NARRATIVE ART IN THE MING DYNASTY NOVEL, WITH
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *SHUIHU ZHUAN, XIYOU JI*
AND *JIN PING MEI*

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ABSTRACT

The thesis is concerned with the structure and
style of the three Ming dynasty novels, *Shuihu zhuan*,
Xiyou ji and *Jin Ping Mei*. Clearly, these novels are not
as simple as they seem — there are multiple levels of
interpretation. By using the conventions of form and
style the author/narrator manipulates the oral
storytelling tradition in order that he may engage in a
discourse with the reader.

Chapter One looks briefly at the origins of and the
influence of other forms on the Ming novel, particularly
oral storytelling, drama and historiography. It also
looks at the question of readership, concluding that
Shuihu zhuan, *Xiyou ji* and *Jin Ping Mei*, while imitating
popular forms, were written for educated readers.

Chapter Two examines structure, first breaking down
the novel into its constituent parts, then analysing the
methods of composition. It shows that plot is of limited
importance and that digression from the plot is the
basic structural principle. The looseness of the
structure enables structural patterns to be imposed on
the narrative. These patterns are one of the ways by
which the author/narrator communicates with the reader.

Chapter Three analyses the use of language, looking
in particular at the classical-vernacular mix; the

attention paid to sentence rhythms in order to achieve
subtlety and depth of expression: the function of verse
and parallel prose; and the use of formulaic language.

Chapter Four looks at how the details of the
fictional world - setting, characters, and so forth -
are presented. In doing so it shows that although
realism was not an effect valued for its own sake there
are realist passages in the novels. The author/narrator
has total and obvious control over the narrative, and
any such literary mode or device is simply taken up or
abandoned according to the needs of the narratorial
presence or the needs of the writer's communication with
the reader.

Chapter Five considers in detail the relationship
between the writer, the narrator, and the reader.
Frequent changes in point of view and variation of
aesthetic distance produce irony, and as a result
several levels of meaning can be discerned.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Ming dynasty (A.D. 1368-1644) is generally
regarded as the golden age of the traditional Chinese
novel. It is certainly true that this period saw both
the right socio-economic and other external conditions
for the production of novels, and, more important, the
necessary "genre-consciousness". This gave rise to many
novels being written, thereby ushering in a new stage in
the development of fiction. Nonetheless, it is dangerous
to assume that the Chinese novel simply appeared in the
late Ming, in a more or less mature form. While it is
true that there is a qualitative difference between the
novels of the late Ming dynasty and earlier fiction, it
must also be remembered that the Ming novel evolved over
a long period, and is steeped in both the literary and
oral traditions.

Ming dynasty fiction is an important part of
Chinese literature, but, until recently at least, it has
lacked the prestige of poetry, essay writing,
historiography and other classical forms. It is not
quite true, however, that fiction was totally
unacceptable and unappreciated, nor that it was purely a
popular form. Amongst the scholar/official class there
were enthusiastic connoisseurs of fiction, including
several who made great contributions to the study and
survival of the genre. But certainly fiction did not
have the widespread recognition and respectability

enjoyed by other forms. The change in attitude came in
the early Republican period.[1] Even so, for much of this
century there has been the tendency to compare the Ming
novel with the European novel - specifically, works like
the nineteenth-century realist novels. John L. Bishop,
for instance, commented that the traditional Chinese
novel "is limited in two respects: the one a limitation
of narrative convention, the other a limitation of
purpose".[2] I believe such a view is shortsighted, coming
as it does from a Western (realist) aesthetic
standpoint.

Most studies of Chinese fiction are extrinsic in
nature, looking at the origins of works, questions of
authorship, the reflection of society in the work, and
so forth. Intrinsic studies are still relatively few
(though the last ten years or so have seen a marked
increase in them), and the majority are on the Qing
dynasty masterpiece *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (A Dream of
Red Chambers). Extrinsic studies are important, and
Honglou meng is a great work, but it is also not
entirely typical of the traditional Chinese novel. More
work needs to be done on Ming fiction, looking at the
novel primarily as a work of art, if we are to reach a
better understanding of the genre.

[1] See Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement*
(Harvard: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), Ch. iii.

[2] "Some Limitations of Chinese Fiction", in *Studies in
Chinese Literature*, ed. John L. Bishop (Cambridge,
Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 237-45.

Two things occurred to me about the Ming novel which led to my research taking the direction it has: the enormous popularity of the novels from when they were first published in the Ming dynasty, and the fact that they were appreciated and analysed by contemporary critics — in particular Jin Shengtan 金 聖 嘆 , who saw *Shuihu zhuan* as being on an equal footing with the classics. The former made me realize that the great Ming novels must truly be masterpieces of storytelling; the latter, that these novels are not as simple as they seem and that we need to read between the lines to appreciate the subtleties of the writing, just as contemporary critics did. While the Ming novels contain some passages of marvellous storytelling, I am convinced that the novels are not meant to be taken at face value: their brilliance lies in how old, simple forms (particularly, but not only, oral storytelling) were used as the basis for a discourse between writer and reader. Assuming a sophisticated readership, the writer was able to use the stories to comment indirectly on contemporary Ming society; to view traditional heroes ironically; and to share his delight in popular literary forms with like-minded people.

The most important feature of the Ming novel, the one which enables the writer-reader discourse to take place, is the writer's control of point of view. In order to vary aesthetic distance, the Ming novelist regulates the structure of the novel, the use of

language, the degree of realism, the presentation of the characters and setting, and the tone.

The three novels I have chosen to concentrate on are superb illustrations of the narrative art of the Ming novel. *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (commonly known in English as "The Water Margin"), *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 ("Journey to the West") and *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 ("Golden Lotus") are three of the most popular Chinese novels of all time and among the best examples of the genre. Moreover, they each represent a different type or sub-genre of the Ming novel: *Xiyou ji* is a fantasy, and humorous and satirical. *Jin Ping Mei* has a high degree of naturalism, and, while criticising some aspects of society as *Xiyou ji* does, is more serious in tone. *Shuihu zhuan* could be placed between the two. It incorporates fantasy and realism and high and low styles. Amongst admirers of Chinese fiction, these three works have had a high reputation since they first appeared. The late-Ming critic Jin Shengtan referred to *Shuihu zhuan* as *diwu caizi shu* 第五才子書 (the fifth work of genius),[3] and the early Qing critic Zhang Zhupo 張竹坡 called *Jin Ping Mei diyi qishu* 第一奇書 (the first marvellous book). In the Qing dynasty the three novels came to be collectively known as the

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[3] The other "works of genius", according to Jin, included the *Li Sao* 離騷 ("Encountering Sorrow"), the *Shi ji* 史記 ("Historical Records"), the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, the poetry of Du Fu 杜甫, and the early Ming play *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 ("The Western Chamber").

"three marvellous books".[4] It is the aim of this paper
to examine narrative art in the Ming novel in general,
illustrating my theory with examples from these three
works.

Chinese Fiction and the Origins of the Novels

As I have said, a great deal of extrinsic work has
already been done; I do not intend to add anything to
the mass of material on the development of the Ming
novel. However, the development of my argument depends
on certain assumptions about the origins of the novels,
so I would like to digress briefly to make clear my
stance regarding this problematic issue.[5]

Not much is known for certain about the development
of the Ming novel, and there is a great deal of
controversy surrounding the topic. According to what was

[4] Lu Hsun (Lu Xun), *A Brief History of Chinese
Fiction*, trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang from 1930
Chinese edition (1959; rpt. Beijing: Foreign Languages
Press, 1976), p. 220.

[5] Detailed examinations of the development of the Ming
novel in general and these three works in particular
include: Andrew H. Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the
Ming Novel: Ssu ta ch'i-shu* (Princeton: Princeton Univ.
Press, 1987), pp. 3-72, 183-202, and 279-303; Jia
Wenzhao 賈文昭 and Xu Zhaoxun 徐召勛, *Zhongguo
gudian xiaoshuo yishu xinshang* 中國古典小說藝術
欣賞 (Hefei: Anhui renmin chuban she, 1982), Ch. i;
Dudbridge, *The Hsi-yu chi: A Study of Antecedents to the
Sixteenth-Century Novel*,(Cambridge: Cambridge Univ.
Press); Richard G. Irwin, *The Evolution of a Chinese
Novel: Shui-hu chuan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ.
Press, 1966); Wilt Idema, *Chinese Vernacular Fiction:
The Formative Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

the generally accepted theory of the development of Chinese fiction, the novel is based on *pinghua* 平話 and *huaben* 話本 forms, which are directly or indirectly derived, to a greater or lesser extent, from the professional storytellers' texts in the Song dynasty (960-1278) and possibly also the Yuan (1260-1368).

Storytelling itself is of course much older than this - probably as old as Chinese civilization. Being oral, it has naturally left behind few relics. The evidence we have about the nature of oral storytelling in China includes: the Dunhuang *bianwen* 變文 scrolls; later prompt books or records; contemporary written accounts of storytelling in the Song and Yuan dynasties, such as the *Ducheng jisheng* 都城紀勝 * and Luo Ye's 羅燁 *Zuiweng tanlu* 醉翁談錄; the fact that there is still oral storytelling in some parts of China today; and the work of scholars researching European oral storytelling (this last helps us to make sense of the other shreds of evidence we have). It is important to bear in mind the characteristics of oral storytelling, as it is the naive style of oral storytelling which is the basis of the more sophisticated novels.

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* This mentions the types of entertainment available in Hangzhou during the Song dynasty, which included music, acrobatics and storytelling. It seems there were three main genres of storytelling: *xiaoshuo* 小說 (fiction), *shuojing* 說經 (Buddhist stories), and *jiang shishu* 講史書 (historical stories). The importance of improvisation is noted. (See Idema, pp. 4-6; Irwin pp. 23-24.)

Scrolls found in the Dunhuang caves are evidence that storytelling was well established by the Tang dynasty (618-907). Some of these are *bianwen* 變文 .[7] Written in the vernacular, with a sizeable admixture of verse, they appear to be either notes for or transcripts of oral storytelling. One of these scrolls is even illustrated. Many of them are on Buddhist themes, and most of them are moralistic.[8]

By the Song dynasty oral storytelling was flourishing. In the the two Song dynasty capitals, Kaifeng in the north and Hangzhou in the south, it was centred around the *wazi* 瓦子 (entertainment districts). Storytelling was a popular form of entertainment amongst the lower classes and the growing class of merchants, but it also attracted the interest of members of the scholar class. Song dynasty storytelling is assumed to have been commercial entertainment, rising with the growth of the urban middle class from this period on, and it probably reflected the values of this new, literate middle class (shopkeepers and so forth) rather than the gentry and officials — unlike the Ming novels, which, while appealing to a broad readership, were written by members

[7] The meaning of *bianwen* is not clear. Eugene Eoyang translates the term as "transformation texts". See "Word of Mouth: Oral Storytelling in the *Pien-wen*". Diss. Univ. of Indiana 1971.

[8] Eoyang, "Word of Mouth", Ch. i.

of the elite scholar/official class for their peers.[9]
After the *bianwen*, the next written records of oral
storytelling are the *pinghua*. Dating from the fourteenth
century (or possibly ealier), these are works of popular
history in simple classical Chinese, and were prompt-
books used by storytellers (or based on prompt-books).[10]
Also of importance are the *huaben* of the Song and Yuan
dynasties, which were texts obviously closely related to
oral storytelling. It is not clear whether they were
storytellers' prompt books, or transcripts based on
storytelling sessions put together by enthusiatic
scholars, or works organized by enterprising publishers
wishing to cash in on the popularity of storytelling. It
is quite possible that all three are at least partly
true. The exact origins of the *huaben* are not important
here — what is important is their close relation to oral
storytelling, and the fact that some sorts of records of
oral storytelling were written and probably circulated.

The *huaben* are in vernacular Chinese, and there are
four main types: *xiaoshuo* 小說, *shuojing* 說經,
jiangshi 講史 and *hesheng* 合生 (stories dealing
with "particular persons or things").[11] *Xiaoshuo huaben*
resemble the modern short story, and in *jiangshi huaben*
can be seen the origins of the traditional Chinese

[9] Idema, p. xvii.

[10] Idema, pp. 69-70.

[11] Lu Hsun, p. 134-35.

novel. *Jiangshi huaben* are relatively long, and *jiangshi*
storytelling performances would not have been completed
in one performance — the origin of the *hui* 回 in the
Ming novel, which always ends with an exhortation to the
reader to "listen to the next *hui*".[12]

What is the relation between *huaben* and the Ming
novel? There are a number of superficial similarities of
form and style (to be discussed below). Moreover, from
the late Ming dynasty at least, vernacular fiction was
sometimes used to express discontent, which would seem
to confirm its position as the literature of the people.
But as Idema points out, the connection between
venacular fiction and storytelling is not as
straightforward as it might seem.[13] There was a long
period between the first known period of storytelling
and when it was supposedly written down (especially the
appearance of *huaben*). Further, although *pinghua* were in
print long before *huaben*, among contemporaneous *pinghua*
and *huaben* the *huaben* "show a much more developed use of
colloquial prose for narrative purposes than the often
very clumsy p'ing-hua". We do not know how much
rewriting was done, or to what extent, before the texts
appeared in print.[14]

Patrick Hanan has a more serious objection. He

[12] Lu Hsun, 395-96.

[13] Idema, p. xvii.

[14] Idema, p. xxii.

maintains that the models of written fiction were
generally earlier vernacular works, rather than actual
storytelling performances. He sees the oral storytelling
touches in novels as having been put in for effect, not
as genuine relics of storytelling.[15] This interpretation
is an important premise of my argument in this paper.
Eugene Eoyang has stressed the importance of considering
the oral basis of Chinese vernacular fiction,
particularly the role of the audience.[16] I do not see
that there is necessarily a contradiction here, as I
believe the writers of Ming vernacular fiction were
acutely aware of the storyteller-audience relationship,
while consciously writing for readers.

Concurrently with the growth of the vernacular
fiction tradition a classical, literary fiction
tradition was also developing. The oldest surviving
examples of written fiction are to be found amongst the
zhiguai 志怪 and zhiren 志人 of the Han, Wei and
Six Dynasties (but there is fiction in embryonic form in
the Zuozhuan 左傳, the Guoyu 國語 and the Shiji
史記. Some of these have discernible plot,
characterization and description, marking them out from

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[15] *The Chinese Vernacular Story* (Cambridge, Mass.:
Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), p. 10.

[16] "A Taste for Apricots: Approaches to Chinese
Fiction", in *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical
Essays*, ed. Andrew Plaks (Princeton: Princeton Univ.
Press, 1977), pp. 53-69. In this article he says that
Chinese vernacular fiction depends on the storyteller's
audience for a correct assessment regarding its unity
and originality.

less developed anecdotes.[17] The *zhiguai* are usually accounts of odd people or occurences, often featuring the supernatural: headless ghosts, fox spirits, Taoist magic, and so forth, but they also sometimes have themes of filial piety rewarded, corrupt rulers punished, and love stories. Many of the plot and character types in later Chinese fiction and drama were derived from the *zhiguai*.

Classical fiction in its developed form first appeared in the Tang dynasty. The *chuanqi* 傳奇 of the Tang were longer, and had more accomplished plots and a higher degree of characterization and description.[18] There were five main types of *chuanqi xiaoshuo*: love stories; satires (*fengci* 諷刺); tales of chivalry (*xiayi* 俠義); *zhiguai*; and historical stories. Despite the presence of fox spirits and the like, the *chuanqi* love stories have a degree of realism. They tend to be dominated by the narrator, and point of view changes frequently. The style of writing is fairly concise, although the plot structure is loose. Another feature of interest is that at the beginning of each story there is some factual or historical material (dates, place names, names of people, and so forth).[19]

[17] Jia Wenzhao and Xu Zhaoxun include *Wu wang xiaonü*, 吳王小女 *Gan jiang moye* 干將莫邪 , and Ban Gu's 班固 *Han Wudi neizhuan* 漢武帝內傳 as examples of the forerunners of fiction. (Jia and Xu, p. 3.)

[18] Jia Wenzhao and Xu Zhaoxun, pp. 4-5.
[19] Jia Wenzhao and Xu Zhaoxun, p. 7.

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In the Ming dynasty novel these five types of story are
all present, although in individual works one or two
elements may dominate. In *Xiyou ji* it is the satirical
and the supernatural. In *Jin Ping Mei* the love story and
the satire are the main elements. In *Shuihu zhuan* tales
of chivalry and love stories are included.[20]

The centre of Chinese fiction – of Chinese culture
in general – during the Ming dynasty was the lower
Yangtze River region ("*jiangnan*" 江 南), which
encompassed the cities of Nanjing, Yangzhou, Suzhou and
Hangzhou. The region was extremely prosperous, having a
good climate and rivers and the Grand Canal, and also
very beautiful. The administrative centre was Suzhou,
which was surrounded by the lesser cities of Wujiang,
Kunshan, Changshu and Wuxi.[21] By the beginning of the
seventeenth century, China had become rich and powerful
under the Ming. The population had increased
dramatically since the start of the dynasty, agriculture
was improving, there were developments in industry and

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[20] Andrew Plaks suggests that apart from economic
reasons, the simultaneous rise of the novel in China and
Europe is due to the tendency for smaller literary forms
to be built gradually into larger ones, resulting in "a
larger, more comprehensive, narrative vessel". In Europe
the novel evolved from the "frame-tale", epistolary
sequences and chapbook fiction; in China the course of
development was Han and Six Dynasties anecdotes, Tang
dynasty *chuanqi*, the vernacular *huaben*, and the oral
story cycle, culminating in the novel. See "Towards a
Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative", in *Chinese
Narrative*, ed. Andrew Plaks, pp. 309-52.

[21] See Robert Hegel, *The Novel in Seventeenth-Century
China* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 4-5.

handicrafts, and both domestic and international trade flourished, with the use of silver becoming widespread.[22]

Robert Hegel describes the late Ming as a golden age of culture, and this was particularly so in the lower Yangtze region. The flourishing of the arts was due not only to economic conditions but also to the fact that there were limited opportunities in the government for educated people.[23] As well as being the period in which *Shuihu zhuan*, *Xiyou ji*, *Jin Ping Mei*, and *Sanguo zhi yanyi* 三國志演義 were all published, this was also the great age of the vernacular short story – both Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 and Ling Mengchu 凌濛初 were active during the late Ming.[24] Andrew Plaks notes that the *bagu* 八股 ("eight-legged") essay was also one of the accomplishments of the Ming dynasty (although naturally it originated earlier).[25] Drama, which had developed during the Song and Yuan dynasties, continued to flourish during the Ming, especially the

[22] See Hegel, pp. 6-9.

[23] Hegel, p. ix.

[24] The date of *Sanguo zhi yanyi* is not certain, but Plaks presents a good case for it being 1522. (See *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, Ch. v.) The dating of the other three novels will be discussed below. Feng Menglong lived from 1574 to 1646, and Ling Mengchu from 1580 to 1644.

[25] *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, p. 33.

chuanqi form.[26]

The importance of the publishing industry to the
rise of the Chinese novel is obvious. Hegel points out
that during the Ming dynasty, the centre of publishing
in China moved from Fujian to the lower Yangtze region,
and most publishing houses were based in Suzhou.[27]
Although printing was relatively cheap during the Ming
dynasty, first editions of novels often had many
illustrations (sometimes even in colour), prefaces
written in fine calligraphy, and other special features.
Consequently these books were very expensive.[28] This
suggests that the intended readers of the novels
(regardless of who eventually read them) were among the
scholar/gentry class, including the nouveau riche (and
the newly educated – see below) who would have been the
only ones who could have afforded these expensive books.

An important side-effect of the prosperity of the
lower Yangtze region during the Ming dynasty was the
growth of the merchant class. As Hegel points out,
merchants who were wealthy enough aspired to the

[26] William Dolby, *A History of Chinese Drama* (London:
Paul Elek, 1976), pp. 14-101; Plaks, *The Four
Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp. 40-45.

[27] Hegel, p. 11. He also notes that the lower Yangtze
region was a centre of book collectors as well as of
publishers.

[28] Hegel gives as an example the first edition of
Fengshen yanyi 封神演義, which cost two liang – the
equivalent of almost one month's wages for a silk worker
or two months' wages for a farm labourer. (Hegel, pp. 8-
10.)

literati class; their aim was to move up the merchant class and out of it. The only way out was through education, and merchants were prepared to spend a great deal on having their sons educated so that they could join the ranks of the scholars and officials. Because the wealthy merchants identified with the literati, they had the same cultural and literary interests: there was no development of a bourgeois culture with the rise of the merchant class. The wealth of the merchants supported elite art and literature.[29]

The means of entry to the literati class which the merchants were so keen to join was to do well in the imperial examinations. The imperial examination system was an ancient institution, undergoing many changes over the centuries; it attained its final form in the Ming dynasty in 1487. There were three examinations: the *shengyuan* 生員 , the *juren* 舉人 and the *jinshi* 進士 , the highest degree.[30] While it is true that in theory the examinations (and hence a career in government) were open to all men, the reality was that it was difficult to succeed. Although there was a limited number of set texts, and they were widely available, candidates from an educated or wealthy family had a great advantage in that they would have had good tutors and access to books of commentary on the set

[29] Hegel, p. 9.

[30] See Hegel, pp. 12-17; Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *The Mind of China* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 15-22.

texts. Even so, while it was relatively easy to pass the *shengyuan* examination, the chances of passing all three have been estimated at 6,000 to one. Consequently, a disproportionately high number of scholars became *shengyuan*, but as the quota of *jinshi* was not altered, they could not advance, which resulted in widespread frustration.[31] This situation was exacerbated by the growing number of examination candidates as the merchants grew wealthier.

On the other hand, the imperial examination system reinforced the unity of "high culture" in China.[32] Succeeding in the examinations was so prestigious, and such a great achievement for the individual, that the ruling class – which owed its own position to it – was certainly not inclined to change the system. Moreover, the limited number of texts examined promoted cultural conformity. Traditional, orthodox studies dominated the lives of the sons of officials and ambitious merchants; written Chinese literature should therefore be looked at from this perspective.

This is not to say that there was no dissension or questioning of traditional ideas and values. On the contrary, the late Ming was a period of intellectual richness. Partly as a reaction to the conformist nature of their education, some scholars established *shuyuan*

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[31] Hegel, pp. 14-15.

[32] Hegel, p. 15.

書院 (private academies) which fostered intellectual and sometimes even political dissent.[33] But it must be remembered that this exploration of ideas came from the educated elite, and was in reaction to some aspects of the education system — few scholars questioned the worth of classical Chinese culture, and any enthusiasm for unorthodox literary forms was always made from the psychological safety of having mastered the orthodox. This was sometimes a more literal safety — many of the connoisseurs of vernacular literature were accomplished classical scholars or writers, and therefore had a certain standing and respectability. Even so, most novelists wrote anonymously — though this was perhaps due more to the ideas they presented rather than the vernacular form they wrote in.

The Ming dynasty grew increasingly weaker from the late 1500s, to fall only half a century later. Although this period saw the flourishing of culture, it lacked a proper government. There were even fewer opportunities for scholars, so many turned to literary pursuits as an outlet for their talent and ideas.[34] Given the political situation, and their personal frustration, it is not surprising that vernacular literature often had a serious political or philosophical dimension.[35] It was

[33] Hegel, p. 17.

[34] Hegel, p. 27.

[35] See Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp. 43-44.

out of this cultural and social background that *Shuihu zhuan*, *Xiyou ji* and *Jin Ping Mei* appeared in their most complete forms — at the end of the sixteenth century, in the waning years of the Ming dynasty.

The earliest edition of *Shuihu zhuan* which survives today was first published in 1610; the fullest version, the 120-chapter *fanben* 繁本 ("full recension") was published shortly afterwards, in 1614. The edition by Jin Shengtan, his reworking of the 120-chapter *fanben*, was published in 1644.[36] The first mention of the *Zhongyi Shuihu zhuan* 忠義水滸傳 ("The loyal and righteous *Shuihu* band"), the name generally given to the *fanben*, is in 1589. There are however, several mentions of a *fanben Shuihu zhuan* in circulation earlier, in the Jiajing 嘉靖 reign (1522-67). The earliest mention of a *fanben Shuihu zhuan* is in the beginning of the sixteenth century.[37]

It is generally assumed, however, that the origins of *Shuihu zhuan* are much earlier than the dates of circulation and publication. The story itself is based on a historical outlaw band of the Song dynasty. If tradition is correct in ascribing it to the dramatist Shi Nai'an 施耐菴 , then it would be a work of the fourteenth century. The other main literary figure

[36] Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp. 288-89.

[37] Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, p. 281.

traditionally credited with writing *Shuihu zhuan* is Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中, who also lived during the fourteenth century. Actually, it is unlikely that either of these two wrote *Shuihu zhuan* as we know it - although Plaks concedes that either or both of them were quite possibly involved in the development of the novel, and may even have been responsible for an early (now lost) version of *Shuihu zhuan*.[38]

I am reasonably confident that the 120-chapter version of *Shuihu zhuan* is a product of the sixteenth century, probably the second half of the century. Naturally, I do not think that the novel was conceived and written by a single author, as modern novels usually are. Rather, I believe that *Shuihu zhuan* evolved over the centuries to be eventually rewritten at some time during the sixteenth century, and possibly then undergoing further refining. A text - at least one of vernacular fiction - was not sacred in Ming China; there would have been nothing unusual in a publisher or fiction connoisseur making changes. But this rewriting in the sixteenth century would have been a conscious adaptation of older source material to produce a new version: it is inconceivable that the complex novel we know as *Shuihu zhuan* is merely a written text of an evolving set of legends. I think it is probable that one person extensively rewrote the previous versions of the

[38] Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp. 293-96.

novel, and that his version was then edited and polished
- possibly as it did the rounds of literati circles
during the Jiajing period.[39] We should not overlook the
fact that the 120-chapter version is the fullest one
surviving, and the one which Jin Shengtan used as the
basis for his edition; the "evolution" of the novel
seems to have ended with the 120-chapter version.

Of even greater significance is the fact that Jin
and other traditional Chinese critics regarded *Shuihu
zhuan* as being the product of one hand.[40] Regardless of
the fact that the novel was based on earlier versions,
and that more than one writer may have played a part in
preparing the resulting novel, it was certainly written
according to one set of aesthetic principles, aiming for
one style, and with a strong notion of the genre. As
Ellen Widmer says, traditional Chinese critics saw
Shuihu zhuan as "the work of one implied author - two
individuals, perhaps, but no more than one authorial

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[39] Most mainland critics see *Shuihu zhuan* as either
written by Shi Nai'an, or written collectively, and play
down the role of the literati. See, for example, Huang
Ruiyun 黃瑞雲, "Cong Shuihu chengshu de guocheng tan
dui Shuihu de pingjia" 從水滸成書的過程談對水
滸的評價, in *Shuihu zhengming* 水滸爭鳴, ed.
Hubei sheng shehui kexue yuan, wenxue yanjiu suo 湖北
省社會科學院文學研究所 and Hubei sheng Shuihu
yanjiu hui 湖北省水滸研究會, I (Yichang:
Changjiang wenyi chuban she, 1982), 83-95.

[40] Their persistence in attributing the novel to Shi
Nai'an or Luo Guanzhong is irrelevant - attributing a
work to an earlier writer was a traditional way of
getting credibility for the work.

presence".[41]

The first edition of the fullest version of *Xiyou ji*, the Shide tang 世得堂 edition, appeared in 1592.[42] This is some twenty years before the publication of the 120-chapter *Zhongyi Shuihu zhuan*, but still in roughly the same period – especially when we remember that manuscripts of *Shuihu zhuan* were probably being circulated during the decades preceding its publication.

Xiyou ji is traditionally attributed to Wu Cheng'en 吳承恩 (c. 1506-1582), but there is no hard evidence either for or against Wu being the author of the novel.[43] Like *Shuihu zhuan*, *Xiyou ji* has a slight grounding in history: there actually was a monk named Xuan Zang 玄奘 (596-664) who journeyed to India and brought Buddhist scriptures back to China. There, however, the resemblance between the historical pilgrimage and the story of *Xiyou ji* ends. As with *Shuihu zhuan*, a story cycle gradually developed. There are a number of early versions of *Xiyou ji*, some of them

[41] *The Margins of Utopia: Shui-hu hou-chuan and the Literature of Ming Loyalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 80-81. There is evidence for this throughout the writings of Jin Shengtan. Both Jin Shengtan and Zhang Zhupo constantly refer to "the author" 作者 in their criticism.

[42] Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp. 183-84.

[43] Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, p. 183.

surviving.[44] But going by the evidence we have, there is
a qualitative difference between the antecedents of
Xiyou ji, and the novel which appeared in the late
sixteenth century.[45] For this reason, it is likely that
there was a *guben* 古本 ("original text") preceding the
late sixteenth-century texts, which Wu Cheng'en (or
someone else), writing during the sixteenth century,
based their version on. Like *Shuihu zhuan*, the version
produced by the 1590s was not "original", and more than
one writer may have been involved; but again like *Shuihu
zhuan*, what is important is that regardless of who wrote
Xiyou ji (or how many writers), it is the product of one
implied author.

    Jin Ping Mei cihua 金瓶梅詞話 , the fullest
version of *Jin Ping Mei*, was first published in January
1618, but like both *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji*, it was in
circulation some years earlier.[46] The novel is built
around a story taken from Chs. 23-25 of *Shuihu zhuan*,
and it appears to have been based on the *Zhongyi Shuihu*

[44] *See Plaks, The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*,
pp. 184-89.

[45] See Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*,
p. 186; Ou Itai, "Essai Critique et Bibliographie sur le
Roman Chinois", Diss. Université de Paris 1933, p. 35.

[46] Plaks notes that the novel is mentioned in the
letters and diaries of various people during the mid-
1590s; the first mention of a complete manuscript is by
Shen Defu 沈得符 in *Wanli yehuo bian* 萬曆野獲編,
1606. (*The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp. 55-
56.) Huang Lin 黃霖 believes that it was first
published between 1589 and 1592. ("Zhongyi Shuihu zhuan
yu Jin Ping Mei cihua" 忠義水滸傳與金瓶梅
詞話, in *Shuihu zhengming*, II, 232.)

zhuan of 1589.[47] An edition which appeared slightly later, in the Chongzhen 崇禎 reign of the Ming dynasty, was almost identical to the *cihua*, but without the songs, poems.[48] Also like the other two novels, nothing is known for sure about the authorship of *Jin Ping Mei*, except that unlike *Shuihu zhuan*, *Jin Ping Mei* is generally regarded as the work of one author.[49] Traditionally, the novel was ascribed to Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526-90), but was probably not written by him. A great many other names have been put forward by various people, but they are really only speculation - there is little evidence for any of them.[50] The fact is, *Shuihu zhuan*, *Xiyou ji* and *Jin Ping Mei* are all anonymous.

Idema, observing that all traditional Chinese colloquial fiction is written in the vernacular, says that within this general grouping we can distinguish two main categories. The first consists of "literary novels", which feature a good use of the colloquial

[47] Huang Lin, 222-33.

[48] C. T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1968), p. 170.

[49] There are, however, scholars such as Pan Kaipei 潘開沛 who see *Jin Ping Mei*'s inconsistencies, and the use of verse and so forth, as evidence that the novel was written by more than one person. See "Jin Ping Mei de chansheng he zuozhe" 金瓶梅的產生和作者 in *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu lunwen ji* 明清小說研究論文集 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1959), pp. 173-78.

[50] See Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp. 57-62, for details of the claims for ten of these possible authors.

dialect combined with good *wenyan* 文言 (literary Chinese), and literary allusions, parody and other sophisticated modes and devices. The other category distinguished is that of "chapbooks" written in "novelese", which is merely simplified *wenyan* rather than proper *baihua* 白話 (vernacular language). Very few poems, letters or historical or literary allusions are incorporated in the texts of these works.[51]

Obviously, the three novels under consideration here belong to the former. While it may be true that some fiction was of a purely popular variety, *Shuihu zhuan*, *Xiyou ji* and *Jin Ping Mei* were not. During the Ming dynasty the short story (called, like the Song dynasty prompt-books, *huaben*) also flourished. Not surprisingly, many of the important features of the Ming novel are shared by the *huaben* — for examples, the use of the oral storyteller persona and oral storytelling formulas, and the inclusion of verse. In other ways, however, the two genres are different, and it is important to make the distinction between the two.

The novel, while it could be called episodic, is not merely a string of short stories. As we shall see in the next chapter, it is complex in structure, being made up of plots, sub-plots and non-plot material, and many patterns and parallels. Compared with the novel the *huaben* is extremely short, and simply does not have the

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[51] Idema, pp. xi-xii.

scope for any gradual construction of patterns, or for the illustration of theme in many different contexts. The short story tends to be more tightly structured, but that is only because it is forced to be compact. The novel in its looseness actually better serves the aesthetic and thematic interests of the writers. In other words, although many techniques and stylistic features of the Ming novel are shared by the *huaben*, it is only in the novel that we see the greatness of Ming dynasty narrative art.

The Influence of Other Literary Forms

Oral storytelling may or may not have played a direct part in the development of the Ming novel, but it was certainly important in another way. As has often been pointed out, the Ming novels have many of the features of oral storytelling, most notably the obvious correspondence between the chapter of the novel and the storytelling session – both called *hui*. But as there is also strong evidence for the argument that the novels are literary works, written to be read, I believe that the oral storytelling characteristics in the novels are artificial. The writers of the novels used the formal features of oral storytelling performance and, to a certain extent, reproduced a naive style, but this is only superficial.

Idema has said that it is necessary to distinguish

more between storytelling and novel-writing. He notes
that nineteenth-century writers, when reworking a
variety of storytelling, such as *tanci* 彈詞 or *guci*
鼓詞 into a novel, "were well aware that the novel as
a form had aims and requirements different from those of
storytelling". He cites *Jintai quanzhuan* 金台全
傳, Chapter 52, which says that in storytelling, the
longer a scene (such as a fight) is drawn out, the
better, but in a novel the writer must conserve energy,
avoid boring the reader, and keep the book to a
reasonable size.[52]

Oral storytelling was very popular in China until
modern times, and the skill of some artists was probably
considerable — oral storytelling certainly appealed not
only to the ordinary people, but also attracted the
attention of the privileged scholar/gentry class. Modern
scholars can only speculate on how oral storytelling
actually was in the Ming dynasty. But, on the basis of
contemporary written accounts and on what modern
storytelling is like, an educated guess can be made, and
on the whole there is agreement on what the main
features of oral storytelling were. The influence of
storytelling on the novel is reflected in a number of
features. Novels are often called *zhanghui xiaoshuo*
章回小説 (fiction in chapters or episodes), the *hui*,
as we have noted, being the term for a storytelling

[52] Idema, pp. xix-xx.

session. Bishop, discussing the influence of oral
storytelling on the novel, lists the main
characteristics of an oral storytelling session as
follows:

1) It had a prologue, consisting of verse and
   anecdotes related to the main story's theme,
   which could be added to until the audience was
   big enough.

2) Poetry was used, probably with musical
   accompaniment. In the beginning the poetry
   "may have had an integral function in the
   story"; later it was used to provide authorial
   commentary, padding to put off the climax, and
   ornamentation.

3) The narrator interrupted the story whenever he
   felt it was necessary, to explain or comment
   on the story.

4) Characters often gave a summary of the plot
   for listeners who arrived late.

5) Dialogue was very important for advancing the
   plot (the storyteller probably made the most
   of this and portrayed different speaking
   styles dramatically).

6) Theatrical techniques used apart from the
   emphasis on dialogue included the painstaking
   description of movement, so that the listener
   always had a vivid picture of characters and
   their actions.

7)   Episodes of the story were about the right

length for the audience to listen to at one

session or *hui*. Breaks between *hui* occurred at

very exciting places in the story.[53]

Idema provides a similar list of oral storytelling

characteristics, and also mentions that the *hui* always

ended on a note of suspense, and the use of oral

storytelling formulas.[54] All of these features are

incorporated in the novel to a greater or lesser extent,

and will be discussed in detail in the course of this

paper. Most important was the third feature listed by

Bishop: the narrators of the novels take on the guise of

oral storytellers, while at a deeper level of meaning in

the texts the writers of the novels employ great

subtlety and insight, and encourage the reader to view

critically the characters and events being narrated.

Oral storytelling is not the only genre contributing

to the form of the Ming novel. Historiography also

influenced the writers.

The recording of history, the important events and

personalities of reigns and dynasties, was of great

importance in Chinese government and hence to the

literati class.[55] So important was it that fiction has

been described as being merely a sub-category of

[53] "Some Limitations of Chinese Fiction", pp. 238-39.

[54] Idema, p. 70.

[55] See Plaks, "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative", p. 311.

historiography.[56] Sima Qian's 司馬遷 *Shi ji* 史記 was the model for all successive official histories until the modern period, and, it has been claimed, contains the seeds of later fiction writing.[57] The method established by Sima Qian was to record all the important events of the period covered, and the lives or deeds of the most important people. This often involved including copies, summaries or excerpts of important documents and apparently verbatim records of speeches. The historian was not supposed to bias the facts in any way. Histories were therefore rather long, and tended to lack analysis of the evidence.[58]

The *Shi ji* is divided into 130 distinct sections and has over half a million words — that is, it is only slightly longer than a typical Ming novel. The overall structure of the *Shi ji* is loose — individual sections are unified, but there is little continuity or development between sections. Although within each section there is chronological order, because of this division into sections the narrative is by necessity

[56] Plaks, "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative", p. 314.

[57] Denis Twitchett, "Chinese Biographical Writing", in *Historians of China and Japan*, ed. W. G. Beasley and E. G. Pulleyblank (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961), p. 97.

[58] Scharfstein, pp. 67-85.

both disjointed and repetitive.[59]

Twitchett notes that official biographies consisted of an outline of the subject's career, official appointments, and so forth, which was filled out in various ways (for instance, by formulaic or conventional passages, the contents of which were "designed to demonstrate the individual's fitness for the category under which the historian wishes to include him", and illustrated Confucian virtues).[60] The use of formulas and types is a feature of the Ming novel, too, as we shall see. Twitchett also notes that the historian's selection of incidents was very subjective.[61] This was also true of the Ming novel.

Most of the *Shi ji* is biographical, with one section (the *liezhuan* 列傳) being devoted to the life of an important or interesting personality. However, as Twitchett points out, the traditional Chinese biography is not like the European. Chinese biography is less an examination of someone's personality than a record of how he fulfils his various

[59] Burton Watson, Introd., *Records of the Grand Historian of China*, by Ssu-ma Ch'ien, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1961), p. 4. Plaks, commenting on the fact that despite the difference in status, fiction and historiography were seen as being similar literary forms, notes that the same genre titles were used for both: zhuan 傳, zhi 志, ji 紀, and so forth. ("Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative", p. 312.)

[60] Twitchett, pp. 107-09.

[61] Twitchett, pp. 107-09.

roles in family and public life. This is due to the Confucian concept of the individual - or rather, the lack of such a concept. Individuals were not seen as important in their own right, but as important only for the parts they played as family members, school-fellows, officials, and so forth.[62] Twitchett suggests that it is because of how the individual was traditionally viewed in China that the Chinese literary tradition lacks both epic and tragedy. It is useless to speculate here on why these forms did not develop, but the point Twitchett makes on the implications to historical biography, and thus to fiction, is interesting:

> Tragedy and the tragic tradition have exercised a deep and lasting effect on Western biography, and helped to crystallize the interest of the Western reader around the individual per se by providing an attitude from which to view his relations with the forces of circumstance. The tragic tradition has, again, been responsible to a considerable degree for the high value placed by the Western reader on form, continuity, and pattern in biographical writings. This trend, which has remained instinct with writers in the European tradition, has no echo in China, where the disconnected and episodic character of all narrative writing, both in fiction and in history, is a most striking difference for the Western reader.[63]

To take Twitchett's idea further, we can distinguish quite different aesthetic standards between

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[62] Twitchett, p. 110. See also Plaks, "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative", p. 311.

[63] Twitchett, p. 110.

China and the West. Possibly the "tragic tradition" of the West took root because of this, and not the other way round. In any case, the Chinese concepts of form, composition and structure in works of literature and art are not the same as those in the West.

Oral storytelling and historiography are two very different genres, and occupy separate places in the Chinese literary tradition. But in their influence on the structure of the Ming novel, they complement rather than compete with one another. Oral storytelling is loosely structured and episodic, due to the demands of the audience and the limitations of the storyteller. Historiography is also loosely structured and episodic. I believe that one of the reasons the oral storytelling form appealed so much to the Ming writers was that it was a form they were comfortable with - the orthodox history was one of the few prose works of any great length in the classical education. Historiography may not have been the form which the Ming novel was based on, but it certainly would have strengthened the influence of the oral storytelling form.

One indication of the influence of historiography on fiction is the fact that most Ming novels - including *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji* - are based on historical episodes. Admittedly in the case of these two novels there is little resemblance between the content and scope of the novels and the official historians' versions. However, the strength of this convention

obviously prevented the Ming authors from completely breaking away from the accepted form of recording events. The colourful and imaginative style and content of the Ming novels is probably due more to the writers' conscious imitation of oral storytelling than to historiography.

