Reading (into) the Ming Novel*

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My purpose here is to explore ways that readers approached the novel as a literary form in late imperial China and some elements of the narrative that facilitate those types of reading. But I will begin centuries earlier, and with the reading—and writing—of other literary forms. The differences, I believe, will prove to be insignificant.

In his immortal meditations on transience and human vanity, Qian Hou Chibi fu 前後赤壁賦, Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101) reflected poignantly on the insubstantial nature of fame and accomplishment. Set in the autumn of 1082 and ostensibly autobiographical, these poetic essays seem to refer to the writer’s personal failures of judgment and the limitations of his abilities. This interpretation is suggested by the way in which its personae read and respond to a number of earlier poems. A prime example occurs in the narrative of the first essay. After opening lines that describe the scene, Su’s companion quotes a

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couplet from a poem written by the Han general Cao Cao (155-220):

The moon so bright that stars are few,  
Crows and magpies southward fly.  
月明星稀，鳥鶴南飛。

Presumably this awakens the memory of the following couplet, not quoted there:

Three times around they circle round the tree,  
where is a branch on which to roost?  
繞樹三匝，何枝可依?¹

This causes Su’s companion to comment and reflect:

He had just subdued Jingzhou and was proceeding from Jiangling by following the current eastward; his craft and vessels extended a thousand li, his banners and pennons obscured the sky. Pouring a libation over the River, he laid his lance crossways and recited this verse: unquestionably the hero of his age, and yet now——where is he now?  
And what of you and me, brother? Mere fishermen and woodcutters on the sandbars of the River, companions of fish and shrimp, friends of stags and deer, sailing on this boat no larger than a leaf, toasting each

other with gourd flagons: like mayflies between heaven and earth, like a single grain in the dark sea.

方其破荆州，下江陵，顺流而东也，舳舻千里，旌旗蔽空，酾酒临江，横槊赋诗，固一世之雄也，而今安在哉？況吾與子漁樵於江渚之上，侣魚蝦而友麋鹿。駕一葉之扁舟，舉匏樽以相屬。寄蜉蝣於天地，渺沧海之一粟。²

Here Su Shi and his companions complete the image of the crows that fly south, with their knowledge of the rest of the poem: the birds find no place to alight——fateful omens in light of Cao’s crushing defeat at the battle at Chibi 赤壁之戰 soon after having written it. Su Shi as reader identifies with the poet and locates Cao Cao specifically in space and time: they are in similar places, literally but more importantly, emotionally. In response to this reading, Su Shi as a character in his own essay further reflects on the impermanence of all things, including impotence in the face of time and chance. Although these somber reflections are shared by several voices on that moonlit cruise, they all suggest the poet’s own situation: Su Shi had been banished here, far from the imperial court and all power; there was no reason to hope that he would be recalled to the capital. As did Cao Cao’s poem, the essay might foretell failure in that regard. As future events were to evolve, he was recalled——but this would not be his last period of exile.

Su Shi’s poetic essay demonstrates a kind of reading that is active and participatory, that identifies the reader (or here, the one who fills in lines from memory) with the original poet’s state of mind; in Stephen Owen’s words, the

poem “is the writer,” and to a significant degree the reader becomes the poet through the deep empathy that poetry inspires. Su Shi does not judge or evaluate Cao Cao’s words or his career in cool intellectual terms; instead his initial response is powerfully emotional.³

Su Shi’s essays are heavily laden with allusions to a variety of texts. *Shijing*詩經, *Chu ci*楚辭, the *Zuo zhuan*左傳 and *Li ji*禮記, even the *Jingangjing*金剛經 or Diamond Sutra, and of course *Sanguo zhi*三國志, presumably the source of his allusions to the climactic battle of the Red Cliffs, thought by some to have occurred near the area of their evening foray on the water.⁴ Throughout the first poetic essay we see Su Shi at work not only as a consummate writer, but also as a highly sensitive reader, piling up images of isolation, uncertainty, and failure—all of these images leading at once to the feelings associated with them. His reply in that first essay is philosophical; his persona withdraws from identification with those earlier texts in order to comment on their meaning. But by the end of *Hou Chibi fu* the first-person narrator is not at all intellectually detached. Instead, his dream is unsettling, and his response to it ambiguous, perhaps anxious. The reader personified in the essay, and presumably the reader as writer, are both left bewildered but powerfully moved by the experience,

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⁴ For the sources of these and other allusions, see my, “Sights and Sounds,” pp. 17-21.
having been immersed in the quoted/cited poem, then commenting on other poems, then merging the seeming reality of dream with recollection of literary and religious associations of cranes with Daoist immortals. Amusement can only come to the reader after disengaging from both essays to reflect critically on their multifaceted accomplishments as pieces of writing.

1. Reading Like a Poet

Responses embodied in these essays constitute a range of reading practices. One might be considered an affective theory of reading, the practice of positioning oneself in a mindset analogous or identical to that of the persona of a poem or a character in a story; this reader experiences strong empathetic feelings with that figure. Related to this, but not the same, are Su Shi’s self-conscious assembly of poetic allusions to express metonymically feelings of separation and longing, a hope for transcendence—or even escape from his current situation—all of which are relevant to his own situation at the time of writing. That is, he applies elements of the poetic situation to his own. Associating himself with the military hero of ages past links them logically only in one way: through their failures to realize their grand goals. And yet a reader—such as Su Shi—need not identify totally with a literary character to be moved, sometimes profoundly, by that character’s fate. The reader needs only to empathize with and to respond emotionally to the figure he is reading about, if only for the duration of the reading. I believe that this proposition is as true for the Ming-Qing reader of vernacular fiction as it is for readers, like Su Shi, of history and poetry.

