CHINESE NOVEL: BEGINNINGS TO THE 20TH CENTURY

Chinese Novel

Beginnings to the 20th Century

During the final century or so of Chinese imperial history, the indigenous novel was lumped together with other forms of prose and dramatic narratives in the bibliographic category known as xiaoshuo. Two thousand years earlier this term, meaning “lesser discourses,” had designated minor philosophical and other informal writings. By the eighth century it was applied, with similar connotations, to imaginative narratives in the classical language. During the 13th century, vernacular prose narratives appeared, again under this classification, and by the end of the 19th century the xiaoshuo category of writing included long narrative plays as well. Modern critics generally have interpreted the term as indicating Confucian disregard for, or even dismissal of, fiction as serious writing. But this was not always the case, as the historical record clearly indicates.

The vernacular novel was a particularly productive form in China, even though only the six “classic novels” are commonly known now among general readers (see separate entry, Six Classic Chinese Novels, and also C.T. Hsia, 1968). A recent bibliographic guide lists 1,160 titles, of which around 900 are still extant. Of those, nearly 600 appeared during the final century of imperial rule, which ended in 1911. Scholarly study of this class of writings really began only in the 1920s with Lu Xun’s pioneering study that took part in the reevaluation of tradition by a generation of youthful, reform-minded intellectuals (see Lu Xun, 1924). Virtually all detailed studies of individual works, genres, and periods are the product of the past few decades.

The earliest extant antecedents for the Chinese novel are collectively known as pinghua, or “plain[ly-told] tales,” because of the common element in the titles of a group of texts printed by a Fujian bookseller between 1321 and 1323. All are historical narratives, and all appeared in uniform small-sized editions with intricate illustrations across the top of each page. Although they had been lost in China, a partial set was discovered in a Japanese library. Several other titles having similar structure and characters, dating from about the same time, were later discovered in China. Extant pinghua narrate exciting periods of Chinese history or the remarkable careers of specific individuals. They include the founding of the Zhou dynasty in the 11th century B.C., the unification of the feudal states by the First Emperor of the Qin, the Three Kingdoms era of the second century, when the great Han dynasty collapsed to begin hundreds of years of political chaos, and the exploits of the sixth-century general Xue Rengui during his campaigns in Korea and Manchuria. Although the extant corpus is incomplete, one can infer that by 1400 there were pinghua versions of the entire sweep of China’s known history. One in particular is structurally different from the others. Termed a shihua or “poetic tale,” it is the discontinuous account of the pilgrimage of the seventh-century monk Xuanzang from China to India, accompanied by a supernatural monkey, to obtain Buddhist scriptures. It may well be that there were a number of other nonhistorical “proto-novels” that no longer exist.
The Chinese novel is a product of the Ming period (1368–1644). Modern scholars generally suggest that the earliest works in this form came to be written soon after the pinghua appeared, around 1400, starting with the work of one or two individuals. However, proprietorial authorship is a later concept, appearing first around 1600, and attempts to link shadowy figures such as the 14th-century dramatist Luo Guanzhong with the creation of the novel form rest on very shaky evidence. The oldest extant novel is the printed edition of Sanguo zhi yanyi (commonly referred to as The Three Kingdoms or Romance of the Three Kingdoms) with prefaces dated 1494 and 1522. With deliberate slowness, it narrates the individual acts that led inexorably to the demise of the Han empire and the bloody civil wars that ensued, pitting virtuous but flawed individuals against vicious but brilliant enemies in endless games of strategy that seemingly hold the empire as prize for the victor. However, all contenders ultimately fail in this remarkable exploration of complex human motivations and abilities. The narrative focuses on Liu Bei, who, because he is the descendant of an emperor, believes he is the rightful heir to the throne. His loyal followers include the military commanders Zhang Fei, Guan Yu, and Liu Bei's divinely insightful advisor Zhuge Liang, all paragons of loyalty who fall through their own blind adherence to loyalty, either to their cause or to each other. Many copies of this work exist; clearly it was respected, even prized, and carefully preserved. For several decades it had no competitors. The next novel, also historical, was published only after the middle of the century.