Jin Ping Mei, on the other hand, lacks the historical background which *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji* have (however distorted), yet at the same time it is more realistic, less fanciful than the other two novels. *Jin Ping Mei* is less influenced by historiography. It focuses on a small group of characters, who are far from being heroes, and there is more unity of time and of space than in the other two novels. In this respect it represents a development in the Chinese novel. *Honglou meng* represents a further development, being entirely without historical basis, and having retreated completely into the characters' world, with no connection to events of national importance. Interestingly, this coincides with the locational scope of the novels: in *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji* the characters travel widely; in *Jin Ping Mei* most of the characters are in Ximen Qing's house for much of the novel; *Honglou meng* is set almost entirely in the Jia family mansion and gardens. However, the writer of *Jin Ping Mei* still chose to adopt many features of the oral storytelling form and the narrator's persona, and was also influenced by drama, particularly in his use of

popular songs.[64]

Given that Chinese drama was flourishing in roughly
the same period as vernacular written fiction was
developing (that is, the Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties),
it would seem highly likely that there was cross-
influence between the two. For instance, during the Ming
dynasty plays became longer, and therefore there was
more scope for narrative development.[65]

The obvious shared feature is the use of verse.
Verse or song dominates Yuan zaju 雜劇 and Ming
chuanqi and kunqu 昆曲, so it is possible that the
inclusion of verse in the Ming novel was directly
influenced by dramatic practice.[66] I think, however,
that there is not such a resemblance as there first
seems. There are several reasons for this. First,
Chinese plays are centred round the verse and singing
parts, with some dialogue inserted.[67] In the novels it
is the other way round: prose narrative and dialogue
comprise the main body of the work, with a small amount
(approximately five to seven per cent) of verse or

[64] Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp.
40-41.

[65] Plaks, "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese
Narrative", p. 324.

[66] See Dolby, pp. 25, 35, 54, and 70.

[67] However, Plaks notes that during the Ming dynasty,
as plays were published more, they came to be read for
the narrative as well as for the lyric quality.
("Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative", p.
325.)

stylized description embellishing or commenting on this. The functions of verse are thus quite different in the two genres. Second, as verse was tremendously important in China, it is not surprising that it was used in both forms - drama did not necessarily influence fiction in this way at all. Third, Tang dynasty *bianwen* texts incorporate a lot of verse, and they were written before drama became such an established form.

The influence of drama on fiction was more subtle than such direct borrowings. In my opinion, what is important is that the Ming dynasty fiction enthusiasts were often also connoisseurs of drama. We find again and again a scholar's name mentioned in connection with both fiction and drama. Jin Shengtan, Feng Menglong, Ling Mengchu and Li Yu 李漁 are just some examples of members of the educated elite who were interested in both fiction and drama.[68]

It makes sense, therefore, to assume that a similar aesthetic outlook was applied to both. Both plays and fiction often took traditional stories as their subject-matter, so dramatists and novelists alike were faced with the problem of balancing the conventions of the tradition and the expectations of the audience or readers, with the demands of literary style. The best

[68] Plaks suggests that written dramatic literature was very important, and that it was probably mostly through this that people learnt about the main heroes and stories of the Chinese narrative tradition. ("Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative", p. 324.

dramatists and novelists shared an interest in language,
and we find in both fiction and drama a range of
language registers and styles.[67] Moreover it seems that
in the ranks of both dramatists and novelists there were
highly educated men who were unable (or unwilling) to
channel their creative energy into a more normal
direction. This meant that there was an interest in
political or social comment as well as literary
allusion, and that both genres could be nonconformist or
even subversive.

Literacy and readership

One of the biggest of the many controversies
surrounding the Ming novel is the question of its
readership. Who were the writers of the novels writing
for? And who actually read them? For much of this
century the form and style of the novels has been taken
at face value, and the novels have been regarded as
popular works based on oral storytelling, written for
ordinary people, and possibly intended to be read aloud.
But in recent years there has been growing support for
the theory that the Ming novel was an elitist art form,
written by members of the privileged scholar/gentry
class for their peers - people with a high level of
literacy. This change in thinking has come about largely

[67] See Dolby, pp. 25, 35.

as a result of a better knowledge of the development of traditional Chinese fiction, and a more careful reading of the novels themselves. Patrick Hanan, Andrew Plaks and a handful of others have led the way in this approach. On the whole, I support their findings. The supposition that the Ming novel is basically a literary creation is the starting point of my thesis, and is supported by what I have discovered about the narrative art of the Ming novel.

The literariness of the Ming novel will become apparent as my argument unfolds. However, it may still be helpful to give a brief summary of the evidence supporting this assumption.

The evidence can be divided into two groups: External or circumstantial, derived from what we know about Ming society and the literary scene; and internal evidence, the evidence in the novels themselves.

The first piece of external evidence is what we know about literacy levels in the Ming dynasty. Evelyn Rawski's study of literacy in the Qing dynasty reveals that literacy was by no means confined to the elite scholar/gentry class — people aspiring to enter the official classes, merchants and other trades people often had the command of a few thousand characters, and possibly a rudimentary knowledge of the classics. But this education was still limited. Sometimes language competence was tied very closely to the person's trade, and even when it did go beyond this, there was still a

huge discrepancy between having studied the Four Books
for a few years and having the educational level of a
scholar.[70] Moreover, we have evidence that at least part
of the readership of the Ming novels had reached a
fairly high standard of education.[71] There are, of
course, contemporary accounts of semi-literate
merchants, women and others reading novels, but these
novels may have been what Idema calls chapbooks, and in
any case, it is unlikely that the reading audience for
novels was limited to this sector of society. The
inclusion of literary and historical allusions, puns and
some fine verse, together with the general tone of the
novels, indicate that the ideal reader was someone like
the writer appears to have been – educated, liberal, and
with a knowledge of a wide range of literary forms.

Second, as already discussed above, the information
we have about the publishing industry in the Ming
dynasty indicates that books – especially the first
editions of novels – were very expensive. Obviously only
the wealthy could have afforded them.

Third, many Ming novels are anonymous, including
the three under discussion in this paper. It has long
been held that this anonymity is due to the low status

[70] *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China* (Ann
Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1979), pp. 8-10, Chs. 2,
4, 6.

[71] For instance, the fact that manuscripts of the
novels were circulated among literati. (See Plaks, *The
Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp. 55-56, 184, 281-
88.

of fiction; although fiction was not so despicable that no one studied it, the writers, if they were scholars or officials, would not have wanted it to be known that they indulged in such an eccentric pastime.

Fourth, some traditional Chinese critics, whom we know were scholars, such as Jin Shengtan, gave the novel their serious attention, treating it as a serious literary genre. This indicates that the novel belonged to the scholar/gentry class. There was not such interest shown by these scholars in folk forms such as storytelling.

These four points constitute the main external evidence for the literariness of the Ming novel. The internal evidence includes: One, the language of the novels. The Ming novels use fairly easy language on the whole, which a reader with a basic education could understand, but they also contain relatively difficult language and characters which are less common. They were clearly written by highly educated people, and assumed an educated readership. Two, the use of allusions, encompassing Chinese literature and philosophy of all styles and all eras. This presupposes wide reading and a classical education. Three, the complex, patterned structure of the novels, which was more likely to be grasped by a reader used to "reading between the lines", as scholars were trained to, and certainly would have been almost totally overlooked by a listener. The many subtleties in observation, characterization, and overall

design in the novels demand careful reading. All of
these points will be examined in detail in this thesis.

I have already noted that most studies of the Ming
novel are extrinsic, looking at questions of text,
authorship, social background, and so forth, and that I
do not wish to add to this. I have instead taken an
approach similar to that of critics such as Plaks and
Hanan. My inspiration — and justification — is the work
of the Ming and Qing commentators on fiction,
particularly Jin Shengtan. The attitude and method of
these critics, their concentration on the works
themselves and the attention they paid to details of
structure, style and technique, often seems uncannily
New Critical. This is merely a surface impression,
however: Jin Shengtan (and the less brilliant Zhang
Zhupo and Mao Zonggang 毛宗崗) were not radical in
their approach, they were simply applying to works of
fiction a critical method which originated with the
study of the Confucian classics.[72] Some of the Ming and
Qing critics' specific comments are questionable (Jin
Shengtan's vendetta against the *Shuihu zhuan* hero Song
Jiang is a case in point) but in general, I believe that
the approach of the traditional Chinese critics is
valid.

[72] For instance, the traditional style of *Shi jing*
commentary. For examples of this commentary, see *Shi
jing xuan*, edited and annotated by Liu Yisheng 劉逸生
and Zhou Xifu 周錫馥 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing,
1982).

As mentioned above, the use of the narrator persona, and the manipulation of point of view which this allows, is one of the most noticeable and important conventions of the Ming novel. It is, in my opinion, central to a correct reading of the Ming novel, as it enables the implied author to distance himself from what is said on the surface of the narrative and engage in a discourse with the reader on a deeper level. Although the traditional Chinese critics did not openly differentiate between author and narrator, it is clear that they recognized the existence of levels of meaning in the work.

In the Ming novel the writer could have as many points of view as he wished — there were no restrictions like those placed on the European novel. Point of view is a recent term in Western literary criticism, and is rather vague. Wayne C. Booth relates it to variations of "distance" in a work, allowing for both "reliable" and "unreliable" narrators. In a literary work an author is communicating with a reader. But this communication is not direct — the reader only perceives what the author consciously or unconsciously allows him to. The closest we, the readers, get to the author is an impression of the implied author. The implied author is the sum of our impressions of the real author, who, being completely outside the work, is far removed from the reader. The implied author is linked to the work through the narrator, who may be hidden — that is, barely

distinguishable, if at all, from the implied author — or who may be obtruding, like one of the characters. Apprehending the "theme" or "meaning" of a work is knowing "where the author *wants* him [the reader] to stand". And everything else about a work is also part of "our sense of the implied author" — style, tone and technique.[73] Booth's analysis is extremely useful for examining the Ming novel.

The author's power, through the implied author, is great. He emphasizes or plays down events and characters not according to their objective importance, but according to what direction he wants the story to take — for example, if he wants to win sympathy for a certain character.

Of the several levels of interpretation in the Ming novels, the most obvious, but least reliable, is the surface impression that the novel is simply a transcript of oral storytelling. But in reality the writers are playing a kind of game with their readers. They are pretending to be storyteller and listener, although the reader is actually responding to the "story" being told by the implied author, which supersedes or undermines the surface story.

In this paper I will argue that the Ming novel is a complex and subtle literary work, written by highly

[73] *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983). See in particular pp. 13-14, 73-74, 125-33, 155-59.

educated writers for a similar readership. The complexity and sophistication is apparent in every aspect of the novels. The structure, while appearing loose and simple, is a series of patterns encompassing both plot and non-plot elements. Language, too, is subtle. A rich mixture of classical and vernacular Chinese, it is used very flexibly. The rhythm of sentences is important, contributing directly to the meaning of what is being said. The use of verse and stylized description set pieces also displays sensitivity to the effect of different styles, and at the same time makes the reader conscious of the implied author's storyteller persona. The fictional world created through description and characterization is interesting and entertaining in its own right, and sometimes realistic, but these achievements are still subservient to the writer's ongoing dialogue with the reader. Sometimes the writer communicates directly with the reader; sometimes the reader is teased with an imitation of oral storytelling performance dominated by the narrator, or by being allowed to become temporarily engrossed in the story. But always the act of storytelling, the blatant crafting of the work, dominates the novels: the narrative art of the Ming novel lies in skilfully telling a story on one level, while at the same time exploiting the telling of the story as a vehicle for a more complex and subtle communication.

Note on the Texts

The main texts I have used for my research are:

Shuihu zhuan: *Shuihu quanzhuan* 水滸全傳 .
The 120-chapter version published in three volumes by
Shanghai Guji publishing company (Shanghai, 1984).

Xiyou ji: The Renmin wenxue edition in three
volumes (Beijing, 1980), edited by Huang Suqiu 黃肅
秋 , based on the Ming dynasty Shide tang edition.

Jin Ping Mei: *Quanben Jin Ping Mei cihua* 全本
金瓶梅詞話 . A facsimile of the Wanli edition,
published by Taiping press (Hong Kong, 1982).

Unless otherwise stated, all references are to
these editions, and all translations are my own.

CHAPTER TWO: STRUCTURE

I.   Introduction

II. The Composition of the Ming Novel

III. Plot and Patterns: How the Ming Novel is
     Structured

IV. Unity

I. Introduction

Although the Ming novel is often criticized for its
loose structure, structure is an important element of the
Chinese narrative art. At first glance the structure of
the Ming novel may not appear to be very different from
that of other narrative forms - for example the
traditional European novel. Both are usually very long,
divided into chapters, and have one or more plot lines.
However, a closer look at the structure of the Ming
novel reveals important differences.[1]

As we have seen in Ch. i, the influence of two sub-
cultures contributed to the Ming novel: the one relying

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[1] I am looking at structure in its broadest sense,
along the lines of Holloway, who defines it as "what
embodies and expresses the deepest and most central idea
of the book". *Narrative and Structure: Exploratory
Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), p. 19.
I find that other, narrower definitions, such as
Bradbury's (he describes structure as "that devised
chain of events") are culturally bound, and not useful
for looking at Chinese narrative. Bradbury, "An Approach
through Structure", in *Towards a Poetics of Fiction*, ed.
Mark Spilka (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1977), p.
9.

on the power of the spoken word, the other based on an
extremely high regard for the classics and the written
word. In the Ming novel we have the unique situation of
educated men, talented members of a privileged minority,
working with the oral tradition. This strange
amalgamation is reflected in every aspect of the Ming
novel, including its structure.

There are two main aspects of structure which we
need to look at. First, the outstanding feature of
structure in the Ming novel is that it is made up of
many components, which are fitted into the basic
structural divisions such as the chapter. The second
aspect is how these components are arranged and joined
together – the degree to which the work is unified into
a novel. We will find in our discussion that common
Western concepts, such as plot, will be of limited
usefulness. In this chapter I will attempt a description
of the structure of the Ming novel, looking first at the
structural elements (Part II), then at how the Ming
novel is organized (Parts III and IV). In the course of
this discussion we will see that some of the most
important features of narrative art in the Ming novel –
suspense and irony, for example – depend on structure.

The structure of the Ming novel is basically how
these levels of organization are arranged, and how
different units are related. The reader of the Ming
novel must be aware that the idea of structure was quite
different in the Ming dynasty from the modern Chinese

and nineteenth-century European concept. Traditional
Chinese critics certainly showed an interest in
structure.[2] They were especially interested in
structural divisions. But, as Andrew Plaks points out,
they were generally interested in the organization of
the narrative structure at a local level, rather than in
the overall structure of the work.[3] How the Ming novel
is structured does of course involve plot. But equally
important are the structural elements and devices which
do not contribute to the plot. The existence of so much
non-plot material is an important feature of the Ming
novel (and obviously one which distinguishes it from the
nineteenth-century European novel). The Ming novel
cannot be fully appreciated if the non-plot parts are
regarded as mere background, and hence secondary to the
structure proper.

II. The Composition of the Ming Novel

For Jin Shengtan 金聖嘆 , Shuihu zhuan was the
history of 108 heroes – this, according to him, was the

[2] Andrew Plaks, "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese
Narrative", in Chinese Narrative, ed. Andrew Plaks
(Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977),
p.33.

[3] "The Problem of Structure in Chinese Narrative",
Tamkang Review, 6, No. 2 and 7, No. 1 (Oct. 1975-Apr.
1976), 431-32.

raw material, what the novel was about.[4] In fact this is a useful way of analysing the structure of the Ming novel. In the Western novel, the impetus for the action is usually character, the personality of the individual; in the Ming novel this is not necessarily the case at all. But character in the Ming novel is a unifying element — the Ming novel, as we shall see below, tends to be structured around the adventures of the various characters. We can describe the Ming novel as being made up of a) the main characters; and b) everything else — minor characters, description (of places, weather, customs, official organizations, and so forth) which is part of the narrative, and description which is separate from the narrative. Jin Shengtan recognized that the adventures of 108 heroes was unwieldy stuff, and believed that the novel only succeeded due to careful organization.[5]

The 108 heroes are more or less fixed to their own stories. Some heroes are involved in other heroes' stories, but only to a limited extent. (This is also true of traditional Chinese historiography — a biography in a history tends to concentrate exclusively on the subject of that biography; other personalities involved feature in their own biographies.) In *Xiyou ji*, once the

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[4] Introduction to *Shuihu zhuan* Ch. 1, in *Shuihu zhuan huiping ben* 水滸傳會評本 , ed. Chen Xizhong 陳曦鍾, Hou Zhongyi 侯忠義 , and Lu Yuchuan 魯玉川 (Beijing: Beijing Daxue chuban she, 1981), I, 54.

[5] Introduction to *Shuihu zhuan* Ch. 1.

pilgrimage gets under way, the four main characters are in nearly all of the chapters, but the various demons they meet are almost totally confined to their own stories. In *Jin Ping Mei*, chapters tend to concentrate on certain characters, but there is much more overlapping of characters' stories. It could be said that after Ch. 71 of *Shuihu zhuan*, when the heroes have all united into the Liang Shan Bo band, that the structure of the novel is not so effective, because many chapters are about all the heroes, instead of concentrating on one or two.

Everything else apart from the 108 heroes, the rest of *Shuihu zhuan*'s content, is fitted round the adventures of the heroes. Description and other background material could generally be used in any main character's story, and often is. The reader is aware, with even a casual reading of the Ming novel, that some situations and parts of situations are repeated over and over again. How many times, for instance, do the pilgrims in *Xiyou ji* come across a mountain (with Sanzang being frightened and Monkey reassuring or otherwise helpful)? Or, in *Shuihu zhuan*, how often do two characters fight before they recognize each other as fellow heroes?

These are two examples of common situations. Examining them more closely, we find that they occur with several variations.

Pilgrims coming across a mountain:

- Monkey reassures them
- Monkey uses magic to help them cross
- there is a demon living on the mountain
- there is a monastery or house on the mountain.

Heroes meeting:

- they fight, and recognize heroic qualities in one another
- they fight, and a third party reconciles them
- they fight, then find they have a common friend
- they meet in a tavern
- an official recognizes the true worth of an outlaw
- an outlaw recognizes the true worth of an official.

With a careful reading of a Ming novel, we discover many stock situations and variations on situations. In fact, it is difficult to find a situation which is "new", which is not repeated. These stock situations, their variations, and details from them can all come under the heading of theme or motif. Motifs are, as we shall see, the basic compositional units of the Ming novel.

Some modern critics have shown how subject can be looked at as an aspect of form - that is, as units of structure. For instance, the Russian scholar A. N. Veselovsky (who preceded the more famous Propp) saw

subject as "a complex of motifs" or basic thematic
units. In a lecture given in 1897, he defined motif as
"the simplest narrative unit that responds with an image
to the different demands of the primitive mind or of
everyday observation".[a]

Motif is a relatively recent term in Western
literary criticism, coming from musicology. It is most
often used in the analysis of folk-tales and oral
literature. I am not aware of any term like motif in
traditional Chinese literary criticism, but it seems
clear to me that this view of works – be they literary,
musical or artistic – as being composed of a number of
set, combinable elements is a Chinese one, as well as a
nineteenth-century Western one. Chinese artists, for
example, analysed and classified the techniques and
subject matter of paintings. Music, too, is often seen
in terms of forty or so basic techniques which comprise
the elements of any piece of music.

Parry and Lord, in their study of Yugoslavian oral
epic, discovered that the motif (or "theme" as they
termed it) is one of the main characteristics of oral

[a] "Poetica sujetov", quoted by Harry Levin in "Motif",
Dictionary of the History of Ideas (1973), p. 237. Motif
is a common term in literary theory, and consequently
suffers from vagueness of definition. M. H. Abrams
defines it simply as "an element – a type of incident,
device, or formula – which recurs frequently in
literature. . . . [The term] is also applied to the
frequent repetition of a significant phrase, or set
description, or complex of images, in a single work".
"Motif and Theme", *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 4th ed.
(1981). Motifs are not only constituents of plot and
character, but also of place and time. (Levin, p. 241.)

significant phrase, or set description, or complex of
images, in a single work".[8] The use of language in this
way is one of the strengths of the Ming novel. The
highly stylized set pieces of description in the Ming
novel are motifs, as are descriptions within the
narrative of characters, weather, scenery and so on.
Although motif is characteristic of folk literature, it
is by no means limited to primitive forms; it is often
used in highly sophisticated works.[9] Often in the Ming
novel a word or an item is repeated throughout a
passage, which in a subtle way gives the passage unity,
and may also serve to emphasize something which would
otherwise have gone unnoticed. This use of motif was
called *cao she hui xian fa* 草蛇灰綫法 ("the
grey line of a grass snake"). It will be discussed below
in Ch. iv (pp. 232-33).

Parry and Lord discovered that although the
Yugoslavian singer thinks of the theme as a unit, he
often breaks it down into smaller parts. But the smaller
parts are still subsidiary to the larger theme. For
convenience, we can call parts of themes "motifs" and
reserve "theme" for the larger theme or complex of
motifs. A motif can be taken from one context and used

[8] M. H. Abrams, "Motif and Theme".

[9] The use of motif is significant (although perhaps
not artistically successful) in the novels of D. H.
Lawrence, for example.

as part of another theme.[10] We find that this is also
true of the Ming novel. To return to the examples of
themes given above, some constituents of those themes
are found in other themes. For example, sometimes there
is bantering between Monkey and Bajie when the pilgrims
have sighted a mountain and are deciding what to do.
These conversations between Monkey and Bajie generally
have little to do with crossing the mountain, and
similar ones are found throughout *Xiyou ji*. In *Shuihu
zhuan*, eating and drinking in a tavern is a very common
occurrence, but although it is used in a wide range of
situations, the descriptions of the tavern, the
characters placing their orders, the tavern-keeper
serving them, and so on, are all more or less the same.

When pieces of description are motifs they have the
same function in the composition of the story. Lord has
noted the importance of these descriptions to the
effectiveness of oral epic: the story comes to a
standstill and the listener is enthralled, although the
descriptions are "as recurrent as any other theme in the
tradition".[11] Jin Shengtan in his criticism pointed out
the recurrence of key words or items in a story. In this
approach Jin, and other critics such as Mao Zonggang 毛
宗崗 , were seeing the work in terms of its
constituent elements — and recognized the use of motifs.

[10] Lord, p. 71.

[11] Lord, pp. 86-87.

Structural Divisions

The great length of most Ming novels and their
looseness of structure makes them somewhat unwieldy when
it comes to closely examining structure. This century,
although the Ming novel is no longer regarded as a low
form of literature, it has suffered from being compared
unfavourably with the European novel – specifically,
works like the nineteenth-century realist novels. Apart
from direct criticism such as Bishop's, most Chinese
critics this century, beginning with Mao Dun 茅盾 ,
have tended (no doubt unconsciously) to apply Western
aesthetic standards to traditional Chinese fiction,
looking for evidence of "realism", a "tight-knit
structure", and so forth. Because of the difficulties in
looking at structure it is helpful to break the Ming
novels down into smaller, more manageable sections. This
was also the approach of traditional Chinese critics, in
particular Jin Shengtan and Mao Zonggang.[12]

I see the Ming novel as being made up of five main
structural levels. (To a certain extent this is an
arbitrary classification – others may perceive more or
fewer divisions – but I have found it useful for
discussing structure in the context of this thesis.)

[12] See Peter Li, "Narrative Patterns in *San-kuo* and
Shui-hu", in *Chinese Narrative*, p. 74.

The divisions are:

Novel: A cycle of stories loosely connected
        structurally and by a central theme.

Series: A group of stories or adventures about a
        particular character.

Story: The basic structural unit of the Ming novel.
        A unified, practically self-contained account
        of a particular action or actions carried out
        by a character or characters.

Episode: A group of scenes constituting a stage in a
         story, but which cannot stand on its own.

Scene: A group of actions about one character (or
        group of characters) set in one place. Can
        also be a static situation which includes some
        action to tie the scene to the story.

Also to be considered is the chapter, which is the
main division of the format of the Ming novel. Called a
hui 回 (session) in Chinese, this division imitates the
oral storytelling session.

The Novel

Its length is the feature which immediately
distinguishes the Ming novel from other traditional
Chinese forms of fiction, such as the vernacular short
story.

The Ming novel is perhaps better termed a cycle.
Like a body of oral storytelling, it is a collection of

stories, loosely linked, and with limited development,
rather than a tight-knit work with one main story.[13] A
Ming novel is not fixed in length and content as a
European novel is. Like the European Arthurian and Robin
Hood cycles, the Ming novel could be added to and
revised endlessly, and still have the same basic
structure. Alternatively, episodes could be removed
without adversely affecting how the whole worked.
Shuihu zhuan is a good example. Jin Shengtan lopped
fifty chapters off the longer version but both this and
the 120-chapter *Shuihu* are valid as versions of the same
work, as are the 100, 115 and 124-chapter editions.

This view of the Ming novel's structural
flexibility is supported by a look at terminology. In
Chinese, there is one term, *xiaoshuo* 小説 , for
fiction in general and for individual works,
irrespective of length. In Europe, on the other hand,
there is "fiction", "novel", "short story", "romance",
"novella" and, lately, terms such as "long short story".
These are all terms based primarily on structure. In

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[13] This was the view of Mao Dun, among others. In
looking at the Ming novel, particularly *Shuihu zhuan* and
Xiyou ji, it is helpful to think, as Ouyang Jian 欧陽
健 and Xiao Xiangkai 肖相愷 suggest, in terms of
"big plot" (大情節), the overall plot of the novel,
and "small plot" (小情節), the plots of the various
series and stories. "Shuihu qingjie jiegou chuyi" 水滸
情節結構芻議, *Shuihu zhengming* 水滸爭鳴 , ed.
Hubei sheng shehui kexue yuan, wenxue yanjiu suo 湖北
省社會科學院文學研究所, and Hubei sheng
Shuihu yanjiu hui 湖北省水滸研究會, I (Yichang:
Changjiang wenyi chuban she, 1982), 204. See also Huang
Ruiyun 黄瑞雲 , "Shuihu yishu zatan" 水滸藝術雜談,
in *Shuihu zhengming*, II, 240.

China, some distinction was made based on content, but
not on structure.[14] ("Changpian xiaoshuo" 長篇小·
說 "long fiction" and "duanpian xiaoshuo" 短篇小·
說 "short fiction" are recent terms, and without the
weight of "novel" and "short story".) Xiaoshuo connotes
a lump of fiction. It may be long or short, but that is
not important enough for separate terms to exist. What
we call the Ming novel is a long piece of xiaoshuo, or
string of xiaoshuo. It could be added to or shortened
without the overall structure being damaged. Despite
this, I think that our term "novel" is a valid term for
Ming dynasty changpian xiaoshuo. Judging by the writings
of Ming and Qing critics, they were regarded as single
(albeit flexible) works with their own style. What is
important to remember is that the Ming novel is not a
tightly stuctured, highly unified work like the European
novel.

[14] Lu Hsün, (Lu Xun) A Brief History of Chinese
Fiction, trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang from 1930
Chinese edition (1959; rpt. Peking: Foreign Languages
Press, 1976), pp. 6-7.

The Series

"Between the great beginning and the great
conclusion, there are another six beginnings and six
conclusions."[15]

Traditional Chinese critics tended to see the Ming
novel not as a simple, unitary work, proceeding from its
beginning through one middle to one end. Rather, they
perceived it as consisting of sections, which in turn
are made up of smaller sections.

The series is the largest subdivision or section
which I distinguish within the Ming novel. It consists
of various adventures or stories involving the same
character or group of characters. Each story in a series
is self-contained, but the stories are linked, and there
is some development in the career of the character
(though there is little, if any, character development).
For example, the Wu Song series in *Shuihu zhuan*: Wu Song
killing the tiger (Ch. 23) leads to his appointment as a
lieutenant. Because of this he meets up with his brother
again, and also has to go away on official duties (Ch.
24). After killing his sister-in-law and her lover (Ch.
26) he is sentenced to exile. On his journey into exile
he comes across Zhang Qing and Sun Erniang (Ch. 27).
When he arrives at the prison he helps the warden's son,

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[15] 總起總結之中又有六起六結。 Mao Zonggang,
"Du Sanguo zhi fa" 讀三國志法, *Sanguo zhi yanyi* 三
國志演義 by Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中 (Hong Kong:
Shangwu yinshu guan, 1982), I, 4.

Shi En, deal with an enemy (Ch. 27). Because of this he
falls foul of Zhang Mengfang (Chs. 30-31). After he
kills Zhang and his household he again meets up with
Zhang Qing and Sun Erniang, who help him escape. And
living as an outlaw he meets up with Song Jiang and
joins the band of heroes. The Wu Song series ends here,
and a Song Jiang series begins. Peter Li observes that
each series in the earlier part of *Shuihu zhuan* follows
a general pattern of getting involved in crime, exile,
escape, adventures and joining the Liang Shan band, as
each main hero "proves his manhood and moral worth".[16]
The series is a unit of thematic importance, setting
out, in a sort of case study format, the conditions for
and process of a hero becoming an outlaw.

There are twelve series in *Shuihu zhuan*, the last
four concerning the band as a whole rather than
individual heroes. The twelve series are: the story of
Lu Zhishen (Chs. 3-7); Lin Chong (Chs. 7-12); Yang Zhi
(Chs. 12-13 and 16-17); Chao Gai (Chs. 14-15 and 18-20);
Song Jiang (Chs. 21-22 and 32-42); Wu Song (Chs. 23-32);
Huyan Zhuo (Chs. 54-58); Lu Junyi (Chs. 60-70); the
outlaw band's battles against the Liaos (Chs. 83-90);
the battle against Tian Hu (Chs. 91-100); the battle
against Wang Qing (Chs. 101-110); and the battle against

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[16] Peter Li, p. 81. See also Ouyang Jian and Xiao
Xiangkai, pp. 214-15, for a discussion of the primacy of
the "individual hero's story" in *Shuihu zhuan*.

Fang La (Chs. 111-119).[17]

There are fewer series in *Xiyou ji*, because most stories feature the same main characters. However, some series are distinguishable. These are: Monkey's origins and rebellion (Chs. 1-7); how the pilgrimage came about (Chs. 8-12); the pilgrimage (Chs. 13-97); and the end of the quest (Chs. 98-100). Single stories tend to be longer in *Xiyou ji* than in *Shuihu zhuan*. They often span three or more chapters and consist of several episodes. For example, in the story told in Chs. 68-71, Monkey cures a king and rescues his queen. The rescue involves battles, trickery, disguise and the intervention of Guanyin, but no one of these episodes can stand independently as a story, therefore these chapters comprise a story rather than a series of stories.

There are also series in *Jin Ping Mei*, usually two or three chapters in length.[18] Usually they involve Ximen Qing's relationship with another character, though sometimes they concentrate on one of his wives (for example, the illness and death of Li Ping'er; Jinlian's affairs with Qintong and Chen Jingji). Series in *Jin Ping Mei* are less conspicuous than in the other two novels because in this work the pool of characters is

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[17] See Peter Li, pp. 80-81.

[18] Alternatively, Pan Kaipei 潘開沛 sees *Jin Ping Mei* as being in four sections: Chs. 1-50; 51-57; 58-87; and 88-100. See "Jin Ping Mei de chansheng he zuozhe" 金瓶梅的產生和作者, in *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu lunwen ji* 明清小說研究論文集 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chuban she, 1954), pp. 176-78.

more constant — there is not usually a complete change
of characters and action between series, as there is in
Shuihu zhuan and *Xiyou ji*, but a more subtle shift of
focus. Series in *Jin Ping Mei* are more closely bound to
the work as a whole. This reflects *Jin Ping Mei's*
greater distance from the written and oral storytelling
traditions, and, more importantly, the writer's greater
interest in the world of his novel — the story itself —
than in the act of storytelling.

The Story

The main internal structural unit of the Ming novel
is the story, and in turn this is based on one or more
hui — the chapter or oral storytelling session. The
story is generally the length of one to three chapters,
though its beginning and end do not usually coincide
exactly with the beginning and end of a *hui*. The story
is complete in itself, and could be read independently
of the novel. (Many stories have in fact been taken from
novels and adapted for the stage, particularly stories
from *Shuihu zhuan*, *Xiyou ji* and *Sanguo zhi yanyi*.) The
story is about one character or group of characters, and
is unified by a central action. For examples, the
capture of Sanzang in many stories in *Xiyou ji*, Song
Jiang killing Yan Poxi in Ch. 21 of *Shuihu zhuan*, and
Ximen Qing's affair with Song Huilian in *Jin Ping Mei*
Chs. 22-26. The story is unified by the central action,

in that all the main events in that story are related to it, but the central action is by no means the most important element of the story. (This aspect of structure will be discussed further below.) There tends to be a definite sense of a beginning and an ending — the story usually begins at some equilibrium and ends at an equilibrium.

At the story level it is generally not possible to rearrange the order of incidents, as it is in the novel as a whole, and to a certain extent, the series. But in another sense, the structure is quite loose — scenes can easily be omitted from or added to the story, so long as the essential information is given. But however many scenes and events make up the story, there is a close relation between them, and the relevance of each part to the whole is apparent.

For example, the story told in Ch. 27 of *Shuihu zhuan*, Wu Song's adventure at the Shizi po inn: Wu Song, on his journey into exile, stops off at an inn. The woman running the inn, Sun Erniang, serves Wu Song and his guards drugged wine. But Wu Song, suspicious, is not fooled: he pretends to have been affected by the wine, then overpowers the woman. At this point the woman's husband, Zhang Qing, enters. Wu Song explains what has happened. Zhang Qing immediately accepts Wu Song and tells his and his wife's story, and the matter ends happily. This story has a relatively tight structure — tight, that is, but not fixed. Everything in it, down to

details like Sun Erniang's dress (she later removes her clothes) and the appearance of the wine (cloudy, because it is drugged) is significant: the various motifs are successfully woven into the story. But the story would still hold together if any of these details were missing. Moreover this story is not an integral part of the novel as a whole, and even the Wu Song series would not be much different without it. As to plot, all that is gained from the Shizi po inn story is the introduction of Zhang Qing and Sun Erniang, who later rescue Wu Song and join the band of heroes. But they could just as well have been introduced later, when they contribute to the plot of the Wu Song cycle and enter the novel as a whole.

Stories in *Xiyou ji* are even more self-contained than those in *Shuihu zhuan*. Like the *Shuihu zhuan* stories they are fairly tightly constructed in themselves, with each part of the story making a contribution to that story. But most *Xiyou ji* stories do not contribute structurally to the whole at all — events in them are generally never referred to again, and do not affect the characters or what happens to them afterwards. There are only a few exceptions: Monkey's rebellion in heaven (Chs. 5-7); Sanzang being sent to fetch the scriptures (Ch. 12); the three disciples and the horse joining Sanzang (Chs. 14, 15, 19 and 22); Sanzang receiving the heart scripture (Ch. 19); and the end of the pilgrimage (Ch.98).

In *Jin Ping Mei* stories tie in a lot more closely
with the novel. For example, the story about Huilian
cited above forms a subplot which makes an important
contribution to the whole novel. What happens to a
character tends to affect his or her later life, and
sometimes even brings about a degree of character
development. In Ch. 59, for instance, Li Ping'er, just
before the death of her baby, dreams about her first
husband Hua Zixu, who had died in Ch. 14 as a result of
her affair with Ximen Qing. Pan Jinlian's murder of
Ping'er's baby, and the part she plays in Ximen Qing's
death, are violent manifestations of her constant
feeling of insecurity, which is established at the
beginning of the novel. Moreover, what happens to one
character often has repercussions on the whole group: as
in real life, there is little in *Jin Ping Mei* which can
be seen in isolation.

The Episode

The episode is a stage in the development of a
story. It is made up of scenes and actions but unlike
the story, the episode cannot stand on its own. The
story is self-contained; it has a beginning, a middle
and an end. The episode lacks either a beginning, or an
end, or both. Usually the episode is a chapter in
length, while a story is told over more than one
chapter. Stories which are only one chapter in length

(for example, *Xiyou ji* Ch. 43, a short adventure about a river-dragon) are not usually divided into distinguishable episodes.[19]

Xiyou ji in particular consists of stories made up of episodes. Most episodes are about chapter-length, though their beginnings and endings do not usually coincide with the beginnings and endings of chapters, and most chapters (when this overlapping is allowed for) are episodes of a story. There are about twenty-five stories of more than one episode, and usually there are three or four episodes to a story.[20] In the first episode, the scene is set and the problem introduced. In the second, Monkey sets about solving the problem. In four-episode stories, the third episode is the worsening of the situation, or a new development. The final (third or fourth) episode is the solving of the problem, and

[19] Plaks, in his discussion of *Xiyou ji*, suggests that the one-chapter story tends to be thematically similar to the two- or three-chapter story following it, and that it therefore acts as a kind of "pivotal" or "lead-in" chapter. See *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel: Ssu ta ch'i shu* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), p. 208.

[20] Plaks says that the story in *Xiyou ji* gives the novel "its primary structural coherence". (*The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp. 207-08.)

the denouement.[21] The story about the Hong Hai'er demon
(Chs. 40-42) is an example. In Ch. 40 the demon is
introduced; he tricks Sanzang and captures him. In Ch.
41 Monkey and the other disciples try to rescue Sanzang,
but are no match for the demon. Bajie is captured too.
In Ch. 42 Monkey asks Guanyin for help, and she finally
subdues the demon. The demon becomes a servant to
Guanyin, and Monkey and Sha Seng release Sanzang and
Bajie.

Story, Episode and Chapter

The relation between the story, the episode and the
chapter is a unique feature of the Ming novel. The
chapter - hui - is the only fixed unit of the external

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[21] L.M. O'Toole suggests that "the fundamental" pattern
of any narrative structure is "Complication - Peripeteia
- Denouement". Stories in the Ming novel clearly take a
similar form: Complication - Further Complication -
Peripeteia - Denouement. O'Toole further observes that
our understanding of the theme of a story depends on
when the peripeteia occurs, and we often find in the
Ming novel that a "twist" towards the end of the story
makes us see what has already happened, or the
characters involved, in a different light. See
"Approaches to Narrative Structure", in *Style and
Structure in Literature: Essays in the New Stylistics*,
ed. Roger Fowler (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), p.
155. In *Xiyou ji* stories, the revelation that a demon is
an agent of Guanyin is an example of peripeteia; when we
reach this point we realize that the adventure is only a
trial, an illusion. Likewise, in *Jin Ping Mei* Ch. 26,
Song Huilian successfully hanging herself at the end of
that story highlights Ximen Qing's corruption, in
contrast to Li Ping'er's attempt to hang herself in Ch.
19, which distracts the reader from Ximen Qing's crimes
and leads to a happy ending with Ximen Qing and Li
Ping'er reconciled.

structure or format, but it is a unit only
superficially. The story, as we have seen, is the
smallest structural unit which can stand independently.
The novel as a whole is changeable, as noted above, and
there are no paragraphs or other divisions as in the
European novel. The other structural units I have
proposed for the Ming novel relate to the internal
structure — the plot and the arrangement of all the
other elements of the story for presentation to the
reader.[22]

Sometimes in a work of fiction the external
structure dominates, and the reader is keenly aware of
the format; sometimes the internal structure is the
stronger, and the external structure is obsolete. When
the external and internal structure match (when, for
example, a chapter corresponds with a natural division
of the story), each strengthening and enhancing the
other, the work is more integrated and the story is
often more believable. In the Ming novel, however, there
is often some discrepancy between external and internal
structure. This discrepancy is not a fault but a feature

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[22] Plaks points out that the zhanghui 章回 form was
a late development in the structuring of the Ming novel.
Before that, novels were divided into other types of
structural units. This, I think, lends support to the
idea that our novels were carefully, consciously
structured — the zhanghui form was not followed blindly.
Plaks further says that the pretence in the novels that
they are divided into storytelling units is still of
aesthetic significance, especially in Jin Ping Mei,
which does not come from an oral storytelling tradition.
(The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel, p. 72.)

which contributes to the oral storytelling effect,
highlighting the existence of the storyteller/narrator.

Ming novels are divided into many chapters, often
around one hundred. In *Xiyou ji* and in *Jin Ping Mei*
there are a hundred chapters, and the known versions of
Shuihu zhuan have 70, 100, 115, 120 and 124 chapters.[23]
The earlier Ming *Sanguo zhi yanyi* 三國志演義
has 120 chapters, and *Sui Tang zhizhuan* 隨唐志傳
and *Fengshen zhuan* 封神傳 each have 100
chapters.[24]

The average chapter length of our three novels is
around 6,200 words, most chapters having between six and
seven thousand words. There is least variation in
chapter length in *Xiyou ji*. In the other two novels
there a few very long chapters (for example, *Shuihu
zhuan* Ch. 24 and *Jin Ping Mei* Ch. 62) but these are
exceptional. None of the three novels has any chapter
with less than four thousand words.

The chapter is an obvious unit of the Ming novel,
yet does not seem to be an important unit of the story.

[23] The original full recension of *Shuihu zhuan* had 100
chapters - see Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming
Novel*, p. 305. The 70-chapter version, as we noted in
Ch. i (p. 18) was produced by Jin Shengtan some fifty
years after the publication of the 120-chapter version.

[24] See Pan Kaipei, pp. 176-78. It is also interesting
to note that shorter novels are also fairly uniform in
length, often having forty to fifty chapters. For
examples: the 1620 edition of *San sui ping yao zhuan*
三遂平妖傳 (forty chapters); *Ba xian chu chu* 八仙
出處 (fifty-six chapters); and an earlier *Xiyou ji* in
forty-one chapters.

