

SOME REMARKS ON THE BIRTH OF THE CHINESE STORY

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Chinese short stories and novels differ greatly from their European counterparts. The birth of the Chinese story is closely linked to the development of the Chinese commercial cities, in which their authors, audience and typical figures lived. Historical themes occur frequently, but the real heroes of the stories are people living on the periphery of society: merchants, thieves, and other city-dwellers. The imperial court and high officials only play a limited role. Young scholars and failed examination candidates, on the other hand, make a frequent appearance. The authors of most stories are unknown to us, as the stories have developed for centuries, and their written versions were compiled relatively lately, centuries after the emergence of the original story cycles.

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When we try to make some remarks on the Chinese story, we cannot say that we are speaking about the Chinese *novel*, because the notion of “novelty” is alien from the Chinese tradition. In China it is what is old that is respectable, and ancient character contributes greatly to the value of a piece of work. That is why we cannot speak about the Chinese novel that has an interesting, exciting ending – at least in the European sense. In China, the subject matter of the story must be traced back to the past – e.g., it may be based on a historical anecdote – and this type of novels and short stories has a vast audience in that country. As a rule, what Europeans label as “novel” is called “short story” in Chinese. When a number of such stories are collected in a volume, it might be called a novel, though the writings are not necessarily related to each other, and are sometimes not even connected to the biographies of the same heroes. So the same name applies to the novel and to the collection of short stories.

In traditional Chinese literature short stories were originally written in a decorative, classical language. For centuries they did not count them as true literature, they were not considered to be parts of the official Chinese tradition. The popular short stories were born in the second millennium, the genre came to real life around the 13–14th centuries. Their themes – which were either historical or otherwise well-known stories – began their lives in the first centuries of the millennium. Their lan-

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guage was not far from the living speech, their story was lively like a tale – sometimes they rather resembled an admonition or a joke. These new short stories were, in a way, not very different from the old type of Chinese story: they dealt with their themes directly, informally, and, of course, they were despised by the Chinese officials. Because of their impertinence and sincerity, and their tradition-criticising spirit, the stories were looked upon with hostility, or at least with suspicion, by the Confucian scholars.

The author or authors of the short stories are generally unknown; most of the pieces were formed and rewritten for centuries, so their special features are the result of the work of many generations. Even some of the oldest works deal with well-known earlier themes, mostly in the form of short episodes. These stories, basically alien from official Chinese culture, appeared at a time when many foreigners arrived at China, who did not speak about their past with pleasure. They generally spoke about the vicissitudes of the period of their fathers, this being the base of the popularity of these stories.

This quickly changing, mobile and vivid genre was popular, first of all, in the cities. Not only was the ordinary audience wider there, but so was the society of scholars and literati. The writers were familiar not only to the figures in the stories, but also to the popular anecdotes, born among the city population and its agricultural neighbourhood. They also willingly wrote semi-historical stories, not only respected accounts of the deeds of the ancestors. The development of the genre was also promoted by the many foreigners coming into the country, who brought their foreign stories with themselves, but also respected Chinese culture at the same time. Most of these tale-bringing foreigners were wandering merchants, who were first friendly to the Chinese – this being their interest – and their appearance meant a source of new motives in the old texts.

In the Song period (960–1279) flourishing cities developed with a population requiring entertainment, so story-tellers, who made ample use of popular folk tales and legends, satisfied a real demand. The written versions of their stories, however, have not come down to us in their original form, only in later rewritten editions, separated from their original background. For example those elements of the traditions of the Yuan dynasty that were considered as national, remained to us mostly in a form on which the highly literate elite of the Ming dynasty has left its mark. The collections containing these rewritten pieces were generally compiled in the second half of the 16th century, even though many of them referred to earlier editions.

The hero of these stories is not only the cultured scholar anymore, respected by the society; it can be a more popular figure, the charming, mischievous figure, the vagabond, whose figure is formed in a most practical way. Even the funny, naughty, and skilful thief can find his place among the positive heroes, who cannot find another way to use his talents.

Sometimes a high-ranking official also appears in the story, who is usually said to arrive at the city at the order of the emperor, in order to correct the injustices and solve the problems of the people – as justice is a most important value for the emperor and his bureaucracy. However, the most popular hero at this time is the thief,

who steals from the rich to support the poor and unlucky. The solution of the conflicts is frequently brought about by the master of jesting, who might not respect law, but is skilful enough to get the treasures of others. This is how justice is done to the rich and merciless, who have the authority to punish thieves, even though they are the ones who deserve to be punished. The commercial cities, and the merchants themselves, can be found on the periphery of great regions and great settlements – these were the places where both the themes and the audience of the “short stories” could be found, which explains the popularity of these works.

The person at the peak of the society – the highest “official”, that is, the emperor – is distant from this world, which is characterised by the everyday life of wealthy merchants and poor vagrants. The highest authority only appears in the story for a few sentences, mainly when administering justice. Therefore, poor people usually do justice for themselves without turning to the law and its officials. A member of a powerful, or even the imperial, family might take part in the events, for example a prince can play the role of fate, or act as a benevolent supporter of the poor. So the emperor and his court might sometimes appear in this world, but do not live their life there. Even high-ranking officials are very rare in the stories. However, the world of the villages is almost as far from the scenes of the stories – the cities – as the emperor; the countryside is usually seen with the eye of a traveller.

We often see young scholars travelling to the city to take the official examination; they are, of course, mainly men, though girls also appear, hiding their origin and social status. Actually, the authors of the stories might have been such unsuccessful examination candidates who could not get higher jobs because of their failure at the exams. They had no other way to make a living than becoming merchants or telling anecdotes and stories in the inns. We can be grateful to them, as they were the ones who compiled the written forms of the short stories from the different motives and elements that had been patched up only occasionally. These sincere and critical texts served to amuse, and maintain the spirit of, the common people: their dissatisfaction was eased by being expressed in the tale, and the frustration over an unsuccessful literary carrier was also consoled by the events described in the stories.

These wandering friends of literature brought the only new motives into the stories for many centuries. Their stories incorporated the fantasy and unreality of the folk tales, while they also reworked the historical legends of the secondary texts, together with jokes and anecdotes. Many of the motives had not been written down before, as these were despised and not taken seriously. The lack of unity and consistency in the stories and novels is not very important; what really matters is the multitude of colourful events, the adventures of the popular figures, told in lively prose, or sometimes in verse.

In the Song era the aim of these stories was to entertain the poor people, the men of the street, of the commercial centres, who were pleased to hear the noisy performances of the professional story-tellers. Maybe the first written versions of the stories were only sketches that served as memory aids to the performers. Many times old stories were told in new forms, according to the intention of the “author”. Sometimes the stories had a changing structure, the only constant element being the “intro-

duction". They were told in a lively, everyday language, full of direct quotations. The introduction often began with a poem to attract the audience; at the beginning of the story a short anecdote was told; and the story was sometimes interrupted by verses not connected to the events, serving only as an opportunity to take a rest.

What made the story authentic was the enjoyment of the audience. The story was told by people well-known by the audience, who heard it themselves: innkeepers, cooks, officials and their victims, beauties and wives, filial sons, etc. The story was formed for centuries by the spontaneous criticism of the audience and the talent of the story-tellers. The development of these stories led to the birth of the Chinese novel in the Ming period (1368–1644), and even before that, other, more varied, eventful genres also developed out of it, for example, the Chinese drama.

Some of these stories, in a somewhat abridged form, may give an authentic and enjoyable picture of everyday life of old China and its cities, even for our generation.