

PREFACE

The studies collected in this volume are actually a result of my research on traditional Chinese vernacular fiction during the 18th and 19th century. In the course of my readings on the latter period I was increasingly impressed by the fact that works of this period showed common characteristics quite different from those of the short story in the first half of the 17th century. These stories, in turn, proved to differ greatly from those that were printed around the middle of the 16th century. Awareness of the diversity and development of traditional vernacular fiction in China gave rise to an increasing discontent with those critical writings, which compare Chinese traditional fiction as a whole to modern Western fiction and explain the characteristics of vernacular fiction in China by its assumed origins in professional storytelling. As a result, my interest was drawn to the study of the earliest examples of vernacular fiction in China and of their relation to later fiction.

This reconsideration of the current hypotheses led me to question a number of well-established views on these issues. However, I am very far from being able to offer clear-cut solutions for all the problems I raise; I have tried to formulate a number of alternative suggestions, which I offer with caution.

In view of the way in which I came to the study of this subject, it is understandable that these studies do not attempt to cover all possible aspects of the texts concerned, the main focus of interest always being the question of the extent to which the origin of the genre can be held responsible for the literary form assumed while it flourished. Occasionally, but especially in "Some Conclusions and Perspectives" one will find my views on the overall development of Chinese fiction summarily expressed: its diversity, its creativity, its originality, points to which I hope to return on another occasion.

Of the many people who taught and helped me, I would first of all like to mention D. R. Jonker, who so unexpectedly passed away in January of last year. It was he who introduced me to the study of Chinese literature and to the study of vernacular fiction in particular. Through his painstaking attention to the texts and his careful scrutiny of different interpretations in the many discussions we had, he not only stimulated me in my research, but also endeavoured to restrain my inclination to rashness and haste.

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