Chapters do not usually fit neatly with stories – stories are carried over into new chapters without there being a natural break in the story, and often stories end a page or so before the end of a chapter. It would seem that to the Ming dynasty writer the chapter is merely a convention, left over from oral storytelling, which can artificially increase (though not actually create) suspense. On the other hand, it should be noted that on the whole the chapter breaks are by no means at the best point in the story for increasing suspense – for example, the story told in Chs. 40-42 of *Xiyou ji* (actually beginning a few pages into Ch. 40 and ending a few pages into Ch. 43). In Ch. 40 the Hong Hai'er demon disguises himself as a helpless child, tricking Sanzang, and captures Sanzang with the intention of eating him. In Ch. 41 the disciples mount a number of attacks on the demon's cave. Monkey finds that he cannot overcome the demon with ordinary fighting, as the demon uses magic fire to defend himself when in difficulty. Monkey enlists the help of the dragon kings, who make rain. But when the magic fire is rained on, Monkey is overcome by the smoke, and when he plunges into a stream to cool off nearly dies from the shock. He sends Bajie off to fetch Guanyin, but the demon disguises himself as Guanyin and captures Bajie. Monkey then gains access to the demon's cave by disguising himself as a fly. Ch. 41 ends with the demon sending some of his followers to invite his father to eat Sanzang, and Monkey (still disguised as a

fly) following them. The reader's curiosity is aroused
by this, and it could be said that suspense is
increased. However, there are a number of other exciting
passages in this chapter – when the demon is about to
start cooking Sanzang (p. 524); when Monkey tries to
reason with the demon and a fight breaks out (pp. 525-
26); when Monkey and the Dragon Kings attack the demon
with rain (p. 531); when Monkey plunges into the cold
stream and appears to have died (p. 532); when the demon
disguises himself as Guanyin and tricks Bajie (p. 534).
All of these have more potential for suspense than the
scene which ends this chapter.

It would seem that chapters end at a reasonably
exciting point, but not the most exciting – the purpose
being to interrupt the story, to remind the reader that
he is reading a story, and that that story is being
controlled by the storyteller/narrator. This is borne
out by the fact that nearly every chapter in *Xiyou ji*
and *Shuihu zhuan* ends on a note of some suspense, to be
resolved in the next chapter. But this arrangement is
not a feature of *Jin Ping Mei.* In *Jin Ping Mei* chapters
tend to coincide with stories or episodes. This reveals
two interesting problems: one, that the division of the
Ming novel into chapters is a strong convention, yet is
not used to its full advantage as regards suspense; two,
that the hundred-chapter convention survives in *Jin Ping
Mei* yet without the overlapping of story and chapter
found in the earlier works. Why did the writers of

Shuihu zhuan and *Xiyou ji* not put the chapter convention to its obvious use? Or, to put it another way: given that *Jin Ping Mei* lacks the overlapping of chapter and story, avoiding the crude attempts to build up suspense, and is thus a more refined and sophisticated work, why did the writer stick to the hundred-chapter convention at all?

The answer to these questions lies not in the handling of suspense but in the storyteller's conventions, and points to a significant difference between *Jin Ping Mei* and the other two, earlier, Ming novels. The writers of *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji* put to good use the conventions of oral storytelling sessions. Breaking off the story at the end of a session (chapter), regardless of whether it is at a natural break in the story, or at an exciting part, draws attention to the storyteller or narrator. But *Jin Ping Mei's* writer was less interested in achieving this effect, aiming instead for greater naturalness and unity.

The Scene

The final main structural division is the scene. While the scene is a structural unit, it is unified by theme rather than by plot. The division of scene is not as immediately obvious as the others, but is nevertheless distinguishable, and useful to consider as

a structural unit of the Ming novel.[25]

A scene consists of action and any other constituent of narrative – description, dialogue, verse, and so forth. It comprises a section of an episode or story, and has one setting or involves one character or group of characters. When the focus of the narrative is switched to another setting or another character, the scene has changed.

Basically, the scene is a complex of motifs, with a greater or lesser amount of action connecting it to the plot (the action may of course consist of motifs too). As we have already seen, the motif is the basic constituent of the Ming novel. Of the distinguishable structural divisions, scene is the most able to be changed. The novel, the series, the story, and the episode can all be increased, decreased or rearranged to a large extent; the same structural principle applies to the scene, only more so. However, the scene is not necessarily as tightly-woven as the episode or story, in that it may consist largely of material irrelevant to the plot.

As an example, we can look at Ch. 56 of *Xiyou ji*. This chapter has the following scenes:

1.   pilgrims on journey

[25] Jin Shengtan was obviously interested in structure and, it seems, even thought in terms of scenes. In his introduction to Ch. 34 he says that "this chapter has many sections" (此回爲節至多). The sections he lists are scenes, although he does not include them all. (See *Shuihu zhuan huiping ben*, I, 639.)

2. Sanzang separated from group, captured by
    bandits

3. Monkey approaches bandits, kills some, some
    escape

4. Sanzang escapes, meets Sha Seng and Bajie

5. Bajie finds Monkey

6. group reunited; the pilgrims look for
    somewhere to stay

7. pilgrims meet an old couple at a manor house

8. their son, the bandit leader, returns home

9. the old man warns the pilgrims and they leave

10. bandits return later to kill pilgrims, and
    pursue them

11. they attack the pilgrims and Monkey kills them

12. Monkey gets into trouble with Sanzang for
    killing people, and is sent away.

There is usually a change in point of view
accompanying each new scene. Sometimes this means not a
complete change in point of view, but a shift in focus —
from a group to one member, or vice versa. Scene rarely
changes without point of view changing, but point of
view can also shift within a scene, usually through the
use of commentary or revelation of a character's
thoughts. The difference is that a scene contains some
action: it is, however tenuously, a unit of the plot,
whereas commentary and other interruptions by the
narrator are static, merely referring to the action of
the story.

A piece of verse or stylized description is not in itself a complete scene, but it is not necessarily part of a scene either. Sometimes it occurs within a scene, sometimes it bridges two scenes. Nor does it necessarily arise out of the action of the story, as does commentary. The function of verse and descriptive passages will be discussed in detail in Chs. iii and iv.

The same sorts of scene recur over and over in each novel — after we have read a number of chapters we are very surprised to come across a new scene — we expect the next scene to be one of a number we have already read. The pool of scenes is admittedly large, and scenes are presented with variations, but it is nevertheless true that before long each scene we read is recognizable. Many scenes are in fact only a cluster of motifs, including at least one element tying the scene in with the plot.

While the number of different scenes in *Shuihu zhuan* is limited, there are even fewer basic scenes (that is, scenes without the variations) in *Xiyou ji*. The external world is much more limited in *Xiyou ji* — one of its main concerns is surely that "reality" is unimportant — so it is the internal world, the psychological realm which dominates. In *Xiyou ji* there are really only a few characters. Apart from Sanzang, Monkey and the other pilgrims, and Guanyin, all the other people and monsters are very predictable, and the situations arising when the two sides meet are

predictable.

In *Jin Ping Mei* there are more individuated characters than in *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji*, and the world presented is much more realistic. In *Jin Ping Mei* scenes therefore vary more.

The scene is not an essential part of the plot, though it must have some link with the plot, and of course the plot cannot be presented without scenes. Scenes are often combined or strung together with minimal regard for the requirements of plot. A story can be drawn out by including a number of scenes, or condensed by reducing several scenes into one conversation scene. For example, in *Jin Ping Mei* Ch. 30, there are three scenes focusing on Ximen Qing's promotion: when he is actually promoted (pp. 775-76); when Lai Bao tells Ximen Qing (p. 788); and when Ximen Qing tells Yue Niang and the other women (p. 789). An example of condensing the story is Lu Zhishen, after rescuing Lin Chong, telling Lin what he has been doing since he last saw him (Ch. 9, p. 104).[24] Just as the novel is not adversely affected by adding or removing series or stories, so the story or episode is flexible as to what scenes it is made up of.

Quite often it is the scenes which are not essential to the plot which make the novels so enjoyable

[24] This characteristic of structure corresponds with the narrative techniques *ji bu sheng* 極不省 ("minimum narrative economy") and *ji sheng* 極省 ("maximum narrative economy") - see below, Ch. iv, pp. 234-35.

to read. For example, the domestic scenes in *Shuihu zhuan*, the witty conversations between Monkey, Sanzang and Bajie in *Xiyou ji*.

III. Plot and Patterns: How the Ming Novel is Structured

In the preceding pages we have examined the main constituents of the Ming novel; now we will consider how the novel is structured.

Victoria Cass says of *Jin Ping Mei*:

> The novel appears as a chaotic aggregation of characters and subplots, bound together by an arbitrary geography, with characters and their guests, reproducing and expanding, like microbes under a lens.[27]

The Ming novel is often criticized for having a loose structure.[28] While "looseness" is indeed one of the most characteristic features of structure in the Ming novel, the criticism is short-sighted and unjustified. We will come back to this point, but let us

[27] "Celebrations at the Gate of Death", Diss. Univ. of California 1979, p. 5.

[28] This is one of the aspects of the Ming novel on which there is little agreement among scholars. Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 thought *Shuihu zhuan* had a tight structure; Richard Irwin regards it as very loose; other scholars see the truth as being somewhere between these two extremes. See Peter Li, p. 80; John L. Bishop, "Some Limitations of Chinese Fiction", in *Studies in Chinese Literature*, ed. John L. Bishop (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), p. 240.

first consider what is meant by looseness.

The structure of a work might be described as loose if: (a) its constituent parts could be rearranged easily; or (b) there are a lot of extraneous elements — "loose strands" — as well as the plot line in the story. Both (a) and (b) apply to the Ming novel. Series and stories could, with only a little alteration (or even no alteration at all) be rearranged. The extraneous elements (things not tied closely to the main story line or the main characters) are present in scenes and motifs, which, as we have seen, are highly "mobile" — that is, they could be put anywhere. Even descriptions of individual main characters are often so stylized that they could be used for other characters just as well.

A tightly-woven structure is one in which all the events contribute to the plot. That is, the outcome is inevitable and there are no loose strands. In a loosely-woven structure, on the other hand, events may be relevant (illuminate character, give background information, and so forth) yet they do not contribute to the plot directly. A loosely-structured work tends to be fairly even in excitement or tension, lacking one main climax with its build-up and denouement. Because the novel's action is not directed towards (nor proceeds from) any one crucial point, it is episodic, with numerous small climaxes instead of one major one. A climax is often a sort of pivot between two stories or episodes. For example, the climax to the episode of Lu

Da killing Butcher Zheng marks the beginning of Lu's story proper. Moreover, as Plaks notes, any high point in the novel is not usually at the end, but long before the end, with a gradual "winding down" until the end of the book.[29] It is also the case in all three novels under examination here that the main story line and characters are not established until some chapters into the novels. This sort of unhurried style of narration is only possible in works which are loosely structured and not dominated by plot.

Both *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji* are highly episodic, but within this general description there are differences. In *Xiyou ji* the main structural division is the story, which is generally divided into episodes, and there is a limited amount of grouping into series. In *Shuihu zhuan* on the other hand the main structural division is the series. The series in *Shuihu zhuan* tends to be made up of single-episode stories with only some stories sub-divided into a number of episodes. The main multi-episode stories are the battle stories, which usually involve several major raids or attacks (for example, the story of the attacks on Zhu Jia Zhuang, Chs. 47-51). Another notable exception to the single-

[29] Plaks goes on to say that this "sense of dissipation" is not meant to be interpreted as final; often there is a new generation of characters on the way up, or some other continuation of the cycle, to carry on the story "in further revolutions of endless flux". ("The Problem of Structure in Chinese Narrative", pp. 438-39.

episode story is the story of Pan Jinlian's adultery and murder of her husband, Chs. 24-26, which is part of the Wu Song series. But most stories are single-episode, confined to one chapter.

Because the dominant structural division in *Xiyou ji* is the story (which is smaller than the series dominating *Shuihu zhuan*), *Xiyou ji* seems even more disjointed and episodic than *Shuihu zhuan*. This stylized structure contributes to the feeling of unreality in the novel. The only realism in *Xiyou ji* is psychological realism.

In *Shuihu zhuan* the larger structural division (the series) allows for a more natural-seeming flow of events, and the structure is sometimes unobtrusive, serving realism. But this unobtrusiveness of structure is only relative: *Shuihu zhuan*, when compared with *Jin Ping Mei* for example, remains basically episodic, and its structure generally advances the storytelling effect being built up.

In *Jin Ping Mei* the episodic effect is greatly reduced.[30] While this novel does not have the straightforward, plot-dominated development of the nineteenth-century European novel, chapters do tend to fit natural divisions in the novel's story: the work is

[30] Although Cass describes the basic structure of *Jin Ping Mei* as "a rake's progress", she notes that there are many genres, subgenres and subplots mixed with the main storyline. ("Celebrations at the Gate of Death", p. 4.)

not dominated by series, story or episode as *Xiyou ji*
and *Shuihu zhuan* are.

Plot

For the purposes of this paper we need not delve
into the complexities of plot theory. Plot can be
defined simply as the underlying story line of a work,
made up of actions or events; in other words, what
happens.[31] It follows therefore that plot involves
change — movement from A to B to C.

A static element, or an element of change which
branches off from the story line — that is, does not
advance the plot — can be classed as a non-plot element.
But what exactly do we mean by "advance the plot"?
Something can be described as advancing the plot if it
brings about development in character, or development in
the fortunes of a character, or both. Quite often the
Ming novel lacks elements which advance the plot. In
Xiyou ji for instance, circumstances change — the
pilgrims may be in a new place, or dealing with
different demons — but the characters of the pilgrims do

[31] See Levin, "Motif", p. 238. It is alo useful in the
present study to bear in mind O'Toole's observation that
fable and plot are "interacting chains but they do not
make a story", rather, it is narrative structure which
makes a story, by combining events into "an easily
perceived and graspable pattern". (O'Toole, p. 155.)
However, I think that for examining Chinese narrative,
"narrative structure" should not be limited to the
combining of *events* but should include other elements as
well.

not develop, their interrelationships do not develop, and there is little sense of their progress on the pilgrimage (when they finally do reach the West it is suddenly).

Novel, series, story, episode and scene are primarily divisions of structure; they are not necessarily bound to the plot. (A scene need not have any element of plot whatsoever.) Looking at how the various structural divisions fit into each other reveals that it is the relationship between the plot and all the other, non-plot elements which makes the novel as a whole loosely structured.

The basic structural principle in the Ming novel is digression from the plot. The plot focuses the story and unifies it to some extent. But it also provides the starting point for numerous sub-plots, pieces of background information, descriptions, conversations between characters, narratorial commentary, and poetic interludes that need not be related to the plot. The Ming novel is digressionary on every level, from the arrangement of large sections of material such as series, down to the combining of motifs in a scene. The greater part of the Ming novel is comprised of this digressionary material, of non-plot elements: the plot is not as important as other narrative patterns

constructed in the work.[32]

The plot of *Xiyou ji* is relatively simple compared with those of *Shuihu zhuan* and *Jin Ping Mei*.[33] In *Xiyou ji* there is one main storyline or plot: the pilgrimage. The main characters are Sanzang and the three disciples, with Monkey as the central character. Chs. 1-7 tell the story of Monkey, Chs. 8-12 tell the story of Sanzang, and these two sections lead into the pilgrimage. The main part of the novel has many little episodic branches - the pilgrims' adventures along the way - which are mostly not essential from the point of view of plot. They do not advance the plot in any way.

The structure of *Shuihu zhuan* is a little more complex. It too has one main storyline, the history of

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[32] Plaks notes that traditional Chinese fiction seems episodic because of the "marked emphasis on the interweaving, or 'dovetailing' of episodes and smaller units", and that works are held together by "internal interconnecting links between episodes" which act as "the mortar between the bricks". ("The Problem of Structure in Chinese Narrative", pp. 433-44.)

[33] Jia Wenzhao 賈文昭 and Xu Zhaoxun 徐召勛 distinguish four main types of plot in the traditional Chinese novel. (1) "Single-thread": the whole book has a main story-line, carried through by one or several central characters. Examples include: *Shuihu zhuan*, *Xiyou ji*, *Shuoyue quanzhuan* 説岳全傳 and *Yangjiafu yanyi* 楊家府演義. Most short stories also have single-thread plots. (2) "Multiple-thread": the novel has more than one storyline. For examples *Sanguo yanyi*, *Dongzhou lieguo zhi* 東周列國志. (3) "Short story": the work is not permeated throughout by a main thread and main characters. For example, *Rulin waishi* 儒林外史. (4) "Alternating": two threads criss-cross through the work. For example, *Feng Yumei tuanyuan* 馮玉梅團圓. See *Zhongguo gudian xiaoshuo yishu xinshang* 中國古典小説藝術欣賞 (Hefei: Anhui renmin chuban she, 1982), pp. 28-30.

the Liang Shan Bo band of outlaws, but this main
storyline is sectionalized: as we have seen above it is
made up of series.[34] The first part of the novel
consists of series of stories about various heroes, and
could stand alone. Each series has a protagonist and a
main thread. We see in these series of stories how all
the heroes "reach the same goal by different routes",
and unite into a righteous outlaw band. Some structural
unity is achieved by having the series overlap slightly,
as we have already noted (see above, p. 58).[35] And each
series has a number of episodic branches or diversions
from its storyline.[36]

The structure of *Jin Ping Mei* is relatively
sophisticated. It consists of not one but several
synchronous main storylines, tracing the lives of the

[34] Peter Li says of *Shuihu zhuan*'s structure that "it
must be acknowledged . . . that the system of linked
plots is fundamentally a weaker and looser form of
organization than that of the interweaving of narrative
strands [as in novels such as *Sanguo zhi yanyi*], even
though these cycles are part of a larger process of 'the
assembling of the heroes'. The overall unifying elements
must be sought on a higher level". (Peter Li, p. 81.)

[35] Plaks describes the structure of *Shuihu zhuan* as
having a "'billiard ball' shift in narrative focus,
according to which we follow the course of one figure
until he runs into another". (*The Four Masterworks of
the Ming Novel*, p. 309.)

[36] Jin Shengtan and other traditional Chinese critics
were interested in the intricate structure of novels.
Zhang Zhupo 張竹坡 often talks about structure - see,
for instance, Section 8 of "Piping diyi qishu Jin Ping
Mei du fa" 批評第一奇書讀法, in *Jin Ping Mei ziliao
huiben*, ed. Huang Lin 黃霖 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju,
1987), p. 64. See also Ellen Widmer's assessment of
Jin's criticism in *The Margins of Utopia* (Cambridge,
Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 101-02.

main characters (Ximen Qing, Pan Jinlian and Li
Ping'er), and the rise and fall of Ximen Qing's
household as a whole. The latter provides a microcosmic
picture of society. Many critics have noted that *Jin
Ping Mei* is so structured that what happens in Ximen
Qing's household reflects what is happening in the
empire, thereby forming a criticism of the late Ming
dynasty. Ximen Qing's wives correspond with government
ministers; Ximen Qing, a weak husband, with the weak
emperor; and the sexual corruption in Ximen Qing's
circle with political corruption. (It was a common
belief in traditional China that weakness or immorality
in the emperor would influence or be imitated by all the
other levels of society. Ximen Qing is corrupt like his
superiors, and the servants imitate the ways of their
masters.)[37] Plaks suggests that *Shuihu zhuan* is
similarly structured: Liang Shan Bo is the geographic
centre of the story, and the centre of the heroes'
lives; the action of the novel gradually radiates out in
larger and larger circles, creating, as in *Jin Ping Mei*,
a microcosm-macrocosm relationship. The stronghold of
the outlaw band in *Shuihu zhuan* is like a mini empire —
even including such ills as innocent people
suffering.[38]

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[37] For example, Katherine Carlitz in *The Rhetoric of
Chin P'ing Mei* (Bloomington: Univ. of Indiana Press,
1986), Ch. ii. See also Cass, pp. 6-7.

[38] *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp. 349-50.

Tied in with the main story lines of *Jin Ping Mei* are numerous sub-plots involving the other important characters. The main plots and sub-plots are skilfully interwoven, overlapping quite naturally for much of the novel, but are still separable into distinct story lines. *Jin Ping Mei* is of course still very episodic, with a lot of action which is static or not relevant to any of the main story lines, but it is much more unified than the other two novels.[39]

Plots of stories in *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji* (and also series in *Shuihu zhuan*) are remarkably similar. There are only a few basic story plots, which in turn are absorbed into the overall pattern of the novel, and its main plot. For example, a plot of a typical story (consisting of one or more chapters) of *Xiyou ji* is as follows:

a)   introduction

b)   the pilgrims come across something

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[39] Cass, following Zhang Zhupo's lead, notes that *Jin Ping Mei* is unified by theme, by the leitmotif of "the retrieval of order". She sees the novel's movement from fragmentation to order as being in three phases: *jin* 金 (gold) and *ping* 瓶 (vessel), "tragic" phases representing fragmentation, and *mei* 梅 (plum), which shows a return to order - in the mind, the family and the state. (Cass, pp. 5-8.) Hanan, remarking on the fact that *Jin Ping Mei* lacks "the episodic arrangement and . . . larger-than-life characterization" of the other novels, goes so far as to suggest that it is "hardly possible to talk of plot at all in connection with" *Jin Ping Mei*. He suggests that the writer of this novel was led to "dispense with the ways of the old kind of novel, and to evolve a new kind" in the course of handling the subject matter and themes he was concerned with. "A Landmark of the Chinese Novel", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 30, No. 3 (1961), 325-27.

c) conversation (on how to cross mountain, where
    to find food, and so on)

d) they see a person or demon

e) Sanzang is almost captured

f) Sanzang is captured

g) the others search for Sanzang

h) Monkey gets information/discovers his
    whereabouts

i) Monkey carries out the first attack or trick

j) Monkey carries out the second attack or trick
    - Bajie spoils things?

k) Monkey carries out the third attack, and wins

l) Sanzang is rescued, the demons are killed or
    punished and their true identities revealed.

m) the pilgrims resume their journey.

One aspect of the narrative style of a work is the
style of the structure. This largely, but in the Ming
novel not necessarily, refers to plot. Structural style
can include such features as flashback, intertwined plot
lines, and so forth. It is not the same as plot, because
it often (in the Ming novel) involves non-plot elements.

Sub-plots are frequent, but tend to be only as long
as the digressionary scene, story or other division.
Although rarely sustained for very long, they are
introduced at every stage to give the main plot extra
interest, then either absorbed into the main plot, or
dropped altogether. Just as the oral storyteller could
not keep too many balls in the air at the same time, the

Ming writers, adopting so many of the structural
conventions of oral storytelling so as to imitate oral
storytelling, were not in a position to develop a
complicated network of plot and sub-plot. (I am talking
here about form; beneath the oral storytelling surface,
the whole work is in fact complex.)

Jia and Xu have identified six styles of plot
presentation in traditional Chinese fiction, of which
four are considered here. The first is *zhengxu* 正敘
("straight narration"). This style is the most common in
traditional Chinese fiction. It is sequential, with the
narration following the order of the plot.[40]

Another is *lunxu* 輪敘 ("alternating narration").
This means that two story-lines are narrated
alternately: first this, then over to that, then back to
the first. . . . The common storytelling phrase *hua fen
liang tou* 話分兩頭 ("the story divides into two
here") is often used to clarify narration in this
style.[41]

Chaxu 插敘 ("inserted narration") involves
inserting a sub-plot into the main plot.[42] Li Ping'er's
marriage to Jiang Zhushan in Ch. 17 of *Jin Ping Mei* is
one such example. In *Xiyou ji* the story of Sanzang's
early life, how the Tang Emperor Taizong came to send

[40] Jia and Xu, p. 30.

[41] Jia and Xu, p. 31.

[42] Jia and Xu, p. 32.

him on the pilgrimage, and the beginning of his
pilgrimage (Chs. 9-12), are inserted into the story of
Monkey (after Ch. 13, of course, Sanzang's and Monkey's
stories coincide). By *chaxu* Jia and Xu mean stories
inserted in the narrative. There is also "inserted
narration" on a smaller scale, usually as a new
character's story given, in condensed form, when that
character is introduced. Obviously this is not a style
unique to traditional Chinese fiction, but in the Ming
novel it is very common, and important, as it abruptly
interrupts the story, thereby reminding the reader of
the narrator. *Chaxu* and smaller narrative insertions
are, like *lunxu*, usually signalled to the reader.[43]

Minor narrative insertion is similar to
"flashback", which is a feature of the European novel,
but there are differences. Like sub-plot, the use of
narrative insertion in the Ming novel is limited by the
need for clarity in such long and loosely-structured
works. Narrative insertion is generally only a passage
of background when a new character or sub-plot is
introduced, but this is different from flashback in
European novels, in which the order in which the reader
receives information is deliberately inverted. In the
Ming novel information is given as a narrative insertion
only when it would not be relevant before. For example,
in the beginning of Ch. 24 of *Shuihu zhuan* there is a

[43] Jia and Xu, p. 32.

narrative insertion giving details of Pan Jinlian's early life and the circumstances of her marriage to Wu Song's brother, Wu Da. But this information could not have been given before, as both Jinlian and Wu Da are only introduced in this chapter. Another example is the story of Zhen Yuanzi, in *Xiyou ji*, inserted between two scenes of the pilgrims exploring a mountain (Ch. 24, pp. 304-05).

Another common way of giving information about something which took place earlier in time is through conversation. This is a variation on narrative insertion. A new character may introduce himself and give his background, which may be information new to the reader. This method is common in all three novels, particularly *Xiyou ji*.

Also of interest are the "preview" device of a character saying what he will do, then proceeding to go and do it; and the reverse device of a character saying what he has done, when it has already been recounted in the narrative. These devices rely heavily on the use of motifs, and are redolent of oral storytelling. A third method is the dream, which predicts the future (or interprets the present).

Finally, Jia and Xu also note the use of zhuixu 追 敘 "retrospective narration", which is used for narrating two contemporaneous events or situations. One is told directly, in ordinary zhengxu style. When it intersects with the other, contemporaneous, event or

situation the second one is then related by a character or by the author/narrator.The scene in *Shuihu zhuan* (Ch. 9, p. 104) in which Lu Zhishen, after saving Lin Chong, tells him how he came to be in Wild Boar Forest, is an example of *zhuixu*: the story told by Lu is supposed to have taken place at the same time as the adventures of Lin Chong, which we have been following.[44]

All of this seems quite straightforward and obvious. But the presentation of plot is important in the Ming novel, because it makes the story more varied and interesting, and makes possible such key storytelling effects as suspense, irony and the intervention of the storyteller/narrator.

Zhengxu is the standard plot style, against which all the others are contrasted. All of the plot styles listed above, except for *zhengxu*, create suspense. Some of these plot styles, particularly *lunxu*, enhance irony by allowing the reader to have greater knowledge of a situation than the characters involved. Obviously, what applies to the presentation of plot also applies to the presentation of non-plot elements.

[44] Jia and Xu, p. 32. Huang Ruiyun discusses this narrative style in terms of hidden and open plot lines (Huang Ruiyun, "Shuihu yishu zatan", pp. 243-46).

Methods of Composition

Quite often in the Ming novel it seems that
important incidents are dismissed in a sentence or two
and less important ones are described in great detail.
For example, in *Shuihu zhuan* Ch. 3: Shi Jin's reunion
with his old teacher Li Zhong is passed over quickly,
yet the governor's fruitless investigation into the
killing of Butcher Zheng is described in considerable
detail when a couple of sentences would have sufficed.
Judging the two as incidents, with a bearing on the
plot, it would seem that the governor's investigation is
no more important — in fact probably less — than the
meeting with Li Zhong. But the two incidents have
different functions, functions which are not plot-
related. The meeting between Shi Jin and Li Zhong is
told fairly concisely, so as not to distract the
reader's attention from Lu Da, who is emerging as the
hero of the story, or to slow down the pace of this
stage of the narrative. But the account of the
governor's investigations is prolonged, for a number of
reasons: to serve as a contrast with the excitement of
the butcher's death in the immediately preceding scene;
to highlight the difference between the official and Lu
Da's brand of law enforcement; to build up suspense
(while the investigations are going on, the reader is
left wondering about what will happen to Lu Da); to give
the sense of time passing — time for Lu Da to make his

escape; and because this type of procedural police work is always interesting to readers.

As we read more of *Shuihu zhuan* we see that both these incidents are common motifs – and motifs can be included or left out, expanded on or condensed, to suit the requirements of the story and the effect the storyteller/narrator is trying to achieve. We have already noted the importance of motifs in the Ming novel, and we have seen that there is much more to the Ming novel than the plot and the events which contribute to the plot. An analysis of the Ming novel based on the event is bound to fail.[45] For much of the Ming novel is not action at all, and therefore is not presented in units of action or events. The story is not the main purpose of Chinese narrative, as it often is of Western fiction. In Chinese narrative main events are embedded in a lot of non-events.[46] If we look only at what happens in the Ming novel, then we overlook what makes it effective. The significance of events is relative: non-events are just as important in the Ming novel.[47] This is where the concept of motif, which can include events but is not restricted to them, is useful.

[45] For a definition of "event" see Holloway, pp. 8-16.

[46] Plaks, "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative", pp. 313-15.

[47] Plaks, "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative", p. 315. Lin Wenshan 林文山 also appreciates the importance of what he terms "temporary calm between two climaxes" ("Shuihu de qingjie anpai" 水滸的情即安排, in *Shuihu zhengming* I, 188).

The investigation scene in Ch. 3 of *Shuihu zhuan*, cited above, shows that what may appear to be mere repetition or trivial detail to the modern or Western reader is actually very important. Apart from the function of such material in building up suspense and enhancing other devices, it holds much of the entertainment value of the Ming novel. Likewise, in the first half of Ch. 20 of *Shuihu zhuan* not much "happens" in the sense of moving the plot along. But this section of the narrative serves as a kind of illustration, a "day in the life" of the outlaw band. In fact, it is a microcosm of the whole book, involving the assembly of heroes; robbing for food, discussing policy and plans; repaying debts of kindness; personal issues (in this case, the fate of Lin Chong's wife) leading to a quest; using the geographical features of Liang Shan Bo to the best advantage; and so on. In other words, while there is certainly a strong story line in the Ming novel, plot is not all-important to structure.

So we could say then that the main compositional principle of the Ming novel is the loose linking of themes and motifs. These elements of the story can be increased or decreased easily. In the Ming novel there are two main ways of doing this, ways which are characteristic of oral storytelling and of the Ming novel.

The first way of increasing or decreasing "extra" material could be described simply as an adding mode.

This allows things to be added to (or taken away from) the work almost indefinitely, as with links in a chain. This is the mode of composition of the novel as a whole (that is, the stringing together of stories and episodes) as well as at the local level (the presentation of scenes within a story or episode).

The second compositional method expands or elaborates upon the story without moving it along. If the first method is comparable to a chain, then here we might use the metaphor of a telescope - each section of a telescope is smaller and fits into the one before. The aim of opening a telescope is to look at something more closely, rather than to look at something different, and many non-plot elements in the Ming novel have this function, especially descriptions and conversations.

This compositional mode is similar to what Eugene Eoyang, in his study of the Dunhuang stories, calls "expansion" and "collapsing" of stories.[48] He was referring to the technique of adding to a story by repeating motifs in full detail, or abbreviating them by leaving out everything but the bare outline.

Themes and motifs, whether put together by the "chain" or the "telescope" method, are joined by the specifics of an individual story - character and place names, particular events rather than stock situations. For example, the famous *Shuihu zhuan* story of the

[48] "Word of Mouth: Oral Storytelling in the Pien-wen", Diss. Indiana Univ. 1971, p. 72.

robbery of the birthday presents (Chs. 14-16) contains
motifs such as Wu Yong thinking of a cunning plan, an
official maltreating his men, very hot weather, drugged
wine, and so forth – all very common motifs in *Shuihu
zhuan*. But in this story they are all united by the
circumstances – Cai Jing's birthday presents being
stolen – and by the particular heroes involved. Apart
from these unifying, particularising elements, the story
is largely made up of elements which could easily be
adapted for use in other stories.

Patterns

The structure of any work of literature is of
necessity artificial to a greater or lesser extent. Some
works may reach such a high degree of realism that their
structure is not apparent at all. But whether the
subject matter of a work is taken from real life or from
the imagination, it still goes through a process of
adjustment and organization to become a work of
literature.

In the Ming novel structure is obvious. First, the
external structural divisions (series, story and
chapter/episode) are distinct – through them the

reader's attention is drawn to the structure, in fact.[49]

Second, the internal structure or plot has a high degree

of artificiality: from early in *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou*

ji it is clear to the reader that a pattern is being

formed. This becomes more obvious as we read on. In

Shuihu zhuan the main overall pattern is that of the

gathering together of the 108 heroes and the eventual

breaking up of the band. (This is the pattern in the

120-chapter version - slightly lop-sided, because the

band breaks up rather suddenly compared with the gradual

process of its formation.)[50]

In the Ming novel what I have called the "loose

strands", the material which does not contribute

[49] Plaks observes that the Ming novels tended to
follow a rhythm based on their division into *juan* 卷
(scrolls or volumes). In both *Shuihu zhuan* and *Jin Ping
Mei*, for instance, there are usually important events in
the ninth and tenth chapters of a decade of chapters,
which would have corresponded with the end of the *juan*.
In the fifth chapter of a decade in *Jin Ping Mei* there
are peaks (of gaiety, sadness, or whatever) which are
"generally flanked by troughs of relative inactivity in
the intervening periods". *Shuihu zhuan, Xiyou ji* and *Jin
Ping Mei* all divide fairly neatly into two, and other
such patterns can be discerned. (*The Four Masterworks of
the Ming Novel*, pp. 72-76, 306-07.)

[50] Jin Shengtan, in his edition of the novel, dispensed
with nearly the entire second half of the full-length
version, in effect destroying the original pattern. But
no one could be more pattern-conscious than Jin
Shengtan: he cut off the last fifty chapters of the
novel because he disapproved of the heroes'
rehabilitation in the later chapters (and possibly also
because the second half of the novel is not as
interesting as the first). Jin tries to patch up the
pattern. When in the last chapter Lu Junyi dreams that
all the heroes are beheaded, this is Jin's way of
killing the heroes off in effect. (See also Widmer, p.
84; Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp.
306, 310.)

directly to the plot, is still part of the pattern of the whole. It is clear that traditional Chinese writers thought of the structure of works of fiction in terms of patterns — a whole set of structural and narrative techniques, many of them based on patterning, was identified.[51] Moreover, terms such as *xian* 綫 (thread or line), and *guansuo* 貫索 (continuous string) are used in traditional Chinese literary criticism.[52]

If we broaden our outlook to encompass more than fiction, or even literature, we will see that there are other kinds of artistic works with motifs or ornaments, or even whole sections, which are not related to the main theme at all. Some music, especially jazz, is like this. So are works of art like intricately designed tapestries or carpets. There is much "unnecessary" detail, that is, detail which is unnecessary to the main theme, yet the whole work is richer as a result. A similar aesthetic principle underlies traditional Chinese fiction.

In the Ming novel the overall pattern — the

[51] See Jia and Xu, pp. 16-17.

[52] Jin Shengtan, in one of his prefaces to *Shuihu zhuan*, says in his definition of the technique *caoshe huixian* 草蛇灰綫 : Reading [a scene featuring this technique] hastily, it is as if there is nothing there; but when you look carefully, you see that there is a line of thread there, and if you pull it, the whole passage moves 驟看之有如無物；及至細尋，其中有一條綫索，拽之通體俱動 . Tracing these threads is one of Jin's preoccupations in his annotation of the novel. "Du diwu caizi shu fa" 讀第五才子書法, in *Shuihu zhuan huiping ben*, I, 20.

structure of the novel as a whole — is therefore
important. A pattern is established at the beginning,
artistically just as important as the plot, which must
be completed.[53] (Sometimes it is only with hindsight
that the reader can discern the pattern.) Patterning was
a feature of narrative which particularly interested Jin
Shengtan. Throughout his annotation of Shuihu zhuan, and
in his introductions to the chapters of the novel, Jin
notes recurring scenes, parallels, and other patterns.
For example, in his introduction to Ch. 31 (Ch. 30 of
the 120-chapter version), he discusses how at the
beginning of the Wu Song series Wu gets drunk and kills
a tiger, and at the end of the series he gets drunk and
kills Jiang Menshen.[54] Another example observed by Jin
is that Pan Jinlian is paired (作對) with another
character surnamed Pan later in the novel — Yang Xiong's
wife Pan Qiaoyun, who commits adultery with a monk in
Ch. 45.[55] And in the introduction to Ch. 4 (Jin's
edition) he points out that the Lu Da series parallels
Wu Song's later in the novel.[56]

The working out of the pattern of a work often
means that the story is predictable. Predictability

[53] Peter Li notes that in spite of a weak internal
structure, the existence of an "overall pattern" in
Shuihu zhuan gives the novel a "sense of unity and
coherence". (Peter Li, p. 84.)

[54] Shuihu zhuan huiping ben, I, 586.

[55] See Shuihu zhuan huiping ben, I, 433; II, 426 ff.

[56] See Shuihu zhuan huiping ben, I, 123.

basically means fulfilling expectations. When a pattern is started, the reader expects it to be completed.[57] (However, this is not the same as inevitability, which refers only to the plot. Inevitability will be discussed further below.)

Patterning can also be found in the Western novel to a certain extent. A genre — and most works can be categorized as belonging to some genre or sub-genre or other — is surely a pattern or model for the writing of the work. Sooner or later in the course of reading the reader recognizes the work as belonging to a certain genre or conforming to a certain pattern — for example, love story, detective story. However, in Western fiction patterning is often suppressed or disguised, due to the demands of realism and the perceived importance of originality. In Western literature there has been, for the last two hundred years at least, a virtual obsession with inspiration, imagination and originality, and obvious patterns have been condemned for being artificial.

So it is that patterns are more obvious in

[57] Robert Keith McMahon suggests that narrative patterns in late Ming fiction are largely to do with causal relations, with "how writers give a semblance of necessity to the actions of the story". He sees two levels of causality: didactic causality, which is concerned with fate and so forth; and aesthetic causality, which results in narrative patterning and showing the relation between various elements of the story. ("The Gap in the Wall: Containment and Abandon in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Fiction", Diss. Princeton Univ. 1984, p. 23.)

traditional Chinese fiction, more acceptable according to traditional Chinese aesthetic standards, and more important to individual works, since the Ming novel's enjoyment lies at least as much in the extraneous, non-plot elements as in the plot.

The structure of the Ming novel, and the patterning, are obvious to the reader. Rather than being suppressed or disguised, as in the Western novel, structure in the Ming novel draws the reader's attention to itself. The implied author/narrator is self-consciously telling the story and weaving the pattern; accordingly the reader is conscious of the storyteller, for where there is a design there must be a designer. Of course, the Western novel is just as carefully crafted, but the reader's attention is not drawn to the act of crafting – instead, the reader is encouraged to be engrossed in the story, and deeply involved with the characters and wondering what will happen to them.

Framing and Other Structural Devices

The device of the frame is obvious in both *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji.*[58] This device is used at the novel, series and story levels. By frame I mean an incident or situation which occurs at the beginning and is returned

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[58] It may be that the frames in the Ming novel are simply obvious manifestations of something present in all stories. (See O'Toole, p. 156.)

to at the very end. Everything which is presented in between is derived from or limited by the frame, yet framing elements barely intrude at all into the material they are framing.[59]

Shuihu zhuan is bordered by Commander Hong releasing the 108 star demons at the beginning of the novel, and in the final chapter this imagery is returned to.[60] (This is true of both the 120-chapter and 70-chapter versions.) The greater part of *Xiyou ji* (eighty-five chapters) comprises the journey to the West; this is framed by the circumstances leading to the pilgrimage (Chs. 1-12) and the successful completion of the pilgrimage and the return journey (Chs. 98-100). *Jin Ping Mei* is framed by the story of Wu Song and Pan Jinlian, the *Shuihu* story on which the novel is based.

Series and stories in *Shuihu zhuan* are generally framed by the background of the main character (often presented in flashback) and the character joining the band of outlaws. Another type of framing in *Shuihu zhuan*, used more in the later chapters, consists of one or more heroes going down the mountain from their stronghold, then returning for a feast after their

[59] I disagree with Plaks' conclusion that the framing device (and others like it) serves merely as "a decorative border and not a structurally-significant enclosure". ("The Problem of Structure in Chinese Narrative", pp. 430-31.)

[60] The stone tablet motif reinforces this framing structure - see Jin Shengtan's discussion in his annotation of the prologue (Ch. 1), *Shuihu zhuan huiping ban*, p. 49, and his introduction to Ch. 70.

adventures. In *Xiyou ji* each story is framed by the pilgrims resuming their journey at the beginning of the story, and taking leave of a place or of some minor characters at the end.

Plaks notes that Ming and Qing dynasty novels tend to have "a structurally distinct prologue section to the main body of the work", comparable with the *ruhua* 入話 (prologue) of the *huaben* 話本 . Plaks sees the novel's prologue as a "self-conscious literary device" which establishes a "narrative model" to draw the reader's attention to certain issues which are examined more fully in the story proper.[61] The release of the demons at the beginning of *Shuihu zhuan* forms a prologue of sorts. It is interesting to note, as Plaks has done, that this material is found only in *Shuihu zhuan* and not in the novel's sources; that it is a conscious device.[62] The next several chapters of *Shuihu zhuan* comprise further prologue material; the central focus of the novel - Liang Shan Bo - is not introduced until Ch. 11. In *Xiyou ji* the prologue is obviously Chs. 1-8, with the next few chapters (up to the beginning of the

[61] *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, p. 76.