The second half of the 16th century witnessed the appearance of numerous works of historical fiction, the genre that has had the most enduring appeal for Chinese readers. Early examples are artful hybrids of uneven quality combining formal historical sources with legends and entertainers' tales of individual heroes. As the form became ever more popular, booksellers sought unemployed scholars to rewrite earlier versions. For each dynastic period there was produced, over the next 300 years, a series of historical novels, each of which freely quoted from and modified its predecessor(s). These story materials were seen to be in the public domain, and the authorship—much less the degree of originality—of any individual title is frequently difficult to determine. With a few noteworthy exceptions, early examples were produced in relatively inexpensive, poorly printed editions.

This interest in historical fiction prompted the production of the second of China's recognized "classics," Shuibu zhuan (c. 1550), an adventure novel known in English primarily as Water Margin or All Men Are Brothers but now best represented by the translation Outlaws of the Marsh. Like the early historical novels, this draws heavily on tales that circulated among theatrical troupes and storytellers. In fact, several competing versions of this novel were in print during the last few centuries of imperial rule. Outlaws of the Marsh describes the interwoven adventures of a number of individual heroes on the fringes of polite society: they include guards, butchers, vagabonds, soothsayers, and thieves. One by one they are forced to flee by their own mistakes and, more commonly, by official abuse of power. They join together in mountain strongholds to become bandit gangs that ultimately constitute a rebel force of considerable proportions. Although much is made up, the band is factual. The name of its leader and several of its commanders do occur in the historical records of the time of its setting, the 12th century. The individual exploits for which the novel is much beloved are purely fictional, however. Each of its 108 heroes has a special nickname, special martial skills or insights, and usually a special weapon. In addition to their close ties of sworn brotherhood, these men are knights-errant who right wrongs, especially acts of exploitation of the defenseless by local authorities. Such chivalrous action is usually identified as the reason for their socially marginal status. But in the novel they are not rebels against imperial authority; rather, their purpose is to rid the court of its corrupt ministers. To this end the bandits form the kind of alternative society that has always appealed to readers, despite its problematic premises.

This outlaw band is misogynistic and self-righteous. It punishes with death all who dare to oppose it, and it justifies acts of cruelty against individual members (or their families) for the sake of the greater common good. Undoubtedly, the novel's enduring appeal is a function of its fundamentally subversive nature. Explicitly or by implication, the novel challenges virtually every tenet of conventional Confucian family values. Its individual male heroes delight in violence in the name of order. The novel glorifies gluttonry rather than moderation.

The most widely read version of the novel was edited by Jin Shengtan in the middle of the 17th century. Jin truncated the work just after the 108 heroes have constituted a single band to conclude the novel with a dream of their mass extermination by Heaven. His purpose, Jin explained, was to demonstrate the fate that awaited all rebels against the throne. (Jin himself was later executed for leading a protest against abuses by Suzhou tax officials.)

A new genre appeared toward the end of the 16th century, the often fantastic adventures of religious figures. Drawn from both the Buddhist and Taoist religious traditions, these novels took on the air of moral seriousness by presenting inspiring, model behavior. Several were produced by the same individual, a publisher. The earliest and most outstanding example is Xiyu ji (c. 1580; The Journey to the West), the third of the classics still widely read today.

The Journey to the West develops what was by then a large and growing group of stories and plays about the Tang period pilgrim Xuanzang and his supernatural companions into a narrative that is best known for its far-ranging humor and verbal complexity. It also explores religious and philosophical themes with such subtlety that some readers still revere the work as virtual scripture. Here the Monkey King, along with the Pig, the Sand Monk, and a dragon who has been turned into a horse, guard the spiritually pure but timid Tang priest as he wends his allegorical way from China through Central Asia—which is populated by demons who seek personal immortality by eating a morsel of his flesh or obtaining a drop of his semen. These adventures are widely loved and frequently appear in later entertainment forms, most recently cartoon movies and a television series. On the allegorical level, it is the Monkey who makes the pilgrimage, however. Nominally already enlightened in a Buddhist sense, the Monkey must transcend all attachments to egotistic conceptions of self to become fully emancipated. The Journey to the West is generally, and probably accurately, attributed to a literatus named Wu Chêng'en, a compiler of literary anecdotes whose life spanned virtually the entire 16th century and who especially admired tales of the supernatural. It would appear that Journey inspired other novels of fantastic adventure (including contests of magic and trips to exotic places), but none
had the enduring appeal of its artistic complexity and multifaceted humor.

