

MING DYNASTY VERNACULAR FICTION AND HU SHI'S LITERARY REVOLUTION

Matthew Miller, Princeton University

This paper looks at the great works of Ming dynasty vernacular fiction through the lens of the thought of Hu Shi and other thinkers of the May Fourth generation. In particular, this paper investigates the concept of 'popular literature.' It asks whether Ming dynasty works can be considered "popular," as Hu would have us believe. This is a thorny issue, since, despite having ostensibly been written in the vernacular, the works are filled with classical language and allusions. According to some commentators, the works would only have been accessible to an elite few. Investigation into the style of the works, multiple versions of the works in concurrent publication, the economics of the publishing industry, and the state of education in the late Ming or early Qing suggests, however, that there was likely a large, non-elite (those who were not a part of the government nor the bureaucracy) audience for Ming vernacular literature. Thus we can reservedly conclude that Ming vernacular fiction literature held a position similar to the one Hu suggested for it.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Chinese officials and intellectuals were faced with an ideological paradox. Confucian tradition had been central to governance in China for centuries: governments that exemplified Confucian morality were perceived as successful, while governments that did not adhere to Confucian doctrine were deemed unsuccessful. Thus, Confucianism was tied directly to notions of governance; it formed the basis for the civil service exam and government decisions. In the 19th century, however, the Qing dynasty started to slowly collapse and became subjugated to Western powers. Chinese thinkers were left to ponder how countries that lacked China's Confucian tradition—which they believed was obviously superior—had the ability to bring about the defeat of China. In the seventy years between the first Opium War and the final collapse of the Qing government, officials had a range of ideas about how to address the state's issues. However, by 1919, it was obvious that none the government's policies had been sufficient to raise China's international standing. It was clear to a vanguard of thinkers that radical action was necessary.

Thinkers of the New Culture Movement believed that the problem lay in traditional Chinese culture. Political reformist protests also picked up after May 4, 1919, when news of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, which recognized Japanese interests in Shandong, reached China. May Fourth and New Culture movements leaders attacked the Confucian tradition and other elements of traditional Chinese society for hindering China's progress. In the eyes of these reformers, one of the chief parts

of Chinese society that needed drastic change was its literary tradition. Up until that moment, academic and official writing was all done in classical literary Chinese, which was very different from the spoken vernacular. This made learning to read and write tantamount to learning a second language, and was likely a reason why illiteracy remained relatively high. One reformer, Song Shu, who had studied in Japan, noted that while perhaps nine out of every ten Westerners could read and write, “In China. . . if we compute who can read today, among men there are approximately one out of a hundred and among women roughly one out of every forty thousand.”¹

Reformers identified two major paths to deal with the illiteracy and found a way to make learning and writing accessible to the wider population. The first was an unsuccessful push for script reform, which aimed to do away with Chinese characters. The other, far more influential movement was the “literary revolution,” which was founded by Hu Shi and supported by all the other key thinkers of the movement. Hu Shi described literary Chinese as a “half-dead language.”² Hu envisioned the creation of a new popular literature written in the vernacular. He called for an elimination of classical phrases and allusions and instead for the embracement of colloquialisms. Of his eight points for literary reform, he stated, “Do not imitate the ancients” and “Do not avoid popular expressions or popular forms of characters.”³ Chen Duxiu, founder of the influential magazine *New Youth*, May Fourth thinker, backer of Hu Shi’s literary revolution and future co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party, also took issue with the old literary style, saying that despite its ostensible artistic quality it was “actually of no benefit to the masses.”⁴

Precisely because most Chinese literature had been tied to classical language and allusion, Hu Shi contended that “colloquial stories alone in modern Chinese literature can be proudly compared with the first class literature of the world. Because they do not imitate the past, but only describe the society of the day, they have become genuine literature.”⁵ In Hu Shi’s view, the only way to create a true Chinese literature was through these colloquial stories. As one Chinese commentator puts it, for Hu Shi the only path to a ‘living literature’ is for it to be written by ‘living people.’⁶

Interestingly, despite his calls to refrain from “imitating the ancients,” Hu’s inspiration came partly from what were termed the “four great books” of Ming dynasty vernacular fiction as well as a number of Qing dynasty works of fiction. Although novels such as *Water Margin* (水浒传) and *Journey to the West* (西游记) were already more than three hundred years old, Hu Shi suggested that modern writers take inspiration from them. In the same essay in which he lambasted the practice of “imitating the ancients,” Hu Shi also stated that in writing “it is better to use the language of the *Water Margin* and *Journey to the West*, which are understood in every household.”⁷

1 WM. Theodore de Bary and Richard Lufano, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 2, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) 303.

2 Liu Bo (刘波), “胡适论 ‘活的文学,’” *Journal of Sichuan Normal University* 34, no.2 (2007): 75.

3 de Bary and Lufano, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 357.

4 *Ibid.*, 361.

5 de Bary and Lufano, 358.

6 Liu, 77.

7 *Ibid.*, 360.

Not only did Hu suggest that the works should be written in the vernacular, but he also suggested that writers should read these works and use them as models.⁸ Clearly Ming dynasty vernacular fiction was important to Hu as an example of literary expression in the vernacular.