[62] Plaks suggests that the prologue chapter of *Shuihu zhuan* gives it "an ironic reflection on what is to come: an advance warning that the treatment of the heroes of the popular tradition in this novel will not necessarily conform to simplistic expectations". (*The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp. 307-08.)

pilgrimage) forming a sort of second prologue.[63]

The framing device is not the only device imposed upon the Ming novel to regulate structure. There are other informing devices. One is that of the heroes acquiring some knowledge of how they should live or what their fate will be. Song Jiang is given scriptures in Ch. 41 of *Shuihu zhuan*; Sanzang receives the heart sutra in Ch. 19 of *Xiyou ji*. In *Jin Ping Mei* all of the main characters have their fortunes told in Ch. 29.

Likewise, what Robert Keith McMahon refers to as interstices are of structural importance in the Ming novel.[64] He includes such motifs as festivals; windows, doorways and other openings or gaps; and urinating (because it involves stepping outside, where anything could happen).[65] A festival such as Mid-Autumn or New Year is the background to many episodes in *Shuihu zhuan* and *Jin Ping Mei*. Something momentous always happens, so festivals are generally turning-points in the story. Windows and other openings are meeting-points between

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[63] Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, p. 209. See also Li Xifan 李希凡 , "Xiyou ji yu shehui xianshi" 西遊記與社會現實 , in *Xiyou ji yanjiu* 西遊記研究 , ed. Jiangsu sheng shehui kexue yuan, wenxue yanjiu suo 江蘇省社會科學院文學研究所 (Nanjing: Jiangsu Guji, 1983), p. 30.

[64] McMahon defines interstice as "a static point of juncture" or "transition between two poles". It could also be a bridge or space between two things being joined. He notes that Jin Shengtan, in his use of the term *rusun* 入筍 ("dovetailing" or "interweaving"), had a similar concept. (McMahon, pp. 29-31.)

[65] McMahon, pp. 31-33.

two locations (two rooms, inside and outside, and so forth). In the Ming novel physical meeting-points are symbolic of joints in the story, when two stories or the lives of two characters coincide (for example, *Shuihu* heroes meeting in taverns). Often this "joining" involves one character spying on or eavesdropping on another. For example, Ximen Qing seeing Pan Jinlian pulling down the blind in *Shuihu zhuan*, various demons seeing the prized Tang Monk, Monkey (in disguise) overhearing a demon's plans, Pan Jinlian and Meng Yulou spying on Ximen Qing as he first punishes Li Ping'er, then accepts her as his wife.

Such events and scenes are significant from a structural point of view because they emphasize the structure of the work. The event or scene may be important to the characters involved, or may seem ordinary, but the reader cannot help but notice that something interesting always happens during a festival, say, or that going to a tavern will result in an important meeting. The reader can see how these points divide the work.

The device of framing is not the same as these interstices, but it is significant for the same reason. The reader is in a position to perceive the frame, to see it as shaping the pattern of the whole work. Ch. 1 of *Shuihu zhuan* (when Commander Hong releases the demons) affects how the reader views the characters - it is one of the causes of both the ambiguity and the irony

in the novel. But of course none of this is felt by the characters; this is a level of communication between writer and reader, and it goes "above the heads" of the characters. *Jin Ping Mei* is often described as having chapters 24-26 of *Shuihu zhuan* as its starting point, but strictly speaking this is not so. The *Shuihu* story is *Jin Ping Mei*'s starting point and also its finishing point. Originally in *Shuihu zhuan*, an unbroken story of three chapters, in *Jin Ping Mei* it is split in two, to frame that novel. But the reader, throughout the course of reading *Jin Ping Mei*, knows how the story must end. The frame, therefore, is crucial to the interpretation of *Jin Ping Mei*.

Another interesting structural device is that of having a scene act as the hub of the work as a whole. Peter Li suggests that Ch. 71 of *Shuihu zhuan*, in which the heroes receive the tablet from heaven, "serves as a 'nucleus' from which the action can proceed in both directions" - back to the release of the demons at the beginning of the novel, and forward to the breaking up of the outlaw band at the end.[66] The Heart Sutra in *Xiyou ji* is central to the understanding of that novel,

[66] Peter Li, p. 83.

C.T. Hsia argues.[47] In *Jin Ping Mei*, Ximen Qing

acquiring the potion from the monk occurs exactly at the

midway point of the novel.[48] While this incident does

not give meaning to the novel in quite the same way as

the "hubs" of the heavenly tablet and the Heart Sutra do

in *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji*, it does mark the turning

point in Ximen Qing's fortunes, and adds to the work's

structural and thematic unity.

Predictability

Any reader of *Shuihu zhuan*, *Xiyou ji* and even *Jin*

Ping Mei would have to acknowledge that these works are

highly predictable, and this characteristic has been

pointed out as a weakness of the Ming novel. But what

makes the Ming novel predictable? And is this

predictability really a flaw?

The Ming writers do not seem to have strived to

avoid predictability. In all three novels, many of the

stories incorporated were well-known legends and folk-

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[47] Hsia notes that in an earlier version of the novel,
the Song dynasty *Tang Sanzang qujing shihua* 唐三藏取
經詩話 the acquisition of this scripture was the
climax, but in later versions of the story this episode
is moved to an earlier part of the story "so that the
meaning of that sutra could be further expounded by the
pilgrims on their journey", making the "whole novel a
philosophical commentary on the sutra". "New
Perspectives on Two Ming Novels: *Hsi Yu Chi* and *Hsi Yu*
Pu", in *Wenlin*, ed. Chow Ts'e-tsung (Madison: Univ. of
Wisconsin Press, 1968), p. 236.

[48] Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp.
75-76.

tales, stories their contemporary reading audience would have recognized. Moreover, chapter headings often reveal what is going to happen in a story.

But apart from this, the Ming novels are also intrinsically predictable – their predictability lies largely in the way in which they were written. As we have observed above, predictability basically means fulfilling expectations.[49] In the Ming novel this is due to: the genre being familiar (due, in turn, to characteristic plot, tone, and so forth); the use of type characters or familiar characters; the presence of foreshadowing or other clues in the text as to what will happen; and the reader's certain knowledge of what will happen – from the chapter headings, as mentioned above, familiarity with the story, and also through a character sometimes saying what he or she will do, then doing it.

These features which make the Ming novel predictable may be present (slightly or to a great extent) in Western fiction, but generally, predictability is not seen as a good thing in the West. Is predictable Chinese fiction acceptable, whereas predictable Western fiction is unacceptable? And if so, why?

In the West, it is so-called primitive fiction – folk-tales, mediaeval romances, and so forth – which tends to have a high degree of predictability, with the

[49] See also Holloway's discussion of "suppositions" (*Narrative and Structure*, pp. 3-15).

nineteenth century being least tolerant of stylization, patterning and predictability in fiction. During the nineteenth century the interest in realism and originality was almost an obsession. The aesthetic standpoint of the last century — and indeed this century — is quite different from both that of earlier centuries, and that of China.

We need to look further into traditional Chinese aesthetics. In painting, for instance, the whole of the space of the painting is important — there is often not one central or main focal point. Perspective is not important, nor physical realism. There is often no clear distinction between different distances; both inside and outside a room may be seen, for instance.

In the Western novel there is design, but such a high degree of patterning as in the Ming novel is rare. Therefore, in general, the Western novel is less predictable. From the point of view of plot, what happens in Western novels is inevitable rather than predictable. The Ming novel, on the other hand, tends to be highly predictable but rarely with an inevitable outcome. Inevitability is created by the action or plot. The more tightly-woven the plot of a novel, the more inevitable the outcome. The Ming novel, made up of so many threads which do not contribute to the plot, produces a pattern. As the pattern takes shape the expectations it creates in the reader's mind demand to be fulfilled, and the work becomes more and more

predictable. The outcome is expected, but is not an inevitable result of the workings of the plot.[70] In fact, in a pattern-dominated rather than plot-dominated work, the outcome is not so important.

Inevitability of plot is compatible with realism, which is not a main feature of the Ming novel. In the European novel the outcome of the plot is inevitable, so the plot (and the structure of the work) seems natural. Too much coincidence, the use of a "deus ex machina", the author withholding information, and so forth, is frowned on. Of course, a good plot is very carefully designed, but it must seem natural, and the outcome must appear to be naturally resulting from the action of the plot — inevitable.

Because plot is not as important in the Ming novel as in the European novel there is no climax, one point when all the elements are brought together and resolved in a high pitch of excitement, followed by a short denouement, then the end. In Chinese paintings there are clusters of activity at intervals rather than one central topic or focal point. Other art forms (jazz

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[70] Lin Wenshan, however, argues just the opposite, saying that coincidence in *Shuihu zhuan* is (with the exception of "superstitious" or supernatural coincidence) natural and inevitable. (Lin Wenshan, pp. 199-203.) But I think that we have only to look at such scenes as the first meeting of Pan Jinlian and Ximen Qing, in which the coincidence is not inevitable at all (see below, Ch. iii, pp. 164-67) to see that the author/narrator of the Ming novel, far from striving for inevitability, actually flaunts how contrived the story is.

comes to mind again) are like this too.

Suspense

Suspense is an important feature of the Ming novel.
It is also an obvious one - the reader cannot fail to
realize that much of the Ming novel serves primarily to
build up suspense.

Suspense in the Ming novel is not necessarily based
on the reader not knowing the outcome; on the contrary,
it is often quite clear what will happen. Suspense is
the tension created by the reader knowing what the
outcome will be, and it not happening. It is only when
the focus is on fighting skill or clever strategy - and
the reader's intellectual curiosity is aroused - that
the writer is able to create suspense by withholding
information. (Sometimes ruci ruci 如此如此 or
zheban zheban 這般這般 is used to indicate this.)
The longer the obvious outcome is delayed, the greater
the tension. An example is Shuihu zhuan Ch. 24, when
Wang Po tells Ximen Qing the ten stages of the
seduction, followed by Ch. 25, in which the seduction
goes exactly according to plan. The reader has known
since the beginning of Ch. 24 that Ximen Qing seduces
Pan Jinlian.

The complex patterning of the Ming novel - its
structure of plot together with many other elements -
enables the writer to delay the outcome. Some of the

narrative forms and devices which achieve this are:
description; verse; comments by the narrator;
unnecessary detail (for the working of the plot) of
action or events; minor characters being as fully
introduced as main characters; and multiple point of
view. These will all be discussed in the following
chapters.[71]

Suspense is a most important feature of *Shuihu
zhuan* and *Xiyou ji*, both works containing a lot of
action, and also of *Jin Ping Mei*, through the tension
and irony built up in that novel. The use of suspense is
highly effective in *Jin Ping Mei*, and an essential
element of that novel's structure. In the short term,
the reader's expectations are not fulfilled. However,
the reader knows what the pattern is — the whole novel
is an elaboration of Chs. 24-26 of *Shuihu zhuan*. The
opening chapters of *Jin Ping Mei* are in fact almost the
same as those chapters of *Shuihu zhuan* — the only
difference is that in *Jin Ping Mei*, Ximen Qing and Pan
Jinlian are not immediately killed by Wu Song. Pan
Jinlian marries Ximen Qing, and the main body of the
novel is concerned with life in Ximan Qing's household.
But the reader knows that Wu Song is alive, is
determined to get vengeance, and sooner or later will
return. This is established at the very beginning of the

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[71] See also Plaks' list of "devices of retardation and
acceleration" of narrative pace ("The Problem of
Structure in Chinese Narrative", p. 438).

novel, and colours the reader's view of the whole novel.
Moreover, there are other clues in the text which
support this structure. For example, the fortune telling
session in Ch. 29 predicts misfortune for most of the
main characters, and the fate of the other Jinlian
(known as Huilian), a maid in Ximen Qing's household,
makes the reader wonder about what will happen to the
main Jinlian.[72]

Suspense does help the reader to become engrossed
in the story, but it is also an important way in which
the storyteller/narrator establishes his presence - and
his power over what happens - in the novel. Suspense in
the Ming novel depends on the reader's curiosity about
how something happens. The writer creates as much
suspense as possible by supplying information in advance
- which therefore gives rise to expectations on the
reader's part - and then, after keeping the reader
waiting, recounting what happens.

For example, in Ch. 3 of *Shuihu zhuan*, we know from
the opening (title) couplet that Lu Zhishen (known at
this stage of the story as Lu Da) gives the butcher
Zheng a beating, but we do not know why this beating
takes place, or when it happens. In the first part of

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[72] Hanan describes Wu Song in *Jin Ping Mei* as "no more
than a kind of *deus ex machina* whose appearance is
delayed until the novel is nearly over". ("A Landmark of
the Chinese Novel", pp. 325-26.) However, I think that
he is overlooking the sense of doom, to which Wu Song's
certain revenge is a contributing factor, that pervades
the novel.

the chapter we do not even know who Butcher Zheng is.
When we first learn of him, and see Lu Zhishen's
reaction to his ill-treatment of Jin Cuilian, we begin
to wait for the beating. But we do not know when exactly
it will take place.

The suspense is increased by false alarms. These
are moments of tension which are created and then
dispelled. However, they are not entirely dispelled, for
the suspense increases with each false alarm. In the
episode of Lu Zhishen beating the butcher there are at
least two separate false alarms before the real
confrontation takes place. The first comes immediately
after the girl has finished telling her story. Lu says,
"You two [Shi Jin and Shi Jin's old teacher Li Zhong]
wait here while I go and beat to death that fellow". But
his companions manage to placate him: "Don't be angry,
brother, sort it out tomorrow". When Lu Zhishen, Shi Jin
and Li Zhong go their separate ways, the suspense
increases, because without the other two to restrain him
Lu is more likely to do something. We are told that Lu
Zhishen is too angry to sleep or eat - a second scene of
tension. But still he does not seek out Butcher Zheng,
going instead to see Jin Cuilian and her father. These
false alarms help build up the suspense. It is not until
almost two-thirds of the way through the chapter that Lu
finally confronts Zheng. Even after Lu has gone to see
him we have to wait again while Lu teases Zheng, until
the fight finally begins some four or five hundred

characters later.

Once the fight has begun the details of what happens become important. Although the situation has been worsened by Lu making Zheng angry, we still do not know what the exact outcome will be — how severe the beating will be, whether Lu will kill Zheng. Moreover, we do not know the details of Zheng's suffering, or what happens to Lu afterwards. So although we have a good idea of the general outcome, we want to find out all these details. It is most important that the ending of a suspenseful story or episode, the thing we have been both looking forward to and dreading, is terrible enough to satisfy the reader and does not fizzle out in an anti-climax. If Lu Zhishen simply hit Zheng a few times without hurting him badly, or killed him with one blow without Zheng suffering much, then the conclusion would not be satisfying. As it is, the ending of Ch. 3 is drawn-out and blood-thirsty, both a climax of the suspense and a high-point of the writer's powers of description.

In the Ming novel we can guess from the title, the ending of the previous chapter and the general nature of the work what will happen, but we are still compelled to read on and find out. The suspense lies in how something happens rather than what happens, and our satisfaction comes not from discovering what happens but from our expectations being realized. The writer balances how much the reader is told with what is kept hidden.

Suspense in *Xiyou ji* is handled in much the same way as in *Shuihu zhuan*. In *Shuihu zhuan* suspense is generally built upon exciting incidents, on action. In *Xiyou ji*, however, suspense is often in the psychological realm. This is made possible by the greater predictability stories have in *Xiyou ji*. There is a lot less variation in plot than in *Shuihu zhuan*, so there is little for the reader to be curious about. Moreover, the humour of *Xiyou ji* makes it difficult to take the action of the stories seriously, which is necessary for tension to arise. We are not supposed to take the adventures seriously. But tension and suspense does exist in the relations between the main characters.

A good example of this is Ch. 27. In this episode a demon tries three times to capture Sanzang, using three different disguises. But the demon is not a serious threat. On each of the demon's attempts Monkey sees through the disguises and deals with him, the third time killing him. There is no suspense at all in this aspect of the story. The suspense – and the interest – lies in the conflict the demon creates between Monkey and Sanzang. We are not curious about whether the demon will capture Sanzang and eat him (we know he will not) but about whether Sanzang will forgive Monkey. With each of the demon's attempts, and Monkey killing the demon's body, Sanzang is more angry; we wonder how far Monkey can go. The suspense of Ch. 27 lies here. This interpretation is supported by the fact that more of the

narrative is devoted to the tension between Monkey and Sanzang than to the demon's attempts to capture Sanzang and Monkey preventing him. The demon attacks and Monkey tries to kill him three times, and Sanzang has to decide on each occasion whether or not to forgive Monkey. Each time the demon appears he is dispensed with easily, but Sanzang's reproach is drawn out.

The information given by the writer revealing what the outcome of a story might be does not detract from the suspense; on the contrary, it enhances it. The climax is foreshadowed in what comes before, building up the reader's expectations which are then satisfied in the climax. To return to the example from *Shuihu zhuan* cited above: the excitement of Ch. 3 depends on Lu Zhishen's quick-tempered and violent personality. But because Lu Zhishen is a new character we need to learn about his temperament in order to have expectations about what could happen, in order for the climax to have any impact. (Most readers would probably have some knowledge of the legendary Lu Zhishen anyway; the information given really serves to remind the reader and to stress the important points about his personality.) We learn about Lu Zhishen through description and dialogue, but our strongest impression comes by means of foreshadowing. In Ch. 3 Lu Zhishen is involved in four incidents, all of them some sort of row: his encounter with Shi Jin's old teacher Li Zhong; the scene in which Jin Cuilian's crying disturbs Lu, and the father and

daughter are brought before him; his attack on the
assistant at the inn; and his fight with Butcher Zheng.
Each of these incidents foreshadows the next. Once we
have learnt how Lu Zhishen reacts when provoked, we
expect him to behave in a similar way when we see a
similar situation arising. Each of the four incidents is
more violent than the one before. In the encounter with
Li Zhong, Lu is annoyed and frightens off Li Zhong's
customers. When he hears the crying he flings the dishes
to the floor. When the assistant at the inn will not
allow Jin Cuilian and her father to leave, Lu hits him.
And in the fight with Butcher Zheng he kills him. This
foreshadowing firmly establishes Lu Zhishen's character
as violent and unpredictable, and contributes to
building up the suspense. The fact that Lu's second
outburst has a happy outcome (he decides to help the
Jins) only strengthens the impression that his behaviour
is unpredictable, increasing the suspense. Suspense can
only be built up if the possibility of something
terrible is raised. This is what foreshadowing does.

In *Jin Ping Mei* foreshadowing is used to build up
suspense, but its use is much more subtle than in *Shuihu
zhuan*. In *Shuihu zhuan* foreshadowing and climax are
generally all within one episode or one story; in *Jin
Ping Mei* there is much more space between the incidents
which foreshadow the climax, and between the
foreshadowing and the climax. For example, the death of
Li Ping'er's son, Guange. The baby is born in Ch. 30,

but Pan Jinlian resents him from the moment she learns of Li Ping'er's pregnancy. The baby is murdered in Ch. 59 by Pan Jinlian, who trained her cat to torment him. This ultimate act of spite is foreshadowed in the intervening chapters, and even before, when Jinlian is cruel to those who are completely helpless and unable to defend themselves. The first is her cruel treatment towards her stepdaughter in the beginning of the novel. After she enters Ximen Qing's household, on several occasions she gives a maid a terrible beating for some minor transgression. And in Ch. 58 she again beats her maid, and a dog, which is not only cruel to them, but disturbs the sickly baby. In the episodes preceding the death of the baby our knowledge of Jinlian's cruelty is balanced against our knowledge of how Ximen Qing would react if anything happened to his only son. For Ximen Qing is established, by means of other, less serious incidents, as a character who stops at nothing to punish those who displease him. Thus there are two threads of foreshadowing contributing to the suspense built up around the fate of the baby.

Pattern of Three

Tied in with suspense is the pattern of three which events and situations in the Ming novel tend to fall into.

In Ch. 27 of *Xiyou ji* Monkey comments, "There's a

saying: things don't happen more than three times" (*shi buguo san* 事不過三). He is referring to Sanzang sending him away for killing people (really a demon) but it is an apt expression for describing the dominant pattern of events of *Xiyou ji* and other Ming novels. In the Ming novel there is a strong tendency for things to happen three times if they happen more than once. Moreover, the third time something happens it may be the climax or in some way conclusive, or it may provide the story with an ironic twist.

For example, in Ch. 27 of *Xiyou ji*, the demon first appears as a girl; Monkey hits her, and she escapes. The demon then appears as an old woman; Monkey hits her, and she escapes. The third time she appears as an old man; Monkey hits him and the demon is destroyed. Concurrent with this pattern of three events is the dialogue between Monkey and Sanzang. Monkey pleads three times with Sanzang to forgive him: the first two times Sazang does forgive Monkey but the third time he does not.

Often the third occurrence is the climax of the whole story or episode. For example, in *Shuihu zhuan* Ch. 3 (to return to the example used above), the fight between the butcher and Lu Zhishen begins with Lu's third unreasonable request, and the butcher dies from Lu's third blow. The whole fight scene is the climax of this chapter, and is the third scene involving Lu trying to help Jin Cuilian and her father. In Ch. 24 Pan Jinlian finally commits adultery on her third visit to

her neighbour Mrs Wang's house.

When the third incidence of something is not a climax, it usually provides some sort of twist to the story, making us see the first two instances in a different light. For example, in Ch. 19 of *Jin Ping Mei* Li Ping'er hangs herself when Ximen Qing ignores her just after their marriage, but is saved. Later, in Ch. 26 the maid Song Huilian, and Ximen Qing's latest conquest, also tries to hang herself when maltreated by Ximen Qing, and is also saved. Shortly after that, when we least expect it, Huilian again hangs herself, and is not discovered in time. This third occurrence of a hanging makes us think again about Ximen Qing's behaviour towards his wives and lovers. Because the first two hangings were not fatal they are passed over easily, but with the third hanging, which ends tragically, we see all three from a different perspective.

The pattern of three contributes to suspense in the novel because the reader has expectations about the plot: if something occurs more than once, we know that probably the third time will be the climax. The pattern of three also gives the story an oral storytelling flavour, in that it is stylized and predictable.

The pattern of three is not of course unique to the Ming novel. It seems to be a universal feature of folk stories, which tend to have more stylized plots than realist novels. In Chinese fiction this structural

pattern is dominant in earlier works (for example the Dunhuang stories) and weaker in later, more sophisticated works. It is still present in *Jin Ping Mei*, but its impact is reduced by the greater complexity of plot and the realism of the work as a whole. In *Jin Ping Mei* the pattern of three structure has a subtle, ironic effect (as in the hanging example mentioned above), whereas in *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji* it is a basic structural pattern, found in almost every episode and story.

IV. Unity

We have looked at some aspects of unity in the discussion of structural divisions, methods of composition, and patterns, so there remain to be made here only a few general remarks about unity. To return briefly to a question posed above (Ch. i, p. 24-25), it might seem when we consider how loosely structured the Ming novel is that there is little difference between an episode or story of a novel, and a *huaben* short story. Ch. 34 of *Shuihu zhuan*, for instance, is only linked to Chs. 33 and 35 through Song Jiang and Hua Rong being prisoners (at the beginning of the chapter), and the need to rescue Huang Xin's wife, which results in the attack on Qing Feng (at the end of the chapter). Chapters of *Xiyou ji* are even more loosely connected to the work as a whole: usually they are linked only by

virtue of being adventures in the one pilgrimage. Unity in the Ming novel comes largely from theme.[73]

We have seen that the structure of the Ming novel has little in common with that of a modern or nineteenth-century European one. The principles of composition, the ideas of what is relevant or important, and even the material which is being structured are all quite different. If we look at traditional Chinese literary theory, we will see that the characteristic features of structure in the Ming novel reflect an underlying attitude in Chinese literature.

The historiographical tradition was perhaps responsible for the lack of a dominant plot-line in the Ming novel (see Ch. i, pp. 29-30). Moreover, the approach of traditional Chinese literary theory excludes the tight, causal type of structure which is a feature of the nineteenth-century European novel and the modern Chinese novel. Ch. 43 of the fifth-century *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons) by Liu Xie 劉勰 is about organization (*fuhui* 附會):

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[73] Bishop says that the structure of *Jin Ping Mei* "binds together a wealth of loosely related episodes, giving these a degree of homogeneity by its [*Jin Ping Mei*'s] implicit unity of theme". ("Some Limitations of Chinese Fiction", p. 241.) I think this is true of all three novels.

何謂附會？謂總文理，統首
尾，定與奪，合涯際，彌綸一
篇，使雜而不越者也。
"Fuhui", pp. 436-37.[74]

Liu Xie emphasizes the importance of organization,
but he is talking more about the unifying concept rather
than how a work is actually organized. He sees having a
plan or an organizing principle as essential, and
compares writing to building a house or making a dress –
without a foundation or a dress pattern, the work cannot
succeed. Much later, Li Yu used the same analogy in
discussing drama.[75]

It may seem at first that there is a contradiction
here – the point we are making is that the Ming novel is
loosely structured, yet Liu Xie obviously regards unity
as very important. But looking at his idea of
organization more closely, we see that there is a basic
difference between this and the Western concept of
unity. To quote from Liu Xie again:

[74] What is the meaning of *fuhui*? It means a
comprehensive view of a literary piece as a whole with
respect to both its language and its ideas; it provides
an underlying principle to unify all its parts, it
defines the conditions governing what should be included
and what excluded, and works elements from all the
various fields into harmony; in short, it organizes the
whole piece in such a way that, though composed of a
variety of elements, it will not as a whole fall short
of the proper standard. *The Literary Mind and the
Carving of Dragons*, trans. Vincent Yu-chung Shih (Hong
Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1983).

[75] See Jia and Xu, p. 23.

以附辭會義，務總綱領，驅
萬塗於同歸，貞百慮於一
致，使眾理雖繁，而無倒置
之乖，群言雖多，而無棼絲
之亂；扶陽而出條，順陰而
藏跡，首尾周密，表裏一體。

"Fuhui", pp. 436-37.[76]

Liu Xie believes that so long as there is an organizing principle, the work will build up naturally and be unified. But for Western writers and critics, unity means a close-knit logical progression. A similar concept of unity to the traditional Chinese one is typical of oral storytellers.[77]

The "organizing principle" of the official

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[76] In bringing order and unity into linguistic elements and ideas, one must have a comprehensive principle, by means of which he will be able to achieve his goal by ten thousand different routes, and give coherence to one hundred different kinds of ideas, so that, for all the variety of ideas, there will be no misplacement of emphasis and, for all the different linguistic elements, there will be no confusion; like a tree, he will be able to send out some shoots to meet the sunshine and keep in reserve others which remain in the shade. In this way he will achieve a close-knit organization from beginning to end, which manifests a unity of external and inner elements.

[77] Parry and Lord found that: "The singer always has the end of the theme in his mind. He knows where he is going. As in the adding of one line to another, so in the adding of one element in a theme to another, the singer can stop and fondly dwell upon any single item without losing a sense of the whole. The style allows comfortably for a digression or for enrichment. Once embarked upon a theme, the singer can proceed at his own pace". (Lord, p. 92.)

histories was the idea that people could learn from history, that principles of human behaviour and of morality are illustrated over and over again in history. History was not regarded as evolutionary, but as a pattern of various states — fortune and disaster, good and evil, activity and quiet, and so on — which are continuously repeated. The Ming novel is similar. *Shuihu zhuan* is unified by the concept of heroic and unheroic behaviour, and the stories of individual heroes and of the whole outlaw band's various battles with officialdom, are so many case histories demonstrating this point. Consequently *Shuihu zhuan* is rather repetitive. The structure is not a progression from A to Z, but a cycle, with no one climax and no real build-up to a conclusion. Individual stories are relatively unified, and have strong plot-lines, but they are units in a work unified more by theme and specific details than by action.[78] *Xiyou ji* is similar. It is episodic and repetitive, unified by the idea that the "real" world is illusory, and by Monkey constantly being shown as superior to his companions and his enemies. Each story is highly structured, and is exciting, but the work as a

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[78] Peter Li says that because *Shuihu zhuan* has a "weak internal structure" we need to look at other unifying elements, such as the geographic base of Liang Shan Bo and the heroes' common motivation. (Peter Li, pp. 81-83.) Plaks suggests that themes such as recognition (zhi ren 知人) and finding a suitable leader (qiu zhu 求主) link the various individual adventures in *Shuihu zhuan*. (*The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp. 308-09.)

whole has barely any plot development.[79]

Jin Ping Mei, as we have already noted, is quite different structurally from the other two novels, it is a departure from the typical Ming novel. The plot of *Jin Ping Mei* definitely develops towards the conclusion, and cause and effect are more important than in the other two novels. On the whole, the same characters are present throughout, and earlier events are referred to in later chapters.

To sum up, the structure of the Ming novel is loose compared with that of the European or modern novel. But such a comparison is not valid: the Ming novel is not dominated by plot as the European novel is. To appreciate the structure of the Ming novel we need to take into account the whole structure, plot and non-plot elements alike, look for the patterns in the narrative which the reader is expected to be aware of, and understand the different literary influences, principles of composition and aesthetic values involved.

[79] Plaks observes that "instead of concentrating on the creation of a singular sense of coherence through the implication of overall narrative shape, the greatest works of Chinese narrative pay more attention to the dimension of internal cohesion – a cohesion cemented by patterns of recurrence which would seem extraneous to a unitary focus, but which here contribute to the evocation of the totalized texture of human experience". ("The Problem of Structure in Chinese Narrative", p. 440.)

CHAPTER THREE: LANGUAGE

I. Introduction

Nearly all of the techniques used by the authors of *Shuihu zhuan*, *Xiyou ji* and *Jin Ping Mei*, from the presentation of the narrator to the closing line of a chapter, rely on the effective handling of language. In particular, the control of point of view – the relation between the author, the storyteller/narrator, the reader, and the characters and action of the story – is a technique inextricably linked to the language of the works. It is central to the art of Ming fiction, and one of its distinguishing features.

We have already noted that the Ming novel, while loose in structure, is actually highly patterned, and aims to produce a certain impression on the reader. Likewise, although the dominant features of the Ming novel make it appear informal and even primitive in style, a closer examination reveals that it is in fact a consciously crafted work, sophisticated in language.

Although the Ming novel draws heavily on the oral tradition, it only works because it is written to be read — if the writers had kept very close to the oral storytelling model the Ming novel would be dull, for most of the features which make an oral storytelling performance enjoyable cannot be written down, and consequently would be absent from the novel. The writer, therefore, would have had to use his sources very carefully, controlling the language of his novel in order to achieve the desired effect. The evidence is that he went a step further, that his creative editing was not merely to reproduce the effect of oral storytelling, but to use language as a tool with which to engage in a dialogue on a higher level with the reader.

Taking this as the basis for my discussion, in this chapter I will examine the style of the Ming novel, looking at the relation between the oral and literary traditions, as seen in language; the use of classical and vernacular language; sentence structure and rhythm; verse and parallel prose; and formulas.

II. Oral and Literary Influences

Unlike earlier fiction which appears to be closer to the oral tradition, the Ming novel is true literary fiction with some features of oral storytelling consciously included. Features of language reminiscent

of oral storytelling include remarks addressed to the
audience, aural puns, the use of dialect words and
generally an informal tone and vernacular style. But the
literary features balancing these could only be present
in written literature, indicating that the oral features
are not truly oral, but were deliberately incorporated
during the writing of the work with a view to achieving
a certain effect.[1] The purely literary features include
parallelism and very elegant descriptions, orthographic
puns, a neater division between prose and verse
passages, and a more formal tone and classical style.[2]
These features are all present in the novels under
examination here.

Parry and Lord, in their study of the Yugoslavian
oral epic, found that the oral and the written
traditions of storytelling are incompatible: a literate
storyteller, who relied on written sources and notes and
also began to compose in writing, ceased to be an oral
storyteller, and the oral tradition would die with the

[1] Anthony C. Yu maintains that Chinese fiction is
probably not oral because "there are no 'ornamental
epithets' and kennings such as we have in The Iliad or
Beowulf, and although there are numerous repetitions of
stock phrases and expressions, the prosodic texture of
the Chinese narrative lacks the metrical uniformity that
would validate the kind of statistical investigations
pioneered by Milman Parry". "Heroic Verse and Heroic
Mission: Dimensions of the Epic in the Hsi-yu chi",
Journal of Asian Studies, 31 (1972), 883.

[2] Eugene Eoyang, "Word of Mouth: Oral Storytelling in
the Pien-wen", Diss. Indiana Univ. 1971, pp. 173, 196.

introduction of written texts.[3] If this conclusion is
applied to the origins of the Chinese novel, it would
appear that the Ming novel could not be simply a
rewritten prompt-book. This view is supported by
Dudbridge. He further makes the point that in the oral
storytelling prompt-books we do have access to (modern
storytellers' *miben* 密本) it is precisely the "oral
characteristics" that have been identified in written
fiction which are *not* included.[4]

Eugene Eoyang wonders whether the Ming novel was a
"transitional text" in the evolution of the novel from
its oral origins.[5] Given that later novels have fewer
oral features, and the presence of both oral and written
features in the Ming novel, this would seem to be so.
However, the number of oral features is not greatly
reduced in later novels such as *Honglou meng*, and the
use of these features in earlier works such as *Xiyou ji*
is obviously ironic.[6] The Ming novel is clearly far

[3] Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge,
Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), p. 79.

[4] Glen Dudbridge, *The Hsi-yu chi: A Study of
Antecedents to the Sixteenth-Century Chinese Novel*
(Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 6-7.

[5] "Word of Mouth", p. 210.

[6] Eoyang comments that *Xiyou ji* is "heavily oral in
segments, but the total design can be demonstrated to be
a consciously written creation". He also says that the
proportion of oral elements in *Shuihu zhuan* suggests
that this novel is "very near to oral narration, almost
a recording" of a series of oral storytelling texts.
("Word of Mouth", p. 211.) However, this is not taking
into account underlying meanings, irony and the
conscious imitation of oral storytelling.

removed from performance notes, and its language in general indicates an educated writer. In fact, some oral features in the Ming novel (addressing the listener, for example) are suspiciously numerous: an abundance of oral features points to a writer consciously incorporating them. For these reasons I think we should reject the idea of the transitional text and regard the Ming novel as a literary work, consciously attempting to recreate the atmosphere of an oral storytelling session.

III. Vernacular and Classical Language

The Ming novel is regarded as being written in the vernacular and is therefore seen in China as the literature of the people. But the language of *Shuihu zhuan*, *Xiyou ji* and *Jin Ping Mei* is not the same as any local version of standard modern Chinese or even, it is believed, as the language spoken in the Ming dynasty. We refer to the language of Ming novels as vernacular for convenience: in reality, it is a cross between the vernacular and classical Chinese.[7] This combination would have been useful in a number of ways.

First, it would have enabled most of the reading audience - town dwellers with a little education - to

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[7] See Plaks, "Full-length *Hsiao-shuo* and the Western Novel: A Generic Reappraisal", *New Asia Academic Bulletin*, 1 (1978), 167; Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, p. 11; Robert Hegel, *The Novel in Seventeenth-Century China* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1981), pp. xi-xii.

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understand them. This question of literacy in the Ming

period, and more specifically, the readership of the

Ming novels, is a difficult and a controversial one.

While it is clear that at least some members of the

educated elite indulged (at least secretly) in fiction

connoisseurship, there are also contemporary reports of

people such as women and shopkeepers reading novels.[8] As

we have seen in Ch. i, there must have been many people

who, having once had official aspirations, had attained

quite a good level of literacy. The language of the

novels is not on the whole difficult. There are many

obscure characters, literary allusions and classical

passages, but these should not have been a major

impediment to comprehension provided the reader had a

good basic vocabulary.[9] It is also likely that such a

semi-educated reader read novels aloud to the less well-

[8] See Hegel, pp. ix-xii, 1-3.

[9] Carlitz suggests that many of the allusions in *Jin
Ping Mei* are to popular rather than classical
literature. See *The Rhetoric of Chin P'ing Mei*
(Bloomington: Univ. of Indiana Press, 1986), p. 72.
While it is true that this novel contains many
references to popular songs and plays, it must also be
remembered that there are allusions to philosophical
texts and other classical works, in this novel and in
Shuihu zhuan and *Xiyou ji*.

educated and the totally illiterate.[10] In other words,

it is probable that the Ming novels were familiar to a

range of people, including the most learned scholars,

literate trades-people, and ordinary, illiterate people.

However, I believe that the Ming novels were written

with the scholarly readership in mind, as there are many

features which would have been lost on anyone but the

writer's peers.[11]

Second, the mix of language types would have given

the writer greater flexibility in the creative process,

making available the pithiness and evocativeness of

classical Chinese while freeing him from its potential

[10] This was suggested to me by Dr William Dolby of
Edinburgh University. In my opinion, however, neither
the reader nor the listener would have fully understood,
and certainly a great deal of subtlety would have been
lost. Hanan supports the idea that the language of the
novels enabled ordinary people to read them. Apart from
the pull of convention and the demands of the story
itself (a character's style of speaking, for instance)
the use of the vernacular gave the writer a wider
reading audience — and by the time the novels were
written there was already an established reading public
for vernacular works. Works written for the (bourgeois)
masses are generally in language which they could
understand: vernacular, easy classical, or a combination
of the two. Writers tended to explain things more
clearly in vernacular texts — they "wrote down" to their
readers, in effect. See *The Chinese Vernacular Story*
(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 5-11.

[11] Carlitz points out that *Shuihu zhuan*, *Xiyou ji* and
Jin Ping Mei are different from the highly formulaic
chantefables, in that their language is a rich mixture
of vernacular and classical, including some quite
different language, and includes lively and
"individualized" dialogue. It is probable, therefore,
that they were written by someone with sufficient
command of the language — a highly educated person.
(Carlitz, p. 20.)

woodenness.[12] And both classical and vernacular would have signalled something to a reader with a background similar to that of the writer (such a reader being perhaps the intended reader).

Although there is a lot of classical language in these novels, their strength lies in the flexible use of both classical and vernacular. A Ming novel can contain both the language of the streets and the most formal speeches and stylized descriptions.[13] Moreover, the type of language used can create an atmosphere and enhance the effect of other narrative techniques. Whether a passage of narrative or a character's speech uses classical language, the vernacular, or a mixture can tell us a lot about the character and about the implied author's attitudes.[14]

The language of the Ming novel is far from uniform. Basically, we can distinguish three types of voice in the narrative (that is, the entire text of the novel

[12] Carlitz notes that *bense* 本色 ("fidelity to natural speech") and *qing* 情 ("genuine emotion") in drama was a quality valued by the literati. The immediacy of oral literature appealed to them, and Ming literary critics often referred to a listening audience, even when discussing purely literary works. (Carlitz, pp. 22-23.) See also Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, pp. 14-16.

[13] Carlitz observes that there is "an increasingly sophisticated use of the contrasts between classical and vernacular Chinese", with different writers having their own language mixes. (Carlitz, p. 19.)

[14] Carlitz suggests that the type of language a writer used depended not so much on his educational standard as on the *genre* he was writing in. (Carlitz, p. 19.)

except for the verse), calling on three different uses
of language:

    1)   the "neutral" standard voice of ordinary
        narration

    2)   the voices of the various characters

    3)   the conversational, intimate voice of the
        dramatized narrator.

The standard voice is the voice that does not draw
attention to itself. It is the voice of the implied
author. Within each novel the voice of its implied
author is the neutral standard (because it is the main
voice), against which other voices are humorous,
dignified, crude, dishonest or whatever. The standard
voice of ordinary narration may draw upon all styles of
language, including both classical and vernacular.

Classical and Vernacular Markers

Because the word order in classical and vernacular
Chinese is basically the same, the words themselves are
very important in comparing language styles.

It may seem that in classical Chinese more words
with a purely grammatical function are used than in
vernacular Chinese. This is not so, however – the point
is that the grammatical words are different. Raymond
Dawson has observed that in the writings of Mencius the
most common characters are: zhi 之 ye 也 bu 不 yi 以

zhe 者 yu 於 and er 而 .[15] In modern Chinese only *bu* retains its function. Other words are still common, but with a different function (*ye*, for example). In the vernacular Chinese of the Ming dynasty novels we also find that the common classical words are less frequent, though not as rare as in modern Chinese. On the other hand the more common vernacular words in Ming fiction are barely present, if at all, in early classical texts. The frequency of certain representative classical and vernacular characters are therefore indicative of how classical or vernacular a piece of writing is; our impressions concerning this can be quantified and made more suitable for analysis.

In my examination of the language of the Ming novel I have looked at the proportion of vernacular to classical language in this way. To do this I randomly selected four chapters of each of the three novels I am studying, along with two short stories, the Ming (or earlier) "Nianyu Guanyin" 碾玉觀音 and the early Qing "Hong Yu" 紅玉 in classical Chinese, by Pu Songling 蒲松齡 . These fourteen texts have a total of approximately 98,700 characters. I chose a number of characters as markers of the classical and the vernacular styles and counted their frequency. The vernacular markers were: *zhe* 這 *na* 那 *nali* 那裏 *ba* 把 *zhe* 著 (as a verbal auxiliary) and *dou* 都 . The

[15] *A New Introduction to Classical Chinese* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), p. 65.

classical ones were: wei 未 jiang 將 (as a preposition before the object); shen 甚 (as an adverb); zhe 者 zhi 之 ci 此 and jie 皆 .[16]

We can see that all twelve chapters of the novels and "Nianyu Guanyin" have more vernacular than classical markers. This can be expressed as a ratio (see Table 1). Not surprisingly, we find that the vernacular markers outnumber the classical markers in all of the chapters. What is striking is that these ratios vary widely, ranging from a low of 1.68:1 to the highest proportion of 59.50:1. The average is 12.63:1.