The fourth "classic" also belongs to the Ming period and was nearly contemporaneous with *The Journey to the West*, although its career took a decidedly different path. Unlike *Journey*, which was reprinted frequently and widely read, manuscripts of *Jin Ping Mei* (which has been translated as *The Golden Lotus* and, more recently, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*) circulated for decades from about 1580 among only a handful of the most talented intellectuals of the day. The reasons for its exclusiveness are many. First, it includes erotic descriptions (most frequently presented in euphemistic terms) that have generally been condemned as pornographic. For that reason, it was probably circulated quietly to protect the identity of its author, perhaps a member of that select circle. In addition, it appears to have been written for the few readers who might appreciate its references to contemporary figures and events and, particularly, to contemporary culture. Recent scholarship has highlighted the work's extremely complex structure, demonstrating it to be a virtual pastiche of popular stories and plays with quotations from—and parodies of—contemporary jokes, gossip, and songs. Some of the juxtapositions of this borrowed material are howlingly funny, but for the most part the effect is horrifying. The novel focuses its central didactic concern on the disastrous effects of self-indulgence, and few characters are bound by any degree of human affection. *The Plum in the Golden Vase* is set in a sprawling merchant household, where the master's numerous wives, concubines, and maids are in constant competition for his attention, which means their power over the others. The protagonist, Ximen Qing, will go to any lengths to attain new partners to indulge his insatiable sexual appetite. His fifth wife, Pan Jinlian, is equally willing to do anything that will attract him to her. These pursuits reach startling degrees of moral degradation in this powerful exposé of human greed and its devastating consequences. The novel has been banned repeatedly since its first printing in 1617, and even today most editions are bowdlerized.

The Chinese novel had come of age by the 17th century. Literati had taken up the form as a vehicle for intense literary experimentation and for the most serious intellectual concerns (see Hegel, 1981). Novels such as *Sui Yangdi yansi* (1631; *The Merry Adventures of Emperor Yang*) used historical figures as a vehicle for castigating contemporary politics. *Xiyou bu* (1641; *A Supplement to Journey to the West*, or *The Tower of Myriad Mirrors*) borrowed the central characters from the earlier *Journey* to explore the world of dreams and delusions. In a daring reversal of gender roles, *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* (Marriage Destinies to Awaken the World) gave women dominant and domineering, even malicious, control over their husbands. While irony had been a common element of the Ming period masterpieces, parody became a mainstay of certain novels of the 17th and subsequent centuries. *Sui shi yuwen* (1633; *Forgotten Tales of the Sui*) reduces its martial hero to a bumbling fool for most of its chapters. The wildly bawdy *Rou putuan* (1658; *The Carnal Prayer Mat*), attributed to the playwright Li Yu (1611–80), makes outrageous fun of both the courtship in popular romances and the quests in religious novels of the time. The 17th century was also the time when detailed novel criticism came of age in China (see Rolston, 1990, 1997).

Besides these novels written primarily for discerning elite readers, the bulk of novel production from around 1650 to early in the 18th century was in the form of romances. Presumably the earliest and still the best known was *Haoqiu zhuang* (c. 1650; *The Fortunate Union*) by an anonymous author. It was followed by dozens of similar works associated with very few individual writers, perhaps only two. The protagonists of these novels were talented young men who wooed virtuous young ladies through poetry and music. After numerous trials and tribulations, customarily instigated by a dastardly and powerful rival, the young man and one or more young women are formally married to live happily ever after. The conventions of the form were simple and easily parodied, as in *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, which appeared within a few years of *The Fortunate Union*. But the romances became popular soon after the Manchu conquest of China, a time of devastating natural disasters as well as great loss of life through fighting—a time when predictable, optimistic fiction found a ready audience as a means of escape from the horrors of reality. Not surprisingly, *The Fortunate Union* was the first Chinese novel to be translated into an European language, by James Wilkinson and Bishop Thomas Percy, as *Hau Kiou Chodan* or *The Pleasing History* (1761).

The Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1911) enforced conventional Confucian morality with considerable strictness. Few novels were produced and few were printed during the first century of Manchu rule, but by the 18th century the form was taken to new heights by a small number of excellent literati novelists. Justifiably the most famous is *Honglou meng* (known primarily to English readers under the title *Dream of the Red Chamber*, although the best translation uses the novel's first title, *Shitou ji*, or *Story of the Stone*). Its author, Cao Xueqin (1715–c. 1764), was an obscure member of what had been China's wealthiest commoner family. Cao was an unimposing little man who supported himself, reportedly badly, by selling his poems and his art (he specialized in the painting of rocks). During his early childhood, he had lived on his family's enormous estate, complete with imposing halls and a labyrinthine garden, but then in 1728 the emperor appropriated all the property of his predecessor's closest retainers, including the Caos. For the rest of his life, Cao Xueqin lived modestly, drank frequently, and apparently worked on *Story of the Stone*. He wrote and rewrote through several decades, sharing his drafts with family members, whose extensive commentaries to extant manuscripts reveal the collaborative process of authorship and feeling into fiction. He died with the text incomplete, and various versions circulated for several decades. Then in 1791, a publisher hired a writer to piece together the various fragments to produce a "complete" edition. His movable-type editions of 1791 and 1792 are the basis for the standard version today, although a number of the manuscripts have been reprinted during the 20th century.

To a remarkable degree, the novel revolves around indeterminacy. It seemingly begins several times—with the story of a celestial stone imbued with divine intelligence that cares for a frail celestial flower; with the same romantic and religious misadventures experienced by a young man in a wealthy household; with these stories carved on a rock that attracts the attention of a passing monk. The monk reads the tale and, through the emotional attachments generated by his reading, becomes further enlightened and goes off to get the story published. But even the act of reading is compromised further on in the novel, as it warns the reader, "Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true; Real becomes unreal where the unreal's real.”
Story of the Stone is most often read either as a great and tragic love story of a young couple or as an exposé of the moral decay and the exploitative nature of old China’s privileged class. It is both. The stone and its flower from the supernatural realm in the introduction are reborn as cousins who are desperately attached to each other with bonds that they never fully comprehend and that drive them both to distraction (see Li, 1993). Their relationship is complicated by the appearance of several equally attractive but constitutionally quite different female cousins with whom they pursue poetry and the other arts. Moreover, they are manipulated by their elders, particularly the matriarch of the family—whose well-being and that of her family takes precedence over all concerns of the individuals under her authority. The bulk of its narrative is devoted to minute descriptions of the mansion and its garden, the clothing and accoutrements of its inhabitants, and the constant conversations between its several hundred characters. The novel is also a poetic evocation, often through intertextual references to earlier stories and plays, of the difficulties of communication, of the expression of true feelings, and of the attainment of genuine spiritual detachment in this complicated, mundane world. So vivid are its descriptions of the opulence of the protagonists’ extended residence that re-creations have been constructed in public parks across China and for an ever increasing number of film and television adaptations. But the theme of spiritual quest underlies and winds explicitly through the narrative to keep the wary reader always informed of its philosophical dimension, whether in chaste tea tasting, in poetic competition, or during childish sensual play.

Cao Xueqin’s contemporaries were to create other, quite different masterpieces of the form. After Story of the Stone, the most widely recognized Qing period classic is Rulín wáishi (c. 1750; An Unofficial History of the Scholars, or, more simply, The Scholars). Its vivid presentations of speech, behavior, and complex social relationships suggest autobiography, and indeed many of the characters are reminiscent of the author’s contemporaries. The novel is created from interwoven tales of individuals or small groups (rather like Outlaws of the Marsh structurally), virtually all of whom are looking for ways to press their personal advantage in business, in the civil service examinations, or in currying favor with the powerful and wealthy. Gentle humor pervades the first half of the novel, but by the crucial central episode—a community service in honor of an ancient paragon of self-denial—the novel’s tone becomes more serious. Characters in its second half are treated with a degree of scorn reminiscent of the later chapters in Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels. In The Scholars, novelist Wu Jingzi (1701–54) created a scathing exposure, despite its humor, of the foibles of his contemporaries that can still make uncomfortable reading today. Its perennial relevance may explain why The Scholars is the least widely read of the “six classics” despite its rich language and powerful use of irony.