Here I would consider only one probable interpretive community for the
developing novel in the mid- and late-Ming: the educated readers of poetry—which could include anyone with a high level of literacy, regardless of age or gender. Since the Han we have been told that *shi yan zhi* 詩言志 (poetry) puts into words the *zhi*, one’s aspirations, will, and ideals. Poetry also springs from emotion, as in the statement *shi yuan qing* 詩緣情. But it is well known that poets often presented their ideas through personae in poetry, in effect using fictional characters sometimes quite unlike themselves in age or gender (the aging male writing languid poems in the voice of an abandoned young woman is a case in point). In applying this notion to a fictional text, the literatus novelist, like the historian, might well have striven to create separate and identifiable emotional profiles for his separate characters, to distinguish them one from another. Even though Su Shi never read a novel, he certainly had read prose narratives, one of which he referred to in his prose poem, the *Sanguo zhi*. Through his reading, the essayist identified with Cao Cao’s character, then reflected on his own situation, and later linked that reflective mood with a different set of literary cues. Ways of reading available to the sophisticated

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5 This line famously appears in the *Mao shi Daxu* 毛詩大序; for this and related quotations from Lu Ji 陸機, *Wenfu* 文賦, see James J. Y. Liu 劉若愚, *Chinese Theories of Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 72-77, where he explores the fusion of emotion and intellect in both *Wenfu* and Liu Xie’s 劉勰, *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍, noting that *qing* may also indicate “the prevailing condition or basic nature of a thing.” Stephen Owen translates *zhi* as “what is intently on the mind” in his *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, pp. 130-31, where he notes that by changing the earlier line to include emotion, Lu Ji “account[s] more perfectly for poetry’s true range.” As the *Daxu* also points out, 情動於中而形於言, “Feelings are stirred within and take on form in words.” See Owen, *Readings*, pp. 38-49; this from p. 41.

6 Certainly some *chuanqi xiaoshuo* 傳奇小說 of the Tang and Song had complex structures, but few concentrated on characterization to the extent that is common in later vernacular novels; the one exception may be “Yingying zhuan” 英英傳. The more relevant reading in narratives available in Su Shi’s time would be historiography, in particular the rich characterization by Sima Qian 司馬遷 in *Shiji* 史記.
reader during the Song were available to the well-educated readers of the Ming as well, a range of interactive, emotional responses through creative engagement with texts and the stories they tell.

2. Cheering from the Sidelines

Ample evidence of the range of readers’ engagements with the characters and adventures narrated in Ming vernacular fiction can be found in the original commentaries, in particular the meipi 眉批 or (upper) marginal comments and the jiapi 夹批, the comments printed within or between the lines of text in characters half the size of the text itself. By contrast, chapter-end commentaries (zongping 總評), tend to be more critical of the writing, from a more detached perspective. Even a quick survey of late Ming works of fiction, huaben 話本 (short stories) as well as longer zhanghui 章回 (novels), reveals that commentators—as model readers—regularly imagined themselves directly involved in the narrative.

In chapter 5 of the 1633 novel Sui shi yiwen 隋史遺文, the commentator reacts to an admission by the central character Qin Shubao 秦叔寶 with a critique that might have been uttered by a bystander in the scene: “Why didn’t you say that before?” 何不早說. Later, in chapter 11 when serious legal charges against Shubao are dropped, he leaves the yamen without asking for his confiscated possessions to be returned. There the commentator affirms that choice, albeit sardonically: “Who would have allowed you to ask for them?” 誰許你討.

Commentary by Ye Zhou 葉晝 (Ye Yangkai 葉陽開, fl. 1595-1624) in the late Ming novel Li Zhuowu yuan ping xiuxiang guben Sanguo zhi 李卓吾原評

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繡像古本三國志 includes impassioned interjections. In response to Cao Cao’s boasting about his past victories and his anticipated easy defeat of the combined forces of Wu 吳 and Liu Bei 劉備, the commentator exclaims, “These are all omens of defeat——pay heed, pay heed!” 此皆敗徵也，可戒可戒 He even goes so far as to comment sarcastically on the foolhardy attempt by inexperienced northern fighters to raid the southern naval station: “And here we see the marvelous skill of the northerners in naval fighting——ha, ha!” 也見北人水戰妙手，呵呵8 In the early Qing Kangxi period commentary edition of Sanguo zhi yanyi 三國志演義 edited by Mao Lun 毛論 (1605?-1700?) and his son Mao Zonggang 毛宗崗 (1632-after 1709) completed decades later, the commentator’s feeling of closeness to the action is again to be seen. When in chapter 48 Cao Cao is informed of rumors of attacks on his forces from the west, the commentator observes, sympathetically: “He ought not believe them, but he cannot not believe them.” 不便信，又不得不信9 Throughout the narrative of Wu commander Zhou Yu’s 周瑜 preparations for the onslaught of Cao Cao’s flotilla and his combative conversation with Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 in chapter 49 of Sanguo zhi yanyi, the Maos comment repeatedly——and enthusiastically——on their enjoyment of the dialogue: “Ah!” 喔 “Excellent!” 好 “Marvelous!” 妙 “How marvelous!” 妙甚 “Even more marvelous!” 更妙10 All of these comments suggest a deep emotional involvement with the narrated action, even though their attitude may be playful.

