

Book Review

Bandits in Print: “The Water Margin” and the Transformations of the Chinese Novel

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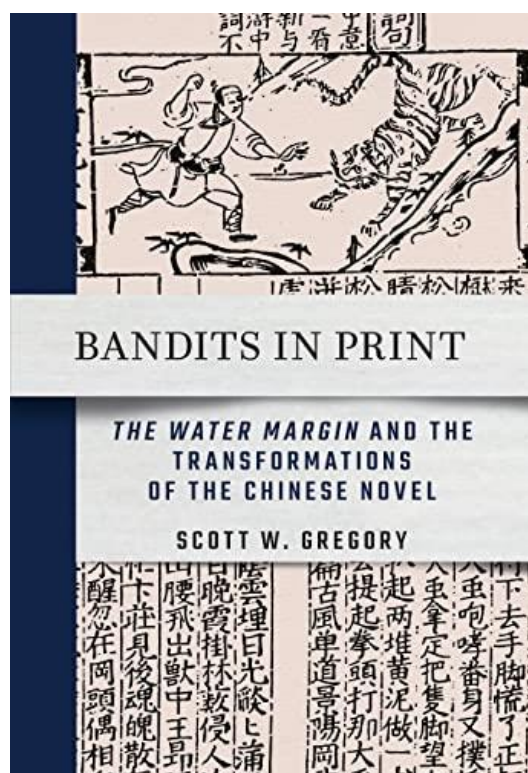
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Bandits in Print: “The Water Margin” and the Transformations of the Chinese Novel

by Scott W. Gregory

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In some East Asian literary and historical studies, although thematic analysis may be revealing, focus often returns to the text itself.

This appears to be the conclusion of an erudite, perceptive new book about *Water Margin*, one of the earliest Chinese novels written in Mandarin, which has also been translated into English as *Outlaws of the Marsh* and *All Men Are Brothers*.

The story is set almost one thousand years ago, when a group of 108 outlaws gathered at Mount Liang to rebel against a corrupt government. Later they were granted amnesty and enlisted by the government to resist the nomadic conquest of the Liao dynasty and other rebels. These idealized malefactors correspond to Western legends of heroic outlaws such as Robin Hood (Hobsbawm, 2000).

The novel is traditionally attributed to Shi Nai'an, who died in the 1300s, but its first known edition was in the 1500s. This delay inspired an ongoing academic debate over when *Water Margin* was written and which historical events the author must have seen to be able to write the book.

This is meaningful because *Water Margin* is considered one of the leading early Chinese literary works, influencing writers across East Asia, especially in Japan. Beyond the domain of literature, *Water Margin* has also impacted film, art, theatre, and even political life with statements about honor, societal and economic networks, and secret societies.

The firm beliefs among the outlaw characters about such virtues as camaraderie, honor, fidelity, and patriotism still strike a chord in China today. The rebels see their qualities and abilities as overlooked by society at large, and find refuge in solid friendships and mutual esteem with others in similar situations.

The characters in *Water Margin* make a stand against local injustice and cruel local authorities through revenge, plotting, and violence. Some cultural historians have traced the legacy of *Water Margin* in the fiction of the Hong Kong writer Jin Yong and kung fu films starring Bruce Lee and others.

This omnipresent impact makes certain aspects of *Water Margin* controversial among some readers, such as the enthused, unabashed descriptions of cannibalism as an appropriate form of vengeance against adversaries (Wang, 2019).

Notably, an English translation sponsored by the People's Republic of China (PRC) and published by the Beijing Foreign Language Press in 1981 deleted over 90% of descriptions of cannibalism in *Water Margin*, doubtless finding them unappetizing for contemporary English language readers.

Nevertheless, recent translations of *Water Margin* typically retain humor and racy language, although some critics starting in the Ming dynasty have scorned its obscenity. English language readers were at a disadvantage for some years when the most widely available English language version was the heavily bowdlerized *All Men Are Brothers* (1933) freely adapted by the American novelist Pearl Buck.

Long castigated for its infidelity to the original, Buck's translation has been rediscovered more recently by Chinese linguists more open-minded about its intentions and willing to place them in historical context to find virtues in Pearl Buck's efforts. (Hu & Shi, 2015).