Other noteworthy 18th-century literati novels reflect on the lives of the literati. Liyé xianzhong (1771; Tracks of an Immortal in the Mundane World) by Li Baichuan (c. 1710–71) is firmly based on the author’s own experiences, according to the preface. It chronicles his frustrations in life, his fondness for ghost stories, and his romantic encounters. Qiu dong (Lamp at the Crossroads), written by Li Liuyuan (1707–90), provides a detailed narrative of a student’s life as he proceeds through the civil service examinations to success as an official. Yesou yuyan (The Humble Words of an Old Rustic) by Xia Jingguo (1705–87) is an immodest attempt to demonstrate the author’s worth as a participant in the Confucian intellectual tradition and appeals to someone of appropriately high position to appreciate his true moral stature.

One Qing period novel reflects the fashion for collecting that occupied many of the elite. Jingshu yuantu (1821; Flowers in the Mirror) by Li Ruzhen, a “novel of erudition,” in C.T. Hsia’s apt phrase (see Hsia, 1977), accumulates an impressive amount of pure cultural data seemingly intended to display just how much its author knew. This work also takes up social causes of the time, most particularly the status of women and the painful process of footbinding.

Especially in these outstanding Qing period works, the role of the cultural elite is unmistakable. Philosophical trends starting late in the Ming focused first on the moral nature of the individual and then on the proper social role of the intellectual. By the middle of the Qing, the dominant thinkers had come to focus on the capacity of the individual to effect social change instead of the universal social harmony projected as the goal of the individual thinker in classical Confucianism. Thus the movement toward increasing self-awareness in writing was paralleled by a new sense of autonomy among China’s cultural elite (see Huang, 1995).

In the novel, these developments were exemplified in The Scholars, where the individual protagonist becomes the only standard of morality—even though he often falls far short of exemplary behavior—while members of the Confucian establishment are caricatured as ignorant and egotistical. In other novels, Story of the Stone prime among them, the action moves into the private sphere of life. Quotidian detail is supplied for all aspects of life, including personal tastes and sexuality. But in contrast to the fiction of the Ming, these later novels generally limit their purview to the elite themselves, as literati novels become clearly distinguished from the action fiction seemingly intended for more general reading audiences.

Many of the central characters in these literati novels are female, but they often serve as metaphors for men subordinated by failure in the civil service examinations and for others displaced from the position of social dominance they had been raised to expect. What has been termed the “feminization” of literati novelists came to its most sophisticated level in the androgynous protagonist Baoyu in Story of the Stone. But later novels fall into question both the viability of the Confucian state and the morality it professed to embody. This was reflected in the innumerable shrews, lechers, and other antisocial characters in many Qing novels who are impervious to Confucian blandishments. This tendency came to its fullest expression in the flood of novels that appeared during the last century of imperial rule.

Many of the better known late Qing novels are highly critical of their milieu. Building on the satirical attacks in The Scholars, some expose the ineptitude of Confucian teachers and administrators; others take up a variety of social problems. Ershihnan mudi zhi gai xianzhuang (Vignettes from the Late Ch’ing) by Wu Woyao (also known as Wu Jianren, 1867–1910) castigates official malfeasance and stupidity, as did others of the time. Cultural exoticism plays a central role: the lengthy Pihua baojian (1849; Precious Mirror for the Evaluation of “Flowers”), by Chen Sen (c. 1792–1848), narrates the lives of opera performers
and male prostitutes, while 

and female sex trade of the time. Several novels written after the turn of the century are even more virulent in their condemnation of social ills. Unusual crime cases are the focus of 

unveils a new, more realistic, and personal life that found an airing in two
two 19th century novels also by Wu Woyao. But by then, the influence of European fiction was visible in the themes and structure of these novels (see Dolezelová-Velingerová, 1980).