A second, closely related, perspective on reading fiction seems like partisan participation in the narrated action on the part of the reader. That is, the commentator explains and comments on, either for the sake of the character

9 Ibid., p. 601.
10 Ibid., pp. 610-615.
or for his implied reader, the significance of what just happened from a more serious, more deeply imaginative engagement with the text—as if he were speaking for the author. In chapter 9 of *Sui shi yiwen* the chivalrous benefactor Shan Xiongxin 單雄信 is ready to set out at dawn to find the impoverished Qin Shubao; rather than sleep, he proposes to his companions that they just drink the night away. At that, the commentator explains, “Xiongxin is so thirsty to show his affection for Shubao that he forgets all about sleeping.” 雄信渴戀叔寶，遂至忘寢

As the southern wind brings disaster to Cao Cao’s camp on the northern bank of the Yangzi in the battle of Chibi, the Mao commentary says about Cao, “Even now the old traitor is dreaming!” 此時老奸尚在夢中 Moreover, when Zhuge Liang seems about to be apprehended by the warriors sent by the suspicious Zhou Yu just before the conflagration there begins, commentators Mao Zonggang and Mao Lun observe, “Having read this far, one can only be worried again over [the safety of] Kongming!” 讀書至此，又為孔明一急

Similarly, in the first story of Feng Menglong’s 馮夢龍 (1574-1646) first *huaben* collection *Gujin xiaoshuo* 古今小說, “Jiang Xingge chonghui zhenzhushan” 蔣興哥重會珍珠衫, when Jiang takes leave of his pretty wife he advises her to stay away from the front windows of the house. To this the commentator responds, “These words will later come to pass” 說着了, as if warning the young wife Sanqiaoer 三巧兒. Later, when the woman consults a for-

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11 Of course some novelists wrote commentary for their own fiction, as if to control this perspective and thereby guide their real readers. See David L. Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary: Reading and Writing Between the Lines* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 6-11, 269-83.
12 *Sui shi yiwen*, p. 73.
13 *Sanguo yanyi huiping ben*, p. 619.
tuneteller, the commentator admonishes her, “The deceptions wrought by fortunetellers are not insignificant!” 算命起意的誤人不淺
Still later in that collection, when the narrative describes a young man’s attachment to a songbird, the commentator ruefully warns, “Root of trouble!” 禍本
In these cases, the reader/commentator seems to function as a participant in the action, observing and cajoling its fictional participants as if he had projected himself into the scene. Again he is emotionally involved, but seemingly at a deeper level of involvement and identification that that of purely emotional responder.

A third type of reader’s response has gained more scholarly attention; it approaches that of the modern literary critic. Here the reader/commentator critiques the writer’s handling of the story material, very often in positive terms. The late Ming critic Jin Shengtan 金聖嘑 (1608-1661), probably more than any other, advocated evaluating vernacular literature as if it were as worthy of careful reading as the canonical literary and philosophical texts. This pattern of reading can be seen in comments on Sanguo zhi yanyi when, during intense planning for the climactic battle at Chibi, the strategist Pang Tong 龐統 whispers a plan to Xu Shu 徐庶——which is not revealed to the reader. The Mao commentary at this point remarks, “How marvelous that it does not explain this in detail!” 妙在不敘明白
Many more examples of this sort of evaluation of the story as narrative can be seen in the chapter-end commentaries and prefatory (dufa 讀法

16 Feng, Gu jin xiaoshuo, 2: p. 402n4; see Feng, Stories, p. 463.
17 See Rolston, Chinese Fiction, esp. pp. 108-11; the commentator Ye Zhou often scorned the lack of skill he saw in narrative crafting, Rolston observes, pp. 32-35.
18 Sanguo yanyi huiping ben, p. 600.
or “how-to-read”) essays in a variety of novels.  

In his extensive commentary on *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳, Jin Shengtan repeatedly urges his reader to distance himself emotionally from the text in order to appreciate and to contemplate the novelist’s art more intellectually. As David Rolston has noted, these fiction commentaries are “concerned with questions of style and composition,” in line with the widespread use of earlier texts as models for composition during the late Ming.  

In their head comment to *Sanguo zhi yanyi* (chapter 48) leading up to the Chibi battle, the Maos explain,

> The emphasis is on the main episodes, and not on the secondary episodes .... Such naturally marvelous events seem to happen by chance in this naturally marvelous writing. Surely the fiction writers of today cannot even conceive such structural complexity.

When the commentator draws the reader’s attention to the skill of the writer, the commentator’s stance implies that if left unguided, the reader would necessarily be deeply engaged with the narrated action, emotionally invested in such scenes.

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19 See Sun Xun 孫遼 and Sun Juyuan 孫菊園, comp., *Zhongguo gudian xiaoshuo meixue ziliao huicui* 中國古典小說美學資料匯粹 (Taipei: Da’an, 1991); Wang Xianpei 王先霈 and Zhou Weimin 周偉民, *Ming Qing xiaoshuo lilun piping shi* 明清小說理論批評史 (Guangzhou: Huacheng, 1988) for extensive collections and interpretations of these materials.  