The different use of individual characters may be features of an individual writer's style within the general range of Ming fiction styles. Bishop suggests that the use of oral storytelling conventions helped to preserve the author's anonymity, and that consequently there is "a curious absence of personality in the style of such fiction, a monotonous preoccupation with 'story' rather than with an individual mode of telling the story".[17] I would argue just the opposite. First, as I hope will be seen in this thesis, "telling the story" was subservient to the writer-reader discourse, which

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[16] Hanan, too, has used this technique of examining markers. In *The Chinese Short Story* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973) he looks at markers related to verb and adverb constructions to date stories (see pp. 25 ff).

[17] "Some Limitations of Chinese Fiction", in *Studies in Chinese Literature*, ed. John L. Bishop (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), p. 240.

TABLE 1

RATIO OF VERNACULAR TO CLASSICAL MARKERS

Shuihu zhuan	Ch. 3	Ch. 8	Ch. 24	Ch. 30
	10.80:1	5.76:1	20.52:1	6.30:1
Xiyou ji	Ch. 27	Ch. 39	Ch. 40	Ch.44
	17.1:1	15.90:1	4.97:1	3.80:1
Jin Ping Mei	Ch. 2	Ch. 7	Ch. 62	Ch. 65
	5.70:1	59.5:1	5.17:1	1.68:1
"Hong Yu"	No vernacular markers found			
"Nianyu Guanyin"	7.09:1			

depended on a subtle use of language. Second, I think
that the evidence of the surface impression from reading
the novels, as well as statistical evidence such as that
given here, indicates that the writers all had strong
and individual styles. For example, in *Shuihu zhuan*, *na*
and *zhe* are usually used before a character's name if he
or she is bad, or at least not a hero. A hero's name is
almost never preceded by *na* or *zhe*. Ch. 24 is dominated
by unsympathetic characters – Pan Jinlian, Ximen Qing
and Mrs Wang – which could account for the high
frequency of *na* in that chapter (see Table 2). In *Xiyou
ji* on the other hand, *na* and *zhe* have no special
significance. They are used before characters' names
indiscriminately, and so frequently as to suggest that
their use was automatic, like a habit of speech (see
Table 2). In *Jin Ping Mei* *na* and *zhe* are used slightly
less frequently than in *Shuihu zhuan*, but again with no
special significance, as in *Xiyou ji* (see Table 4).
Interestingly, one of the features distinguishing the
abridged version of *Jin Ping Mei* from *Jin Ping Mei cihua*
is the omission of *na* before proper names.[18]

On the whole, it seems that the subject of a
chapter does not determine what the proportion of
vernacular and classical language will be. This is
because within one chapter there are often passages in

[18] See Hanan, "A Study of the Composition and the
Sources of the *Chin P'ing Mei*", Diss. Univ. of London
1960, p. 26.

TABLE 2

FREQUENCY OF VERNACULAR AND CLASSICAL MARKERS

IN *SHUIHU ZHUAN*[19]

Vernacular	Ch. 3	Ch. 8	Ch. 24	Ch. 30
這	0.20	0.38	0.70	0.54
那	0.63	0.53	2.71	0.82
那裏	0.14	0.14	0.08	0.28
把	0.34	0.38	0.41	0.66
着	0.48	0.38	0.62	0.69
者	0.37	0.38	0.20	0.54
Total	2.16	2.19	4.72	3.53

[19] The figures shown here and in Tables 3-5 refer to
the percentage of narrative (dialogue excluded) taken up
by a particular marker.

TABLE 2 (cont...)

Classical	Ch. 3	Ch. 8	Ch. 29	Ch. 30
未	----	0.14	0.08	0.05
將	----	0.14	0.02	0.10
甚	----	----	----	0.03
者	0.03	----	----	----
之	0.14	----	0.08	0.15
此	0.03	0.10	0.05	0.23
皆	----	----	----	----
Total	0.20	0.38	0.23	0.56

TABLE 3

FREQUENCY OF VERNACULAR AND CLASSICAL MARKERS

IN *XIYOU JI*

Vernacular	Ch. 27	Ch. 39	Ch. 40	Ch. 44
這	0.15	0.52	0.16	0.14
那	1.98	2.66	2.26	1.45
那裏	0.30	0.04	0.12	0.23
把	0.40	0.12	0.24	0.54
着	0.54	0.40	0.48	0.72
都	0.05	0.08	0.12	0.23
Total	3.42	3.82	3.38	3.31

TABLE 3 (cont...)

Classical	Ch. 27	Ch. 39	Ch. 40	Ch. 44
未	----	0.04	0.08	0.14
將	----	0.08	0.32	0.14
甚	----	0.04	0.04	----
老	----	----	----	----
之	0.05	0.04	0.16	0.31
此	0.15	0.04	0.08	0.23
皆	----	----	----	0.05
Total	0.20	0.38	0.23	0.56

TABLE 4

FREQUENCY OF VERNACULAR AND CLASSICAL MARKERS

IN *JIN PING MEI*

Vernacular	Ch. 2	Ch. 7	Ch. 62	Ch. 65
這	0.55	0.55	0.31	0.13
那	0.81	0.34	0.63	0.33
那裏	----	0.04	0.04	----
把	0.26	0.26	0.23	0.04
着	0.64	0.98	0.79	0.22
都	0.21	0.21	0.43	0.44
Total	2.47	2.38	2.43	1.16

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TABLE 4 (cont...)

Classical	Ch. 2	Ch. 7	Ch. 62	Ch. 65
未	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.02
將	0.13	----	----	0.04
喜	0.04	----	0.02	0.02
者	----	----	0.04	0.04
之	0.09	----	0.25	0.35
此	0.13	----	0.02	0.09
皆	----	----	0.10	0.13
Total	0.43	0.04	0.47	0.69

TABLE 5

FREQUENCY OF VERNACULAR AND CLASSICAL MARKERS

IN "HONG YU" AND "NIANYU GUANYIN"

Vernacular	"Hong Yu"	"Nianyu Guanyin"
這	----	0.85
那	----	0.26
那裏	----	----
把	----	0.14
着	----	0.91
都	----	0.11
Total	0.00	2.27

TABLE 5 (cont...)

Classical	"Hong Yu"	"Nianyu Guanyin"
未	0.08	0.03
將	-----	0.17
吾	----	----
者	0.16	----
之	2.42	0.09
此	0.08	0.03
皆	----	----
Total	2.74	0.32

pure vernacular and passages in a more formal style, and because the language used is a reflection more of the writer's tone than of the subject matter – once again we see that the communication between writer and reader is of prime importance. For example, the central scene in Ch. 7 of *Jin Ping Mei* is Ximen Qing's visit to Meng Yulou's house, in particular his negotiations with her aunt (pp. 189-93). On the surface this is a very formal scene, but the presence of vernacular markers (and absence of any classical markers) undermines our surface impression, and the author/narrator's contempt for the woman is reinforced.

There are exceptions, however, when subject matter itself does seem to govern the language used. For example, *Shuihu zhuan* Ch. 24 is dominated by the vernacular, and *Jin Ping Mei* Ch. 65 has an unusually high classical ratio because it contains two long, very formal scenes. Moreover, it is interesting to note that in *Xiyou ji*, the language of adventures with a rural background is more informal than of those set in towns; this is probably because town adventures usually feature at least one court scene, requiring a more formal, classical register. However, as these adventures are often concerned with evil government, it is entirely conceivable that the more classical language is being used ironically, to draw attention to the officiousness and lack of sincerity of such courts (especially in contrast with Monkey's honesty).

Hanan suggests that "there is a close relationship between style and context, and the language mix, as a principle stylistic variable, depends on context". He goes on to say that classical language is used to convey dignity or formality — but therefore can also be used for satire or parody. Vernacular language is used in domestic (as opposed to court) contexts, and for "close-up narrative . . . especially in dialogue". Language which is a mixture of classical and vernacular is used for summary of events, commentary, and, in dialogue, to distinguish different character types.[20]

The high frequency of vernacular words in *Xiyou ji* may seem surprising (see Table 3). *Xiyou ji*, more than *Shuihu zhuan* and *Jin Ping Mei*, has a classical "feel". This is because the language of this novel is more rhythmic than the other two works. The use of contrasted language register — vernacular words, classical rhythm — is, in my opinion, a conscious artistic technique. It contributes to the humour and irony of the work, and accounts for the novel's unique style. For example, in Ch. 54, Bajie's gluttony is presented in vernacular language but with a classical rhythm:

那八戒那管好歹,放開肚
子,只情嚷起。也不管甚麼
玉屑米飯、蒸餅、糖糕、蘑菇、
香蕈、筍芽、木耳、黃花菜、石

[20] *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, pp. 14-16.

花菜、紫菜、蔓菁、芋頭、蘿蔔、
山藥、黃精，一齊辣啅了個
罄盡。喝了五七杯酒，口裏
裏道：“着添換來！拿大鍾來！
再喫幾鍾，各人幹事去。”

Xiyou ji Ch. 54, p. 702.[21]

IV. Sentences and Rhythm

Sentence structure is an aspect of language which can complement and strengthen other narrative techniques. The subtle handling of the basically simple Chinese sentence is one of the features of Ming fiction. This is particularly so in the narrated passages, which use the voice of the "ordinary" narrator or of the dramatized narrator. This is because language is used here more self-consciously, whereas in the dialogue the author often strives for naturalism.

The normal word order in the Chinese sentence is subject-verb-object, and has been throughout the history

[21] That Bajie didn't care about good and evil, but gave in to his stomach and just wanted to tuck in. He also didn't care whether it was fine white rice, steamed bread, sweet dumplings, mushrooms, fragrant mushrooms, bamboo-shoots, *muer* fungus, day-lily, agar-agar, laver, rape-turnip, taro, turnip, yam or sealwort, but guzzled the lot. He drank five or seven cups of wine, and yelled, "More! Bring a big jar of wine! I'll have another several jars, then we'll each go about our business".

of the language.[22] This is true of both classical and
vernacular Chinese: any variation from this standard
word order is due to style, to the effect the writer
wishes to achieve, not to the type of language used.

While it is possible to identify and analyse the
"sentence" in the Ming novel, this term is not very
useful for looking at the Ming novel. Western-style
punctuation was not introduced to Chinese writing until
this century; before that the only punctuation was *judou*
句讀 , the process of dividing a passage into
sentences and clauses. Divisions were traditionally
marked by the *juhao* 句號 . The *juhao* differs from
English punctuation marks in that its function is to
indicate a pause; its use is not determined by
syntax.[23]

We are accustomed to considering the pause or
caesura in classical Chinese prose and poetry. In
poetry, apart from being essential to the rhythm, it is
used to draw attention to individual words or word
groups, to emphasize parallels or antitheses, and to
bring out nuances of tone or meaning.[24] In good poetry
and classical prose the pause is used very effectively,

[22] R.A.D. Forrest, *The Chinese Language* (London: Faber
and Faber, 1948), p. 70.

[23] See Shadick's examination of the sentence in
classical Chinese in *A First Course in Literary Chinese*
(Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1968), III, 827.

[24] See James Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago:
Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 42-45.

and with great subtlety.

Such use of the pause is not confined to classical prose and poetry, however. *Judou* in the Ming novel is often handled very skilfully, giving a passage richness of meaning which it would otherwise not have.

The sound of the language has been important throughout the history of Chinese literature. Chanting the text was the normal way of studying or memorising anything, and "read" often meant "read aloud". Moreover, a thorough knowledge of poetry and the ability to write verse has always been an essential accomplishment of the Chinese gentleman. If we bear this in mind, the use of rhythm in the language of the Ming novel will seem less surprising.

Rhythm — created by the use of pauses — is integral to all traditional Chinese verse forms, including the more diversified *ci* 詞 form as well as the *lüshi* 詩 . But the prose of the Ming novels is much freer, and there is no built-in rhyme. This is why *judou* is so important in the Ming novel: *juhao* indicate where the reader is to pause, thereby determining the rhythm, and making an important contribution to clarity of meaning, style and tone.

The main functions of the pause in the narrative passages of the Ming novel are to build up suspense and to draw attention to something mentioned.

Climax and Culmination

We have seen above (Ch. ii) that the loose structure of the Ming novel is exploited by the Ming writers to build up suspense. The climax can be delayed by adding extra details, description or verse. In the same way, climactic sentences are often structured to keep the key word or words until last.[25] For example:

跳出一隻吊睛白額大蟲來。

Shuihu zhuan, Ch. 23, p. 273.[26]

This type of variation on the standard subject-verb-object structure of the Chinese sentence is common in the Ming novel. But more interesting is the use of the pause. Looking at the *ju* leading up to this climactic sentence is revealing. The scene is that in which Wu Song is surprised by the tiger. (I have written the following passages out with one *ju* per line to better illustrate the rhythm.)

1. 原來但凡世上雲生從龍,
2. 風生從虎.
3. 那一陣風過處,

[25] I am using "character" and "word" synonymously.

[26] There leapt out a rolling-eyed, white-browed tiger.

4. 只聽得亂樹背後撲地一聲響，
5. 跳出一隻弔睛白額大蟲來。

Shuihu zhuan, Ch. 23, p. 273.[27]

The climactic fifth line is matched by line four. Both
ju are exciting, and, with 11 and 12 characters
respectively before the *juhao*, must be read fast. Line
1, with 10 characters, is not much shorter, but it comes
immediately after a poem, and is therefore not a
culmination. Lines 2 and 3 (four and six characters) are
a brief build-up to lines 4 and 5.

Wu Song and the tiger is probably the most famous
episode in *Shuihu zhuan*, and the actual fight with the
tiger is one of the most celebrated pieces of
description in Chinese fiction. In this scene, too, we
can see the effectiveness of *judou*:

1. 那大蟲咆哮，
2. 性發起來，
3. 翻身又只一撲，
4. 撲將來。
5. 武松又只一跳，
6. 卻退了十步遠。
7. 那大蟲卻好把兩隻爪搭在

<hr>

[27] It has always been the case that all clouds in the
world come with the dragon, while wind springs from the
tiger. Where that gust of wind passed over could be
heard, behind the tangled trees, a noise, and there
leapt out a rolling-eyed, white-browed tiger.

武松面前

8. 武松將半截梢丟在一邊，

9. 兩隻手就勢把大蟲頂花皮
揞地揪住，

10. 一按按將下來。

11. 那隻大蟲急要掙扎，

12. 被武松儘氣力納定，

13. 那裏肯放半點兒鬆寬。

14. 武松把隻腳望大蟲面門上、

15. 眼睛裏只顧亂踢。

16. 那大蟲咆哮起來，

17. 把身底下扒起兩堆黃泥，

18. 做了一個土坑。

19. 武松把那大蟲嘴直按下黃泥
坑裏去。

20. 那大蟲吃武松奈何得沒了些氣力。

Shuihu zhuan, Ch. 23, p. 274.[28]

Lines 1 to 6 are fairly short, suggestive of abrupt

action. Then with line 7 we have an unusually long *ju*

---

[28] That tiger roared, angry now, and turned round and
pounced. Wu Song also made a leap, moving back some ten
paces. At that moment the tiger positioned his two front
paws in front of Wu Song. Wu Song dropped the stump of
his club to one side, and with all his strength he
seized the striped skin of the tiger's head with his two
hands, and pressed down hard. That tiger struggled
desperately. Wu Song was pressing down on him with all
his might, and there was no way he'd relax his hold. Wu
Song aimed a kick at the tiger's forehead, and just kept
kicking him wildly in the eyes. That tiger gave a
roar, and underneath his body scraped up two heaps of
earth, making an adobe *kang*. Wu Song pressed the tiger's
mouth right into the earthen *kang*. That tiger was
punished by Wu Song to the point that he had no strength
left at all.

(sixteen characters), as the tiger moves in for what could be the kill. This is matched by line 9, Wu Song's response, which also has sixteen characters. As with the long line in the previous example, the long sentences here are the culmination of the build-up of the preceding lines, and must be spoken in a rush – well suited to the context. After line 9 there is another series of even lines, with the climax in lines 19 and 20, fifteen and fourteen lines respectively, in which Wu Song finally overpowers the tiger.

Wu Song has killed the tiger, and is just catching his breath when he has another fright:

1. 走不到半里多路,
2. 只見枯草叢中,
3. 鑽出兩隻大蟲來。
4. 武松道:
5. "呵呀!
6. 我今番罷了!"
7. 只見那兩隻大蟲,
8. 於黑影裏直立來,
9. 武松定睛看時,
10. 却是兩個人,
11. 把虎皮縫做衣裳,
12. 緊緊拱在身上。
13. 那兩個人手裏各拿着一條
    五股叉。
14. 見了武松,

15. 吃了一驚道...

Shuihu zhuan, Ch. 32, p. 275.[29]

Two tigers would definitely overpower Wu Song. But we, the readers, know there is nothing to be afraid of. The pace here is measured, the lines fairly even in length: there is no build-up to the awful leaping forth of the tiger as in the other tiger scenes. In this scene we and the writer/narrator know more than Wu Song, who understandably is terrified. His consternation is expressed in three jerky lines (lines 4 to 6), then the even rhythm is returned to as the "tigers" stand up and are revealed to be men. The only real tension comes in line 13, when we are told that the men are armed, but this is quickly dispelled in the following lines when the men are startled at seeing Wu Song.

Another tiger scene is in Ch. 43, involving Li Kui:

1. 那一陣風起處,
2. 星月光輝之下,
3. 大吼了一聲,
4. 忽地跳出一隻花睛白額虎來。

[29] He hadn't gone further than half a *li* when he saw, coming from a clump of withered grass, two tigers. Wu Song said, "Oh no! I'm done for this time!" Then he just saw those two tigers, in the dark shadows, stand up. When Wu Song fixed his eyes on them, they turned out to be people, with tiger skins sewn into clothes fastened on them. Those two people each held in his hands a five-pronged fork, and when they saw Wu Song, they got a fright and said . . .

5. 那大蟲望李逵猛一撲
6. 那李逵不慌不忙
7. 趁著那大蟲的勢力
8. 手起一刀，
9. 正中那大蟲頷下。

Shuihu zhuan, Ch. 43, p. 542.[30]

The first four lines remind us of the lines
introducing Wu Song's tiger: the same motifs are used,
and a similar effect is achieved. The first two lines
are the same length (6 characters), followed by a five-
character line, then, suddenly, a twelve-character line
when the tiger leaps out. The rush of this *ju* enhances
the excitement, and is also a nice contrast with the
evenness of the first two lines. The third *ju* is a
little abrupt, breaking the rhythm set in the preceding
two *ju*, and this adds to the foreboding contained in the
words. But after line 4 this tiger scene differs from
the Wu Song one. Whereas in the account of Wu Song's
fight with the tiger excitement continues to mount, in
this scene there is a return to a measured pace, with
fairly even lines. This is because the tiger is no real

___

[30] Where that gust of wind rose, and below the
brilliant stars and moon, there was a great roar, and
suddenly there leapt out a rolling-eyed, white-browed
tiger. That tiger pounced at Li Kui; that Li Kui didn't
panic, but availed himself of the tiger's power, took
out a knife, and it went right in under that tiger's
chin.

threat: Li Kui is not afraid, and disposes of the tiger easily. Hence long, fast-paced lines are not called for. The longest sentence is the appearance of the tiger, not Li Kui killing it.

This example in particular reveals how important *judou* is in the Ming novel. The two scenes are similar in subject matter, and in the words used, yet the effect achieved is quite different. A feature of the Ming novel is the recurrence of the same scenes and motifs. Examining the use of the pause helps explain why the novels manage to remain interesting and lively.

While heightened suspense is often the effect achieved by long *ju*, this is not always the case. Sometimes the long sentence is simply the culmination of what has gone before, rather than a particularly exciting moment. For example, this passage from *Xiyou ji*:

1. 他將身一縱,
2. 徑到他門首,
3. 門尚關著睡覺。
4. 行者不叫門,
5. 且不驚動妖怪,
6. 捻著訣,
7. 念個呪語,
8. 搖身一變,

9. 變做一個花腳蚊蟲，
10. 真個小巧！

Xiyou ji, Ch. 21, p. 270.[31]

None of these sentences is very long – the average length is only five characters. But line 9, with eight characters, is longer than any of the others, and this is emphasized by the two four-character lines immediately preceding and following. Line 9 is not exciting, but it is the line in which Monkey turns himself into a mosquito, the culmination of eight sentences of activity. (Line 10 is not an action sentence, it is simply rhetorical praise of Monkey.)

Emphasis and Contrast

Another important function of the pause in Ming novel narrative passages is to draw the reader's attention, either directly or indirectly, to certain sentences.

Sometimes this is achieved by a change of pace. For example:

1. 話說西門慶。

---

[31] He leapt up, and went to the doorway; the doorman had it closed and was asleep. Monkey didn't call for it to be opened, he didn't disturb the demons; he worked his magic, recited the spell, and with a shake of his body changed – changed into a spotted-legged mosquito; what a trick!

2. 家中起盖花園捲棚。
3. 約有半年光景。
4. 裝修油漆完備。
5. 前後煥然一新。
6. 慶房竪吃了數日酒。
7. 俱不在話下一日八月
8. 初旬天氣。

Jin Ping Mei, Ch. 19, p. 475.[32]

Lines 3 to 5 are all six characters in length. They describe Ximen Qing's new garden house. Lines 2, 6 and 8 are related to the plot, and being longer (eight characters) stand out against the descriptive *ju*. Moreover, as the description consists of three lines of equal length and the action consists of three lines of a different equal length, the two threads – description and action – are separated in the reader's mind.

The rhythm of a passage of narrative, as in poetry, can draw attention to the relationship between the various things mentioned. For example:

1. 月娘于是。
2. 先在一個最高亭子上。
3. 名喚卧雲亭。

---

[32] The story goes that Ximen Qing built at his house a garden pavilion. By about mid-year, it was decorated, painted and finished. Everything was brand new. To warm the new building he held a party over several days. We won't go into all that. One day, it was at the beginning of the eighth month . . .

4. 和孟玉樓。
5. 李嬌兒下棊。
6. 潘金蓮。
7. 和西門大姐。
8. 孫雪娥。
9. 都在翫花樓。
10. 望下翫看。
11. 見樓前牡丹花畔。
12. 芍藥圃。
13. 海棠軒。
14. 薔薇架。
15. 木香棚。
16. 又有那耐寒君子竹。
17. 欺雪大夫松。
18. 端的四時有不卸之花。
19. 八節有長春之景。

Jin Ping Mei, Ch. 19, p. 477.[33]

First there is a series of short lines, listing all of
Ximen Qing's wives at that time, and his daughter. This
is followed by another series of short lines listing the

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[33] Thereupon Yue Niang climbed the highest pavilion;
its name was Sleeping Cloud Pavilion. She played chess
with Meng Yulou and Li Jiao'er. Pan Jinlian, with Miss
Ximen and Sun Xue'e, were all in the Enjoying Flowers
Tower, looking at what was down below. They saw in front
of the building banks of tree peonies, beds of
herbaceous peonies, crab-apple bowers, rose frames, and
a canopy of banksia roses. There were also that
gentleman who withstands the cold, the bamboo, and that
high official who cheats the snow, the pine. Indeed, all
year round were flowers that didn't die; in all seasons
it was a scene of eternal spring.

flowers in the garden. Obviously the women are being likened to the flowers. But this straightforward comparison is carried a step further. The two lines (16 and 17) immediately following the list of flowers, which are longer and therefore noticeable, mention the pine and bamboo. This reference is conventional: the noble pine and bamboo, enduring the cold. But surely in this context the reference to pine and bamboo has a special significance. They are tacitly contrasted with the flowers (which of course cannot survive in the snow), and therefore with the women. The last two lines actually state that there will be flowers all year round, but this, coming immediately after the reference to cold and snow, is clearly ironic. We know that spring flowers die when the cold comes. It is vanity and self-delusion on the part of Ximen Qing and the women to think anything else. The women are beautiful and fresh like flowers, but will wither and die eventually. Here, in the most subtle way, the writer/narrator is stepping forward from the story and drawing attention to the scheme of the novel as a whole, which he has absolute control over.

The meeting between Ximen Qing and Pan Jinlian in Ch. 24 is presented as a coincidence (沒巧不成話 "without coincidence there isn't a story") — drawing attention to the writer/narrator telling us the story, in which things can be arranged as he sees fit. The actual meeting between Ximen Qing and Pan Jinlian is as

follows:

1. 這 婦 人 正 手 裏 拿 叉 竿 不 牢，
2. 失 手 滑 將 倒 去，
3. 不 端 不 正，
4. 却 好 打 在 那 人 頭 巾 上。
5. 那 人 立 住 了 腳，
6. 正 待 要 發 作，
7. 回 過 臉 來 看 時，
8. 是 個 生 的 妖 嬈 的 婦 人。

Shuihu zhuan, Ch. 24, p. 290.[34]

The rhythm of this passage adds to the sense of its naturalness. Moreover, divided into *ju* in this way, there is a juxtaposition between "man" and "woman" whenever they occur: *zhe furen* 這 婦 人 at the beginning of line 1 matches *na ren* 那 人 at the beginning of line 5. Lines 4 and 8 each have nine characters and end with *na ren toujin shang* 那 人 頭 巾 上 and *yaotiao de furen* 妖 嬈 的 婦 人 respectively.

The meeting between Ximen Qing and Pan Jinlian is also in *Jin Ping Mei*. This passage obviously aroused the interest of the writer of *Jin Ping Mei*, because it is

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[34] This woman was not holding the stick in her hand securely, and it slipped out and came tumbling down right onto that man's turban. That man stopped in his tracks, and was about to lash out when he turned his head and saw that it was a gentle and graceful woman.

one of the ones he changes in his retelling of the story. The mention of coincidence (with all that that suggests) is the same, but there is also reference to fate. The lines describing the actual meeting are presented in two parts. First Pan Jinlian's actions are described, then, seventeen sentences later (mostly comprising a description of Ximen Qing) we see Ximen Qing's reaction. But to counteract this interruption, the lines concerning the meeting are more rhythmic, so that the significance of their meeting is still clear:

1. 婦人正手裡拏着义竿放簾子。
2. 忽被一陣風。
3. 將义竿刮倒。
4. 婦人手不牢。
5. 不端不正郤打在那人頭巾上。
. . . .
6. 這個人被义杆打在頭上。
7. 便立住了腳。
8. 待要發作時。

9. 回過臉來看。

10. 却又莊是個美貌妖嬈的婦人。

Jin Ping Mei, Ch. 2, pp. 94-95.[35]

The separation of the two sections makes for greater
subtlety, but the symmetry of this version emphasizes
the writer/narrator's control and the workings of fate
(the latter effect is also strengthened by having a gust
of wind, rather than Jinlian's clumsiness, responsible
for their meeting).

V. Verse and Parallel Prose

The use of poetry and parallel prose is one of the
distinguishing features of Ming fiction, but one
surrounded by controversy. Many scholars regard the
verse passages as merely a remnant of oral storytelling,
and therefore a flaw. C. T. Hsia, for example, dismisses
verse in *Shuihu zhuan* as mere convention, and verse in
Xiyou ji is only praised for being well-written, not for
any contribution it may make to the telling of the

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[35] The woman was holding the stick in her hand to close
the blinds, when suddenly a gust of wind blew it down.
The woman wasn't holding it firmly; it tumbled onto that
man's turban.
. . . . . .
This person was hit on the head by the stick. He
stopped in his tracks. Just as he was about to lash out,
he turned his head and looked, and who would have
thought it, but it was a lovely, gentle and graceful
woman.

story.[36] Hsia also has a low opinion of the function of verse in *Jin Ping Mei*.[37] But it seems to me that this view of verse in the Ming novel is too simplistic — the obvious talent and versatility of the Ming authors is often overlooked. On the other hand, it is true that we modern readers have difficulty in appreciating verse in Ming fiction, and finding a satisfactory explanation for the use of so much verse. Very little has been written on the use of poetry in the Ming novel, but by looking at the works themselves we can make some speculations about the function of verse in fiction.

Many types of verse are used in the Ming novel, including various forms of *shi* 詩 and *ci* 詞 songs. There is also *pianwen* 駢文 (parallel prose). This is not strictly speaking a verse form, but it is very rhythmic and stylized — quite distinct from ordinary prose — and its uses seem to overlap with those of poetry, so I will discuss verse and parallel prose together.

Shi is a general term including a number of verse types. There are four-syllable *shi*; *gutishi* 古體詩, with lines of five or seven syllables and alternate lines rhyming; *lüshi* 律詩 or *jintishi* 近體詩, which is more regulated; and *jueju* 絕句, which is a shorter version of the *lüshi*. *Lüshi* is a poem of eight

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[36] *The Classic Chinese Novel* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1968), p. 120.

[37] *The Classic Chinese Novel*, pp. 169-78.

lines, with either five or seven characters per line.
There is usually rhyme at the end of the first, second,
fourth, sixth and eighth lines. The middle four lines
(lines three to six) make up two antithetical couplets.
There is also a set pattern of ping 平 and ze 仄
tones. *Jueju* consists of only four lines and does not
have the antithetical middle couplets. Unlike the
preceding dynasties, the Ming dynasty was not remarkable
for its poetry, although, as Plaks points out, progress
was made in poetic theory and there was experimentation
with a range of styles.[38]

In Ming fiction *lüshi* and *jueju* are the predominant
verse forms.[39] In *Shuihu zhuan* and *Jin Ping Mei* there is
more *jueju* than *lüshi*, while in *Xiyou ji* there is more
lüshi than *jueju*, but together *lüshi* and *jueju* are the
most common verse forms. Poems in these novels are

[38] Prosody became less restricted, more non-*shi* poetry
was written, and a lot of poetry written during the Ming
dynasty was intimate and informal in style. This is not
to say, however, that the verse was more natural or
spontaneous — the "primitive" feel is self-conscious, a
result of experimenting with different styles and
dictions, perhaps. Plaks stresses that Ming poetry was
not popular poetry, but poetry imitating popular poetry,
written by literati. Moreover, during the Ming dynasty
there was also a greater tendency in poetry writing
towards plays on words, elaborate figures, and other
such artifices. *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel:
Ssu ta ch'i-shu* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ.
Press, 1987), pp. 36-40.

[39] Chen Zhouchang 陳周昌 has found that in *Shuihu
zhuan* there are over 100 poems at beginnings of chapters
and 140 at ends of chapters. Including *pianwen*, there
are more than 730 verse passages in the novel. ("Lun
Shuihu yunwen de yishu zuoyong" 論水滸韻文的藝術
作用, in *Shuihu zhengming* 水滸爭鳴, II (Yichang:
Changjiang wenyi chuban she, 1983), 281-82.

usually seven-syllabic, though in some cases there are only five syllables per line. In *Xiyou ji* we sometimes find *gutishi*; this is less common in *Shuihu zhuan*. In all three novels four-syllabic *shi* are rare.

Shi is sometimes used for stylized description, focusing on external appearances, as is parallel prose. For example, in *Xiyou ji*:

四壁寒風起
萬家燈火明。
六街關戶扇
三市閉門庭。
釣艇歸深樹,
耕犂罷短繩
樵夫柯斧歇,
學子誦書聲。

Xiyou ji, Ch. 62, p. 794.[40]

In *Shuihu zhuan*, *shi* are more often used to provide insight into what is happening in the story. A *shi* can be a link between the particular circumstances and more general concerns — that is, it can express the theme or moral of the story. For example:

[40] The cold wind rose on all sides, / Lights glowed brightly in ten thousand houses. / In all the streets doors and windows were shut, / In three markets the gates were closed. / Fishing boats returned to deep in the trees, / The plough-oxes were no longer tethered. / Woodcutters' axes were stilled, / Students recited their lessons.

好人有難皆憐惜，
奸惡無災盡詫憎。
可見生平須自檢，
臨時情義始堪憑。

Shuihu zhuan, Ch. 21, p. 254.[41]

Shi is also used for this purpose in the other two novels, for example:

三五年前歸正宗，
持齋把素悟真空。
誠心要保唐三藏，
初秉沙門立此功。

Xiyou ji, Ch. 20, p. 263.[42]

Sometimes a *shi* can reveal a character's feelings or motives, which are generally only hinted at in the narration. For example, in *Shuihu zhuan*:

良言逆聽即為仇，
笑眼登時有淚流。

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[41] When a good person is in trouble everyone is sympathetic. / When a villain has no problems all are amazed and resentful. / It can be seen that one must always examine oneself, / Then the friendship at that time can be relied upon.

[42] Three or five years previously he had returned to the true path, / Keeping to a vegetarian diet and aware of the true emptiness. / With a sincere heart he would protect the Tang monk Sanzang, / From the beginning he established this merit.

只是兩行姦婦水，
不因悲苦不因羞.

Shuihu zhuan, Ch. 24, p. 289.[43]

Writing in the Ming dynasty, Yuan Wuya 袁無涯
observed that verse was used in fiction to describe
people and to break off exposition of emotion (頓挫
人情者).[44]

Bishop suggests that one of the functions of verse
in the short story is to give authority to something in
the story by "quoting" from the ancients (although the
text referred to was generally non-existent).[45] This use
of verse can also be seen in the Ming novel, although
the texts referred to are often authentic.

After *shi* (particularly *lüshi* and *jueju*) parallel
prose or *pianwen* is most dominant.

An exact definition of *pianwen* is difficult, but
the term is usually applied to an extremely stylized,
ornate form of writing consisting of parallel couplets.
Parallels can be on three levels: metrical, grammatical

[43] Good advice was disobeyed out of revenge,/ Her
smiling eyes now flowed with tears. / They were simply
the tracks of misadventure in immorality, / They weren't
due to sadness and they weren't due to shame.

[44] "Zhongyi Shuihu quanshu fafan" 忠義水滸全書發
凡, in *Shuihu zhuan ziliao huibian* 水滸傳資料
彙編, ed. Zhu Yixuan 朱一玄 and Liu Yuchen 劉毓忱
. (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chuban she, 1981), p. 148.

[45] *The Colloquial Short Story in China: A Study of the
San-yen Collections* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ.
Press, 1956), pp. 31-32.

and phonic. Good parallel prose employs all three and is
often very complex, with double meanings, allusions and
different patterns of repetition. It is an elaborate
play on words, with the use of language being of prime
importance, and is therefore not suited at all to
narration or exposition.[46] Not surprisingly, we find
that it is not used for this in the Ming novel.

In the Ming novel parallel prose passages are
always set descriptions of something concrete, rather
than narration, commentary or lyrical expression. Common
topics are a character's appearance, a fight, scenery,
weather and other natural phenomena, and (in *Xiyou ji*)
supernatural phenomena — for example, magic fires.
Parallel prose usually sticks to the external
characteristics of the thing or scene being described.
An example from *Xiyou ji* is:

山南有青松碧檜，山北有綠
柳紅桃。鬧聒聒，山禽對語；舞
翩翩，仙鶴齊飛。香馥馥，諸花
千樣色；青冉冉，雜草萬般奇。
澗下有潺潺綠水，崖前有磊
磊祥雲。真個是景致非常幽

雅處，敖然不見往來人。

Xiyou ji, Ch. 19, p. 248.[47]

Hanan notes that these passages usually have a general
viewpoint, functioning as "a tableau presented to the
reader usually at the same time the character sees . . .
[what is being described] but not necessarily through
his psychology".[48]

Shi and *pianwen*, rather than *ci*, are the
predominant verse forms in *Jin Ping Mei*, as they are in
Shuihu zhuan and *Xiyou ji*. According to Bishop, in the
huaben, *ci* poetry, a subtle and complex form, is much
less common than doggerel, "colloquial verses of five-
word lines". He suggests that later audiences found
Song-dynasty style *ci* unintelligible, and says that
where *ci* are used in stories, they are always explained
or summarized in the prose narrative.[49] If we accept
Bishop's hypothesis, then the complexity of some poetry,

[47] On the south of the mountain were green pines and
blue cypresses, on the north of the mountain were
emerald willows and red peach trees. With much noise,
the birds of the mountain would answer each other;
flitting about, the white cranes would all take wing.
The air was full of the perfume of flowers of a thousand
different colours; there were various shades of green
among the grasses of ten thousand wondrous kinds. The
bottom of the mountain stream gushed with green water,
and in front of the cliff were piled clouds of different
shapes. Really, one had a view of an extraordinarily
elegant spot, quiet and without the traffic of people.

[48] *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, pp. 20-21.

[49] *The Colloquial Short Story in China*, p. 31.

the greater use of the *ci* form, and the paucity of interpretation of the poetry used would all indicate that the Ming novels were written for educated people, people who would not have found anything but doggerel unintelligible. (Sometimes, it is true, a verse passage is explained, but I see this as a concession to the oral storytelling convention which the writers were following, rather than genuine clarification; the fact that verse is often not explained is more significant.)

Although not used as frequently as *shi* and *pianwen*, in *Jin Ping Mei* songs, particularly *ci*, are still very important. *Ci* is generally more lyrical and sensual than *shi*. It also seems a freer verse form, though it is actually much more complex in prosody than *shi* is. Many of the *ci* and other songs in *Jin Ping Mei* are not original, but were well-known in the Ming dynasty. The writer of *Jin Ping Mei* incorporated them into the novel in the same way that established stories, themes, motifs, character types were incorporated into *Jin Ping Mei* and the other novels. Songs in *Jin Ping Mei* include *xiaoling* (shorter *ci*) and *santao* (song sequences). Originally from plays, they later became part of the courtesan-singer's repertoire, independent of drama. By the time *Jin Ping Mei* was published these songs were very popular, and books of them were

published.[50] There are references to at least twenty

song-suites and 120 individual songs, as well as some

twenty-five plays in *Jin Ping Mei*.[51] Most of the lyrics

in *Jin Ping Mei* are sung by characters in the novel and

therefore occur in the narrative much more naturally and

unobtrusively than other verse forms.[52] For example,

when Chen Jingji, dejected because Pan Jinlian has gone,

sings a *ci*, we are told it is "to drive away his

melancholy" 以遣其悶 (Ch. 19, p. 479).

This could be regarded as an important advance in

the development of the Ming novel. This device is used

in *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji*, too, but only infrequently

and in the case of *Xiyou ji* the verse does not seem to

come from the characters naturally. For example, Sanzang

breaks into verse quite incongruously:

那師父戰戰兢兢，進此深山，
心中悚惨，兜住馬，叫聲"悟
空啊！我
自從益智登山盟，

---

[50] Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel*, p. 169. Hsia
comments that the songs in *Jin Ping Mei* "are quite
refined and represent at their best the sentimental and
erotic tz'u [ci] poetry of the late T'ang period in its
final stage of significant development". (*The Classic
Chinese Novel*, p. 177.)

[51] Carlitz, pp. 95-127.

[52] See Hanan, "A Landmark of the Chinese Novel",
University of Toronto Quarterly, 30, No. 3 (1961), 328.

王子擡行送出城...

Xiyou ji, Ch. 36, p. 458.[53]

In Jin Shengtan's edition of *Shuihu zhuan* (which
appeared some twenty-five years after the first
publication of *Jin Ping Mei*, even longer after copies of
Jin Ping Mei started to be circulated), most of the
verse has been omitted altogether. In *Honglou meng* much
of the verse is "written" by the characters, and
therefore seems less intrusive. It would appear that the
writers of *Jin Ping Mei* and *Honglou meng* are striving
for greater realism. However, there are a number of
things against this theory. First, in *Jin Ping Mei* there
is still a great deal of verse which is not spoken by
characters, but interrupts the narrative. *Ci* may be more
noticeable in *Jin Ping Mei*, but there is actually more
shi and *pianwen*. Second, many of the *ci* are comments
(usually ironic) on characters or action in the story.[54]
Generally, the character singing the *ci* is not aware of
this, but the reader is, so *ci*, like *shi* and *pianwen*, is
still an important part of the discourse between
author/narrator and reader. For example, the poignant

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[53] That Master, trembling with fear, went deep into
this mountain. Feeling very anxious, he reined in his
horse and called, "Wukong! I: After attaining wisdom and
making my vows, / Wasn't detained by the king but seen
out of the city . . . "

[54] See Carlitz, Ch. iv.

songs of love and loneliness sung by Pan Jinlian, in sharp contrast to her normal manner of speaking and her behaviour, surely have an ironic function. C. T. Hsia's comment that because the songs in *Jin Ping Mei* (and those sung by Jinlian in particular) were taken from courtesans' repertoires they are therefore unsuitable and "serve little novelistic function beyond providing a certain poetic atmosphere of languor and eroticism" is unwarranted. Hsia, in this criticism, does not take account of the Chinese tradition of examining verse carefully for deeper meanings, and seriously underestimates the novel's achievement.[55] Third, in later works, including *Honglou meng*, there is no significant increase in the amount of verse incorporated as part of the plot (or decrease in interruptive verse), which suggests that in its use of verse the traditional Chinese novel did not evolve a great deal.