Novels in China generally are considered vernacular writings even though the style of language varies considerably within the more complex examples of the form. The Three Kingdoms is written in a relatively easily read version of the classical literary language, the style most familiar to anyone who had any formal education in preparation for the civil service examinations. Other of the middle Ming historical novels were written in a similar style. However, by the time of the late Ming masterpieces The Plum in the Golden Vase and The Journey to the West, the vehicle for extended prose narrative was clearly the "vernacular" language, a term that needs some clarification. Generally, the linguistic medium of premodern Chinese novels was the lingua franca of administration throughout the linguistically diverse Chinese empire—the style known to foreigners as Mandarin. Yet most novels also incorporate colloquialisms from the lower Yangtze region, home to many of China's novelists—and bookstores—and a major cultural center. Many novels are punctuated with classical verse and documents written in a formal style. Speech for socially marginal characters is often constructed from dialectical expressions and slang. The masterpieces of the form are generally known for their linguistic richness.

The original edition of Three Kingdoms had been divided into 240 sections. Later, when the novel was edited slightly in the 17th century by Mao Lun (born 1605) and his son Mao Zonggang (born 1632) to form the standard version, these were grouped into 120 chapters, which by then had become the conventional structural division. Chapters in novels from the late 16th century onward were usually given titles in couplet form, each line of which refers to a major event within the chapter. Chapters end on a note of mild suspense, and many conclude with variations on the line, "If you wish to know what happened next, then read the following chapter." The mystery is always resolved in the first page or two of the next chapter, but by then the reader is considered to have been "hooked." Many of China's premodern novels are long, having more than 60 chapters. Novelists often used chapter divisions in larger structural schemes. The clearest example is The Plum in the Golden Vase, the chapters of which, as Andrew Plaks has effectively demonstrated, are arranged in groups of ten (see Plaks, 1987). The two halves of the narrative are likewise symmetrically arranged, with, for example, disaster matching disaster in equal distance from the center point of the work. (More than any other work, The Plum in the Golden Vase also balances events: "hot" episodes are followed by "cold" episodes, cruelty by seduction, and the like.) Likewise, most novelists regularly employed what Patrick Hanan has termed the "storyteller's manner," a collection of rhetorical tags that ostensibly recreate the circumstances of oral narration, complete with conspiratorial fictive dialogue between the narrator and the reader, explanatory asides, and moral advice and admonitions to the reader, who, by convention, is more insightful and better informed than any character in the narrative (see Hanan, 1981).

In complex ways, Chinese novels are all firmly embedded in their tradition. Many take up matters of social, political, or ethical import for exploration and explicit evaluation. Clarifying the date and provenance of a novel generally allows identification of the "cause" that the moralistic Confucian novelist had in mind as he wrote. Even though not all novelists were equally engaged with their times, virtually all made free use of their common literary heritage. There was only one education system during the Ming and Qing: all schools, regardless of sponsorship, had as their first priority training young men for administration, and the state set the curriculum for the civil service examinations. In addition, all educated people, men and women alike, had memorized large sections of the Confucian canon. This large fund of common knowledge and the widespread practice of close reading allowed the novelist to employ allusion and verbal play to an extraordinary degree. Elite readers would appreciate even the most subtle reference to earlier writings. And, of course, the corpus to draw from was enormous. Printing had spread widely at about the same time that the novel developed (see Hegel, 1998), making large private collections of poetry, prose, and even plays and other informal writings relatively commonplace among the wealthy. Literati novelists generally wrote for an audience who knew traditional literature very well and who saw the novel as a complex artistic form. Like the virtuoso performer who lends his own personal artistic variations to a role already familiar to theatre audiences, the novelist, even when substantially rewriting an earlier narrative, could be confident that his discerning readers would appreciate his own contribution to the growing tradition. Readers were helped along in this process of close reading by fiction critics, who contributed introductory critical essays and interlinear commentary to most editions (see Roslton, 1990, 1997).