21 *Sanguo yanyi huiping ben*, p. 599. These translations of *Sanguo* commentaries were prepared by Maria Franca Sibau and me for a forthcoming anthology of fiction and play commentaries edited by Stephen H. West and Ling Xiaochao.
as Wu Song’s 武松 fight with the tiger, or the killing of a child to force Zhu Tong 朱仝 to join the Liangshan band. This process of enticing readers to identify emotionally with characters served to bring historic figures into the present, and to make supernatural beings—whether stone monkeys or bodhisattvas—seem like ordinary people in at least a few respects—despite Jin Shengtan’s later warnings about reading more dispassionately in order to discern the art of the novel. But this approach to reading is not unique to the efforts of Jin Shengtan. Even the commentator in the “Jiang Xingge” story compliments the author at one point by remarking, “A foreshadowing!”

3. Engaging the Reader

Having surveyed how several commentators, as verifiable historical readers, responded to the reading of fiction, I will move on to a much more speculative area of consideration: how changes in the developing arts of vernacular fiction might have encouraged serious emotional and intellectual involvement with vernacular fictional narratives. Commentators’ emotional and critical responses suggest that almost regardless of type of fiction or situation narrated, some relevance for the reader was to be sought there. It would seem that close sympathetic and analytical reading was enhanced by the


23 Feng, Gujin, p. 34; Stories, p. 16.
development of emotionally complex and ambiguous characters and situations in fiction to a greater extent than did more sophisticated narrative structures. Probably not coincidentally, from the Wanli era onward illustrations became nearly as ubiquitous in printed works of fiction as did commentaries; they too seemingly encouraged the imaginative engagement of readers with the persons and the actions of the fiction. The illustrations that were of artistically higher quality inevitably compiled standard elements into new combinations, their familiarity and conventionality facilitating identification with the persons and events suggested thereby. The attention of the reader/viewer is not drawn to their unusual features, but just the contrary. Appropriately, Jin Shengtan’s *Guanhuatang* commentary edition of *Shuihu zhuan* had no illustrations, presumably to avoid the aids to creative imagination that they would offer and thereby to enhance the reader’s attention to the text.

More complex characters and situations, often because they include elements not anticipated by the reader, seemingly encouraged the kind of emotional engagement allowed as well by serious poetry—a kind of reading that would be very familiar to the educated elite of the late Ming. That is, these texts suggest readily comprehensible parallels with the reader’s world, but they leave information gaps that require the reader’s imaginative projection of himself into the fictional situation in order to make meaningful connections and conclusions. In many cases the provocative issue is motivation. Some of these characters became so powerfully real in readers’ imaginations that they inspired the creation of poetry, essays, or more fiction, especially during the middle and

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24 See, for example, my *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 321-26.

25 Interestingly, Jin explicitly encouraged visualization of the fictional scene by the reader but by intrusively pointing out what to visualize, his intervention might have provoked less direct emotional engagement with its action.
late Qing period.\textsuperscript{26}

Already by the late 16\textsuperscript{th} century, the emotional complexity of central characters, rather than mere descriptive elements, had become the point of greatest development in the vernacular prose literary traditions.\textsuperscript{27} The vernacular short story as well as the novel regularly narrated incidents and actions that demonstrate the weaknesses and flaws of their heroes as well as highlighting factors that mitigate against simple understandings of negative characters as well. Andrew Plaks identified this reorientation of characterization as the ironic deflation of simplistic characters inherited from the oral and performance traditions. But especially because characters and situations in vernacular fiction were very often adapted from classical language sources, I see no reason to attribute any such characteristics to the broad tradition of live performance—in which fictional figures can also be richly characterized. Instead, my purpose here is to pursue a more widely applicable avenue of interpretation than his philosophical orientation will easily allow, an interpretation that highlights the emotional closeness readers seemingly felt to fictional characters.

Even in the early novel \textit{Sanguo zhi tongsu yanyi}, commentators Mao Zonggang and Mao Lun emphasize the common human bonds that tie historical people together. For example, in their prefatory commentary to chapter 79 the Maos compare various degrees of trust and understanding among real and sworn kinsmen, as Zhang Fei 張飛 is murdered and Liu Bei executes his son Liu Feng 劉封:

\textsuperscript{26} On this perception of continuity between experience and characterization, see Wolfgang Iser, \textit{The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response} (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), chap. 5 and pp. 185-95.

\textsuperscript{27} Rolston, \textit{Traditional Chinese Fiction}, pp. 192-225, explores this focus on characterization in vernacular fiction.
Comparing the configuration of circumstances in the Liu and Cao houses, what a gap there is between the serious and the frivolous. Xuande, a [sworn] ‘brother’ of another surname, grieved for his younger brother’s death. By contrast, Cao Pi, a brother of the same womb, was eager for his brothers’ deaths. Xuande felt pain for the loss of an adopted brother and was heedless of compassion for his adopted son. Cao Pi sought his true brothers’ deaths and was heedless of his natural mother’s feelings of love.

劉曹之相形，何厚薄之懸殊乎？玄德以異姓之兄而痛悼其弟之亡，曹丕以同胞之兄而急欲其弟之死；一則痛義弟之死而不顧其養子之恩，一則欲其親弟之亡而不顧其生母之愛。君子於此有天倫之感焉？

Implicit in this comparison is that these relationships should matter to the reader and that the reader, too, should share their righteous anger over Cao Pi’s callous desire to rid himself of rivals. The same events outraged the commentator Ye Zhou in the Li Zhuowu recension of the novel; in his chapter-end comment he declares:

One might still forgive Xuande for the crime of having killed Liu Feng without knowing of his virtue, but even beheading would be too good for Kongming for the crime of having killed him despite knowing of it.