The writers of *Shuihu zhuan*, *Xiyou ji* and *Jin Ping Mei* were all very accomplished. They had to draw on or combine a number of different sources and each novel has its own distinctive style. Because of this, I find it hard to accept that they included verse and parallel prose in their works only because it was the convention. I believe that they chose to follow this convention, that they saw verse and parallel prose as serving some

[55] See *The Classic Chinese Novel*, pp. 169-78.

purpose.[54] Comparison between Ch. 2 of *Jin Ping Mei* and
the corresponding scene in Ch. 24 of *Shuihu zhuan* bears
this out. The *Jin Ping Mei* chapter is based on the
Shuihu zhuan scene — the wording is often exactly the
same, suggesting that the author of *Jin Ping Mei* had a
copy of the earlier work open in front of him as he
wrote. However, the verse sections show striking
differences. There are seven poems or parallel prose
descriptions in Ch. 2 of *Jin Ping Mei*, but only three in
the *Shuihu zhuan* scene — the writer of *Jin Ping Mei*
added four himself. If he had been merely following
convention he would not have done so. Moreover the poems
in *Jin Ping Mei* which are taken from *Shuihu zhuan* have
been changed considerably. They are on the same subject,
and in the same place in the narrative, but are
different poems. This suggests that the writers of the
Ming novels thought carefully about their poetry.
Moreover, as Jaroslav Prusek points out, the use of
verse in Chinese fiction was "not so obligatory" — there
are some Dunhuang texts which are entirely in prose.[57]

It is not only in this scene of *Jin Ping Mei*, based
on an episode in *Shuihu zhuan*, that there is more verse
and parallel prose than in the other two novels. On the
whole there is a significantly greater amount of both in

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[54] Chen Zhouchang says that without the verse, the Ming
novel "would seem incomplete" (使讀者對故事情節產
生不完整的印像) Chen Zhouchang, p. 289.

[57] "The Realistic and Lyric Elements in the Chinese
Mediaeval Story", *Archiv Orientalni*, 32 (1964), 10.

Jin Ping Mei than in *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji*. The average proportion of verse and parallel prose in the sample chapters of *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji* is 5.07% and 5.18% respectively of the whole: in *Jin Ping Mei* it is 6.99%. If the use of verse and parallel prose is merely a left-over oral storytelling convention, then we would expect there to be less of it, not more, in *Jin Ping Mei*, as this novel is further removed from the oral storytelling origins of Ming fiction (that is, it is not a reworking of traditional oral storytelling material), and is generally more subtle and realistic.

We have already mentioned that *shi* is often used to sum up something or provide insight into what is happening. Verse is a more effective medium for this purpose than prose in the novels, which is often quite simple (on the surface at least).[58] There is apparently a difference between how verse is used in the Ming novel and how it is used in the Tang *bianwen*. Eugene Eoyang observes that verse in the *bianwen* is "well-integrated" with prose, without a clear separation of roles, except that "verse seems always to recapitulate part of what has been covered in the prose, before it advances the story".[59] In the Ming novel, there is a clear division between the functions of verse and prose, and verse,

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[58] See Liu Xie 劉勰 *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, trans. Vincent Yu-chung Shih (Hong Kong: The Chinese Univ. Press, 1983), vi, "Ming-shih".

[59] "Word of Mouth", p. 137.

though it may sometimes recapitulate, is never used to advance the plot.

The Ming novelists do not discuss or describe emotions in ordinary prose narration. In prose these are generally dealt with in a brief sentence, or by recording a character's thoughts in dialogue form. The writer avoids analysing feelings directly, or describing them in any detail in the narrated parts of the text. When a closer examination of feelings or thoughts is called for the writer puts them in verse form. It seems that in Ming fiction it was quite acceptable to discuss very personal things in poetry, but that the writers were unwilling to do so in prose. Throughout the history of traditional Chinese literature emotional outpourings have tended to be in verse. Prose, while not being devoid of feeling, has always been a more restrained form.[60]

In both *Xiyou ji* and *Jin Ping Mei* external action is less important than in *Shuihu zhuan* and there is plenty of psychological insight – although emotions are not dealt with directly, the small number of main characters in these two novels enables personalities and relationships to be thoroughly explored. The writers did not have to rely on *shi* to do this. But *shi* still has a function. It can serve as a focal point of the novel's

[60] Eoyang notes that in the *bianwen* "it is the verse that elicits our emotional response", whereas prose provides the setting, atmosphere, and so forth. ("Word of Mouth", p. 137.)

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main issues and ideas and the implied author's attitude,
helping the reader to interpret the action.[41] Unlike the
ordinary prose of the narrative of the novels, *shi* has
the scope to scrutinize feelings and ideas directly. In
general, *shi* rather than parallel prose is used to
express concepts and meaning, whereas both *shi* and
parallel prose are used for description. In *Xiyou ji shi*
is also used for Buddhist subject matter — parallel
prose and other verse forms rarely are.

This impression of the different uses of verse in
the Ming novel can be supported quantitatively. The
amount of verse and parallel prose used is fairly
consistent within each novel. It varies a lot less from
chapter to chapter than the ratio of classical to
vernacular language in the prose, and there does not
seem to be any relation between the classical/vernacular
ratio in prose and the amount of verse and parallel
prose in a chapter. However, if we look at the ratio of
shi to parallel prose within individual chapters, we
find something very interesting: there is a correlation
between the *shi* : parallel prose ratio and the
vernacular : classical ratio. In chapters with more

[41] Plaks notes that the opening verse of *Shuihu zhuan*
is similar in function to the opening of *Sanguo zhi
yanyi* 三國志演義 :indicating how the reader should
interpret what happens in the story. (Plaks also cites
this as evidence of the writer's awareness of genre —
apart from the fact that both *Shuihu zhuan* and *Sanguo
zhi yanyi* open with a meaningful poem, the author of the
Sanguo poem is also mentioned at the beginning of *Xiyou
ji*.) See *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp.
309-10.

vernacular markers there is more *shi* than parallel prose, and the fewer the vernacular markers the fewer *shi* and more parallel prose passages there are. This indicates that different verse forms are used for a reason, not randomly selected. (See Table 6.) Note that in *Xiyou ji* the ratios of parallel prose to *shi* are on the whole lower than in *Shuihu zhuan*. In *Xiyou ji* there is more *shi* because it is used for description as well as for comment or summary.

The epigrammatic function of *shi* is easily understood, but the purpose of parallel prose, descriptive *shi* and other verse forms is not so obvious. They cannot be solely for description, because there are also descriptive passages in the narrative. It is important to note that parallel prose and descriptive verse never supply new information. Rather, they only embellish something already mentioned in the narrative.[42]

In *Xiyou ji* our attention is focused on the relations between the three main characters, and on the humour and satire. The work is a fantasy, and, on the whole, lacks the realistic description of things and places that we find in *Shuihu zhuan* and *Jin Ping Mei*.

[42] Prušek discusses the effectiveness of verse description in twelfth- and thirteenth-century *huaben* in "The Realistic and Lyric Elements in the Chinese Mediaeval Story", pp. 11-12. He notes the "poetizing" of "trivial reality" which verse in these stories achieved, and that verse description is "not limited to descriptions of specific phenomena" but is invested with "general validity".

TABLE 6

RATIOS OF VERNACULAR TO CLASSICAL AND NON-*SHI* TO *SHI*

IN THE THREE NOVELS

Shuihu zhuan	Ch. 24	Ch. 3	Ch. 30	Ch. 8
Vern/Class	20.52:1	10.80:1	6.30:1	5.76:1
Non-*shi*/*shi*	0.51:1	4.14:1	2.50:1	9.50:1

Xiyou ji	Ch. 27	Ch. 39	Ch. 40	Ch. 44
Vern/Class	17.10:1	15.90:1	4.97:1	3.80:1
Non-*shi*/*shi*	1.36:1	1.46:1	1.36:1	1.65:1

Jin Ping Mei	Ch. 7	Ch. 2	Ch. 62	Ch. 65
Vern/Class	59.50:1	5.70:1	5.17:1	1.68:1
Non-*shi*/*shi*	0.73:1	2.24:1	4.41:1	5.33:1

The poetic descriptions in *Xiyou ji* only heighten the
feeling of unreality. The parallel prose (as we have
seen in the example from *Xiyou ji* Ch. 19, cited above)
in particular is as elaborate and distorted a use of
language as the descriptions are fantastic presentations
of the real or imaginary world. Parallel prose is well
suited to *Xiyou ji*.

   Shuihu zhuan shows a much less accomplished use of
parallel prose than does *Xiyou ji*. The examples in
Shuihu zhuan are often clumsy by comparison. The
parallels are obvious, and there is little subtlety,
complexity or allusion. Technically, these passages are
in *pianwen* form, but they lack the grace and complexity
of true *pianwen*. For example, this description of Ruan
Xiaoqi:

疙瘩臉橫生怪肉, 玲瓏眼突
出雙睛。腮邊長短淡黃鬚, 身
上交加烏黑點。渾如生鐵打
成, 疑是頑銅鑄就。世上降生
真玉逞, 村中喚作活閻羅。

Shuihu zhuan, Ch. 15, p. 167.[63]

[63] His warty, jaundiced face was very fleshy, and from
fine eyes the pupils protruded. Short yellow whiskers
grew from his cheeks, and there were crow-black spots on
his body. The whole effect was as if he were made of
cast-iron, you'd think he was forged out of hard copper.
He was the Wu Dao General incarnate, in the village they
called him a living Yama.

In *Shuihu zhuan* the best descriptions are in ordinary
narration, not parallel prose. For example, Lu Zhishen
killing the butcher in Ch. 3. (Narrative description
will be discussed in Ch. iv below.) But parallel prose
in *Shuihu zhuan* still serves a purpose. As in *Xiyou ji*,
it draws our attention away from what is described to
the language used. And focusing our attention on the
language means that we are aware of the imaginary
storyteller. This brings us to the underlying function
of verse and parallel prose in Ming fiction.

Verse and parallel prose in the Ming novel are not
used to achieve any one effect. *Shi* is used to add
insight, to summarize and to describe. *Pianwen* is used
in descriptions that are exercises for their own sake
and to demonstrate the storyteller's skill with words.
What these various effects all have in common is that
our attention is focused on the storyteller. We are
aware of him commenting or playing with words. Any
illusion of reality is dispelled as soon as the
storyteller breaks into verse. The reader is no longer
caught up in the story, but concentrating on the
storyteller. In this way, the narrator manipulates the
reader's response to the story, and the reader cannot
forget for long that he is being told a story by a
storyteller, who, the reader is aware, is a literary
writer. Sometimes a strong sense of irony comes out of
this. There is a clear distance between the characters
in the novel on the one hand, and the author/narrator

and the reader on the other.

To understand how successfully the author/narrator
in a Ming novel could have controlled his readers we
need to remember the importance of poetry in traditional
China. We have already noted above (Ch. i) that in oral
storytelling the use of verse and song would have been
very effective in varying a performance and building up
an intimacy between storyteller and audience.[44] But
because the Ming novels are written fiction, the
continued use of verse is often regarded as a flaw.
However, the Ming writers were doubtless well aware of
the auditory power of written poetry. Modern readers -
Chinese and Western alike - rarely read aloud. But in
the Ming dynasty reciting aloud was part of the learning
process in formal education. Because of this, it would
have been easy for contemporary readers to imagine that
they were listening to a story rather than reading it.
The verse and parallel prose would not have been to them
the dry interruptions they sometimes are to modern
readers. The Ming writers would have retained poetry
because they would have known that their readers would
pay attention to sound and rhythm, and recreate in their
minds the effect of an oral storytelling session - an
impression which is ultimately undermined by the obvious

[44] Eoyang suggests that music accompanying verse would
have been a very important part of Tang dynasty bianwen;
it is likely that this was true of later oral
storytelling, too. ("Word of Mouth", p. 138.) See also
Chen Zhouchang, pp. 279-80.

literariness of the novels.

The importance of the sound and rhythm of poetry is borne out by the correlation between the amount of verse and the amount of dialogue in chapters: the chapters with more dialogue have less verse and parallel prose and vice versa. Chapters with a lot of dialogue would not need a lot of verse — the voices of different characters and of the narrator would provide enough flavour and variety.[65]

VI. Formulas

One of the more noticeable features of language in the Ming novel is the use of repetition and formulas. Often very similar language is used to describe the same thing many times. Where it would be easy to vary the language used, it seems that the intention is to keep to the familiar wording as far as possible, that this is in fact the effect aimed for, rather than freshness or originality of expression.

The use of formulas is of course common in oral

[65] Plaks believes that the mix of language types, which was a feature of Ming dynasty chuanqi 傳奇 drama, probably influenced the Ming novel: in chuanqi there is a "complex counterpoint of spoken dialogue, lyric passages, and mimesis of action", and, in particular, a contrast between "the virtuosity of ch'ü [qu] 曲 composition" and the direct, spoken passages. This allowed "considerable opportunity for the display of urbane wit and the generation of thick dramatic ironies". (*The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, p. 42.)

storytelling. Parry and Lord identified a number of

principles relating to formulas in the Yugoslavian oral

epic:

> The poetic grammar of oral epic is and must be
> based on the formula. It is a grammar of
> parataxis and of frequently used and useful
> phrases. . . . [The singer's] oft-used phrases
> and lines lose something in sharpness, yet
> many of them must resound with overtones from
> the dim past whence they came.[66]

Formulas in oral storytelling are a response to the

conditions of performance — the main aim of their use is

not originality, or beauty of expression, but to express

an idea "under stress of performance".[67] Generally, if

there is a ready-made phrase for an idea, the oral

storyteller uses it. He only creates a new phrase if

there is no suitable existing formula, or if he cannot

remember the ready-made phrase.[68]

The use of formulas in the Ming novel serves three

main purposes. One, the paratactic tendency of formulaic

composition is well-suited to the structure of the Ming

novel, as we have seen above (Ch. ii). Two, formulas,

far from being a restriction, actually enrich the

language of the Ming novel. As Parry and Lord observed,

[66] Lord, p. 65.

[67] Lord, p. 44.

[68] Lord, pp. 44-45.

a formula can in a few words express a great deal.[69] In the case of the Ming novel, this means that the use of a formula is tapping into the wealth of Chinese literary heritage. To give a rather obvious instance, in the examples from *Shuihu zhuan* Ch. 24 and *Jin Ping Mei* Ch. 2 cited above, Pan Jinlian is described as being *yaotiao*, a formulaic expression from the *Shi jing* 詩經 (Book of Songs), and a term used for describing a modest, gentle, lovely, maidenly woman — everything that Jinlian clearly is not. Because *yaotiao* and its connotation would have been recognized immediately by the Ming dynasty reader, the irony would have been most effective. Formulas are derived from written literature and folk literature. Moreover, the interplay of formulas and more original, specific language (infrequent though this is) maximizes the effect of both styles, and also gives the narrative variety.

Three, being so redolent of oral storytelling performance, the use of formulas strengthens the naive, oral style of the Ming novel. It does not, of course, make us think that we are actually witnessing a storytelling performance — how could we be doing anything but reading? Rather, it gives prominence to the speaker of these formulas — the storyteller/ narrator. The building up of a strong narratorial presence is central to the Ming novel. (See Ch. v.)

[69] Lord, pp. 34 ff.

Lord noted that most formulas fall into four main groups of ideas to be expressed: the names and identities of characters, the main actions, time, and place. In the Ming novel there are two types of formula: formulas about the process of oral storytelling - the common expressions in the voice of the implied narrator/storyteller - and formulas which are part of the story - usually description. Both strengthen the narrator's storyteller persona. To the second group belong the four main formula categories Lord identified, together with a fifth: ideas or philosophy. Some common formulas directly express the ideas underlying the novels. For example, the common criticism of officials in *Shuihu zhuan*, the criticism of nuns in *Jin Ping Mei*.

Formulas which are part of the story are motifs. The motif - the repeated set phrase, or description, or mention of the same thing - is a distinctive characteristic of oral storytelling, yet one used very effectively in the Ming novel. The use of language in this way is one of the strengths of the Ming novel, bridging the gap between oral and literary creation. In fact, the use of motifs can be very sophisticated, and would have required a reading rather than a listening audience to fully appreciate them. For example, the shoe or slipper motif in *Jin Ping Mei*, which has many associations, is used throughout the novel, but subtly, demanding attentive reading.

In the language of the Ming novel, we can see how the writers drew on both the oral and literary traditions. The classical-vernacular language mix, and the attention paid to sentence rhythm, enabled them to achieve nuances of style and tone, vital to the communication between author/narrator and reader.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE PRESENTATION OF THE

FICTIONAL WORLD

I. Introduction

I have discussed in Chs. ii and iii how structure
and language work in the Ming novel. These two
components are the basis for description and
characterization, the means through which the Ming
novelist creates the world within the novel — the
fictional world. But this is not the ultimate effect
achieved in the works. In the course of constructing the
fictional world the novelist is also communicating with
the reader, through his manipulation of the conventions
of description and characterization. The reader,
therefore, should look beyond the presentation of a
physical world (realistic or not) peopled by the
characters, to perceive the underlying patterns and
meaning through which the implied author is addressing
the reader.

II. Description and Realism

We have seen above in Ch. iii that apart from dialogue, the Ming novel is made up of two components: narrative and verse (including stylized description set pieces). The verse and stylized description passages of the Ming novel are non-realist. But it is a mistake to assume that "ordinary narrative" — that is, everything which is not verse or stylized description — is therefore realist.

Nevertheless, Chinese narrative art is often discussed from the point of view of realism. During the nineteenth century Western fiction came to be dominated by the idea that the author's ultimate aim was to create and maintain the illusion of reality, and that the reader's pleasure depended on the quality of this illusion. But that view is a short-sighted one. What makes a novel successful is not necessarily realism; many other factors play a part.[1] Unfortunately, the dominance of realism in Western literature and criticism has coloured the views of both Chinese and Western critics towards traditional Chinese fiction. John L. Bishop, for instance, criticized the intrusion of the narrator and the use of a mixture of natural and

[1] See Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), Chs. i and ii.

supernatural elements because it spoilt the realism.[2]
Many modern Chinese critics tend to single out for
praise passages of realism, ignoring non-realist scenes,
which means that the place of realism in the Ming novel,
its contribution to the overall effect, is completely
overlooked. While it is true that there are passages of
striking realism in the Ming novel, the purpose and
effect of this realism is quite different from that of
the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western novel or
the twentieth-century Chinese novel. Realism in the Ming
novel is just one of many techniques the writer has to
draw upon, the purpose being not to create the illusion
of reality, but the illusion of a storyteller telling a
story. The fictional world of the Ming novel may
sometimes bear a remarkable resemblance to what we know
of the "real" world of Ming China, but it is only
superficial, an impression created or dispelled when it
suits the author or narrator. More important than that
is the intellectual milieu shared in the novel by writer
and reader.

I have said that the Ming novels are often looked
at from a realist standpoint; let us briefly examine in
what their realism (if any) lies, and at how to assess

[2] See "Some Limitations of Chinese Fiction", in
Studies in Chinese Literature, ed. John L. Bishop
(Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 241-42.

whether a passage of writing is realist.[3]

Plaks suggests that in both Chinese historiography
and fiction, there is "the sense that what is recorded
is ultimately true - either true to fact or true to
life . . . despite the obvious untruths of hyperbole,
supernatural detail, or ideological distortion".[4] *Shuihu
zhuan* celebrates Ming dynasty low life (although it is
ostensibly set in the Song dynasty), with countless
descriptions of bandit strongholds, taverns, prisons,
fishing boats and shops, as well as teeming towns and
lonely roads. C. T. Hsia writes of these descriptions as
constituting a "diversified and vibrant human
landscape", and says that "it is this bustling and often
savage world that gives *The Water Margin* its distinctive
aura of human truth".[5] Apart from descriptions of the
physical background, time and the seasons are usually
noted in greater or lesser detail, as are the dress and
physical appearance of the characters.

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[3] By "realism" I mean a mode of writing which is aimed
primarily at representing external, objective reality.
In realist writing, fantasy, symbolism and so forth are
avoided. Instead, the writer strives to describe
carefully the physical appearance of people and scenes,
provide a plausible explanation for human behaviour,
have logical, believable plots, and refrain from
imposing his own presence on the work too much.

[4] "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative", in
Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays, ed.
Andrew Plaks (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ.
Press, 1977), p. 313.

[5] *The Classic Chinese Novel* (New York: Columbia Univ.
Press, 1968), p. 85.

In contrast with both *Shuihu zhuan* and *Jin Ping
Mei*, *Xiyou ji* is full of incredible events and exotic
description; the world presented in this novel is
not realistic. The manner of description is partly
responsible for this, often making ordinary things seem
outlandish, but mostly it is due to the dominance of the
supernatural: the population of gods, demons, dragons,
and so forth, the marvellous abilities possessed by
Monkey and the demons, the magical properties of objects
and places. But *Xiyou ji* is not entirely non-realist.
Contrasting delightfully with the monsters, magic and
weird landscapes, there is considerable psychological
realism. The main characters are well-rounded, and the
many scenes featuring Sanzang complaining, or Monkey and
Bajie bickering, are quite mundane. Also of interest is
the presentation of society: although the characters
might be demons, the novel's presentation of officialdom
and various human institutions is true-to-life.

Jin Ping Mei is the most realist of the three
novels; it has often been remarked upon for its
"realism" or "naturalism". Hanan observes that *Jin Ping
Mei* is especially detailed and true-to-life in the
attention paid to money and prices, due to the great
importance of money in the world of *Jin Ping Mei*. Social
status in the novel is dependent on money, so "money is
in the very fabric of the story".[*] Social status is not

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[*] "A Landmark of the Chinese Novel", *University of
Toronto Quarterly*, 30, No. 3 (1961), 329-30.

only revealed in money; it shows in dress, property,
conversation - practically everything.[7] The details of
all these things must be presented to the reader so that
the struggle for possession and position - and its
accompanying corruption - can be fully explored.

Bishop complains that "Chinese fiction, while
partially developing a naturalistic method, never wholly
accepts its obvious concomitant, a naturalistic and
purely human view of life".[8] While most readers accept
that *Xiyou ji* is a fantasy, the presence of supernatural
elements in *Shuihu zhuan* and *Jin Ping Mei* has been
harder to swallow.[9] Even when there is little of the
supernatural, stories are often still dominated by fate
or coincidence. But the Ming novel is only imperfectly
realist according to Western aesthetic values. I believe
that the writers of the novels were not trying to
achieve realism, and therefore we should not judge them
by realist standards. The writers of the novels are free
of the limitations imposed by realism. The immediate
result of such a freedom is to reduce the significance
of the characters. They are very much the creatures of

[7] Hanan, "A Landmark of the Chinese Novel", pp. 331-
32.

[8] "Some Limitations of Chinese Fiction", in *Studies in
Chinese Literature*, ed. John L. Bishop (Cambridge,
Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), p. 242.

[9] Bishop maintains that whereas the supernatural is
acceptable in *Xiyou ji*, having a mixture of naturalism
and supernaturalism in the same work is a flaw. ("Some
Limitations of Chinese Fiction", p. 241.)

the writer, subject to both the workings of fate and the demands of narrative design. With the characters cut down to size, the writer is able to engage in a discourse with the reader. The characters and the world they inhabit can be presented in detail when the story calls for it, used to illustrate the theme, or pushed into the background while the narrator comments on the story, shows off his skill with words in a poem or piece of stylized description, or makes a show of addressing the "listener" directly (see Ch. v, p. 246).

Deciding whether a passage of writing is realist (or alternatively plain, poetic, or whatever) is basically a subjective process. But it is still possible to identify language with deviates from "standard" language, from the ideal neutral langauge. Corresponding with the standard or neutral register (see Ch. iii, pp. 135-36), this is language which is devoid of individual style, poetic embellishment, realist detail, or special rhythms or imagery.[10]

There are three main narrative styles available to a writer: plain, which has no distortion of standard language and little reference to reality; realist, which has some distortion, and much reference to reality; and poetic, which has a lot of distortion and little reference to reality. A plain style involves using the

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[10] See Nils Erik Enkvist, "On Defining Style: An Essay in Applied Linguistics", in *Linguistics and Style*, by N. E. Enkvist, J. Spencer and M. Gregory (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965).

standard language within the work, against which any
deviation is noticeable. A poetic style involves
deviation from standard language, and distortion of
reality - it is too symmetrical, too melodious, too
beautiful (or too ugly, or whatever). A plain style may
be realistic - that is genuine, not distorted - but it
is not realist. It should also be remembered that not
just a poetic style, but a realist style, too, is a
distortion of actual reality.[11] The main difference
between a realist and a poetic passage is that the
realist must refer to reality (the average person's
conception of everyday, objective reality), and the
poetic need not. Something that does not conform with
reality can be described in a realist style, by relating
it to everyday reality, providing a lot of detail, and
so forth. On the other hand, something real can be
described poetically rather than realistically, by not
referring to, or by distorting, reality.

The following examples from *Xiyou ji* illustrate the
different narrative styles. They are all variations on
the common motif of the pilgrims coming across a
mountain:

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[11] An analogy is the French flag: in order that the
three stripes that make up the flag seem the same size,
the blue one is slightly larger than the others and the
white square slightly smaller.

忽然又遇一山

Ch. 50, p. 643.[12]

This is plain narration in standard language. Only the bare facts are given, with little detail and no artistry.

忽又見一座高山阻路

Ch. 56, p. 718.[13]

This sentence, like the first example, is without distortion, but gives some detail about the mountain; it is more realist.

忽見一座高山远望着與天相接

Ch. 65, p. 828.[14]

This sentence is longer, but it does not give any more information which would enable the reader to picture what the mountain is actually like. The style is tending towards the poetic, as the mountain's height is exaggerated.

[12] Suddenly they again came across a mountain.

[13] Suddenly they again saw a high mountain blocking the road.

[14] Suddenly they saw a high mountain which was seen in the distance to meet the sky.

路窄崖高, 石多嶺峻, 人馬難行

Ch. 50, p. 643.[15]

This is another example of a poetic narrative style.
There is little reference to objective reality: the
words used convey hardly any information, and the
reader's attention focuses on the rhythm. The next stage
along the plain-poetic axis of narrative style would be
a poem or set piece of description.

My conclusion is that although the Ming novels can
in no way be described as realist overall, they are
realist in parts. Within the narrative passages (as
opposed to the verse) of the novels, the style ranges
from realist to poetic.

We saw in Ch. iii that verse and stylized
description are used to sum up or to provide insight
into what is happening; to describe; and to reinforce
the oral storytelling effect. Narrative description in
the Ming novel is used to create three main effects: it
can supply information to the reader about what
something looks like or what is happening, information
generally needed for the development of the plot; it can
heighten suspense, by interrupting the story with a lot
of detailed background information; and it involves the
reader in the story, making the narrator's storytelling

[15] The road was narrow, the cliff high, the rocks were
many and the mountains steep; the people and the horse
found the going hard.

persona all the more effective when he reminds the
reader that what is happening is only a story.

Compare for example, the description of Wu Song's
struggle with the *muyecha* in Ch. 27 of *Shuihu zhuan* with
a typical stylized fight scene in the novel. In Ch. 27
Wu Song is the prisoner of a woman who kills customers
at her tavern to use their flesh to fill mantou. Wu Song
has pretended to be affected by some drugged wine:

那婦人...脫去了綠紗衫兒,解下
了紅絹裙子,赤膊着,便來把武松
輕輕提將起來。武松就勢抱住那
婦人,把兩隻手一拘,拘將攏來,望
胸前摟住。却把兩隻腿望那婦人
下半截只一挾,壓在婦人身上。那
婦人殺豬也似叫將來。

Shuihu zhuan, Ch. 27, p. 337.[16]

Throughout this piece we have a clear idea of what is
happening – the verbs used refer to ordinary actions.
(So clear and graphic is the writing that the reader
could probably recreate the fight for himself if he
wished.)

[16] That woman . . . removed her green gauze gown, undid
her red silk skirt, and bare-shouldered lightly picked
Wu Song up. Wu Song thereupon grabbed that woman,
seizing her with his hands and hugging her to his chest,
then with his legs he gripped the lower half of her body
and pressed down on her. That woman squealed like a pig
being slaughtered.

In Ch. 14 a fight breaks out, due to a
misunderstanding, between Lei Heng and Liu Tang, two
heroes:

雷橫見劉唐起上來，呵呵大笑，挺
手中朴刀來迎。兩個就大路上厮
併。但見：
一來一往，似鳳翻身；一撞一衝，如
鷹展翅。一個照拋盡依良法，一個
遮攔自有悟頭。這個丁字脚，搶將
入來；那個四換頭，透將進去。

Shuihu zhuan, Ch. 14, p. 160.[17]

In this piece the action is less specifically described,
and the language tends to refer not to actual movements
and appearances, but to other ideas and expressions. It
is left up to the reader to imagine what is happening.
In the first fight description, there is only one
comparison made — the woman is compared with a squealing
pig, something earthy and ordinary. In the second piece
the heroes are compared with the phoenix — a mythical
bird — and the eagle, which although not mythical is

[17] When Lei Heng saw Liu Tang after him, he gave a
laugh, and stuck out his sword to meet him. So the two
of them clashed in the road, just see: One approaches,
the other goes towards him, like phoenixes moving
around; one pushes forward, the other clashes against
him, it is as if eagles were spreading their wings. One
depends on thrusting, relying on good technique; the
other obstructs him, he has his own approach. This one
puts his feet at an angle and rushes in; that one dodges
about and hastens forward.

grander than a pig.[18]

Exaggeration and hyperbole, rather than precision, are characteristics of oral storytelling.[19] In the Ming novel we find both exaggerated or fantastic passages and precise, relatively realistic description. The Ming novels were very carefully crafted; their writers drew on the oral storytelling tradition when they wanted to produce the effect of oral storytelling, and wrote in a more detailed or down-to-earth style when a different effect was called for. He Shilong 何士龍 notes that in *Shuihu zhuan* attention is paid to describing concrete details, and there is a preponderance of verbs, as, for example, in the scene in Ch. 4 (p. 58) in which Lu Zhishen forces the monks to eat dog meat.[20] Passages of relatively detailed description are scattered throughout

[18] Hanan comments that "the language of close-up narration in the *Shuihu* is effective precisely because it is in the vernacular; it has a direct physical connotation". See *The Chinese Vernacular Story* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), p. 16. Plaks, too, is aware of the power of the vernacular language: discussing the richness of the language of *Shuihu zhuan* he observes that some notable descriptions are in colloquial language whereas the norm was for them to be in classical or semi-classical — for example, the description of the horse hooves in Ch. 13 (p. 146). See *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), p. 318.

[19] Eugene Eoyang, "Word of Mouth: Oral Storytelling in the Pien-wen", Diss. Indiana Univ. 1971, p. 139.

[20] "Tantan Shuihu de yuyan yishu", 談談水滸的語言藝術 in *Shuihu zhengming* 水滸爭鳴 ed. Hubei sheng shehui kexue yuan, wenxue yanjiu suo 湖北省社會科學院文學研究所 and Hubei sheng Shuihu yanjiu hui 湖北省水滸研究會, I (Yichang: Changjiang wenyi chuban she, 1982), 182.

the novels, and in that they give concrete details of something ordinary, using "plain" language, they could be called realist.

Description in the Ming novel is always connected to what is happening in the story, and to characters' actions.[21] We are not, for the sake of a full picture, given a description of everything presented.

Some description in the Ming novel involves a close, detailed examination of something particular, while other passages are of distant description – the reader is given a panoramic view of a scene, with few details of any one part of the scene. Description of action is often distant, and this kind of description does not allow for psychological insight. (An exception to this is distant description seen through a character's eyes.) As in film photography, description in the Ming novel often begins with a distant view, then focuses on a detail. Unlike description in European fiction, we are not given a systematic description of the overall picture and all the significant details. To draw another analogy, description in the Ming novel is like traditional Chinese painting: a painting may be a general picture of a scene – as in landscapes – or it may be a close, relatively detailed portrayal of a person, flower, animal or some other small thing. The landscape lacks the detail of the portrait, and the

[21] He Shilong, p. 179.

close-up picture is generally without a background. We
rarely find both precise detail and a wider view in one
painting. Compare, for example, these two descriptions
of houses in *Jin Ping Mei*:

到獅子街燈市去瓶兒新買的
房子。門面四間。到底三層臨街
是樓。僦門去兩邊廂房三間。客
座一間。稍間過道穿進去第三
層。三間臥房，一間厨房。後邊落
地。緊靠著喬皇親花園。

Jin Ping Mei, Ch. 15, pp. 386-87.[22]

This gives only a very general idea of what the house
looks like.

月娘。衆姊妹到了喬大戶家....
他娘子讓進衆人房中去。寬衣
服。就放卓兒擺茶。無非是蒸煤
細巧茶食。菜餡點心酥菜甜食。
諸般菜蔬。擺設甚是齊整。請堂
客坐下吃茶....到廳屏開孔雀

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[22] They went to the lantern market in Lion Street,
where Li Ping'er had bought a house. It was a four-frame
house, with three sections. The building was on the
street. To the sides of the ceremonial gate were two
wings of three rooms, and a reception room. They soon
went along a passage and entered the third section.
There were three bed chambers and a kitchen, and down-
stairs at the back it adjoined the garden of the
imperial relatives the Qiaos.

裙隱芙蓉。正面設四張卓席。

Jin Ping Mei, Ch. 41, pp. 1078-79.[23]

In this description we learn about minute details, but are given no indication of the size, layout or appearance of the house.

This difference in ways of describing something similar is explained by the fact that in Chinese narrative description we are given only what is relevant; the rest of the picture is not supplied. Another example is this description from *Shuihu zhuan*:

王四相別了庄莊, 一面走著,
被山風一吹,酒卻湧上來, 浪
浪蹌踉, 一步一擻。走不得十
里之路, 見座林子, 透到裏面,
望著那綠茸茸莎草地上, 挨

Yue Niang and the other women went to Lord Qiao's house. . . . His wife invited them in and they took off their coats. A table was set and tea things laid out. There was nothing but steamed or fried delicacies, pastries filled with fruit, crisp fruit sweets, and all sorts of fruit and vegetables. It was laid out very nicely. They were invited into the hall, to the guests' places, to take tea. . . . They entered the hall; there was a screen displaying peacocks screen and cushions concealing hibiscuses. In front were placed four tables.

地倒了。

Shuihu zhuan, Ch. 2, p. 29.[24]

We are given only the important details, as they become
relevant. As Wang Si leaves to return to Shi Jin's
mansion, we see him walking along. As the wine begins to
affect him, we are told about how he staggers - the most
visible sign of drunkenness. When he comes to the wood,
we learn for the first time of the wood's existence and
are told what the grass is like when Wang Si collapses
on it. Before this, we have no idea of the landscape. It
is as if Wang Si were walking across the blank white
paper of a painting.

Another example is in *Xiyou ji* Ch. 59. At the
beginning of the chapter the pilgrims resume their
journey, and we are given only a perfunctory few words
of background description (p. 753), and a short piece of
parallel prose. The very next reference to their
surroundings is as follows:

只见那路旁有座庄院，乃
是红瓦盖的房舍，红砖砌
的垣墙，红油门扇，红漆板

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[24] Wang Si took his leave and returned to the estate.
As he walked, he was blown by the mountain breeze and
the wine went to his head. He staggered about, falling
over at every step. He hadn't gone ten *li* when he saw a
wood; he hurried in, and collapsed onto the luxuriant
green sedge grass.

塌，一片都是红的。

Xiyou ji, Ch. 59, p. 754.[25]

We are not given any details of the mansion apart from its colour, and have no idea at all of its surroundings. This practice of picking out a few relevant or representative details is similar to synecdoche, which is not exclusive to the Ming novel, but common in Chinese literature in general.[26]

Discussing *Don Quixote*, Alan Spiegel makes some interesting observations about the pre-realist European novel, which shed some light on how description works in the Ming novel. He says that because Cervantes and his readers "share certain assumptions" (due to the relative stability of Cervantes' times) about society, how to live, and so forth, Cervantes could take a lot for granted when telling the story.[27] A thumb-nail sketch of Don Quixote immediately tells the reader everything about his social class and background, and the type of person he is. Cervantes needed only to write about "the typical", "the habitual", ignoring "the sensuous surface

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[25] They saw at the side of the road a mansion. It was a red house built of red tiles, with walls made of red bricks, red painted door-leaves, red beds — it was all red.

[26] See He Shilong's discussion of Lu Zhishen's bristling cheeks. (He Shilong, p. 179.)

[27] *Fiction and the Camera Eye: Visual Consciousness in Film and the Modern Novel* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), pp. 8-16.

details of Quixote's physical appearance".[28]

Spiegel says that this is true of the presentation of everything else in the novel. In the Ming novel descriptions are highly conventional, and usually do not give the reader a strong visual impression. Spiegel says that it is "essential" reality rather than sensual or objective reality which is important in novels like Don Quixote:

> The concrete particulars function in the narrative as a kind of algebraic code or sensual shorthand that immediately evokes the author's conceptual apprehension of any given character, setting or event.[29]

This kind of "sensuous shorthand" is a feature of description in the Ming novel. An example of this is the description of Ximen Qing just after he meets Pan Jinlian in Ch. 24 of *Shuihu zhuan*. In a few lines we are told all we need to know about what type of person he is. The information contained in this brief introduction is enough to ensure that his later behaviour is no surprise to us. Another example is the brief description of Wen Bigu in *Jin Ping Mei* Ch. 58 (p. 1562).

In *Xiyou ji* Ch. 27 we have three thumb-nail sketches of people – a young girl, an old man and an old woman. (Actually they are really three disguises of a

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[28] Spiegel, p. 13

[29] Spiegel, p. 14.

demon.) In the case of the old woman, we are only told
her age, that she is crying, and that she walks with a
stick:

好妖精....變作個老婦人，年滿
八旬，手拄着一根彎頭竹杖，一
步一聲的哭着走來。

Xiyou ji, Ch. 27, p. 347.[30]

In a Western or Chinese realist novel, this brief sketch
would not be satisfactory, but in the context of the
Ming novel, it tells us all we need to know. The woman's
age automatically makes her worthy of respect and
sympathy. This is reinforced by the walking stick and
the crying. Her grief and helplessness contrast with
Monkey's seeming ruthlessness - we know she is really a
demon, and that Monkey will kill her.

Narrative description is no more detailed than
stylized description, but the details are different -
they are details of things which are part of the real
(everyday) world and the reader is able to picture the
thing or scene being described. In other words, the
reader's attention is drawn not to the style of
presentation, as is the case with stylized description,
but to what is being presented. The effect is a

[30] Oh that demon! . . . It turned into an old woman, a
good eighty years in age, leaning on a curved bamboo
stick, crying with every step as she walked along.

relatively realist narrative style — but not a great degree of realism, because we "see" only what we are allowed to by the author/narrator; we are not given a full picture.

Stylized description is used to draw attention to the storyteller. Realist description achieves just the opposite — the reader is allowed to forget about the storyteller's presence and become involved in the story. This is only temporary, however. At any time the narrator can step forward and make his presence felt again, by inserting commentary, verse or pianwen, or some other storytelling formula. The fictional world, whether presented in a relatively realist or in a stylized mode, is totally controlled by the author/narrator.

III. Characterization and Dialogue

We have looked at the style of the narrative passages in general and how the fictional world is described. Let us now turn to how the inhabitants of this world are presented. One of the features of *Shuihu zhuan*, *Xiyou ji* and *Jin Ping Mei* is the vivid characterization, the presence of clearly distinguished and identifiable people.

Both *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji* are too limited by structure and content to allow for fully developed characterization. If there are many characters in a

work, of more or less equal importance (as opposed to novels with a few central characters and many "extras"), then there is unlikely to be much depth of characterization. This applies to both *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji*, particularly the former, with its several dozen main characters and hundreds of supporting characters. Another obstacle to characterization is the episodic structure of the Ming novel. Because it is made up of loose-linked, almost self-contained stories, there is little continuity, which means that it is impossible to achieve character development. Moreover, these stories tend to be centred round action, with psychological interest having a low priority. This is even true of *Xiyou ji*. Although the relationships among the characters are important, and a fairly realistic portrayal, this is only on the level of types: the motivation and inner thoughts of individuals are not explored.

While all three novels are renowned for their characters, characterization is handled differently in each one. Characters in *Shuihu zhuan* fall into several types — there is very little, if any, individuation.[31] In *Xiyou ji* the three main characters — Monkey, Bajie and Sanzang — are individuals to a limited extent, and all the other characters, the various demons, kings and

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[31] This seems quite obvious to me. However, many critics, beginning with Jin Shengtan, have enthused about how distinct each of the *Shuihu zhuan* heroes is, and even the various demons in *Xiyou ji*.

dragons, are types. *Jin Ping Mei* has relatively deep
characterization, with characters who are more
individuated, and thus this novel represents a
development (or at least a movement away) from the
earlier works. In *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji* there is no
character development: a character may reflect on the
past, and notch up experiences, but by the end of the
novel he is more or less the same as at the beginning.
This even applies to Monkey. Nor in *Jin Ping Mei* is
there much character development, although characters in
this novel are affected by their experiences more than
the characters in the other two works.