Hu's admiration of the Ming novels is even more surprising, considering that there is much evidence to suggest that the books were not the products of a broad, 'popular' culture, but rather were written by and for members of the literati elite. In his foundational work *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, Andrew Plaks states that far from being products of 'popular' culture, the four novels owe more to "patterns of composition, critical theories and prevailing intellectual trends more characteristic of the literati milieu."⁹ He even titles his introduction to this work "The Literati Novel." Plaks ascribes all the serious works of vernacular literature in the Ming dynasty to the classically educated literati elite: "It was only after the Ming-Ch'ing transition that the enterprise of writing fiction began to pass into the hands of noticeably less cultivated individuals."¹⁰

How, then, are we to approach Ming vernacular fiction? Is it, as Hu Shi would suggest, broad and popular in appeal? Or is it exclusively the domain of the classically educated elite? As with many controversies, the answer is not as clear-cut as those two options, and a range of scholars from diverse backgrounds have come to very different conclusions. Although it is difficult to know for certain how different audiences reacted to the novels when they were first published, or even how many or what type of people bought or read them, conjectures can be made based on other approaches, such as literary analysis. As David Johnson notes, it may be impossible to survey the audience for any work in the Ming dynasty, but the texts themselves can give hints as to what sort of person would have been able to read and appreciate them. Thus, texts which made frequent literary allusions or used rare characters must have been aimed at the highly-educated reader.¹¹ Unfortunately, the literary analysis approach fails to yield a conclusive answer, but analysis of the social and economic changes that took place in the late Ming may shed some light on what sort of popular readership existed.

Even if a work similar to *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* or *Jin Ping Mei* retained levels of classical stylistic gloss that would make them less accessible to someone without a high level of education, recent scholarship suggests that the Ming dynasty saw a significant growth in non-elite education and literacy rates. China experienced a significant economic boom spurred in part by an influx of foreign silver in the mid Ming. During this period China developed something along the lines of a free market system in certain industries.¹² More jobs that required functional literacy were created and the education system was greatly expanded to accommodate this demand.

⁸ de Bary and Lufrano, 363.

⁹ Andrew Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹¹ David Johnson, "Chinese Popular Literature and Its Contexts," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 3, no. 2 (1981): 227.

¹² David Johnson, Andrew Nathan, and Evelyn Rawski, eds., *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 2-6.

The growth in literacy in turn stimulated demand for written materials.¹³ By the end of the Ming dynasty there was a flourishing commercial print industry producing materials not only for the elite or highly educated, but also for a broader audience, suggesting a significant degree of popular literacy.¹⁴ Included among books aimed at a broader audience were simplified versions of high literature, such as the four great books. While it may have been hyperbolic for Hu Shi to suggest that the language of the great Ming novels could be “understood in every household,” they were part of a broader move to create works of literature in the vernacular that would certainly have passed Hu’s and other May Fourth thinkers requirements for a living literature.

Before attempting to tackle the question of exactly how ‘popular’ the Ming vernacular novels were, it is necessary first to define clearly what the term ‘popular’ means. A simple working definition places ‘popular’ on a spectrum opposite ‘elite’ and suggests that a work of ‘popular’ literature is generally more accessible than the relatively difficult ‘elite’ literature.¹⁵ This schema, however, is hard to apply to Chinese fiction. As Patrick Hanan points out, classical Chinese and vernacular Chinese have similar grammatical structures and differ in their use of different vocabularies.¹⁶ A classically educated person would be expected to have knowledge of a certain lexicon, but people with more basic educations would have varying degrees of literacy. Thus, it is important not to discount people who lacked an elite level of literacy as being therefore ‘illiterate.’ Evelyn Rawski suggests that failing to recognize people with some level of functional literacy as ‘literate’ has led the gross underestimation of literacy rates in early modern China.¹⁷ David Johnson argues that there was a spectrum of functional literacy within which “gradations between different levels of literacy were infinitely fine.”¹⁸ In this context it is difficult to determine where ‘popular’ ends and ‘elite’ begins, particularly when the nature of the vernacular language of the time is not completely understood.¹⁹ On top of that, how does one reconcile with the idea that those who read the texts do not totally understand the meanings behind the text? It is certainly possible that those with a more basic education could read a vernacular piece aimed at an elite audience and understand most of what they read, even if some of the nuance and literary allusion was lost on them.

Alternatively, one might directly approach the appellations of ‘elite’ and ‘popular’ through the reference of class stratification. This approach recognizes the ability of educated, yet ‘non-elite’ readers to read serious literary works. As we shall see, the Ming dynasty saw a rise in education rates and in jobs that required a relatively high degree of functional literacy. Not all of these educated people, however, could be classified as being part of the ‘literati elite.’ That title might be aptly applied only to those select few who passed the imperial examination system and entered the upper ranks of the bureaucracy. Thus, the hundreds of thousands of government clerks and

13 Johnson, 232.

14 Evelyn Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), 6.

15 Johnson, 225.

16 Patrick Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 13-14.

17 Rawski, 3-4.

18 Johnson, Nathan, and Rawski, 37.

19 Ibid, 113.

literate, prosperous merchants could not hold any pretensions to being literati elite. This method of classification stresses the importance of the channel any given work takes in its propagation. A manuscript circulated among high ranking bureaucrats cannot be seen as ‘popular,’ but a book commercially printed would be available to anyone who could afford it, no matter what social position he occupied. As we shall see, non-elite channels for literature, even highly sophisticated literature, gained increasing importance in the late Ming dynasty with the growth of a highly educated yet ‘non-elite’ population.