劉封忠義，玄德不知而殺之，罪猶可原；孔明知而殺之，罪不容誅矣。


29 Ibid., p. 970.
The point of these comments—and the emotional engagement they both reflect and elicit—is that these fictional events are worthy of the reader’s full attention and of his commitment to understanding, rather like one reads poetry. The same is true of complex characterization even without commentary to guide the reader’s understanding. The responses of both Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang in that chapter are disturbing: there is a clear gap between what we as readers are led to expect of them and what they actually do in relation to others. Our response, to judge from the commentators, might well be disillusionment and even anger at their betrayal of our expectations.

4. Reading with the Heart

Comparing early novels suggests that from the beginning, experiments in writing for the novel form shared the implicit goal of making the experience of their characters approachable to their readers on relatively simple emotional rather than on more abstract moral or philosophical levels. This does not involve the re-creation of reality in writing, but instead the regular incorporation in the fictional text of elements of external reality that allow the reader to see his own world with new insights. Not surprisingly, these elements generally evoke strong emotional responses on the part of the reader. Their discontinuities with reality may be in fact the point of engagement: “blank spaces” require active imagination on the part of the reader to fill in. In the Qian Hou Chibi fu essay

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30 Plaks, “Critical Theory,” p. 351, notes, “it is the disharmony and suffering of the individual human perspective that is responsible for the emotional response of the traditional readership to the greatest narrative works....” He leaves the mechanism for such emotional appeals unexplored, however.

31 As Iser suggests, Act of Reading, pp. 180-81.
we see its characters filling in what was left unsaid when the Cao Cao couplet was quoted; fiction can also become meaningful when readers perceive and imaginatively fill in the substantial gap between the anticipated behavior and what is actually narrated.

A number of the relatively simple early novels center on religious figures, a fashion that apparently arose in response to the popularity of *Xiyou ji* 西遊記, which was first printed in 1592. The major characters in *Nanhai Guanyin quanzhuan* 南海觀音全傳 (ca. 1605), a fictional version of the career of the bodhisattva Guanyin 觀音, are the miraculous maiden and her father. She begins as Miaoshan 妙善, the third daughter in a royal South Indian family that has no sons. After a fit of anxiety over a successor to his throne, the aging king decides to give it to the most worthy of his sons-in-law. But when the first two young men prove to be untalented sensualists, the king insists that Miaoshan marry in the hope that her husband would be a more capable leader than the other two. Yet from childhood Miaoshan had set her mind on Buddhist self-cultivation and is unshakeable in her resolve. The bulk of the novel narrates their escalating disagreement, to the point at which the king loses all self-control and has the young woman executed for disobedience to his will. Like Liu Bei’s execution of his son Liu Feng, this is perceived by the reader, who has understood her pure motivations since the beginning, to be a terrible mistake.  

Even though readers may be inspired by her single-minded devotion to meditation and the religious life, by the time of her death Miaoshan seems almost as unbelievable as her father. From the perspective of a fervent believer, there is no question that the text provides some level of transcendent truth. But

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32 The text I refer to here is the first half of *Nanhai Guanyin quanzhuan*, *Damo chushen chuandeng zhuan* 南海觀音全傳・達摩出身傳燈傳 (合刊), ed. Shen Chuanfeng 沈傳鳳 (Taipei: Sanmin, 2008).
to the modern reader—and the more secular reader of around 1600—this tale is virtually absurd: no normal person could be expected to thwart her parents so insistently, and no one could survive the increasingly destructive punishments to which her fulminating father sentences her. The purity of Miaoshan’s commitment is inspiring to the faithful; the explicit injustice of her death seems designed at least to elicit a strong condemnation from the modern reader. Yet the average Ming reader of this novel may well not have been wholeheartedly devoted to finding Buddhist Truth here nor was he (or she) so cynical and objective as we may be now. Superficially it would seem that the attraction in the novel would be Miaoshan’s/Guanyin’s supernatural abilities, rather like the magical antics of the Monkey King in *Xiyou ji*. But in the same way that the relationship between Sun Wukong and the Tang Monk dominates the narrative through most of the earlier novel, the central theme of *Nanhai Guanyin quanzhuan* is the relationship between the father and the daughter, a relationship that is not so far removed from reality.

By the end of the novel, Guanyin has been resurrected only to allow herself to be mutilated; she donates her eyes and hands to make a cure for her father’s disease—the cosmic punishment for his increasingly cruel treatment of the girl. Finally he is enlightened to his daughter’s compassion for others, even those as totally undeserving as he. The father repents, admitting that Miaoshan has fulfilled her filial duties, even if in grotesque ways. In essence, the novel represents the dangers involved in conflicts that can arise among family members—as does the *Sanguo zhi yanyi* segment discussed above. Only her divinity allows Guanyin to survive and to reconcile with her parents when they back down from their rigidly held positions. The King’s redemption may allow a kind of vicarious pleasure for the reader, as does his ultimate recognition of Miaoshan’s saintly nature. Neither central character is ordinary, but as readers
we might be moved to sympathize with them, to identify emotionally to at least some degree with their feelings about family members. Even though the outcomes are fantastic, their motivations and actions are comprehensible—the daughter will not obey her parents, and yet her miraculous loving compassion is first extended to her father, a properly filial act. We as readers must imaginatively close the gap between those seemingly contradictory attitudes; doing so makes us participants in the story.