Given the great diversity of expression within the novel format, exceptions may easily be found for virtually any generalization about the content of premodern Chinese novels. Even so, certain themes recur with considerable frequency, whether or not they are dominant within any individual work. Perhaps the most obvious theme is that of the general ineptitude and moral weakness of central leaders, emperors in particular. Virtually all are subject to the same human foibles as any other character. Some delude themselves that they are true "sons of Heaven" in moral terms, while others are merely self-indulgent. Often they are the helpless pawns of those who provide information about and access to the empire. These negative views of the imperial institution are generally balanced by appeals to basic Confucian ideals of the perfectability of the individual and the possibility of human harmony throughout society. This optimism, most frequently offered without irony, prevents the novel from being a politically subversive form, but surely the negative images of the throne—and positive images of rebels—entered into justifications for censorship that recurred at local and regional administrative levels for the last three centuries of imperial rule.

In a similar vein, many novels record the perversity of humanity in ignoring that basic Confucian goodness of which all are capable. Personal moral reform and a return to uprightness appear far less commonly in these works than does the punishment that self-indulgent, socially exploitative, or criminal activity rightly deserves. Didactic messages appear in virtually all works, and
most are explicit. Even Carnal Prayer Mat, which parodies the homilies about sexual indulgence common to other works, ends with the spiritual progress of the central character.

Perhaps more than any other, Carnal Prayer Mat points to another theme that runs through the literati novels that were written for more sophisticated readers: the difficulty of true spiritual emancipation. The Chinese poetic tradition is commonly known in the West by its few outstanding poets, such as Wang Wei (c. 699–751), who express a sense of transcendence in their poetry, and yet other poets equally well known to Chinese readers, such as Tao Qian (365–427) and Su Shi (1037–1101), wrote numerous poems that complain of their failed attempts to find true solace. In the great novels, Story of the Stone and The Scholars among them, emancipation from human entanglements, the achievement of a general feeling of contentment, is rare, if not illusory. In sum, the novelistic tradition is Confucian in its concern for the individual in society; Buddhist or Taoist enlightenment does not appear in these works as a realistic goal.

With few exceptions, until approximately 1900 all Chinese novels appeared in blockprinted editions that facilitated the incorporation of pictures into the text. The Yuan period pinghua had been printed in small format with poorly proofread texts but with relatively fine illustrations: they compare favorably in quality with illustrated books in other categories of that time. They were produced in Fujian in southeast China, a major publishing area throughout the Ming. The early historical novels were produced as the quality of Fujian publishing was declining, and they tend to be illustrated at a significantly lower level of artistry than these precursors. Three Kingdoms appeared as text only, but virtually all subsequent novels were produced with illustrations. The 1522 Three Kingdoms, a large format edition (with pages measuring 6 x 9 inches), set the standard for later novels, the best editions of which were produced in the lower Yangtze cultural centers Nanjing, Suzhou, and Hangzhou. In pure physical size, many novels compared favorably with other, culturally more privileged publications during the Ming. Several novels from the early Qing have been identified as exceptionally fine examples of the printer’s art. But by the middle of the Qing period, novels were increasingly produced in smaller size editions on poor paper with simple, even unattractive illustrations. By 1800, the social stature of the novel clearly had changed.

From the quality of the books as physical objects, one can deduce some characteristics of the intended audiences. The original readers must have been relatively affluent, for many novels appeared in editions that could only have been expensive. By 1800, however, masterpieces and more popular fiction alike were produced in smaller formats on pages crowded with type and introduced by a limited number of crudely drawn portraits of the central characters. Books were everywhere by then, and China’s literate population was growing rapidly. In addition to the few large and relatively fine editions that easily accommodated leisure reading by candlelight, these small editions assumed a readership with the daytime leisure to allow sustained reading of these lengthy texts. Lithographic printing technology was introduced from Europe late in the 19th century, and Shanghai publishers began to produce small editions with tiny print, some so small that a magnifying lens was required to make it legible. The new novels of the time clearly were intended for readers unfamiliar with the workings of government, not the privileged literati of an earlier age. Thus in physical form as in content, the transition from premodern novels to the modern form can be observed to occur around 1900.