This paper aims to examine how any commercially published work, written mostly in the vernacular, can be seen as ‘popular’ in some sense. This is not to deny the possibility of a work written in the vernacular that excludes potential readership as being too literary, but, as will be seen shortly, it proves difficult to apply that standard to our judgments of Ming fiction. One could just as easily argue also that popular, written fiction is impossible in a society in which a significant portion of the population is illiterate; simply by being written down, such fiction could not be appreciated by most people. An overly restrictive view, however, glosses over the significance that new modes of expression, such as commercial vernacular fiction, had in the Ming dynasty. The late Ming saw a great rise in the reading populace outside of official channels. The new reading population was undoubtedly significant and ‘popular’: it were not tied to the ruling elite but included people from across all strata of society. This approach is also useful in approaching the claims of the May Fourth thinkers, as it is the same standard Hu Shi applied. Hu Shi did not make significant distinctions between ‘vernacular,’ ‘popular,’ and ‘of the common people’; to him all these categories signified the same thing.²⁰

Andrew Plaks states explicitly that one of his aims in *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel* is to “refute the common view that this genre [the Ming vernacular novel] is primarily the outgrowth of the popular tradition.”²¹ Plaks points to both the language used within the works, which often use classical structures and literary allusion, and to the structures of the novels as a whole, which seem to conform to a nuanced framework he calls “the literati novel.” This line of argument is in some ways very convincing, especially when noting the scale of the works in question. Unlike the image that most people have of novels, the Ming novels are epic in scale, with most accepted versions of them having 100 or more chapters. They are also notable for the sheer number of characters they have and the complexity that arises from having multiple storylines woven together.

The language used in much of Ming vernacular fiction is also very advanced, even when the fiction is imitating much simpler, perhaps more popular source material. One writer of Ming vernacular fiction, Feng Menglong—who coincidentally was the one who coined “the four great books” as a reference to *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin*, *Journey to the West*, and *Jin Ping Mei*²² and played an

20 Liu Bo (刘波), “胡适论‘活的文学,’” *Journal of Sichuan Normal University* 34, no.2 (2007): 76.

21 Plaks, 16.

22 Wang Qizhou (王齐洲), “四大奇书’命名的文化意义,” *Journal of Hubei University of Economics* 2, no. 1, (2004): 116.

important part in bringing *Jin Ping Mei* to print²³—was renowned for writing short stories presented as adaptations of playbooks. He was, however, a highly-educated person who had been classically educated in preparation for taking the civil service examination.²⁴ After failing the examination, he found success as a writer. His classical education undoubtedly influenced his writing style, as the vocabulary he uses is plentiful; as one writer says, “it doesn’t reject any useful words at all.”²⁵ Feng’s diction is more elevated than that used in actual playbooks of the time.²⁶ While Feng copied the form of popular *hua ben* playbooks, his mock playbooks were likely intended only for the highly educated and cultured readers.²⁷ Plaks approaches the language used in the longer novels in a similar way and concludes again that they were likely not intended for a broad audience.

Plaks has much to say about the composition of these works, it is also worth noting the strong tradition that literary analysis holds to contrary opinion. A brief discussion on just a few of the areas of contention should serve to illustrate the range of contradictory opinions literary analysis of the works results in. The work that Plaks uses as an archetype of the literati novel, *Jin Ping Mei*, serves as a useful illustration for this sort of disagreement. *Jin Ping Mei*, like all of the novels in question, is a long and complex work, especially notable for the way the author weaves in portions of drama, poetry, historical texts, religious texts and popular song. Plaks suggests that the manner in which the author transforms earlier popular material “reveals a highly sophisticated literary sensibility.”²⁸ This is an important note to the premise of his work. The novels often owe much to popular histories or folk tales, using them as starting points for broader narratives. Their roots in popular materials, however, should not necessarily be taken as signs of broad appeal. In the case of *Jin Ping Mei*, the author’s willingness to take inspiration from all sources leads not only to the incorporation of popular song, but also to classical language pieces. Thus, despite the presence of popular influences in the work, *Jin Ping Mei* can be seen as a work of no mean literary sophistication.

Due to its sophistication, Plaks works on the assumption that *Jin Ping Mei* was enjoyed only by the literati-elite. Some accounts of the earlier versions of the novel support this assumption. Accounts suggest that only twelve copies of the early manuscript form of the book existed.²⁹ These manuscripts were passed, sometimes in incomplete form, between different readers, who were largely officials or well known public personages. Certainly, all of the early readers of *Jin Ping Mei* possessed a high level of education.³⁰

Despite *Jin Ping Mei*’s liberal use of classical poetry, many commentators take a

23 Kai-wing Chow, *Publishing, Culture and Power in Early Modern China*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 85.

24 Miao Yonghe (缪咏禾), 冯梦龙与三言, (Shenyang: Liaoning Educational Publishing House, 1992), 10.

25 Ibid, 32.

26 Li Shuanghua (李双华), “冯梦龙是俗文学家吗?,” *Journal of Jiangnan University (Humanities and Social Sciences)* 21, no.5, (2002): 39.