Aspects of the text that allow a sympathetic reading become far more obvious when one compares the novel with the explicitly didactic baojuan that predates and presumably inspires the novel. Glen Dudbridge describes the novelist’s response to the earlier text this way: the baojuan’s

interminable moralistic dialogues, sprawling through long stretches of monotonous verse and prose, must have tried [the reader’s] patience. [Novelist Zhu Dingchen] reduced the debates to a token length, brought in a rich cast of named supporting characters, and worked into the story whatever ideas he could gather from the current printed fiction dealing with traditional religious figures, and probably from more ephemeral sources.33

It is the additional episodes introduced here and the relationships between the characters, including between the two older daughters and their husbands, that make the problematic father-daughter relationship so poignant; it becomes comprehensible through the very incongruities between their relationship and what might normally occur in everyday life.

Recasting larger-than-life characters in ways that allow understanding is a process that has long shaped Chinese narratives. If we consider early representations of Fuxi 伏羲 and Nüwa 女媧 as they appear on Han tomb tiles, for example, we see that they began with tails—serpentine tales, probably revealing a family resemblance to dragons with their fearsome nurturing function. However, the top halves of their bodies suggest normal humanity. And yet early textual references to these figures, and even to Shennong 神農 and the Great Yu 大禹, portray them very much as human—albeit humans with semi-divine attributes, abilities, and accomplishments. How could we understand a creature that interacts with humanity but is really half snake? It is difficult to comprehend, harder still to imagine communicating or cooperating with them; they are the stuff of myth, not of everyday social life. Vernacular fiction reduced such mythical creatures to more familiar proportions and introduced them into readily recognizable human relationships.

Exemplifying this process are the many versions of the legendary White Snake stories, the Baishe zhuan 白蛇传; its fullest early presentation is the late Ming huaben, “Bai Niangzi yong zhen Leifengta” 白娘子永镇雷峰塔. Significantly, these stories begin with the White Snake embodied as a dangerously alluring young woman, all dressed in white, wet from a rainfall on

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34 For Tang period paintings of the couple with intertwined tails recently discovered in Xinjiang, see Zhongguo huihua quanji 中國繪畫全集 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1997-2001) 1: pp. 95-97, Fig. 72-74.

35 In this regard we might also consider the representations of the founders of the Zhou royal house in the Deya 大雅 poems of Shijing 詩經: as caring fathers, as good providers, and as determined leaders, not as the hidden powers of the early Song 頌 verses. See Arthur Waley, trans., The Book of Songs, ed. Joseph R. Allen (New York: Grove, 1996), pp. 232-33 (No. 237); compare pp. 313-17 (No. 300).

Qingming jie 清明節, the time of remembrance of the dead when the realms of the mundane and the supernatural seem to open to each other. The White Snake’s beauty, the story tells us, renders Xu Xuan 許宣 helpless and he immediately becomes infatuated with her—a situation described with enough detail that we as (male) readers might easily find it understandable, despite the threatening circumstances surrounding their meeting. Even if the text is illustrated, the woman’s beauty cannot be ascertained by a simple baimiao 白描 drawing; the reader’s imagination must be firmly engaged in creating her image. But that image clashes utterly with the idea of an enormous serpent somehow hidden behind her fair countenance.

Early versions of the story, including the huaben tale, narrate their extraordinary love affair: she magically supplies her lover with fine clothing and money, and then appears in her true monstrous form when she goes to relieve herself. The Buddhist monk in the tale identifies all such monstrous snakes as treacherous; they must be subdued. Ultimately he confines her under the Leifeng Pagoda 雷峰塔 at Xihu 西湖. However, Qing period versions of the story make her ever less unpredictable and ever more familiar. No longer primarily a demonic creature, she becomes a loving wife, a fond mother, a maternal figure for whom readers can easily generate sympathy. Meanwhile, the monk who tames her ultimately comes to be interpreted as a troublemaker who interferes in the destined marriage of the young couple. Thus the reader can far more readily respond with sympathy to the lovers who become a faithful married couple than he/she could to a creature from a different species who has bewitched a normal, if incautious, young man.

37 There may be irony here: early South Asian pictorial representations of the Buddha in meditation show him surrounded and protected by an enormous cobra, although Feng and his collaborators may not have known about this tradition.
What happened to the white snake in later versions of the tale parallels the process by which the semi-divine—and unnatural looking—cultural heroes of most ancient China came to be portrayed as exceptionally insightful and powerful but physically normal human leaders through the process known as euhemerization. Feng Menglong’s humorous reduction of this miraculous snake to a creature who needs to empty her bladder might be termed ironic deflation. Yet by comparison, later versions of the tale transform the Snake Lady from object of low mirth to one worthy of admiration, a suffering wife and mother. In both cases, heroic figures are reduced in scale to the level of recognizable features and attributes, but with gaps in motivations that readers must fill in for themselves. The purpose of doing so in ancient China was to transform the mythical and divine into human sages; in more recent times, compromising and complicating extraordinary characteristics made it easier for readers to feel empathy with fictional figures and therefore to identify with them emotionally.