Literary scholars have also disagreed on whether *Water Margin* is misogynistic, since some beautiful female characters in the novel are described as cruelly scheming against the protagonists.

Associate Professor Scott Gregory, who teaches East Asian Studies at the University of Arizona, the United States of America, sets aside these concerns to return to the book's publication history.

Associate Professor Gregory evaluates how *Water Margin*, which he notes is more like a chain of interconnected stories than what today is commonly considered a novel, was transformed in different editions.

Intended for different readerships, *Water Margin* was reshaped by editor-publishers. Since no formal literary copyright system existed, these editor-publishers also rewrote the text when they wished. Instead of being faithful to the original author or authors, who remain unknown, the publishers instead catered to their customers.

Paradoxically, concentration on the publication history of *Water Margin* preceded explication of the book's themes, according to a study by Richard G. Irwin (1960). Writing in 1960, Professor Irwin noted that research on *Water Margin* had for decades been mostly limited to the "relationship between its various editions," but this approach was hampered before widespread digitization of literary texts.

When few examples of different editions were easily available, textual analysis could only go so far. Whereas now, even considering the strong echoes of oral literature and storytelling in the book, *Water Margin* may be said to amount to a series of print appearances and how its publishers were trying to market it.

The present new study is divided into two principal parts, with the first section examining early editions of *The Water Margin* intended for an elite court readership. Chapter 1 analyzes an edition printed by Guo Xun, Marquis of Wuding, a high-ranking noble military minister who loved literature. Chapter 2 deals with an edition printed by the Ming Censorate, the dynasty's highest oversight body.

Although no examples of these two editions has survived, they are discussed to recreate the historical context and societal milieu for which they were designed. Based on historical records; bibliographies, informal jottings, and handwritten notebooks (*biji*), the author rebuilds a lost literary context.

Chapter 3 addresses an early reader of *Water Margin*, Li Kaixian, a Chinese writer, playwright and literary critic of the Ming dynasty from Shandong. Associate Professor Gregory argues that the extensive social world surrounding Li Kaixian helped facilitate editions in his time, when *The Water Margin* had highly personal significance to individual authors.

Simultaneously, it also gained widespread popularity among the general public, as exploited by Ming dynasty commercial printers such as Xiong Damu, who compiled a number of relatively popular historical saga novels. Some researchers have suggested that Xiong was

a barely literate bookstore owner who copied and pasted stories from different volumes in all of the novels he issued.

The second section of *Bandits in Print* traces how *The Water Margin* evolved in the commercial publishing industry of the late Ming Dynasty, as succeeding editions responded to questions or problems posed by previous printings. Chapter 4 further adumbrates how *The Water Margin* was adapted by commercial editor-publishers to suit the taste of their clientele. Introductions, commentaries, and other texts were added, sometimes with political implications about absurdities of Chinese hierarchic society and positive values displayed by robbers.

Some of these commentaries were so vivid as to seem like voices of supplementary characters belatedly added to the book. Chapter 5 studies the edition of Jin Shengtan, an editor, writer and critic who has been called the champion of vernacular Chinese literature. Making drastic alterations to the text, Jin deleted a large portion of the story, apparently for the sake of concision and literary effect.

He also added extensive observations, both lauding and condemning outlaws. These additions have usually been analyzed stylistically, but here they are perceived as replies to statements by previous editors of *The Water Margin*. A conclusion places the novel in a traditional genre as essentially a print phenomenon.

Insofar as the major theme of *Water Margin* is the expression of rage and rebellion against tyrannical rulers, as long as oppressive governments exist in China and neighboring Asian countries, the book will retain its relevance.

Yet specialists continue to disagree about the political philosophy of *Water Margin*, with some pointing out that the rebels accepted amnesty and promptly enlisted in government service, which would seem to contradict their identity as ferocious radicals. Whether or not the rebels behave as genuine rural laborers might during uprisings, their status as idealistic Daoist dreamers has never been in doubt (Wu, 1996).

A leitmotif for all commentaries on the book is the sheer vivacity of its narrative voices. As Paul Jakov Smith observed in 2006, "so lively and precise are the characters and situations portrayed" in *Water Margin* "that it is tempting to see it as a window onto an actual social world" (Smith, 2006). So historians and political scientists will doubtless continue to scrutinize the book, looking for clues about real-life Chinese societal conflicts and their eventual resolution.

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