27 Ibid, 32.

28 Plaks, 71.

29 Ye Guitong (叶桂桐), 论金瓶梅, (郑州: 中州古籍出版社, 2005), 26.

30 Ibid, 27.

less laudatory stance towards the book's literary merit. Actually, some see the author's use of disparate sources, such as the poetry, drama and folk song mentioned above, as detrimental to the work's overall quality. C. T. Hsia, for instance, observed contradictions that often occur between the central story and the poems and popular songs incorporated into the book.³¹ By utilizing as many other materials as he could, the author was sometimes careless—he used poems or songs to describe people or things in ways that directly contradicted his previous narrative. Similarly, two different accounts are given on the rebirth of one of the main characters within four pages of each other.³² As a result, *Jin Ping Mei*, in Hsia's opinion, manifests "obvious structural anarchy,"³³ much to the detriment of the novel as a whole.

One would naturally wonder why a novel otherwise carefully crafted and passed between highly educated, undoubtedly discerning readers would be plagued by such contradictions. One theory suggests that the book was actually adapted from a tradition of generations of oral storytellers who told the story of the main character accompanied by songs and poems.³⁴ If this is the case, such discrepancies could easily be explained as the differences between different versions of the story as it evolved. There are, however, many scholars who disagree with this hypothesis, including Patrick Hanan who has worked extensively with the text.³⁵ Whether *Jin Ping Mei* was adapted from an oral tradition or not, it is worth noting the importance of such sources on the work. By the late Ming dynasty, songbooks and play books were popular and there was a high demand for them.³⁶ It seems likely that he incorporated popular songs and play elements because of their popularity.

The popularity of some of *Jin Ping Mei*'s source material may account for the popularity the book has had historically. *Jin Ping Mei*, although circulated in manuscript form at first, was later printed and would go on to be a substantial moneymaker for the print industry.³⁷ Thus, despite a certain sophisticated sheen to the novel, enough people found it enjoyable to make it a major print success. In light of this and the seeming carelessness with which it was written, it would not be wise to jump to the conclusion that *Jin Ping Mei* appealed only to a limited audience. The audience was large enough to make it a success, thus, either it appealed to a broader audience than just the highly educated or there were many more highly educated people to read it than some commentators would imagine.

The Water Margin (Shui-hu Zhuan) presents a similarly contradictory situation: in some ways it appears a very sophisticated work of literature, but this glosses over the ways it was revolutionarily broad in its outlook. Like *Jin Ping Mei*, *Shui-hu Zhuan* is written in a mixed literary style, alternating between more formal and more colloquial patterns of speech in an incredibly subtle manner.³⁸ When describing the

31 C. T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel*, (Ithaca: Columbia University Press, 1968), 173.

32 Ibid, 174.

33 Ibid, 180.

34 Ibid, 167.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid, 169.

37 Qizhou, 116.

38 Deborah Porter, "Toward an Aesthetic of Chinese Vernacular Fiction: Style and the Colloquial Medium of Shui-hu

outlaws who are the main actors in the story, the text speaks colloquially, but when handling court figures, the text adopts a more classical tone. The language used by and to describe the outlaws also shifts subtly on the colloquial-classical spectrum depending on the situation the outlaws are in.³⁹ *Shui-hu Zhuan* is certainly a subtle work of literature as far as its language is concerned and one likely designed by a highly educated author. As one scholar, Deborah Porter, states, “*Shui-hu Chuan* is the product of a brilliant novelist who exploits his mastery of Chinese to create a sophisticated, expressive instrument capable of profound revelation.”⁴⁰

It would be a mistake, however, to regard *Shui-hu Zhuan* there as a work designed to appeal solely to the highly or classically educated. While *Shui-hu Zhuan* is certainly a subtle work, that does not mean it is above comprehension for the average educated reader. Far from it, many passages exemplify the somewhat revolutionary use of plain expression. One recurrent feature of classical Chinese literary style is the use of certain stock phrases, passages and allusions used to describe a person or scene instead of directly describing it. Such phrases are not only lost on those who have not been educated in their meaning and back story, but also becomes convention after years of re-use and fall into cliché.⁴¹ Specificity in description is also lost if the author needs to rely on preordained passages and expressions. The Jin Shengtān (Chin Sheng-t’an) edition of *Shui-hu Chuan* does itself a service by not using stock poetic passages at all to describe actions but rather using only direct language.⁴² It is worth noting that the elimination of stock classical passages, and instead the direct use describing in colloquial language was one of Hu Shi’s specific suggestions for the creation of a new literary tradition in China.

One of the inherent problems in the attempt to use literary analysis to determine the audience of these novels is that many different versions of each of these novels exist and it is often unclear which version should be considered canonical. Complete texts of *Shui-hu Chuan*, for instance, can be split into two categories, the *fan-ben* (繁本) or “full recension” and the *jian-ben* (简本) or “simpler recension.” At only 70 chapters, the *jian-ben* version is indeed much shorter than the 100-chapter *fan-ben* version, but it is written entirely in a condensed classical style and would itself have hardly be considered vernacular.⁴³ Of the recensions written in the vernacular, however, there are still many different versions. The version Hu Shi would have read was the Jin Shengtān edition, which was dominant for hundreds of years.⁴⁴ Since the 1940s, however, this version has fallen from favor, partly because of political pressure and partly because it is in some ways incomplete, a 71-chapter abridgement of the full novel.⁴⁵ Editions with 100, 115 and 120 chapters also exist.⁴⁶