The domestication of monstrous characters may seem simple; at least in the case of early novels and stories such as the Guanyin and White Snake tales these characters have little intellectual or emotional complexity. But as the novel matures during the seventeenth century to reach the narrative richness of eighteenth-century literati or wenren 文人 novels, the finest examples take on the artistic sophistication identified with poetry and other high culture literature. One might see, then, a development of narrative techniques in the direction of more poetic sensibilities, elements of which can be seen in texts written throughout the vernacular narrative tradition.

38 See Fu Xihua 傅惜華, comp., Baishe zhuan ji 白蛇傳集 (Shanghai: Shanghai chuban gongsi, 1955). Wilt L. Idema translates a selection of these and other related texts in his The White Snake and Her Son: A Translation of The Precious Scroll of Thunder Peak with Related Texts (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 2009).
As we have observed, it is gaps in characterization, not just a degree of realism, that provoke imaginative and emotionally committed reading. Plaks demonstrates that written sources in general, and *Sanguo zhi tongsu yanyi* in particular, give a far more nuanced view of Cao Cao than do popular oral and theatrical presentations, where he is usually an unmitigated villain. The reader of the novel has to explain or at least appreciate the conflicting elements in his personality; it is only a short step farther to sympathize with Cao Cao as he becomes his own worst enemy. So too does that earliest novel complicate Liu Bei’s supposed right to rule with his many flaws of character, his many erroneous decisions, thus making him a far more engaging character.

Plaks’s project was to demonstrate the extensive use of narrative irony in the four great Ming novels as evidence of their literary sophistication. This allows him to consider them serious works of art somewhat comparable to modern European novels. Although he surely is correct in reading irony in each of the four Ming masterpieces of the novel form, I would submit that one crucial factor in their success is their ability to elicit the reader’s imaginative participation in identifying emotionally with their characters.

In *Xiyou ji*, the most powerful characters are the Buddha 如來佛, the Jade Emperor of Heaven, Yuhuang dadi 玉皇大帝, and the bodhisattva Guanyin 觀世

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40 Plaks, *Four Masterworks*, p. 303. He sees the fuller versions of *Shuihu zhuan*, the “fanben” 繁本 editions, as deeply ironic revisions of their source materials. In internal contrasts between characters or between their representations in literati versions of *Shuihu zhuan* and in the shorter *jianben* 簡本 editions, these popular versions are less sophisticated and less subtle. He admits, “Even within the co-called popular sources, the evaluation of the activities of the Liang-shan band are far from unequivocal. This is especially true with respect to the treatment of the principal heroes in *zaju* drama” (pp.303-4n79). My point is that even the writings of literati authors Plaks addresses are replete with playful ironies, where the contrast is made clear not through references to specific texts but to the expectations set up for the reader by clues offered within the novel itself.
Given their stature in the religious traditions widely observed during the late Ming period, one might expect that these characters should be treated reverentially and that ordinary characters would turn to them in time of need. But the novel regularly reduces them from aloof, all-powerful beings to the level of common humanity, or below; they can be jealous, suspicious, or self-congratulatory. They are characterized not by awe-inspiring power or magic tricks; they generally have complex motivations, including feelings with which the reader can easily identify. As early as chapter 6, the minions of Yuhuang dadi fail to defeat the Monkey King 美猴王, and the Daoist deity must turn to the Buddha for help. The Buddha may be more powerful than Sun Wukong, but his response is simply petty: when the Monkey challenges him, the Buddha’s response is to punish Sun Wukong by imprisoning him for 500 years. Contemporary religious texts portray Buddhist figures as helpful and compassionate; contrary to expectations, gaps and inconsistencies in these fictional divinities render them comprehensible in human terms, even if their responses are frequently negative. The expected response seems to be a closer degree of identification with Sun Wukong on the part of the reader.

Guanyin provides aid to the pilgrims repeatedly through this novel. In chapters 33–34 Guanyin helps capture Honghai’er 紅孩兒; she pacifies him by taking him back to become her disciple. Ostensibly this is a good outcome: the lives of the pilgrims are spared, and the unruly young monster will have a chance at enlightenment. But the boy’s parents, Niu Mowang 牛魔王 and Luoshanü 羅剎女, miss him and are willing to fight to get him back. The incongruities here are numerous; among them the idea that monsters have common human feelings, and that being a monster in the world is preferable to being an ascetic disciple of

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Guanyin in Heaven. Even though these characters are demonic and destructive, the reader has a point of human contact in their anguish over losing a child: both monsters and the gods are not “other” to humanity; they are emotionally familiar. Despite their extraordinary attributes, at least to judge from illustrations prepared for early editions, the reader is enticed to make sense of them.

Ironic distance between motivations of characters as presented early in the narrative and their subsequent behavior and the “domestication” of the bizarre reflect a creative process that seems highly self-conscious on the part of the novelist, a consistent reduction of sometimes superhuman abilities and dedication to much more common proportions. As we have seen, fiction commentators regularly note realistic elements in characterization by recording comments referring to characters as if they were real, often remarking on how the writer sets up the reader’s expectations about a character and then later providing contradictory information. In this, the commentators model appropriate responses for readers, inviting intervention by the reader to make characters comprehensible.