One final note on readership: The Plum in the Golden Vase had circulated in manuscript for decades before it was printed, although most late Ming novels were probably printed very soon after compilation. In contrast to the anguished condemnation of venality in The Plum in the Golden Vase, most novels were less serious, and many were produced for commercial gain throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. However, the masterpieces of the 18th century generally circulated only in manuscript form during their authors’ lifetimes. Their message, it would appear, was too personal to make public. Likewise, none of the 18th-century literati novelists had the connections with publishers or financiers who would support the initial cost of publication. These most complex examples of the novel form thus were initially meant to be read exclusively by small circles of selected friends for their personal message and to be appreciated by the discriminating for their painstaking art.

Robert E. Hegel

See also Six Classic Chinese Novels

Further Reading
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Chinese Novel

20th Century

In 1900 the final efforts of the Chinese Empress Dowager to expel foreign powers, liquidate their Chinese associates, and forestall modernization failed, and the ensuing decade was given over to wide-ranging reforms toward modernization under the imperial Qing dynasty government. The reforms greatly stimulated the publication of newspapers and periodicals, which in turn promoted both Chinese and foreign fiction. Between 1901 and 1911 the topic of reform inspired several notable Chinese novels of social criticism and satire devoted to representing the tribulations of common Chinese subjects and the failures of Chinese officials and the cultural elite either to adopt effective reforms or to live up to their own Confucian code of leadership through moral example and benevolence. Prominent among these novels are Li Boyuan’s Wenming xiaoshi (1903–05; A Brief History of Civilization) and Guanchang xiansheng ji (1903–05; The Bureaucrats), Wu Woyao’s Ershi nian mudu zhi guai xianzhuang (1903–10; Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed Over Two Decades) and Hen hai (1905; Sea of Woe), Zeng Pu’s roman à clef Nie hai hua (1905–07; Flower on an Ocean of Sin), and Liu E’s Lao Can youjì (1904–07; Travels of Lao Can). Of these, Travels of Lao Can exemplifies the striking social criticism and formal innovations among novels of this decade. While maintaining the traditional, vernacular, storyteller style of most previous Chinese novels, the new novels introduced such innovations as first-person and unreliable narrators. Such a hybrid form is found in Travels of Lao Can, where lyrical passages in prose, previously distinctive of poetry, are incorporated into the narrative as internal monologues of the narrator, with an effect close to stream of consciousness. As an author, Liu E viewed himself as a Confucian intellectual promoting reforms in an effort to forestall the threat of republican revolution. His protagonist, Lao Can, a Chinese physician, is episodically drawn into several situations that evoke his sympathies for ordinary subjects of the empire and indignant reflections on the harshness and irresponsibility of officials, all of which could lead to revolution.

The link between the cultural capital of a Confucian education and sociopolitical status was loosened but not entirely broken by the termination of the Confucian Civil Service Examination in 1905. The collapse of the last imperial dynasty in 1912 was followed directly by the formation of a republic with a constitution that provided a place for Confucian principles as “the basis for the cultivation of personal character in national education.” Confucian discourse had resisted giving fiction the same status as poetry and essays, and the classic Chinese novel had developed as an institution outside the academy. However, the reform movements at the close of the Qing, the last imperial dynasty, brought translations of foreign novels and a revaluation of the status of fiction in light of Hegelian aesthetics and a concern with national spirit. Fiction came to be discussed by writers with very respectable credentials as Chinese scholars.

The bulk of Chinese novels had developed vernacular styles and a form imitative of storytellers’ conventions. However, many of the most popular foreign novels of the late Qing dynasty were translated into the classical, literary styles that were the mark of status culture and avoided the idioms of storytelling. The fiction that attracted the most widespread attention among the youth of the cultural elite immediately following the Republican Revolution followed this trend. The most famous of a popular series of romance novels were Xu Zhenyu’s Yu li hun (1911–12; The Soul of Jade Pear Flowers) and Su Manshu’s...
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