Chuan,” *T’oung Pao* 79 (1993): 113-114

39 Hanan, 15.

40 Porter, 113.

41 Hsia, 100.

42 Ibid, 100.

43 Porter, 115.

44 Plaks, 292.

45 She Daping (余大平), “《水浒传》传播问题的历史与现状,” *Journal of Ezhou University* (2006).

46 Hsia, 82.

The decision of which edition is the definitive or canonical version is not necessarily an easy task. Historically, the preferred edition has been chosen partly for aesthetic reasons, but also partly for political reasons. Chronologically, the 100- and 120-chapter editions both predate the Jin Shengtian 71-chapter edition, but the Jin Shengtian edition was deemed aesthetically superior after its publication in 1641.⁴⁷ Although it is an abridgment of the longer versions, it was seen as a tighter, more cohesive novel. In particular, the last forty chapters of the longer editions of the novel involve the rebels who are the main protagonists; upon defeat, they submitted to the government and worked for the state. This somewhat unexpected change of roles for the rebels is missing entirely from the Jin Shengtian edition, giving the novel's end a very different flavor. For nearly 300 years, this was the version of the novel that all but a select few read. It is likely that when Hu Shi first began writing on his literary revolution in the late 1910s that he did not know another version existed at all.⁴⁸ After longer editions of the novel were rediscovered in the 1920s, he bought a 120-chapter version of the novel. He was clearly uncomfortable with the implication that the novel he had read for so long was so incomplete and inauthentic that sources say he never even opened the longer edition he bought.⁴⁹

Most modern scholarship on *Shui-hu Chuan* is based on the longer editions of the novel. This is partly because those editions are older, but also partly because Jin Shengtian was seen as a "feudal reactionary" by the Communist Party.⁵⁰ From the 1950s to the end of the 1970s it was nearly impossible to find a copy of Jin Shengtian's edition in mainland China. The Communist Party was, however, still conflicted about the longer editions of the novel. Mao Zedong had long referenced the rebels as exemplars of revolutionary spirit in his speeches and writings; the idea that such model revolutionaries could be forced to submit to the state and effectively betray their cause was unsettling to him.⁵¹ Despite this unease, the Communist party played a role in pushing the historically popular Jin Shengtian edition of *Shui-hu Chuan* out of public discourse in China.

Even without the political pressure to influence scholarly decisions, the process of determining which edition to use to represent the work is not a complex. Not only do the different recensions differ in length due to the omission of the final chapters, but the language used in each recension is also different. Thus, literary analysis will yield a different view of the novel, depending on which version is read. The Jin Shengtian edition is notable in part because Jin deleted a number of poetic passages, not only arguably increasing the literary merit of the work, but also making it easier for less classically educated people to read.⁵² By the late Ming dynasty commercial publishers felt free to add or delete passages or chapters from the novel whenever they so desired.⁵³ In this sort of situation it is unclear which edition should be considered

47 She, 52.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid, 53.

52 Hsia, 100.

53 Ibid, 82.

the ‘real’ edition of the novel: the oldest? The one with the most literary merit? Even if such seemingly straightforward metrics are adopted, they too are difficult to apply. The relationship between the novel and Ming dynasty *Zaju* operas from which many of the characters and scenarios are derived is complicated and not well understood.⁵⁴ Thus, even if the earliest version of the novel is extant, it is unclear how much of the novel was the original author’s work and how much was adapted from existing plays. If one attempts to decide based on the literary merit of the texts, one must then contend with how exactly to measure such merit.

One further complication that is often looked over in discussions of the Ming vernacular novels is that the classic vernacular novels were published in different versions for different audiences. Besides the normal editions that were largely the focus of current scholarship, there were also “fully illustrated” editions for less educated readers with pictures on each page and a shorter, simpler text.⁵⁵ The illustrated editions also utilized a simpler linguistic style and lacked many passages in classical Chinese or literary references common in the more complicated versions of the novels.⁵⁶ Thus, the Chinese classic novels challenge Western notions of literary narratives by encompassing groups of related narratives that included simpler ones designed for a less educated audience. These pictorial versions of the novels had quite an audience in the Ming dynasty. Nearly half of all extant Ming versions of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, for instance, are in this pictorial style. This suggests that they were nearly as popular as the more complicated editions.⁵⁷ In the case of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, it is worth noting that the earliest extant version of the pictorial edition dates nearly fifty years after the earliest extant version of the more complicated style, which would suggest that the complicated version was created first.⁵⁸ Although later creations, the pictorial versions represent a way in which a broader spectrum of the populace could interact with the great novels of the time.

Therefore, the use of literary analysis to accurately determine who the audience for any “novel” was difficult. Not only does such an endeavor require nuanced knowledge of what sort of language was used by various social strata in Ming the dynasty, but the presence of multiple different strains of each narrative question our very notion of what a single novel is. Simplified versions of each of the novels may appear like different works altogether, but it is unclear to what extent the collection of different versions of any of these stories were seen to represent a single narrative or multiple separate narratives. Evaluating whether a novel can be seen as ‘popular’ or not is an even trickier proposition. It involves determining what exactly would constitute a ‘popular’ novel in the Ming dynasty.