Here again Su Shi’s reading of Cao Cao’s poem is instructive to our understanding of how novels were appreciated. Most Ming novels do not narrate the everyday lives of ordinary characters; instead, often they appear in quite extraordinary appearances or in rare circumstances. Plaks argues that there are

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42 Plaks regularly refers to the “ironic distance” between “popular images” of the heroes and their actions in Sanguo zhi yanyi, but does not establish precisely which images the novelist might be responding to in the creation of these characters. Because I do not find that argument particularly convincing, instead I would draw attention to contrasts between ideals articulated by characters in the novel and their outcomes in action.

43 In his preface to the 1633 novel Sui shi yiwen, Yuan Yuling (1599-1674) states that his purpose in writing was to provide just the opposite, the life of his hero, Tang general Qin Shubao, before he became famous, when he was just an “ordinary” fellow. See Sui shi yiwen, “Sui shi yiwen xu” 隋史遺文序, pp. 1-2.
fundamental Confucian ideals to be traced here, among them the recognition and mutual appreciation, that constitute “basic topoi of the Chinese literary tradition.” But Plaks does not identify the mechanism for this understanding; he asserts that it is left up to the discerning reader to determine: novelists do not customarily reveal a character’s precise motivations for action. This, Plaks says, is because of “an implicit understanding between narrator and audience that the causes of human behavior usually need not be spelled out, or are better off left unstated.” The perception of a logical connection between one’s expectations of a character and some incident is, after all, a function of the particular circumstances in which the reader is reading. It would seem that Plaks misses a crucial point here: the motivations of fictional characters are deliberately left unstated precisely in order to provoke the reader’s imaginative, emotional involvement in the fictional situation. Clearly it is the motivations and feelings of these characters—not their unnatural appearances or extraordinary abilities—that draw the commentators’ attention, hence the reader’s participation.

5. Vicarious Enjoyment through Projection

Psychologists suggest that people are drawn to frightening stories—gory fiction and, more recently, films and videogames—because they allow a kind of vicarious enjoyment of another’s (mis)adventures. For the reader to share the sense of anxiety or fear experienced in these stories, and then to put the book

down and return to reality, may not always promote a feeling of sympathy for the endangered character, but reading allows the imaginative reader to experience that danger from a safe distance. For the time being we can share the fictional experience, at least emotionally. Su Shi contemplated the fate of Cao Cao a number of centuries before, and he seems to have projected on to this historical figure his feelings from only a partially analogous situation.

Figures who seem recognizable to readers, if only in outline, elicit imaginative completion. As we have seen in the words of our several commentators, readers take the clues about character traits that narratives generally give and make them into more fully rounded, convincing, and lifelike figures through their own projective, imaginative readings. By “lifelike” I mean characters that share recognizable attributes with living human beings, but which are not necessarily “realistic” in the modern sense of being described in intimate detail, nor are they created with the illusion of reality as a goal of writing. Instead, like human beings they are not fully consistent, have mutually contradictory motivations, and leave other gaps in the narrative that cry out for interpretation. Reading about the wrongful death of a child, or the reunion of a father and daughter, or a massive turn in one’s fortune—especially when these events come as an unanticipated surprise—have a powerful and virtually unavoidable emotional effect on the reader. So powerful, in fact, that one loses track of the artistry of the story unless the reader has a commentator who intervenes to remind him constantly that his engagement with the text has been manipulated by the text itself.

45 Here again think of Jin Shengtan’s interventions in Wu Song’s confrontation with the tiger in Shuihu zhuan; see my Reading Illustrated Fiction, pp. 324-25.
6. The Interactions of Reading and Writing

My point throughout this exercise was to demonstrate that reading Chinese fiction in late imperial China shared many characteristics with the reading of poetry, despite verse having a considerably higher cultural value than vernacular fiction. This has been merely a preliminary survey of the sorts of considerations that must enter into any such inquiry; one may well question the applicability of all aspects of my reading of *Qian Hou Chibi fu* as a guide to the reading of fiction. But consider the several responses to reading that we see presented there: emotional identification with the poet’s situation through an imaginative projection into his mindset, intellectual responses to artistic stimuli, and more detached, and more philosophical, reflections on the broader relevance and general meaning of a work of art. These responses constitute a matrix upon which we might test the significance of elements in narratives in a different style of language and in a different literary form—that were being read by readers trained, for the most part, to read canonical texts with sensitivity and understanding. As when one reads poetry, differences in age, gender, place, and time are no obstacle to emotional identification and sympathy for fictional characters. Like the reader of poetry, the fiction reader’s personal experience is enriched, his humanity enlarged, by this sort of mental activity. It is not my purpose here to argue for any kind of artistic parity between Ming vernacular fiction and the Song *guwen* 古文 essay, much less with classical poetry. But through the testimony of commentators as historical readers, even though they may have been more attentive to the texts than an ordinary reader might have been, we can see that their responses to reading fiction could parallel the experience of reading poetry. At the least, these preliminary comparisons suggest that a much more detailed investigation of these reading processes is warranted,
especially those practices involving imaginatively projecting oneself emotionally into the narrative. I have tried to reach beyond the testimony of a few historical readers to grasp a broader understanding of how vernacular fiction was understood in late imperial China. This question merits far more research, but surely one conclusion is warranted: commentator Jin Shengtan was hardly alone in regarding literary fiction as on an artistic par with far more formal writings and worthy of being read with the same degree of attention.