It is interesting to note that in traditional
Chinese literary criticism there does not seem to be a
term for "character" as distinct from "person", which
indicates that there was no concept of characterization
in literature (although this is not to say that
traditional Chinese critics did not appreciate the
presentation of characters). Only important characters
are described, or given a background, and then only if
the pace of the story allows for it. For example, in the
first part of Ch. 20 of *Shuihu zhuan*, the first chapter
after the Liang Shan Bo band has become properly
established, no one is described, because the few new
characters are not worthy of much attention, and because
this chapter is largely an overview, with little close-
up narration. In the second half of this chapter,
however, both Zhang San and Liu Tang are described in

detail (see pp. 238 and 239), because the pace allows
for it - it is slower, with a closer examination of what
is happening. Moreover, the story requires a relatively
detailed presentation of these two characters, for what
we learn about them is important in Ch. 21. The dandy
Zhang San, having served as a contrast to Liu Tang in
Ch. 20, is now, as the lover of Song Jiang's mistress
Poxi, tacitly compared with Song Jiang. Liu Tang was the
bearer of the letter from Chao Gai, which in Ch. 21 is
fought over by Song Jiang and Yan Poxi, resulting in
Song Jiang killing Poxi.

Xiao ren 小人 (unimportant people, non-heroes)
are generally not described in detail. These include
soldiers and servants, minor bullies (such as the
dachong 大蟲, Niu Er, whom Yang Zhi kills in Ch. 12 of
Shuihu zhuan), and women. There are exceptions to this
general tendency. The muyecha Sun Erniang is given a
detailed description, but she is a hero, which cancels
out her femaleness. Another exception, as we have seen,
is the minor character Zhang Wenyuan (Zhang San) who is,
briefly, indirectly involved in Song Jiang's life.

In Shuihu zhuan and Xiyou ji what individualism
there is refers to distinguishable types rather than to
individuals. For examples: hero, bad woman, servant,
virtuous woman, demon, minor deity, honest old man.
Occasionally an individual does stand out, for examples,
Lu Zhishen, Bajie.

Some of the main character types in Shuihu zhuan

are as follows:

1. gentleman hero (e.g. Lin Chong, Song Jiang,
   Shi Jin)

2. rough hero; bully (e.g. Lu Zhishen, Li Kui,
   Niu Er, the Ruan brothers)

3. good official (e.g Sun Ding)

4. bad official (e.g. Gao Qiu)

5. unheroic man; dandy (e.g. Ximen Qing, Zhang
   San)

6. servant; soldier; underling (e.g. the *xiao
   luolou*)

7. virtuous woman (Lin Chong's wife)

8. bad woman (e.g. Pan Jinlian, Lu Junyi's
   wife).[32]

In Xiyou ji the main character types include:

1. Sanzang

2. Monkey; demon

3. Bajie; rough character

4. king; other official

5. scheming official, Taoist priest, bad person,

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[32] These types which I have identified, and those for
the other two novels which follow, are arbitrary. Others
have distinguished different types using other criteria.
My criteria are whether the character is good or bad;
how rough or genteel the character is (and sometimes,
how "masculine" or "feminine"); and the status of the
character (which inludes whether they are male or
female). To give just one example of another system,
Huang Ruiyun 黄瑞雲 classifies characters according to
class and how willing they are to rise up in rebellion
(see "Shuihu yishu zatan" 水滸藝術雜談 in *Shuihu
zhengming*, II, pp. 240-41). The exact types identified
are not the most important thing; the point I wish to
make is that characters are types.

demon

6. Sha Seng: ordinary person; monk; minor deity.

The main characters in *Jin Ping Mei* are much more individual, but types can still be distinguished:

1. decadent man (e.g. Ximen Qing, Chen Jingji, Ying Bojue)

2. servants

3. maids

4. virtuous women (e.g. Wu Yueniang, Li Ping'er)

5. demonic women (e.g. Pan Jinlian, Pang Chunmei)

6. lascivious women (e.g. Ximen Qing's various married lovers)

7. surly women (e.g. Li Jiao'er, Sun Xue'o)

8. corrupt women (e.g. matchmakers, nuns)

We can identify types in *Jin Ping Mei* (although there may not be many characters belonging to each type).[33] Part of the cleverness of *Jin Ping Mei* is in characters going against their types. *Not*, that is, becoming complete individuals, but changing from one type to another. For example, Song Huilian originally seems to be just like all the other maids and singing girls seduced by Ximen Qing. She is however more ambitious than most, and there are obvious parallels between her and Pan Jinlian, so she seems to fall more into this

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[33] Zhang Zhupo 張竹坡 classified characters, and concentrated on their functions rather than as individuals. "Piping diyi qishu Jin Ping Mei"批評第一奇書金瓶梅讀法 in *Jin Ping Mei ziliao huibian* 金瓶梅資料彙編, ed. Huang Lin 黄霖 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), pp. 68-72.

category. But finally she conforms with neither of these
types, becoming instead a version of the virtuous woman.
Meng Yulou is another example. While not presented in
enough detail to be an individual, she belongs to
several types and none of them. She firmly rejects the
idea of chaste widowhood, but is willing to be a
conventional virtuous wife to Ximen Qing; she is Pan
Jinlian's chief crony, but is herself unambitious and
likeable; She is a beauty, who has foolishly been
impressed by Ximen Qing, but is in other ways very
sensible.

Character types in this work differ from those in
other Chinese novels and stories, but still work as
types within *Jin Ping Mei*. In this way *Jin Ping Mei* can
perhaps be seen as a counter-genre. All the characters
in *Jin Ping Mei* are flawed in some way, reflecting the
very cynical world view of the implied author.[34] They
thereby undermine the established character types in
Chinese fiction, and constitute an ironic comment on

[34] See Zhang Zhupo's discussion on Yueniang. (Zhang
Zhupo, p. 72.)

these works.[35]

There is so much dialogue in the Ming novel (on average around fifty per cent) that it can easily be used by the author to provide insight into characters' personalities, which means that there is less need to resort to overtly omniscient writing and judgement. Despite claims to the contrary, not all the characters in Ming novels are given a distinctive speaking style, though most of the main character types are identifiable by their speech. This is true of the main characters — Monkey, Sanzang and Bajie — in *Xiyou ji*, of Song Jiang, Lu Zhishen, Li Kui and a few others in *Shuihu zhuan*, and, to a lesser extent, of Ximen Qing, Pan Jinlian and the other main characters in *Jin Ping Mei*. In *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji* this characterization through speech is rather limited, in that it tends to rely on superficial characteristics, and is sometimes a little heavy-handed. However, it is still the main way the writers portray characters.

Dialogue is responsible to a large extent for

[35] Robert Keith McMahon discusses how the *haohan* types (for example, Song Jiang, Li Kui) in *Shuihu zhuan*, who shun women, are "surpassed by the clever and socially adept *haohan* who is also *fengliu*   " (for example, Yan Qing). See "The Gap in the Wall: Containment and Abandon in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Fiction", Diss. Princeton Univ. 1984, pp. 92-96. For a discussion of genre and counter-genre, see Claudio Guillén, "Genre and Countergenre: The Discovery of the Picaresque", in *Literature as System: Essays Toward the Theory of Literary History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970).

whatever realism the Ming novel possesses. When the
dialogue is natural and lively the reader is drawn into
the story and the narrator's presence is not strongly
felt. Often the Ming novelists took great pains to make
the dialogue resemble real speech, incorporating dialect
words and common speech patterns.[36] The imitation of
speech is used in dialogue, and includes repetition,
stammering and half-finished sentences. The main effect
this achieves is realism, but it can also serve to
emphasize something important in the story in a subtle
way.

The register of a piece of dialogue is important in
considering the degree of realism in a piece of
narrative. If the register is appropriate the effect of
realism is built up. If it is inappropriate there is no
such illusion: the reader is kept at a distance from the
world of the story and other effects are achieved (for
example the narrator may become more obvious, or the
story may become ironic).

Hanan points to the important part realistic
dialogue plays in *Jin Ping Mei*. It is so subtle and
realistic that all the nuances of social relationships
can be expressed in it, and it is unsurpassed in all
other Chinese novels except for *Honglou meng*. The
dialogue in *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji* is not as

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[36] Plaks notes there was a tendency among sixteenth-
century critics to promote the use of speech rhythms in
guwen 古文 composition. (*The Four Masterworks of the
Ming Novel*, p. 31.)

penetrating as that of *Jin Ping Mei*, but it is still a noteworthy achievement.

In *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji* characters often speak their thoughts aloud. This detracts from the realism, as in real life this would be unlikely to happen. For example, *Shuihu zhuan* Ch. 27, when Sun Erniang drugs the officials (p. 337). This is almost certainly an oral storytelling device imitated by the writers of the novels: in oral storytelling, presenting a character's thoughts in direct speech would have been much more effective than reporting them in indirect speech.

Although individuation is limited, characters being mostly types, characterization of types in the Ming novel is often very subtle, and hence effective. This applies to *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji* as well as to *Jin Ping Mei*. For example, in *Shuihu zhuan*, we are not told directly that Wu Song lives by the Confucian family ethic (*ti* 悌). But it is apparent from the beginning, in the way Wu Song always refers to himself as Wu Er — surname Wu, second in the family. The fact that Wu Song's elder brother, the object of his brotherly devotion and respect, is a weak, pathetic, unheroic character, in sharp contrast to Wu Song, emphasises Wu Song's virtuousness in this respect.

Another example of this subtlety of characterization is in the portrayal of Wu Yong, the outlaws' strategist, in *Shuihu zhuan*. Our impression of Wu Yong is that he is very self-assured, although we are

not told that directly. This feeling is due not so much
to anything Wu Yong says as to the contrasting self-
effacement of Lin Chong and Chao Gai.

Lin Chong's wife is one of the very few virtuous
women in *Shuihu zhuan*. Apart from what we are told about
her by the author/narrator, the portrayal of her
character is reinforced by the behaviour of other women
in the novel. Most of our information about Lin Chong's
wife is given in Chs. 7 and 8, and is mostly to do with
her fidelity and loyalty. After that we follow Lin Chong
on his journey into exile, and learn nothing more about
his wife until Ch. 20. In this chapter Lin Chong misses
his wife, and sends a man to find her. The man returns
to report that Lin Chong's wife killed herself rather
than surrender to Gao Qiu. Thus we are reminded of how
virtuous she is. After twelve chapters which have no
mention of Lin Chong's wife, this episode comes just
before the introduction later in the chapter of Yan
Poxi, who is presented as a woman of questionable
virtue. The next chapter continues the story of Song
Jiang and Yan Poxi, and Poxi is confirmed as being
thoroughly bad. And only three chapters on from that is
the story of Wu Song's adulterous sister-in-law Pan
Jinlian, the most infamous woman of all. Lin Chong's
wife thus serves as a foil for the bad women in *Shuihu
zhuan*. The writer does not draw the comparison between
the two types of women explicitly, but indirectly
through the arrangement of the stories. The reader is

expected to notice this.

This method is also used in the portrayal of the female hero, the *muyecha* Sun Erniang. She is the first female character to be introduced after the story of Pan Jinlian, which emphasizes how different she is to Jinlian, the antithesis of virtuous womanhood and a threat to heroes. Sun Erniang is not described in great detail, but we receive a vivid impression of her as fresh and pretty. When she is first introduced she is out of doors, in contrast to Jinlian and Poxi who are always indoors (in the latter's case, always in the bedroom). Interestingly, Lin Chong's wife, who is a traditional woman (rather than a female hero) and would therefore be expected to be confined to the house, is also often out of doors. Apart from the obvious sexual undertones, Sun Erniang's appearance, dressed as she is in red and green silk, with ornaments, makeup and flowers, seems fresh and healthy, again in contrast to Pan Jinlian and Yan Poxi, whose beauty seems unwholesome and threatening. Sun Erniang is not disrespectful, but she is not fawning like Yan Poxi and Pan Jinlian. Nor is she sullen and always thinking about love as the other two are – Sun Erniang is energetic and busy, she has work to do, while the others sit around idle and brooding. (She even kills people in an honest way, rather than through her sexuality.) Finally, Sun Erniang is relaxed, whereas our impression of Jinlian and Poxi is that they are tense and discontented.

Another example of this method of characterization through contrast is the treatment of Zhang San, mentioned above. He is portrayed as a pretty young man, wasting his talents, and serves to emphasize that Song Jiang, who is also involved with Yan Poxi, should not stoop to that level. Zhang San's attributes are all womanly: the common characteristics of men in *Shuihu zhuan* (great size and strength, ferocious appearance, voracious appetite, skill with weapons, and so forth) are all conspicuous in their absence from the description of Zhang San. Almost immediately after the description of Zhang San is a description of Liu Tang, a real hero.[37]

The obstacles to characterization typical of the Ming novel are less present in *Jin Ping Mei*. First, this novel is centred round a small, limited group of characters. Unlike *Xiyou ji*, in which the lives of the main characters are little more than a frame or a background to the action-filled adventures, in *Jin Ping Mei* the main characters are the main interest of the story, and the action and other characters serve to highlight these characters. Second, *Jin Ping Mei* has a much tighter structure than the other two works, with more continuity and internal unity, allowing for a character to be thoroughly explored in the course of the

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[37] Plaks suggests that the writer of *Shuihu zhuan* went even further and undermined some of the heroes in this way. (See *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp. 332-35.)

novel. Third, *Jin Ping Mei* is about ordinary people and
their everyday relationships and institutions, rather
than about the heroic or the supernatural. As Hanan
points out, the lesser amount, and different handling
of, melodrama in *Jin Ping Mei* means that the emphasis
has shifted from plot (as in the other novels) to
character. He suggests in fact that it is "hardly
possible to talk of 'plot' at all in connection with the
Chin P'ing Mei".[38] We can see a fundamental difference
between *Jin Ping Mei* and the other two works in the
concept of the hero. In *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji* the
heroes or protagonists are outcasts, removed from
reality in some way, and we accept them on these terms.
In *Jin Ping Mei* on the other hand the concept of the
hero is much more sophisticated – the characters in this
work are all very real, and very flawed, which means
that the reader cannot respond to them in a clear-cut,
unquestioning way. Characters in *Jin Ping Mei* are, as
Plaks and others have observed, examined against a
background of irony.

Hanan has noted that the characterization of women
in *Jin Ping Mei* is especially remarkable. This interest
in female characters is possibly due to the influence of
the erotic novel tradition and the popular song
tradition, both of which feature women.[39] This interest

[38] Hanan, "A Landmark of the Chinese Novel", p. 327.
[39] "A Landmark of the Chinese Novel", p. 328.

in and sympathy for women is lacking in *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji*.

Sometimes in the Ming novel the illusion that we are witnessing people speaking is broken. This detracts from the realism, but not from the novel as a whole. A realistic picture is not the main aim in Ming novels. The main aim is to set up a direct line of communication with the reader, and all the various features of the Ming novel — storytelling devices, realism, verse, structural patterns and so forth — serve this end. The narrator is constantly hovering in the background, and may come forward at any moment. It is not so much that the illusion of reality is spoilt by the intrusion of the narrator as that the effect of a narrated story is interrupted by realistic scenes.

In dialogue the author can supply a lot of information to the reader without the flow of the story being interrupted. Often in the Ming novel a scene is presented to the reader by one of the characters, rather than by the narrator directly. The story is told through the mouth of a character, using that character's speaking style. This gives a long passage of narration more interest.

Sometimes when the author does not put anything in a character's speech to distinguish him or her from the other characters, an interesting effect is created, such as story-within-a-story or even character disguise. Story-within-a-story, the device of a character telling

a story as part of the action of the main story, is common in fiction. In the Ming novel it is especially effective because we are not distracted by the character who is telling the story. With few idiosyncrasies to remind us that it is a character and not the narrator speaking, we can become more involved in the story and see it from the viewpoint of the characters listening. We are confused about who is speaking and about what the views of the narrator are, until the trick ends and the narrator comes back into the story. This device enables point of view to change easily and almost imperceptibly.

A good example of this is *Xiyou ji* Ch. 40, in which a demon disguises itself as a little child. The story he tells is so elaborate that we cannot help becoming interested in the child's misfortunes, and almost forget that the whole story is totally untrue. (See *Xiyou ji*, pp. 515-16).

To a lesser extent, the same effect is achieved with every instance of story-within-a-story: the reader becomes engrossed in the story being related by a character, and forgets that the real story is this character speaking to other characters. An example is in *Shuihu zhuan*, when Zhang Qing tells Wu Song his life story (*Shuihu zhuan*, Ch. 27, pp. 338-39). This is because the story-within-a-story is being told no differently to how the novel as a whole is narrated: all the necessary details are supplied, but "background" information which is not directly relevant is kept to a

minimum. (There may be many plot threads in the Ming
novel, threads which may not be directly relevant to the
main plot, but nearly everything included is necessary
to its immediate context, although it may not be a key
element in the work's overall plot-line - see Ch. ii,
p. 82 ff.) In the Western novel (and indeed in real
life) a story told by a character is concise compared
with a dramatized story, one in which the action is
presented directly to the reader. Only the salient facts
or the strongest impressions are presented in a story
told by a character, whereas in ordinary, direct
narration in the Western novel we are usually given a
fuller, more rounded picture. But in the Ming novel
there is not such a distinction between ordinary
narration and narration by a character.

Story-within-a-story is a frequently used device in
the Ming novel, giving variety to the presentation of
the plot. But more than that, it is revealing of the
whole narrative process of the Ming novel. When we, the
readers, are caught up in a story told by a character,
only to be let go again when the proper story - the main
narrative - is resumed, we are consciously experiencing
what we are part of all the time as readers of the Ming
novels. We are being told a story by a storyteller, a
story which is "real" until the storyteller/narrator
steps forward and destroys the illusion.

In *Jin Ping Mei* the *ci* songs sometimes lead us to
lose track of what is really happening in the main

story. When, for instance, Pan Jinlian sings movingly of her loneliness, we are almost tricked into sympathizing with her.

Sometimes the dialogue does not only reflect in speech what is happening, but is itself the action. For instance, the bickering between Monkey and Bajie in *Xiyou ji*, the flirtatious bantering and the spiteful rows in *Jin Ping Mei*, the meetings of heroes and the convivial get-togethers in *Shuihu zhuan*. Digression from the plot (discussed in Ch. ii, pp. 63-64) is often in the form of a conversation scene.

IV. Narrative Techniques

I have called this chapter "The Presentation of the Fictional World", and we have seen that the setting and characters are sometimes realist, sometimes not, sometimes described in detail, sometimes presented in the form of a distant overview. The common denominator of these different narrative modes is the domination of the fictional world by the demands of the storytelling game: the "fictional world" is subservient to the self-conscious "presentation" of this world.

This impression is borne out by an examination of some of the narrative techniques identified by traditional Chinese critics. While marvelling at the writer's skill, critics such as Jin Shengtan recognised that writing was very much a self-conscious

act, and that the writer manipulated the material to suit his purpose.

Jia Wenzhao 賈之鳴 and Xu Zhaoxun 徐召勛 have compiled a list of some forty writing techniques which were identified in works of fiction by traditional critics.[40] Fifteen of these techniques were noted by Jin Shengtan in his examination of *Shuihu zhuan*, and used by other traditional Chinese critics to discuss other works. I will confine my discussion here to techniques included in this list of fifteen, as they cover the main points of interest, and as the fuller list of Jia and Xu contains a number of redundancies.

Jin Shengtan, without the advantage of the knowledge modern scholars have, actually recognized the use of motifs in *Shuihu zhuan* — though naturally he did not call them that. Two of the techniques he talks about are *zhengfan fa* 正犯法 and *lüefan fa* 略犯法 "full (or open) breach of the law" and "partial breach of the law". *Zhengfan fa* is the technique of writing about the same thing several times without being repetitive.[41] A celebrated example is the repetition of encounters with tigers in *Shuihu zhuan* — the scenes are

[40] *Zhongguo gudian xiaoshuo yishu xinshang* 中國古典小說藝術欣賞 (Hefei: Anhui renmin chuban she, 1982), pp. 16-17.

[41] See John Ching-yu Wang, *Chin Sheng-t'an* (New York: Twayne, 1972), p. 72. Ellen Widmer calls *zhengfan fa* the "repetition of whole themes". See *The Margins of Utopia: Shui-hu hou-chuan and the Literature of Ming Loyalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), p. 94.

basically the same, but told in such a way that the reader's interest does not flag. Examples from *Xiyou ji* include the pilgrims encountering a demon covetous of Sanzang's flesh; Monkey killing a demon's human incarnations; Monkey rescuing a kingdom or town from Taoist usurpers. Ximen Qing's numerous seductions in *Jin Ping Mei*, beginning with the famous meal with Pan Jinlian, could be described as "full breach of the law"; likewise, the many chapters in which Ximen Qing and his wives or friends hold a feast. "Partial breach of the law", *lüefan fa*, is similar, but with more variation.[42] There are numerous examples of this technique in all three novels.

Also comparable with the modern concept of motif is *caoshe huixian fa* 草蛇灰綫法 "the line of a grass snake". This is the technique of repeating a word or phrase throughout a passage, thereby emphasizing something or showing up relationships. Pan Jinlian addresses Wu Song as *shushu* 叔叔 (the polite term of address for one's husband's younger brother) thirty-nine times in Ch. 24, which emphasizes how wicked she is — in attempting to seduce her brother-in-law she is violating

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[42] See John Wang, p. 72; Widmer, p. 73; Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, p. 315.

a sacred relationship.[43] In the same chapter, the
repeated use of *lianzi* 簾子 (window blinds), *li* 籬
(fence), *guan* 關 (to close), and other such words,
highlights the fact that Pan Jinlian is transgressing
beyond the home. *Lianzi* and several other significant
words were noted and actually counted by Jin Shengtan.[44]
Obviously, the sensitive reader was expected to notice
these patterns of imagery. It seems that Jin Shengtan's
attention was focused on patterns within the narrative,
on what the writer was presenting for the reader only,
and that the story itself was not so important.

Five of Jin Shengtan's techniques are related to
detail or how fully something is presented. *Da luomo* 大
落墨 (sometimes *da luobi* 大落筆) means literally
"extensively putting brush to paper", and refers to the
technique of giving a rounded picture of something,
presenting an incident or scene in full.[45] For example,
in *Jin Ping Mei* the story of Li Ping'er's marriage to
Ximen Qing, from the initial illicit liaison, through
the presentation of Pan Jinlian's attitude, the death of

[43] Jin Shengtan also notes that after calling Wu Song
shushu thirty-nine times, Pan Jinlian, as she proceeds
to try to seduce Wu Song, suddenly addresses him using
ni 你 (you), which wins Jin's praise. See *Shuihu zhuan
huiping ben* 水滸傳會評本 , ed. Chen Xizhong 陳曦
鍾, Hou Zhongyi 侯忠義 , and Lu Yuchuan 魯玉川
(Beijing: Beijing Daxue chuban she, 1981), I, p. 441.

[44] See *Shuihu zhuan huiping ben*, Ch. 23.

[45] Andrew Plaks renders this as the "technique of total
depiction" (see *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*,
pp. 317-18); John Wang takes it to mean "writing with
sweeping strokes" (see John Wang, p. 70).

Hua Zixu, Ping'er's relations with Ximen Qing's wives, her unhappy marriage with Jiang Zhushan, Jiang's death, her entry into Ximen Qing's household, and her final acceptance by Ximen Qing. Likewise, the death of Ximen Qing is presented with a full account of what happens immediately before and of the horrible event itself. An example from *Xiyou ji* is the story of Monkey's rescue of a queen from a demon in Chs. 69-71.

Another technique is *ji busheng* 極不省 , which Plaks translates as "minimum narrative economy".[44] This is the technique of giving extra detail or including more incidents in relating something. It is almost the same as the *da luomo* technique, the difference being that *da luomo* means telling something in full, not omitting anything, whereas *ji busheng* implies adding extra detail to reinforce what the writer is saying.[47] An example is the detail in the scene in Ch. 69 of *Xiyou ji*, in which the pilgrims prepare the medicine for the sick king and collect urine from the horse. The use of this technique in *Xiyou ji* enables the writer to give full play to the humour in many situations. *Ji busheng* is the hall-mark of *Jin Ping Mei*; as noted above, in the density of detail the writer can explore the subtleties of status and power which are central to the novel.

[44] *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, p. 317.

[47] Widmer calls this technique "roundabout writing", the elaborate presentation of important events. (See *The Margins of Utopia*, pp. 94-95.)

Ji sheng, "maximum narrative economy", is the opposite of *ji busheng*.[48] It denotes the technique of recounting an event as concisely as possible or, as John Wang has suggested, of avoiding repetition without anything being lost from the narrative.[49] For example, in *Jin Ping Mei* Ch. 7: after the exhaustive account of the making of the marriage contract between Ximen Qing and Meng Yulou, Meng Yulou's entry into Ximen Qing's household is very brief (p. 208). New adventures in *Xiyou ji* often begin with narrative economy, too. For example, in Ch. 72:

話表三藏別了朱紫國王，整頓
鞍馬西進。行毂多少山原，歷盡
無窮水道，不覺的秋去冬殘，又
值春光明媚。師徒們正在路踏
青玩景，忽見一座庵林。

Xiyou ji, Ch. 72, p. 914.[50]

The Chinese critics' identification of these three techniques – *da luomo*, *ji busheng*, and *ji sheng* –

[48] Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, p. 317.

[49] John Wang, p. 72.

[50] The story goes that Sanzang took his leave of the King of Crimson Land, saddled the horse and headed west. They travelled through so many mountains and plains, and passed through endless waterways, and before they knew it autumn had passed and winter was nearly over, and it was a bright and lovely spring scene. As master and disciples were enjoying their walk through the spring scenery, they suddenly saw a monastery in a wood.

indicates that the material or story was regarded as dispensible, that the writer was in total control of the fictional world and could say whatever he wanted, regardless of the objective importance of something.

Nongyin fa 弄引法 , "the technique of lead-in elements", is used to prepare the reader for what is to follow by first narrating something that is related to, but not as important as, the main event or episode; for example, the ten stages of seduction which old Mrs Wang explains to Ximen Qing in Ch. 24 of *Shuihu zhuan*, followed by the process of the seduction itself.[51] The oppression of the Buddhist monks in Ch. 44 of *Xiyou ji* introduces the story of wicked Taoists controlling a king and his kingdom. This is a technique of narrative style, because it is to do with how much detail, and of what kind, rather than a structural device, related to the arrangement of material. Like the other techniques discussed above, *nongyin fa* serves the writer's concern for how the narrative will be read.

Complementing the *nongyin* technique is *tawei fa*, the "tail of an otter" technique.[52] Just as *nongyin fa* introduced the main event gradually, this is the technique of tapering off a scene rather than ending it abruptly. This, as Plaks notes, allows the reader to "keep the scene in focus after the main action" is

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[51] Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, p. 317.

[52] John Wang, p. 71.

over.[53] For example, in Ch. 3 of *Shuihu zhuan*, after Lu Da has killed the butcher and fled, we are given details of the investigation launched. This passage is not essential to the story (especially as the investigation is fruitless), but, while ordinary and unexciting, it keeps Lu Da's action firmly in the reader's mind. Another example is *Jin Ping Mei*; Ximen Qing's punishment and acceptance of Li Ping'er in Ch. 19 is really the end of that story, but instead of stopping at this high point, the writer winds down the story in the beginning of Ch. 20 by having Pan Jinlian, Meng Yulou and Pang Chunmei discuss what has happened.

These are just some of the techniques which interested the traditional Chinese critics - and, we can assume from that, the Ming writers and readers as well. Their importance in the present discussion is not so much as devices of storytelling, but as revealing an attitude or approach to writing.

V. Patterns

We noted in Ch. ii that the loose structure of the Ming novel lends itself to the creation of patterns in the work; plot, in fact, is not the most important aspect of structure. Basically, patterns serve the theme of the Ming novel. The arrangement of the work's various

[53] *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, p. 317.

elements into distinct patterns gives form to the ideas
of the work, or at least reinforces what the writer is
trying to say. We can identify a number of general ways
in which patterns serve theme, true of most Ming novels,
and also a number of specific ways in the novels under
consideration here.

The inexorable working of fate is a preoccupation
of most Ming fiction, and patterning in the Ming novel
serves this. The repetition of events, the similarity of
the fates of numerous individuals, building up into one
general fate or conclusion, makes human efforts seem
puny. For example, in the first half of *Shuihu zhuan* the
reader soon learns that no matter how brave or righteous
a hero may be, he will inevitably fall foul of the law
and become an outlaw, or be forced to join the outlaws
in some other, equally predictable way.[54] This will
happen, nothing can prevent it. Likewise in *Jin Ping
Mei*: no effort by an individual can avoid the
inevitable, be it seduction, or death, or both. In *Xiyou
ji* we know from the beginning that the pilgrimage will
be successful, and there can be no disputing that
Sanzang only achieves his goal in spite of himself. Even
Monkey's efforts cannot be said to be a positive
contribution, since the obstacles met along the way are
illusory, and the pilgrims are destined to succeed no

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[54] See Ling Zuoyi 凌左義 , "Lun zhong-jian douzheng
shi Shuihu miaoxie de zhuxian"論忠奸鬥爭是水滸
描寫的主綫 , in *Shuihu zhengming*, II. p. 233.

matter what.

The strong sense of an inexorable fate ties in of course with the role of the individual in the Ming novel - and indeed in traditional Chinese society. As we have already noted (see above, Ch. i, pp. 30-31), in traditional China the individual was not seen as being of importance in himself but was valued only for his role in society. Accordingly the function of character in the Ming novel is directly opposite to how it tends to be in the Western novel. In the latter, character is central, from character arises action, and a message or theme may be construed from the nature of character and action. In the Ming novel, however, the starting point is the theme - which generally includes the workings of fate. This is illustrated by the events of the plot and the other elements of the work, and characters are chosen which fit those circumstances. This fundamental literary principle expresses one of the major differences between the Ming and the Western novel, and is essential to an understanding of how the Ming novel works.

Another way in which patterning in the Ming novel serves the ideas contained in it is the shaping of the novel according to the interplay of opposites of various kinds. This has been discussed in considerable detail by Andrew Plaks. Actually, Plaks has distinguished two kinds of patterns reflecting "existential change". One, which he calls complementary bipolarity, corresponds with yinyang 陰陽 . The other, "multiple periodicity",

matches the *wu xing* 五 行 (the "five elements"), the 64

hexagrams, and other numerical systems.[55] Complementary

bipolarity is manifest in the patterns of waxing and

waning, joy and sorrow, movement and stillness, and so

forth.[56] Often it involves, like the *yinyang* emblem

itself, the interpenetration of paired qualities, such

as presence in absence or strength in weakness.[57]

It seems to me that this "complementary bipolarity"

pattern represents an underlying philosophical and

aesthetic principle rather than a pattern which is

consciously designed and developed. It is, however,

reflected in more intentional narrative patterns, such

as a cyclical presentation of history. This idea is

important in traditional Chinese novels, including

Shuihu zhuan, Jin Ping Mei, Sanguo zhi yanyi, and

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[55] See *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel,* pp. 204-06.

[56] Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel,* pp. 81-85.

[57] Referring to this, Plaks observes: "The interpenetration of action and repose (忙閒) or movement and stillness (動靜) may in large measure account for the mingling of events and non-events in the narrative mimesis of experience. One immediately recalls the 'static' chapters of the classic Chinese novels — the endless round of parties . . . , purposeless gatherings, and idle chit-chat — that present a critical problem in terms of the advancement of plot action, but that nevertheless comprise some of the high points of the tradition in the eyes of its readership". "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative", p. 336. See also Carlitz, *The Rhetoric of Chin P'ing Mei* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986) pp. 79-82. Widmer notes that one of the things Jin Shengtan was interested in was the balance of opposites — the real and the imaginary, major and minor, and so forth. (See *The Margins of Utopia,* p. 102.)

Honglou meng. The numerical patterns, on the other hand, while they are based on philosophical tenets, are more complex, and I believe are at least sometimes used consciously.

Turning to specific uses of patterns, one of the best examples is surely in *Xiyou ji.* The pattern of the eighty-one nan 難 (trials) of Sanzang is one of the main designs in the novel. This pattern, so obviously contrived, emphasizes the ideas presented in the novel concerning fate and the illusory nature of worldly existence. One of the novel's many jokes against it itself, occurring at the end (Ch. 99) involves this pattern; as the pilgrims near the Western Heaven, the trials are counted up and found to be two short, so two more adventures are summarily added.

A type of pattern which is particularly important to *Shuihu zhuan* is based on the distribution of characters. This sort of patterning enables the writer to get the maximum effect out of the novel's characterization, in a very subtle, understated way. For example, stories of "rough" heroes like Lu Zhishen, Li Kui, Wu Song and the Ruan brothers, are alternated with stories featuring the more gentlemanly or scholarly heroes, such as Shi Jin, Lin Chong, Wu Yong and Song Jiang. Sometimes two heroes, one of each type, features in the same story: the Song Jiang-Li Kui relationship is famous for this. It should also be noted that the many stories featuring the device of only allowing Li Kui to

leave the stronghold in the company of a more responsible hero contributes to this pattern. We have already noted that in *Jin Ping Mei* Ximen Qing's household symbolises the empire, his wives corresponding to both the six imperial ministries, and the *liufang* of Ximen Qing's yamen. Some of the songs in the novel stress the link between the Ximen household and the empire.[58]

Another way in which the writer manipulates the material he is presenting, but less clear-cut than the patterns discussed above, is through imagery: often the visual effect of a passage is striking. For example, in *Shuihu zhuan* Ch. 23 the colour red dominates. Also in *Shuihu zhuan*, particularly in the second half of the novel, colour is sometimes important in distant, overview scenes. A good example is Ch. 77, which describes the outlaw forces massing for battle, each division of troops with its own colour. Many of the heroes, too, have strong colour associations. This kind of presentation is reminiscent of Chinese drama, in which colour symbolism is very important. It is possible that the Ming novel was influenced by this aspect of drama: as we noted in Ch. i (p. 35), it seems that connoisseurs of fiction were often also lovers of drama, and it is therefore likely that writers of fiction and

[58] Carlitz, pp. 41-42. See also Cass, "Celebrations at the Gate of Death: Symbol and Structure in Chin P'ing Mei", Diss. Univ. of California 1979, pp. 9 ff.

of drama had similar aesthetic outlooks. I do not think that the colour symbolism in *Shuihu zhuan* corresponds with the colour symbolism of drama; rather, I am suggesting that the approach to the material was similar.

Visual patterns also feature in *Xiyou ji*, in much the same way as number patterns, five element patterns, and so forth do. One interesting visual pattern is the alternation of settings between town and mountain, with a variation such as a river, or heaven, included only occasionally.

We saw in Ch. ii that non-plot elements and patterns are more important than plot. Likewise, setting and characters are manipulated by the author/narrator in order to carry on a discourse with the reader. This discourse, and the levels of interpretation in the Ming novel, will be examined in Ch. v.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE WRITER-READER DISCOURSE

I.   Introduction

II.   Distance and the Narrator's Persona

III. Point of View

IV.   Narrator's Effect on Story

I. Introduction

The preceding three chapters have been concerned
with structure, language, and the creation of the
fictional world in the Ming novel. In this chapter I
will examine the narrator's persona and point of view.
The choice of form and style and the use of the various
techniques discussed all contribute to the strong
presence of the storyteller/narrator persona. They are
all evidence of a carefully, consciously crafted work,
and, as we have seen, often direct the reader's
attention away from the story and onto the storytelling
process — that is, the implied author disguised as a
storyteller.

II. Distance and the Narrator's Persona

My discussion of the narrator's persona and point
of view in the Ming novel is based on two premises,
familiar enough in Western literary criticism through
Booth and lately applied to Chinese literature. One,

that a number of types of person can be identified in the work of fiction. These types of person include the implied author, the narrator, the reader, and the characters. Two, that sometimes the point of view of one person is not the same as that of one or more of the others, resulting in distance or irony.

As we have seen above (Ch. i, pp. 41-42), the implied author is the sum of everything we can tell about the author in the work, rather than the historical person who lived in the world and wrote a book. Implied author is an abstract term, but it prevents us from allowing external things (such as biographical data) to colour our interpretation of the work, and helps us to concentrate on the work itself. Ellen Widmer points out that traditional Chinese critics of *Shuihu Zhuan* saw the novel as the work of a single implied author - although they conceded that more than one individual might have been responsible for the work's single authorial presence.[1]

The narrator of a work is the voice or persona used

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[1] *The Margins of Utopia: Shui-hu hou-chuan and the Literature of Ming Loyalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 80-81. Widmer further notes that this conviction of the traditional critics was used to explain inconsistencies in the work: Jin Shengtan frequently "resorts to author-reader discourse as the explanation of inconsistency" (Widmer, p. 90). Widmer argues that this can be reconciled to some extent with modern evolutionist theories of the Chinese novels. *Shuihu zhuan* may have developed over a long period, then been polished by an editor to bring out all of the parallels and other textual patterns and the deeper meaning and ironies. (Widmer, pp. 97-98).

by the implied author to tell the story. There are
various kinds of narrator. Often we cannot distinguish
between the implied author and the narrator; sometimes
the narrator is one of the characters, actually part of
the action of the story. The important distinction to
make with regard to our discussion of the Ming novel is
between the undramatized and the dramatized narrator.
The dramatized narrator has identifiable features, as
characters do, whereas the undramatized narrator is
impersonal and neutral in voice.

Having the convention of the dramatized narrator
was useful in several ways: it made the work instantly
recognizable as imitating the style of a particular
genre (that is, oral storytelling); and as we have seen
above (Ch. iii, p. 190), it enabled the writer to
summarize or recapitulate from time to time, in the
manner of oral storytellers, which was useful in
organizing the work and manipulating the reader's
response. In the same way, the "narrator" could supply
extra information when necessary, or predict the
outcome.[2]

There are a number of features in the Ming novel
which make the reader aware of the dramatized narrator.
They include: commentary on what is happening in the
story; the use of oral storytelling formulas; directly
addressing the listener/reader; the narrator's speaking

[2] Katherine Carlitz, *The Rhetoric of Chin P'ing Mei*
(Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986), p. 91.

style; and (indirectly) the use of verse and parallel prose. We have already seen how verse and parallel prose break the illusion of the fictional world, drawing our attention instead to the narrator. Let us now examine the other characteristics of the dramatized narrator in the Ming novel.

Commentary

One of the main indications of the narrator's presence is the narrator speaking directly to the reader, commenting on what is happening in the story. For example:

兩個公人那里忍得饑渴，只顧奪起來吃了。

Shuihu zhuan, Ch. 27, p. 337.[3]

Or from *Xiyou ji*:

分明是個妖精，那長老也不認得。

Xiyou ji, Ch. 27, p. 344.[4]

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[3] How could the two officials stand their hunger and thirst, they just wanted to take [the wine] and drink.

[4] Clearly he was a demon, but that monk didn't realize it.

There are three kinds of commentary on characters:

1. Information. Instead of allowing some aspect of a character's personality to be revealed gradually in the course of the narrative, the narrator tells us directly:

這婆惜是個酒色娼妓。

Shuihu zhuan, Ch. 20, p. 238.[5]

那媽媽兒賢慧。

Xiyou ji, Ch. 56, p. 727.[6]

2. Reinforcement. The narrator reinforces something about a character which the reader already knows, having been told or shown many times before. For example:

原來這唐僧是個慈憫的聖僧。

Xiyou ji, Ch. 27, pp. 346-47.[7]

3. Interpretation. The narrator steps in and gives his judgement on a character:

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[5] This Poxi was a drunken whore.

[6] That mother was virtuous and wise.

[7] You see this monk was a compassionate holy monk.

那婆子是乖的。

Shuihu zhuan, Ch. 21, p. 243.[8]

那長老信邪風。

Xiyou ji, Ch. 39, p. 497.[9]

Plaks notes that commentary is sometimes serious, and suggests that serious commentary, showing the relationship between the action of the story and the larger world, was possibly developed by the author of *Jin Ping Mei*.[10] (Interpretation by the narrator will be discussed further below.) Remarks addressed to the reader directly are usually commentary, too, but go even further in emphasizing the writer/narrator's omniscience and control of the story, and the relationship with the reader. This is very common in *Jin Ping Mei*, usually

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[8] That woman was perverse.

[9] That pilgrim was swayed by an evil wind.

[10] See *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel: Ssu ta ch'i-shu* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 122-23. Hanan suggests that passages of commentary (including poems) also serve to break up the story into sections. See *The Chinese Vernacular Story* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), p. 20.

preceded by *kanguan tingshuo* 看官聽說 .[11] For

example:

看官聽說。後來西門慶死了。家
中時敗勢 衰。吳月娘守寡。把小
玉配與玳 安..此係後事。表過又題。

Jin Ping Mei, Ch. 31, p. 797.[12]

Some remarks addressed to the reader do not form a

comment, but simply remind us of the narrator's

presence. For example, in *Xiyou ji*, when the narrator

[11] Some critics, for example He Shilong 何士龍 ,
interpret *kanguan* 看官 as meaning *guanzhong*
(audience) rather than "reader". See He Shilong, "Tantan
Shuihu de yuyan yishu" 談談水滸的語言藝術 in
Shuihu zhengming 水滸爭鳴 , ed. Hubei sheng shehui
kexue yuan, wenxue yanjiu suo 湖北省社會科學院,文
學研究所 and Hubei sheng Shuihu yanjiu hui 湖北省
水滸研究會, I (Yichang: Changjiang wenyi, 1982) p.
183. However, even if *kanguan* was the term for
addressing an audience this only reinforces the argument
that the novels were written to be read, since an
interpolation such as "audience, listen!" could not
possibly have remained in a written work, if it had ever
been written down in the first place, unless the writer
was consciously trying to achieve some effect. (See
above, Ch. iii, p. 131, and below p. 252). Plaks
believes that *kanguan tingshuo* is the most significant
oral storytelling formula in *Jin Ping Mei*, as it
dramatizes the narrator-audience game being played. (*The
Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, p. 122.) Plaks also
notes that in *Xiyou ji* the *kanguan tingshuo* convention
is not exploited - "probably because the voice of an
omniscient narrator would clash with the deliberate
opacity of the allegory". (*The Four Masterworks of the
Ming Novel*, p. 220.)