Even if the great works of Ming dynasty fiction were aimed at a relatively well educated audience, however, that does not necessarily mean that Hu Shi was wrong

54 Gao Rihui (高日晖), “明代水浒杂剧与《水浒传》的关系度,” *Journal of Dalian University* 26, no. 1 (2005).

55 Anne E. McLaren, “Ming Audiences and Vernacular Hermeneutics: the Uses of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*,” *T’oung Pao* 81 (1995): 51-52.

56 Ibid, 53.

57 Ibid, 77.

58 Ibid, 65.

to approach them as works with relatively broad appeal and models for his literary revolution. The late Ming dynasty saw greater rates of education and literacy as well as a boom in the commercial printing industry. The result was a larger population of highly literate people than ever before in Chinese history who formed a considerable market for books of all sorts. The percentage of non-literati elite people who possessed at least some degree of functional literacy grew tremendously. The readership for vernacular fiction, even vernacular fiction with a high degree of literary sophistication, also grew considerably among the non-ruling strata of Chinese society. A consideration of the growth of the literate populace is necessary to evaluate the claim that Ming vernacular fiction represents a 'popular' literary movement.

Although it is common to assume, as reformer Song Shu did, that the vast majority of people in early modern China were illiterate, recent scholarship actually suggests that literacy rates have been underestimated. Evelyn Rawski suggests that this is partly due to the tendency to only incorporate fully literate people in estimates of literacy.⁵⁹ Only considering those with 'literati' or civil service exam levels of literacy will underestimate the total population of people with at least some level of literacy. The percentage of functionally literate people was, while perhaps small by modern standards, much larger than often assumed.

While it is impossible to survey people in the Ming dynasty to determine their level of literacy, indirect measures should give a good sense for how many people were literate. The written civil service exam, for instance, hints to how many classically educated people there were. The exam required a high level of familiarity with the Confucian classics and classical Chinese, thus it is safe to assume that any applicant for the exam received enough education to be fully literate in classical Chinese.⁶⁰ By the late Ming the number of people taking the exams and even passing the lowest provincial level had grown considerably.⁶¹ Although perhaps as few as 300 candidates passed the highest level of the metropolitan exam, only a slim fraction of those who took the exam at lower levels earned the highest degree. Most who took the exam, even those at the lowest provincial level, failed. Most who succeeded at the provincial level failed at the higher levels. Despite this, the number of successful provincial candidates increased significantly in the late Ming dynasty. In 1400 there were only a total of 30,000 successful provincial candidates in all of China, but by 1700 the number had ballooned to 500,000.⁶² This number, of course, only represents those who passed the provincial examination. In 1601 only around 6.4 percent of candidates passed the provincial exams.⁶³ By the late Qing dynasty the percentage of successful provincial candidates had dropped to 1.5 percent of examinees.⁶⁴ It is clear that the number of classically educated people was therefore many times greater than the number of people who actually succeeded in passing the exam. David John-

59 Rawski, 3-4.

60 Johnson, 37.

61 Benjamin Elman, "Political, Social and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China," *The Journal of Asiatic Studies* 50, no. 1, (1991): 14.

62 Ibid.

63 Chow, 94.

64 Elman, 14.

son estimates that by the mid Qing dynasty classically educated commoners actually numbered in the millions.⁶⁵

The growing number of candidates and exam takers who were successful at the provincial level but unsuccessful at higher levels was actually very significant for the development of non-elite, print fiction in China. As Anne E. McLaren has suggested, unsuccessful exam takers represented something of a “middle class’ between the elite and the commoners.”⁶⁶ Although disconnected from governance, they were highly educated and became important producers and consumers of popular culture. Feng Menglong was himself a failed exam candidate who spent much of his youth studying to take the exam.⁶⁷ He was, however, repeatedly unsuccessful. Unable to serve as an official, he turned instead to teaching and writing⁶⁸ and as a writer of vernacular fiction he would gain much renown. Despite failure in the exam system, unsuccessful exam candidates were nonetheless highly educated and would have been able to understand even the most sophisticated literary work. It is still necessary, however, to recognize that they occupied a different social position than the ‘elite.’

There was also a similarly sizable population of people with a lower level of functional literacy. Evelyn Rawski has suggested that community schools in the Ming dynasty flourished with government support and received even more support under Qing emperors.⁶⁹ Even many peasant children would have been able to receive some level of education, especially in the winter when they would not have been working.⁷⁰ The expansion of the economy and the growth of something approaching a free market in some sectors also stimulated the demand for occupations staffed by literate people.⁷¹ Successful merchants, for instance, might be expected to have some degree of literacy in order to facilitate bookkeeping. Government clerks were also relatively literate people who occupied a decidedly non-elite status. In the Ming dynasty there were likely more than 300,000 literate clerks who served local governments at any one time. There were term limits for government clerks, so the number of literate people qualified to hold the position must have been significantly more than that.⁷² Despite their relatively good education, clerks can hardly be considered elite. All in all, Evelyn Rawski estimates that perhaps as many as half of all school age males in the Ming dynasty received a basic education and had some degree of functional literacy.⁷³

In the past, it has often also been assumed that books in early modern China must have been rare commodities and unattainable for all but the wealthiest people. This was assumed because even after the invention of the movable type press in the West, books were still expensive and out of reach for most people. It was also assumed that since the Chinese language had thousands of unique characters, the investment

65 Johnson, Nathan, and Rawski, 59-60.

66 McLaren, 64.

67 Miao, 10.

68 Ibid, 11.

69 Rawski, 33.

70 Ibid, 53.

71 Johnson, Nathan, and Rawski, 12.

72 Rawski, 8.

73 Johnson, Nathan, and Rawski, 11.

required to make a moveable typeset for the Chinese language would be prohibitively expensive.⁷⁴ On top of the initial investment, using such type would be burdensome. Without moveable type, which was key in the development of cheap, mass print in the West, earlier commentators figured that early modern China simply could not have created affordable print material. On top of this, most extant Ming dynasty books were of high quality and Western historians figured that such books were undoubtedly expensive. While the extent of book production through the use of moveable type print in the Ming dynasty is often underestimated,⁷⁵ it is true that Chinese printers seemed to recognize the difficulties inherent in using moveable type to print Chinese materials, and largely used woodblock print instead. Recent scholarship suggests, however, that with cheaply produced paper and a rise in available labor, woodblock printing was able to produce very affordable print materials not out of reach even of ordinary urban workers.⁷⁶

While paper in the west was made from rag until the late nineteenth century and remained quite expensive, Chinese producers made paper from a number of different materials, including significantly cheaper bamboo paper.⁷⁷ The use of woodblock printing, instead of moveable type, should not be taken as a sign that Chinese books must have been expensive to produce. The carving of each woodblock likely took about as much time as setting a page of type would and the labor used to carve the blocks was very cheap.⁷⁸ The price of a book printed in the Ming dynasty would vary depending on the quality of the paper and craftsmanship, and some of them could be relatively cheap. There were instances when book prices of Ming dynasty materials were very expensive. While this has led some historians to suggest that all books were expensive at the time, it would also be a mistake to assume that those prices are indicative of book prices in general. The extant information on book prices from the Ming dynasty deals mostly with books of very high quality and collector items, which have prices that reflect their quality or rarity.⁷⁹ Common books of normal or poor quality are unlikely to turn up in such sources. Books aimed at non-elite readers, which were likely the most numerous in circulation, are actually the ones with the fewest extant copies because book collectors were largely uninterested in them.⁸⁰

Extrapolating the price of books from the cost of production and what is known about Ming dynasty publishing practice suggests prices that were no more expensive than any other basic commodity and not necessarily out of reach of urban workers. For example, postal workers and clerks, which were so numerous, were paid relatively high wages, ostensibly to reduce the temptation of corruption, though clerks often did augment their incomes illegally.⁸¹ These necessarily literate workers would very

74 Chow, 58.

75 *Ibid.*, 68.

76 *Ibid.*, 23, 47.

77 *Ibid.*, 29.

78 *Ibid.*, 36, 67.

79 *Ibid.*, 39.

80 Johnson, 65.

81 Chow, 53-54.

likely have been able to afford books to read. Not only were urban workers able to afford their own small collections of books, but early Western travelers to Guangdong noticed the presence of circulating libraries as well.⁸² The expansion of the Chinese economy in the Ming dynasty thus facilitated the creation of book culture in China through the proliferation of relatively cheap and available books. There were books aimed at every potential literate social strata, including “unpretentious editions of the Four Books,”⁸³ education primers,⁸⁴ and vernacular fiction aimed at the non-elite. While there was a substantial portion of the population that did not receive an education and were illiterate, reading and books did not only figure in the lives of the elite.

It is easy to see why some commentators reject Ming dynasty vernacular as works of popular fiction based on their structure and the language they utilize, just as they did to the four great books. In this light, how are we to evaluate the opinions of the May Fourth movement thinkers, who put such literature up on a pedestal as works worthy of emulation in their proposed literary revolution? Ultimately, these two attitudes are not as incongruous as they may seem on the surface. While Hu Shi and others stressed the importance of writing in the vernacular, they did not suggest that literary quality be sacrificed to make all writing universally accessible. Rather than creating a literature that was understood and appealed to everyone, the May Fourth thinkers more likely wanted to educate the people until they were able to understand more sophisticated literary works. Lu Xun, for instance, was contemptuous towards the notions of “studying from the masses” or “moving to the center of people,” both common early Communist slogans.⁸⁵ Lu Xun was not interested in appeasing the literary desires of the masses, but was interested in “enlightening” them. He believed that without proper guidance, people might “cling to useless ideas, maybe even harmful things.”⁸⁶ Despite being an advocate for literary reform and writing in the vernacular, Lu Xun did not believe in the adaptation of literature to fit the desires of the broader population.