[12] Reader, attend to this. Afterwards, Ximen Qing died.
His house declined and weakened. Wu Yueniang maintained
her widowhood, and married Xiao Yu to Dai An. . . . But
this is all later. Having mentioned it, we won't go into
it.

says:

你道他作怒為何？

Xiyou ji, ch. 83, p. 1059.[13]

Dramatized Narrator Formulas

There are only a few different types of formula
used by the dramatized narrator, though these few are
used very frequently in the Ming novel. They are:
formulas for beginning a new chapter, formulas for
ending a chapter, and formulas used in the course of a
chapter.

In *Xiyou ji* most of the hundred chapters begin with
que shuo 却說 (the story goes). A variation, *hua shuo*
話說 (sometimes *hua biao* 話表) seems to be used
interchangeably. The other main alternative is for the
chapter to begin with a poem or piece of parallel prose,
which is possibly followed by *que shuo* or *hua shuo*.
Approximately one third of chapters begin with the
formula *que shuo*, one third with *hua shuo* or *hua biao*,
and one third with a poem or a passage of parallel
prose. In a few cases (four chapters) there is the
formula *qie bu yan* . . . *que shuo* 且又言 . . . .且

[13] Do you know why he was angry?

說 (we won't talk about . . . but about . . .) and in four chapters no formula at all is used to begin the chapter.

The standard formula for the closing of a chapter of *Xiyou ji* is *bijing bu zhi . . . qie ting xia hui fenjie* 畢竟又知 . . . 且聽下回分解 (if you don't know . . . then listen to the next chapter). However, the first half of this formula is varied in seventeen chapters. In approximately two thirds of the total number of chapters this formula is preceded by the formula *zheng shi* 正是 (thus, really), or variations on it, introducing an aphorism or enigmatic comment on the story. Thus we can see that while formulas are used to open and close chapters of *Xiyou ji*, there is still a lot of variety.[14]

There is much less variation in opening and closing formulas in *Shuihu zhuan* and *Jin Ping Mei*. In the 120-chapter version of *Shuihu zhuan*, all except five chapters begin with *hua shuo*. The closing formula in all chapters but one is *bijing . . . qie ting xiahui fenjie*. Often this is preceded by the formula *you fen jiao* 有分教 (it is explained), or *zheng shi*, or the two together. The use of formulas in *Jin Ping Mei* is even more rigid. Nearly all chapters begin with a poem

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[14] Plaks notes that *Xiyou ji* sticks closer to oral storytelling conventions than the other two novels do, and comments that this "probably says more about the artistic control of the author than the lack of it". (*The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, p. 220.)

followed by *hua shuo*, and all chapters end with *bijing*

weizhi houlai heru qie ting xiahui fenjie 畢竟未

知後來何必且聽下回分解 . In most

cases this is preceded by a poem.

It seems from this that although the oral

storytelling convention for opening and closing chapters

was strictly adhered to, and formulas were used, the

formulas used by an individual writer are indicative of

that writer's style.

We can also see that a certain amount of variation

is possible, while still fulfilling the demands of the

convention. When variation is possible (that is, allowed

by both the context and the writer's experience) yet the

formula is not varied, then it would seem to indicate

that the writer deliberately chose not to use variation

- that he chose to adhere rigidly to the formula.[15] In

other words, the Ming writers were consciously using

formulas which would immediately have called to the

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[15] See Nils Erik Enkvist's discussion of style and
context in "On Defining Style: An Essay in Applied
Linguistics", in *Linguistics and Style*, by N. E.
Enkvist, J. Spencer and M. Gregory (Oxford: Oxford Univ.
Press, 1965), pp. 28-32.

readers' minds an oral storytelling session.[16]

This is supported by *Jin Ping Mei* in which, as we
have seen, there is hardly any variation in the opening
and closing formulas. In many ways, this novel is more
sophisticated and subtle than the other two, and it is
unlikely that the writer would have slavishly used
opening and closing formulas, not daring to change a
word — it is more likely that he used them to achieve a
certain effect.

The oral storytelling formulas used within chapters
are drawn mostly from a small range of formulas. The
most common ones include: qie shuo 且說 , que shuo, bu
zai hua xia 不再話下 , zai shuo 再說 and zhi
shuo 只說 . Others include: kanguan tingshuo, hua xiu
xufan 話休絮煩 , hua fen liang tou 話分兩
頭 and you hua ji chang, wu hua ji duan 有話極長,
無話極短 . It seems that chapters with a higher
proportion of vernacular markers (see Ch. iii, pp. 138-
149) have more oral storytelling formulas, and that
chapters with a higher proportion of classical markers
contain fewer of these formulas. This is probably

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[16] Plaks describes oral storytelling formulas as
"playing a significant role in the narrative continuum"
(*The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, p. 122). Other
critics regard the use of these formulas as a flaw.
Bishop, for instance, comments that "with the
conservatism characteristic of Chinese literature, these
once functional literary devices have been retained as
unessential literary cliches", resulting in the illusion
of reality being destroyed. See "Some Limitations of
Chinese Fiction", in *Studies in Chinese Literature*, ed.
John L. Bishop (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press,
1965), p. 239.

because oral storytelling formulas could not easily be used in a passage of classical language, being as they are closer to the language of the streets.

The Narrator's Speaking Style

Apart from the use of oral storytelling formulas and commentary, the style of the narrated passages of the Ming novel often draws the reader's attention to the narrator, as it can be more idiosyncratic than ordinary, neutral narration, and at the same time distinct from the speaking styles of the characters. Just as the main character types, and some individuals, have their own recognizable voices, so too can we distinguish the narrator's speaking style. This voice of the dramatized narrator is not always apparent — often the language of the narrated passages is neutral, allowing the reader to pay more attention to the story and the characters.

We have already noted above (Ch. iii) the use of *na* 那 and *zhe* 這 in the Ming novel. These two characters are probably the most frequently used words in Ming narrative, and, belonging to the vernacular language, give the narrated passages an informal tone. More than that, they can be used (as in *Shuihu zhuan*) to suggest the narrator's disapproval. We have seen that the usage of *na* and *zhe* varies between novels, indicating that individual narrators have their own speaking style.

Another sign of the narrator's style is the use of

ni jian 你見 , *dan jian* 但見 , and the like,
usually in description of action. These tags are used
very frequently in all three novels. On the surface they
would appear to be remarks addressed to the reader, but
I think that their use is too perfunctory for that. It
has also been suggested that they introduce a change in
point of view from narrator to character.[17] However it
seems to me that the effect achieved is not a switch in
point of view from one character to another, or from
narrator to character, but from a character to the
narrator. *Ni kan, dan jian* and other such tags remind
the reader of the process of narration, and thereby
bring the reader closer to the narrator, placing the
characters at a distance.

The narrator's speaking style is often very
colourful, due to the use of interjections. This is
especially so in *Xiyou ji*.[18]

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[17] Chun-jo Liu, "Syllabicity and the Sentence: An
Inquiry into the Narrative Style of the *Hung-lou meng*",
in *Critical Essays on Chinese Fiction*, ed. Winston L. Y.
Yang and Curtis P. Adkins (Hong Kong: The Chinese Univ.
Press, 1980), p. 184.

[18] Plaks suggests that the *bagu* 八股 form (see above,
Ch. i, p. 13) possibly influenced the Ming novel in that
this form called for the implied speaker's voice to be
modulated, which led to more personal kinds of
expression emerging (*The Four Masterworks of the Ming
Novel*, p. 34).

III. Point of View

Point of view was not conceptualized until the nineteenth century, which may account for a tendency among critics to associate it with realism – the more consistent the point of view, the more realistic the novel, therefore the better the work. But is inconsistency of point of view really a fault? Does unified point of view achieve more in a work than inconsistent point of view?

If we take the nineteenth-century European novel as the standard, then we would have to say that point of view must always be consistent. But once we look outside the European realist tradition, we see that consistency of point of view is not essential to good literature, and that sometimes the effectiveness of a work depends on the point of view *not* being consistent.[19] In the Ming novel frequent changing of point of view is not a weakness, but an important factor in the telling of the story and in the discourse between implied author and reader.

As suggested above in Ch. iv, in *Shuihu zhuan*, *Xiyou ji* and *Jin Ping Mei* the writers' main purpose was surely not to create an illusion of reality. Therefore, we should not worry about point of view being consistent, and instead look at the positive

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[19] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 14.

achievements of the special use of point of view in the Ming novel.

In the Ming novel point of view changes smoothly and as often as the writer wishes. The more characters in a chapter or episode, the more potential there is for change in point of view. However, it does not necessarily follow that change in point of view is in direct relation to the number of characters. Take, for instance, Ch. 20 of *Shuihu zhuan*. It can be divided into two parts: the first part is about a meeting of the heroes and a battle, and the second part is about the domestic life of one of the heroes. The first part has a lot more characters than the second, and is longer, but the number of changes of point of view in each part is roughly the same. Likewise, in *Xiyou ji*, some chapters have only the four main characters and a demon or two, some have a cast of thousands – main characters, demons, spirits, Buddhist deities, monks, kings, citizens, and so forth, yet the number of changes of point of view does not vary greatly between chapters.

It is generally thought that a non-realist style has an alienating effect, and it was for this that Brecht admired traditional Chinese drama. This alienating effect is present in the Ming novel. The reader sees the action of the story through many different eyes, and therefore sees what is happening from different perspectives. He is not allowed to identify closely with any of the characters. The

reader's knowledge of the world of the novel or story is greater than what the characters know - he is sharing in the omniscience of the implied author. In other words, inconsistent point of view creates a distance between reader and characters, but narrows the distance between reader and implied author.

Point of view is often linked with the degree of omniscience the narrator has. Or, to put it the other way round, the degree of omniscience depends on point of view. We can see that basically there are five possible levels of omniscience in a work of fiction:

1. omniscience

2. complete knowledge of all characters (including their thoughts, etc.)

3. complete knowledge of most characters (usually the main ones) or complete knowledge of a select few characters

4. complete knowledge of one character

5. limited knowledge of characters, equivalent to what the reader would know himself if he actually met the characters - no privileged insight into their background, thoughts, etc.

The Ming novel belongs to the first category - that is, the narrator is omniscient. Through the narrator we see into the minds of characters. Usually we get just a glimpse, rather than the detailed revelation which stream of consciousness-type narrative supplies, but this is nevertheless enough to let us know how different

characters think. For example, in Ch. 21 of *Shuihu zhuan*, when Old Woman Yan forces Yan Poxi and Song Jiang into having supper together, we know what all three are thinking:

婆惜一頭聽了，一面肚裡尋思：
"我只心在張三身上，兀誰奈煩
相伴這厮！若不把他灌得醉了，
他必來纏我"婆惜只得勉意拏
起酒來，吃了半盞。婆子笑道："我
兒只是焦燥，且開懷吃兩盞兒，
睡押司也滿飲幾盃。"宋江被他
勸不過，連飲了三五盃。婆子也
連連吃了幾盞。再下樓去溫酒。
那婆子見女兒不吃酒，心中又
悦。繞見女兒回心兜得他住，那人惱恨
"若是今夜和他纏幾時，卻再
都忘了。且又和他一頭尋思，一面自在
商量"婆子吃了三大鍾酒，覺道有些
寵前上來。卻又篩了一碗吃。旋
痒麻上來。傾在注子裡，爬上樓
了大半旋，傾低著頭不做聲，女
來。見那宋江低著頭不做聲，女
兒也別轉著臉弄裙子。這婆子
哈哈地笑道："你兩個又不是泥
塑的做甚麼都不做聲？押司，
你又合是個男子漢，只得裝
些溫柔說些風話兒要"宋江
正沒做道理處，口裡只又做

聲，肚裡好生進退不得。閻婆惜自想道：
"你又來采我，指望老娘一似閒常時來
陪你話，相伴你耍笑，我如今卻不要！"

Shuihu zhuan, Ch. 21, p. 245.[20]

In this short scene we gain an insight into the

protagonists' minds and learn what they think of each

other and the situation they are in. Because of this,

the chapter develops into an exciting episode, ending

with the murder of Poxi and Song Jiang's capture. This

story is full of tension, yet the reader knows all along

what is going to happen. We generally see suspense

[20] As Poxi was listening she was thinking to herself,
"I can only think of Zhang San, how could I possibly
stand keeping this fellow company! If I don't fill him
with wine he's going to come and make demands of me!"
Poxi could only take up the wine and drink half a cup.
The old woman laughing said, "You're impatient, my
child; take your time and and have a drink and go to bed
— you have a drink too, sir." Song Jiang was talked into
it, and drank down three or five cups. The old woman
also drank several cups one after the other, then went
downstairs to heat some more wine. When that old woman
had seen her daughter not drinking, she was not pleased,
but seeing her change her mind and drink some wine, she
said delightedly, "If I can get him to stay tonight his
resentment will be forgotten; I must just keep him here
for a while and we can discuss it later." As she
reflected, the old woman freely drank three big cups of
wine in front of the stove. She began to feel a bit
numb, but poured another bowl and drank, tipped out
another heater-full, and went upstairs. She saw Song
Jiang with lowered head, completely silent; her
daughter, too, was playing with her skirt with her face
turned away. The old woman laughing said, "You two
aren't clay statues, what are you doing, not saying a
thing? Sir, are you not a real man, you need only act
gentle and say a few sweet nothings and teasing words."
Was it through lack of argument that Song Jiang had
nothing to say? Inside, he was wondering whether to go
on or go back. Yan Poxi thought to herself, "Don't you
pay attention to me, counting on me to while away the
time with you. Accompany you, playing and laughing? I
certainly will not!"

stories as relying on the reader's ignorance of
something in order to succeed. In Chinese suspense
stories the opposite is often the case.[21] The reader is
told everything, and this knowledge makes him fully
aware of all the implications of a speech or action,
heightening the drama, and the dramatic irony - often
the characters ignore the wisdom or warnings apparent to
the reader.[22]

Changing point of view, as illustrated in this
extract, also enables the reader to understand the
characters. On the one hand we sympathize with Song
Jiang - that is inevitable, as he is the main male
character, a hero, and shown in a good light, whereas
Old Woman Yan and her daughter are portrayed as coarse
and sullen respectively. On the other hand, although we
cannot approve of the two women, we can understand them,
and why they act as they do. In fact, if we were to look
at the characters objectively, we would see that Song
Jiang is not totally blameless. But we are not allowed
by the narrator to reach a fair judgement. In the
subsequent unfolding of the story Song Jiang is
favoured, so in spite of our understanding of Yan Poxi
and her mother, we sympathize with Song Jiang and
condemn the two women. Seeing the story from the point

[21] Widmer notes that Jin Shengtan was particularly
interested in this phenomenon of the reader sometimes
knowing what was happening, and sometimes being
surprised.

[22] See Carlitz, p. 87.

of view of all the participants emphasizes the control of the narrator when we are "told" how to judge the characters. (This will be discussed further below.)

In comic fiction changing point of view heightens not suspense but dramatic irony. Let us look again at an example cited earlier, Ch. 40 of *Xiyou ji*, (in which a demon disguises itself as a little boy). The reader knows all along that the child is really a demon. We also know that Monkey knows. Sanzang, however, does not, although he should by now have learnt to listen to Monkey, and we know that the demon's intention is to eat Sanzang. Therefore, when Sanzang insists on helping the child it is quite amusing, and the irony is intensified when Sanzang invites the child to ride on the horse with him. The demon says he is not used to horses. Sanzang suggests that Bajie carry him, but the child says he is frightened, and also frightened of Sha Seng. So Monkey must carry the demon. This (the reader knows) is what the demon has been angling for all along — by this time the demon knows who Monkey is, and each is aware of the other's power, which makes the ensuing battle of strength and wits more interesting.

We have already noted that how often point of view changes in an episode does not depend on how many characters there are. What is important is the amount of psychological insight as opposed to physical action. Generally, the more action there is in an episode, the fewer changes in point of view. If we compare narrative

with film, in the traditional Chinese novel action scenes (battles and so forth) are presented through a panoramic camera: the whole scene is spread before us and we view from a distance. However, scenes involving personal relationships, motivation — the inner world — require a close focus. In action scenes we are given an overview, in parts concentrating on people (as in the passage quoted above) the pace is slowed down, and everything described in more detail. It is these scenes that provide scope for changes in point of view. Moreover, these relatively intimate scenes colour our view of the action scenes — that is, we look at the action in the light of what we know about the people involved. It is true that sometimes there are long descriptions of battles, fights, court scenes and so forth, but these are generally very stylized set pieces, and therefore cannot really be compared with the detailed examination of people's thoughts and feelings made elsewhere.

In *Shuihu zhuan* there are chapters dominated by fighting, domestic chapters and journey chapters, to name a few types. In *Xiyou ji* all the chapters are more or less the same in structure, content and style. Because of this there is less variation in point of view and the degree of omniscience than in *Shuihu zhuan*. In *Jin Ping Mei*, too, the chapters are more uniform as regards content, being mostly domestic, or at least concerning people and their relationships. But with more

main characters than *Xiyou ji*, and with more "inner"
action and less overview and external action, there is a
lot of scope for variation of distance, and point of
view does change frequently.[23]

Omniscience lies in seeing into the minds of the
characters. When a reader knows what a character is
thinking or feeling, then he can see the events of the
story and the other characters from that character's
point of view. In the Ming novel, the reader knows the
thoughts of many characters, and therefore sees the
story from many points of view. Omniscience also lies in
knowing what is going to happen, in having a full
knowledge of the plot (see my discussion of
predictability, Ch. ii, pp. 107-11). But in the Ming
novel this omniscience shared by the narrator and the
reader goes even further. Through the descriptive
passages we learn more about the world of the story than
even the heroes know. We see into the characters' minds,
and see the world through their eyes, but also see the
whole scene, which they have only a partial knowledge

[23] Robert Keith McMahon makes note of the greater
interest, in the late Ming novel, in the inner world and
the subtleties of life, shown by the revelation of the
vulgar or obscene side of life; the greater use of
imagery or of detail; and the presence of irony and
satire. This involved exploring the feminine, or the
feminine side of men - it is no coincidence that *Jin
Ping Mei* is set in the women's quarters. Likewise, in
Shuihu zhuan, the *haohan* ideal is undermined by the more
feminine, *fengliu* type such as Yan Qing. ("The Gap in
the Wall: Containment and Abandon in Seventeenth-Century
Chinese Fiction", Diss. Princeton Univ. 1984, pp. 89-
96).

of. This is particularly so in descriptions (usually in verse or parallel prose) of scenery although it is also true, to some extent, in descriptions of people and demons, and in descriptions of the weather. Descriptions of scenery are usually introduced by a character (generally the main character in an episode), with a set phrase such as:

那大聖跳在空中, 仔細觀看, 果然
是座山門。但見:

Xiyou ji, Ch. 36, p. 459.[24]

There are two things to notice about the description which follows such set phrases. The first is, it includes details which the character could not possibly have seen, or if he had, would not have paid any attention to. For example, the description of the mountain at the beginning of Ch. 40 of *Xiyou ji*. It is true that in other kinds of fiction – the European realist novel, for example – we are given a general description of a whole scene. But what makes the Chinese descriptions different is that they appear at any place in the narrative, they are not used merely to frame the story before the writer focuses on some detail, as in Western fiction.

Booth, as we have seen, distinguishes between

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[24] That great sage jumped into mid air, carefully looked around, and it was a monastery. Just look . . .

dramatized and undramatized narrators. In "rigorously impersonal" works there is no distinction between the implied author and the narrator; the narrator, too, is only "implied", or undramatized. We have a dramatized narrator when the story is told through someone's consciousness - "I", "he", and so forth.[25] Verse, stylized description, and so forth in the Ming novel interrupt the flow of objective, straightforward narrative, making the reader aware of the storyteller. The narrator, who had been undramatized, behind the scenes, now steps forward as another person involved in the story. Generally in fiction, the more dramatized a narrator is, the lower the degree of omniscience. But in the Ming novel this is not the case. The total omniscience with which the story is sometimes told is only possible because the narrator appears as a storyteller, with all the characters and events in their proper context as products of his imagination, under his control. So we can see that in the Ming novel there are variations of point of view not only from character to character, but also between the undramatized and dramatized narrator.

Although the Ming writers probably had a great interest in and affection for oral storytelling, drama, and other popular forms, it is most unlikely that they themselves were oral storytellers. As we have seen above

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[25] Booth, pp. 151-53.

(Ch. i, pp. 37-39), this is indicated by both external evidence - what we know about oral storytelling, for instance - and by the style of the works themselves. Basically, as we have seen (Ch. iii), they are written, literary creations, artificially incorporating some features of oral storytelling.

It is becoming more and more accepted by scholars that the Ming novels were written by members of the educated elite, and with readers like themselves in mind. Yet the narrator addresses the reader as though addressing an audience. Because of this, we can distinguish between an implied or ideal reader (that is, the writer's fellow-literati) and an imaginary listener, to whom the works are ostensibly addressed. As Carlitz points out, all the allusions, quotations and so forth present in the Ming novel would have been significant to the readers, who, as literati, were often connoisseurs of drama and song, and were also accustomed to looking for deeper levels of meaning in what they read. This wealth of significant detail and references thus constitutes "a kind of private language" between writer and reader.[24] Apparently, some literati were so interested in drama and song that they knew whole *zaju*

[24] Carlitz, pp. 95-96.

by heart.[27]

We have mentioned literary distance as a discrepancy between the points of view of any of the types of person in a work. Wayne Booth explains this idea concisely:

> In any reading experience there is an implied
> dialogue among author, narrator, the other
> characters, and the reader. Each of the four
> can range, in relation to each of the others,
> from identification to complete opposition, on
> any axis of value, moral, intellectual,
> aesthetic, and even physical.[28]

In the Ming novel we have not one, but two, parallel author-reader relationships: implied author-ideal reader, and narrator-imaginary listener. Within each of these two relationships there is similarity of point of view, but between them there is a large discrepancy. It is stronger perhaps than the ordinary difference in point of view between two single types of person (reader-character, for example), for here we are really dealing with the relationship between four types of person. Author and reader are bonded, reinforcing

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[27] Carlitz, pp. 95-97. She also makes the interesting point that some of the plays referred to in *Jin Ping Mei* were no longer popularly circulated — evidence that the author of this novel was a connoisseur, and that he was addressing other connoiseurs, who would know what he was referring to. As an indication of how dense the Ming novels were with literary allusion, there is, as we have already noted, reference to a great number of plays and songs. (Carlitz, p. 127, pp. 147-150.)

[28] Booth, p. 155.

each other, as are narrator and listener, but these two relationships are separate, and a strong tension exists between them. This author-reader/narrator-listener relationship is central to the Ming novel, and the tension it creates accounts for much of the novel's irony.

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author_____narrator
      ¦                                    ¦
      ¦        different point of view     ¦
      ¦                                    ¦
      ¦                                    ¦
      ∨                                    ∨
reader_____listener
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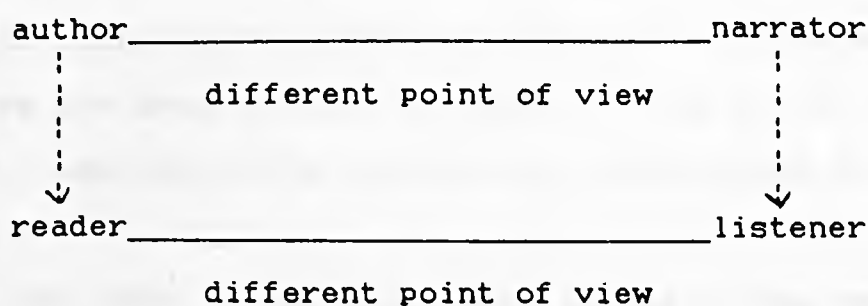
          different point of view

Fig. 1.

We noted above that generally, in novels, we can identify four types of person: implied author, narrator, characters and reader. We have also just seen how important another type of audience — the imaginary listener — is in the Ming novel. In the Ming novel there are not four types of person but five, because there is an imaginary listener as well as the implied or ideal reader.

Moreover, the Ming novel also differs from most other types of novel in that the most important fictional relationship is narrator-imaginary listener, rather than character-character, character-reader, or implied author-character. Point of view in the Ming novel switches frequently between characters, making it

difficult for the reader to identify with a character.
We may sympathize with characters, and be interested in
what happens to them, but the constant switching of
point of view, and the strong presence of the narrator,
distances us from the characters, thereby reinforcing
the narrator's persona. This is true even of strongly
appealing characters such as Monkey in *Xiyou ji* and some
of the *Shuihu* heroes. However sympathetic a character
is, we are never allowed to identify with him or her too
much — the narrator's presence is too strongly felt for
that.[29]

The irony in the Ming novel is due to the two
parallel reading relationships: author-reader and
narrator-listener. This irony can be seen in three
discrepencies: between the oral story and the written
work; between ordinary people and literati; and between
the novels' criticism of book-learning and their
intended audience.

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[29] Widmer sees this as developing in the Qing dynasty —
that is, after Jin Shengtan. Referring to works like
Honglou meng and *Rulin waishi*, she speaks of the
"growing personalization of fiction", with the author
manipulating the narrative in the background. "The net
result is to reduce both narrator and characters to a
far more subordinate staus than they had once enjoyed.
Authors who came after Chin could thus operate in two
voices, the author-commentator's and the narrator's,
with the author-commentator axis assuming the stronger
role." (*The Margins of Utopia*, p. 106.) I agree with her
remarks, but believe that this development had emerged
by the late Ming, and certainly applies to *Shuihu zhuan*,
Xijou ji and *Jin Ping Mei*.

1. Oral Story — Written Work

This is an obvious source of irony. In the Ming novel great pains are taken to create the impression of an oral storytelling session, yet the reader never doubts for a moment that he is reading rather than listening. It is a kind of game: the reader knows that the work is by a writer rather than a narrator, and naturally he knows that he is a reader not a listener, and he knows that the writer knows this, and the writer knows that he is really addressing a reader not a listening audience.[30] Both writer and reader suspend disbelief, acting as narrator and listener respectively, yet at the same time responding to the work in their own persons.[31]

This dual response means that throughout the Ming novel different levels of meaning can be perceived. For example, when Lu Da (Lu Zhishen) kills the butcher in Ch. 3 of *Shuihu zhuan*: On the simplest level we can

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[30] Hanan describes the oral storytelling performance context as "a metaphor for the real communication that is being practised . . . a pretence in which both sides, writer and reader, acquiesce in order to provide the context necessary for successful communication". *The Chinese Short Story: Studies in Dating, Authorship and Composition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), p. 21.

[31] Carlitz makes the same point: "The conventional narrator's commentary is thus distinct from the implicit authorial commentary. . . . The commentary of the implied author is to be found in the puns, allusions, and juxtapositions that seem to put us in touch with a structuring intelligence behind the book." (*The Rhetoric of Chin P'ing Mei*, p. 94.)

respond as listeners to the narrator's account, taking everything at face value, revelling in the violence and unbridled venting of anger, and following the story closely as it unfolds. As less naive readers we can respond in a different way to the narrator's words, appreciating the imagery of the fight scenes, for instance. Carlitz notes that it was a convention of the *huaben* to have poems and anecdotes at the beginning, which the reader was expected to work out the significance of — thus going a step further than the narrator.[32]

Deeper still, we can, as readers, enjoy the author's imitation of oral storytelling, joining the writer in a literary game. Widmer, too, sees the author-reader relationship in this light, with author and reader "respectively imposing and detecting devices, with the critic as middle man". A reader could quickly grasp the plot, but would need to examine the work very carefully in order to read everything the writer was trying to say.[33]

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[32] *The Rhetoric of Chin P'ing Mei*, p. 91. See pp. 91-93 for her discussion of how the author of *Jin Ping Mei* manipulates conventional rhetoric and description to make his own point. Sex, for instance, is often described in the "language of epic battle".

[33] Widmer, p. 99. Plaks notes that the distance between the author-reader and narrator-listener relationships is indicated in the use of puns on characters' names; plant and flower imagery (which has a deeper meaning and other "extended metaphors"; and the use of literary source materials which are not suited to the context (*The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp. 124-31). See also pp. 221-24, 303; Carlitz, Ch. iv.

Underlying all this, the sensitive reader will
respond to the sensitive writer's "message", the hidden
commentary on human society. The novels all have an
obvious, surface moral message (for example, cruel and
evil people are punished in the end), which is part of
the work's realism; and a deeper moral message as well,
which is non-realist — the behaviour of characters in a
family, for instance, may be mirrored on a larger scale
in the fate of society as a whole, or the empire.[34] This
level of meaning is not part of the narrator's story;
only the sensitive reader can look beyond what is
happening on the surface to discern the patterns being
built up by the implied author.[35]

All three novels, but particularly *Xiyou ji* and *Jin
Ping Mei*, invite an allegorical reading. We cannot hope
for a complete understanding of the allegory — probably
not even contemporary readers had that — but it does
seem likely that the various structural patterns, the
imagery, and so forth, signify something beyond the

[34]See Carlitz, p. 88.

[35] Booth lists the main areas of interest to the reader
as: intellectual (finding out "the facts"); aesthetic
(looking for patterns or forms being worked out); and
"practical" (interest in what happens to the
characters). (Booth, p. 125.) Hanan, discussing
narrative in general, also saw it in terms of levels of
interpretation: first, the "serial", the text as a
"string of meanings . . . without major configurations";
second, "configurative", the level of plot and character
development, and where issues are raised; and third,
"interpretive", the level at which the reader looks at
the whole work in general, and possibly also looks for
symbolism, allegory, and so forth. (*The Chinese
Vernacular Story*, p. 19.)

story. The traditional Chinese critics certainly had
this attitude.[36]

2. Ordinary People - Literati

This source of irony is of course related to the
first. The Ming novel is ostensibly addressing ordinary
people on the streets, yet is plainly written for the
educated elite.[37] The reader can see the story through
the eyes of a listener to an oral storytelling
performance, while at the same time appreciating the
work as a reader, and being conscious of the artificial
narrator-listener relationship developed. The more
tricks the author uses to suggest a narrator (and hence

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[36] See Widmer, p. 90. A detailed examination of
allegory is beyond the scope of this study; see Plaks,
The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel, pp. 133-36, 226-
43; Carlitz, Chs. ii, iv; Victoria Cass, "Celebrations
at the Gate of Death: Symbol and Structure in Chin P'ing
Mei", Diss. Univ. of California 1979; Su Xing 蘇興 ,
"Xiyou ji dui Ming Shizong de yinyu pipan he chaofeng"
西遊記對明世宗的隱喻批判和朝諷 , in *Xiyou
ji yanjiu* 西遊記研究, ed. Jiangsu sheng shehui
kexue yuan, wenxue yanjiu suo 江蘇省社會科學院文學
研究所 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji, 1984), pp. 33-53.

[37] The subject matter of the novels, too, is the
bourgeoisie, and the low-ranking officials, ordinary
householders, soldiers, criminals, and the like, rather
than the rarefied world of the scholar/gentry class (see
Cass, pp.3-4). This, of course, gave the writers much
more freedom in presenting their philosophical or
political ideas.

a listener), the more aware the reader is of the *effect* of an oral storytelling performance (rather than the reality) and, being conscious of the attempt to create this effect, of his own distance from the listener.

3. Critical of Learning – Written and Read by Literati

One of the many games the author of the Ming novel indulges in is making fun of the educated elite. Scholars are often portrayed as pompous, untrustworthy, stupid and weak. Sanzang in *Xiyou ji*, for example, is the laughing stock of the whole novel. Wu Yong, the scholar-hero in *Shuihu zhuan*, is a hero, but lacks the pure heroic nature of the *haohan*. His speech has a stronger literary flavour, which is often incongruous, and he is portrayed as cunning rather than brave. The various scholars in *Jin Ping Mei* – doctors, for example, and Ximen Qing's secretary Wen Bigu – are portrayed very harshly indeed. But the ideal reader of the Ming novel is a member of the very class being laughed at or criticized.

There is a further twist to this ironic relationship. Underlying the criticism of scholars there is tacit approval. The more gentlemanly heroes in *Shuihu zhuan* (such as Lin Chong, Song Jiang, Wu Yong) are actually more approved of, it seems, by the implied author, whilst in the portrayal of the rougher heroes (Lu Zhishen, Li Kui, and so on) there is more than a

hint of patronization. The speech of the rough heroes,
for instance, is distinguished from the more standard
voice so that we can laugh at it, and the characters
themselves are larger than life, and their behaviour
more excessive, compared with the gentleman-heroes. For
example, in *Shuihu zhuan* Ch. 74, in which Li Kui takes
over a yamen, dressing up as an official and meting out
his own style of justice. The people laugh at him, and
we, the readers, join in. (After that, on hearing the
sound of students, he enters a school and gentle fun is
poked at the teacher: 吓得那先生跳窗走
了 .³⁸) Likewise, in *Xiyou ji*, while we laugh at the
pedantic, fussy Sanzang, his opposite, Bajie, the
creature of physical appetites and earthy humour, is not
the most sympathetic character. The character the reader
identifies with most is Monkey, who has many of the
attributes of the ideal scholar - wisdom, wit, learning
(he has a much better understanding of the classics than
Sanzang), curiosity and moral courage.³⁹ In one scene,
Monkey actually teases Sanzang by calling him illiterate
(*Xiyou ji*, Ch. 68, p. 863).

Structure contributes to the irony in the Ming
novel. On the surface, the structure of the Ming novel

³⁸ He gave that teacher such a fright that he jumped
through the window and fled. (*Shuihu zhuan*, Ch. 74, p.
917.)

³⁹ See McMahon's discussion of the "deflation of the
haohan", pp. 90-96.

is very simple — storytelling sessions loosely linked together. But, as we have seen in Ch. ii, it is actually quite complex. At every structural level, from the novel down to the scene, there are patterns and parallels. It would not have been possible for an oral storyteller to handle them, and they are evidence of the Ming novel's composition by a writer rather than an oral performer. And the structural complexity of the Ming novel makes us self-conscious readers, as careful reading is required to discern the structural patterns and parallels. This, of course, is one of the preoccupations of critics such as Jin Shengtan.[40]

Likewise, the language of the Ming novel allows irony. The immediate response is to appreciate the lively style and strong rhythms, as a listener would. But the admixture of so much classical, formal language calls for the response of a reader rather than a listener. Moreover, the careful contrast of various language registers — the playing off of formal against informal — and such subtleties as sentence rhythm, can only be appreciated by a reader, and brings the implied author-reader relationship to the fore.

[40] See also Carlitz, p. 91.

IV. Narrator's Effect on Story

As sensitive readers we are aware of the intricate design and careful crafting of the Ming novel. The implied author also controls how close we feel to the characters and action. This control is achieved by means of the narrator, the storyteller persona.

We have seen in our examination of description and characterization in Ch. iv that in the Ming novel we are almost completely dependent on the narrator to create the fictional world and to interpret the story for us. For example, a ferocious man in *Shuihu zhuan* may turn out to be a hero or a bully. There is not much subtlety – a character in *Shuihu zhuan* must be either one or the other, but we need the narrator to tell us. There is no objective description for us to rely on.[41] Although heroes are heroes and bullies are bullies, we need the narrator to tell us that, as their behaviour is often identical. Li Kui, for instance, is a hero, but his behaviour is worse than that of many characters labelled bully or villain. In *Xiyou ji* this kind of narratorial control is used to comment ironically on characters, particularly Sanzang. The narrator tells us how virtuous and worthy he is, but it is plain (mostly through the

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[41] Plaks says that narrative rhetoric "serves to drive a wedge between the first and the final impression we form of characters, between the apparent and the underlying meaning of the events", reminding the reader of the narrator's presence (*The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, p. 123).

pointed contrast with Monkey) that this is not the view of the implied author, and not the one we are expected to have.[42] Plaks, discussing the ambiguity of *Shuihu zhuan* heroes has observed how "figural recurrence" (the repetition of a type character or motif) enables ironic undermining of characters: slight differences in the presentation of a type can make it appear in a different light.[43]

The narrator also controls the setting. As we observed in the last chapter, we only see what we are allowed to see: description is supplied only as it becomes necessary. In addition, whether a place is good or bad is another of the ways in which the narrator manipulates the reader. Taverns, for example, may be good (the meeting place of heroes), or bad (a place where heroes are trapped or conspiracies planned). In Ch. 27 of *Shuihu zhuan* the tavern first seems like a place to rest in, then a place of murder, then a place for heroes. Monasteries in *Xiyou ji* often "change" like

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[42] Booth suggests that an author emphasizes or plays down events not according to their objective importance, but according to how he, the author wants the story to develop (Booth, pp. 13-14).

[43] He gives as examples the different ways in which Wu Song and Li Kui kill tigers, which reflects badly on the heroism of Li Kui (*The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, pp. 320-31).

this.[44]

In *Xiyou ji* a kind of double trick is common:
demons often first seem harmless, then dangerous, then
finally it is revealed that they are agents of Guanyin.
This sort of gradual revealing of the nature of
something is true of characterization in *Jin Ping Mei*,
as we have seen above in Ch. iv. In *Jin Ping Mei* there
is more detail given about characters, and it is clearer
from their behaviour whether they are good or bad.
However, narratorial control is just as tight as in
Shuihu zhuan: characters who seem bad in the beginning
(for example Li Ping'er, Song Huilian) are revealed to
be good after all, and vice versa.

[44] Booth says that apprehending the "theme" or
"meaning" of a work is equivalent to knowing "where the
author *wants* him [the reader] to stand", and that
everything about a work, including style, tone and
technique, is part of "our sense of the implied author"
(Booth, pp. 73-74).

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Herbert Giles was dismayed to find that the "marvellous" book *Jin Ping Mei* is full of double meanings, and found it "objectionable" by the standards he applied (namely those of his contemporary readers). Chinese readers, too, have always been keenly aware of the novel's darker side. Giles' observation that there is more to *Jin Ping Mei* than at first there seems to be is true, and not only of the sexual innuendos. Moreover, the same applies to *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji*.

Reading between the lines of the simple story, the almost naive style, we find a complex structure, a subtle use of language, and a pliable fictional world dominated by the author/narrator. In this paper I have looked at some of the main features of structure, style, description, and characterization. I have restricted my discussion to three works, but I am confident that much of what I have discovered about *Shuihu zhuan*, *Xiyou ji* and *Jin Ping Mei* applies to other novels, and, to some extent, to the short story as well.

The form of the Ming novel, and many of its other features, is derived from oral storytelling. Other genres, such as historiography and drama, also influenced it.

There are many ways of approaching a study of the Ming novel; all have something to offer. In recent years there has been a movement away from studies of

authorship, origins, and other "external" questions. Simultaneously there has been a move towards the analysis of the novels as literature. There is nothing new in this approach. We have effectively gone full circle, rediscovering the methods of the first critics of the Ming novels.

Traditional Chinese critics were interested in the general design of the novel, in the arrangement of scenes and episodes, in details of characterization and in special narrative techniques. They delighted in picking these out. But perhaps the most important contribution they made was their recognition of the role of the reader in the creative process. Critics like Jin Shengtan saw the novel as a contrived, consciously crafted work, written to achieve a particular response from the reader.

In all three novels I have examined in this paper we can see evidence of an accomplished author writing for a sensitive reader. This is borne out especially by the fact that the three novels are so different. Each novel has its own strengths. *Shuihu zhuan* presents a colourful tapestry of human life with an air of both innocence and energy, but it also carries on an author-reader discourse on serious issues. *Xiyou ji* is marvellously comic and imaginative and has an exuberant command of language, as well as being satirical and allegorical.

Jin Ping Mei at first seems to be a completely

different type of novel from *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji*. It contains more realism, and has more individuation and development of characters. Its structure, too, is more natural. Structural divisions fit in with the story – they are not imposed on the material as they are in the other two novels.

Yet *Jin Ping Mei*, for all its refinement, is most definitely of the same genre as *Shuihu zhuan* and *Xiyou ji*. All three novels are dominated by a strong narratorial presence and are built upon oral storytelling conventions, traditional motifs, and formulaic writing. All three, including *Jin Ping Mei*, are basically non-realist, although there are passages of realist narration.

Jin Ping Mei is generally regarded as the forerunner of the Qing dynasty masterpiece *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 , a bridge between the Ming novel and the mature flowering of traditional Chinese fiction. This conventional view needs further investigation. But it seems to me that as unique as *Honglou meng* is, it does not represent a totally different stage in the evolution of the Chinese novel. Many of the qualities *Honglou meng* is praised for are present in the earlier works (albeit in a more rudimentary form), and *Honglou meng* retains many of the conventions which feature in the Ming novel.

Honglou meng was obviously influenced by *Jin Ping Mei* – particularly in its interest in domestic subject matter and the inner lives of the characters – but this

is just further exploration of something present in all of the novels. I would argue that *Honglou meng* and *Jin Ping Mei* are not realist and should not be regarded as being any more like "proper" novels than *Shuihu zhuan* or *Xiyou ji*.

In the development of Chinese fiction the qualitative leap was not between the Ming novel and *Honglou meng*, but between the writing down of oral storytelling and its transformation by literati writers. These people wove complex patterns and ideas into the simple form, and communicated with their intended readership — other members of the literati — in a subtle and sophisticated manner. That, perhaps, is the most important thing to bear in mind.

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