The May Fourth thinkers were actually in some ways quite tied to the traps of Chinese classical literature and education. At the beginning of one article about literature, Lu Xun ironically pointed out that in the first few years of Chen Duxiu’s magazine *New Youth*, which was an important progressive publication that had a central role in the May Fourth movement, nearly all of the articles and stories were written in classical Chinese. Those written in the vernacular were mostly short poems.⁸⁷ Indeed it was not uncommon for reformers, who decried the use of Classical Chinese, to write their manifestos in Classical Chinese.⁸⁸

This should not be taken as hypocrisy on the part of early twentieth century Chinese progressives. Rather, they had a complicated relationship with certain parts of classical Chinese culture, recognizing both the literary quality and the backwards

82 Rawski, 11.

83 Johnson, Nathan, and Rawski, 41.

84 Chow, 46.

85 Li Xinling (李新宁), “鲁迅：中国现代知识分子话语的基石,” 鲁迅研究月刊, no. 7 (1998): 7-8.

86 Ibid, 10.

87 Lu Xun (鲁迅), “《中国新文学大系》小说二集序,” 呐喊, (西安: 陕西师范大学出版社, 2009): 283.

88 deBary and Lufano, 246.

thinking of the Chinese literary tradition. While they called for a literary reform that would make literature more accessible to a non-classically educated population, such reformers recognized the need for more sophisticated types of literature for better-educated readers. Even early Communist Party leaders, who were so enamored of the idea of “learning from the masses” recognized this demand for more sophisticated literature. In his famous speech “On Art and Literature” given in Yan’an in 1942, Mao Zedong stated clearly that the purpose of literature was to “serve the millions upon millions of working people.”⁸⁹ Mao did however concede that having only literature aimed at the working masses would not do: “Being advanced members of the masses, the cadres are generally better educated than the masses and art and literature of a higher level are entirely necessary to them.”⁹⁰ Mao also spoke of the need for the cadres to help educate the masses.

Ming dynasty vernacular fiction actually fits very well with the image that the May Fourth thinkers had for vernacular literature. Works of varying degrees of sophistication were produced for a populace with varying degrees of education and therefore varying degrees of literacy. Evidently, some pieces written ostensibly in the ‘vernacular’ would very well have been understood and appreciated by only a select few, but that does not deny the presence of a significant literate population and a literature suited to their desires. If the four great works of Ming dynasty vernacular fiction sometimes appear to be too literary for the average reader, that does not invalidate Hu Shi’s attitudes towards the works and his literary revolution. The four great works were after all so named presumably in part because they were of better quality than the rest of vernacular fiction of the day. The growth of vernacular fiction in the Ming dynasty was still significant for a literate populace larger than sometimes assumed. Thus, it would be a mistake not to recognize the growth of popular literacy in early modern China.

WORKS CITED

- Chen, Duxiu. “On Literary Revolution.” Edited by De Bary, W.M. Theodore and Lufrano, Richard in *Sources of Chinese Tradition 2*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.
- Chow, Kai-wing. *Publishing, Culture and Power in Early Modern China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Elman, Benjamin. “Political, Social and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China.” *The Journal of Asiatic Studies* 50, no. 1 (1991).
- 高日晖 (Gao, Rihui). “明代水浒杂剧与《水浒传》的关系度.” *Journal of Dalian University* 26, no. 1 (2005).
- Hanan, Patrick. *The Chinese Vernacular Story*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Hsia, C. T. *The Classic Chinese Novel*. Ithaca: Cornell East Asia Program, 1996.
- Hu, Shi. “A Preliminary Discussion of Literary Reform.” Edited by De Bary, W.M. Theodore and Lufrano, Richard in *Sources of Chinese Tradition 2*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.
- Hu, Shi. “Constructive Literary Revolution—A Literature of National Speech.” Edited by De Bary, W.M. Theodore and Lufrano, Richard in *Sources of Chinese Tradition 2*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.
- Johnson, David. “Chinese Popular Literature and Its Contexts.” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 3, no. 2 (1981).
- Johnson, David, Nathan, Andrew J. and Rawski, Evelyn, eds. *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*. Berkeley: University

89 deBary and Lufrano, 442.

90 deBary and Lufrano, 443.

- of California Press, 1985.
- Li, Shuanghua (李双华).“冯梦龙是俗文学家吗?.”*Journal of Jiangnan University* (Humanities and Social Sciences) 21, no.5 (2002).
- Li, Xinning (李新宁).“鲁迅：中国现代知识分子话语的基石.”鲁迅研究月刊，no. 7 (1998).
- Liu, Bo (刘波).“胡适论‘活的文学’.”*Journal of Sichuan Normal University* 34, no.2 (2007).
- Lu, Xun (鲁迅).“《中国新文学大系》小说二集序” in 呐喊. 西安：陕西师范大学出版社，2009.
- Mao, Zedong. “On Art and Literature.” Edited by De Bary, W.M. Theodore and Lufrano, Richard in *Sources of Chinese Tradition 2*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.
- Miao, Yonghe (缪咏禾). 冯梦龙与三言. Shenyang: Liaoning Educational Publishing House, 1992.
- Plaks, Andrew. *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- Porter, Deborah. “Toward an Aesthetic of Chinese Vernacular Fiction: Style and the Colloquial Medium of Shui-hu Chuan.” *T'oung Pao* 79, Second Series (1993).
- Rawski, Evelyn. *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979.
- She, Daping (佘大平).“《水浒传》传播问题的历史与现状.”*Journal of Ezhou University* (2006).
- Song, Shu, “Liuzhai Beiyi.” Edited by De Bary, W.M. Theodore and Lufrano, Richard in *Sources of Chinese Tradition 2*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.
- Wang, Qizhou (王齐洲).“‘四大奇书’命名的文化意义.” *Journal of Hubei University of Economics* 2, no. 1 (2004).
- Ye, Guitong (叶桂桐). 论金瓶梅. 郑州：中州古籍出版社. 2005.