Competing Discourses: The Metamorphosis of Song Jiang’s Image in China

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This article provides a genealogical examination of the shifting image of Song Jiang 宋江 (fl. 12th century) as presented in various discourses of officially recorded history, folk literature, and literati creation during four successive dynasties in China from the 12th century to the 17th century. Specifically, the article probes three issues: (1) the shifting roles of Song Jiang designated by different social and political groups as representative of themselves in their own narratives, respectively presented as the agent of the state, the agent of the masses, and the agent of literati; (2) the creation of Song Jiang’s image as a meeting ground on which people project their own fantasies, ideological practices, and interpretations of history; and (3) the multiplicity of Song Jiang’s characterization in Outlaws of the Marsh (Shuihu zhuan 水浒傳) as a result of having been written and rewritten in diverse discourses. Taking the metamorphosis of the image of Song Jiang as an example, the article aims at explicating a dynamic process, that is, in representing history, people attempt to seek a higher level of coherence and synthesis, yet it is precisely in such an attempt that the fictionality of history has constantly been made.

As a result of the imperial court’s confiscatory taxation and heavy levies, the closing years of the Northern Song Dynasty 北宋 (960-1127) witnessed popular uprisings that precipitated the breakdown of the empire. The main rebel force of the time was the Fang La 方臘 (?-1121) rebellion that engulfed fifty-two counties and six administrative prefectures along the lower Yangtze River, one of the empire’s most highly commercialized and productive regions. The quelling of the rebellion was accomplished with the massive deployment of imperial troops. Coinciding with the Fang La rebellion were smaller scale uprisings elsewhere in the empire. One of these was the uprising of Song Jiang 宋江 (fl. 12th century) in the present-day province of Shandong. No mention of any direct confrontation between official troops and the Song Jiang rebellion occurred in documentary records and dynastic history of the Song, nor the final fate of the historical Song Jiang. Since the events of the two uprisings they have received opposite treatments in official accounts and popular folklore. While the Fang La uprising is
prominent in the official record, tales describing Song Jiang’s insurgency pervaded the folklore of the Song. Through the ages, the image of Song Jiang has evolved from bandit, magistrate, to literati. This article traces the metamorphosis of Song Jiang’s image as a result of having been written and rewritten in the discourses of official, intellectual, and mass productions. This metamorphosis, inversely, makes the shifting image of Song Jiang into a mirror that reflects how a history and a historical figure have been fictionalized and recycled in coincidence with both the conflict and reconciliation of different ideologies.

Records on Song Jiang’s uprising in officially recorded history are both scant and inconsistent. The Song shi 宋史 (Song History) biographies of Hou Meng 侯蒙 (1054-1121) and Zhang Shuye 張叔夜 (1065-1127) give identical and yet brief sketches of this uprising: “Song Jiang swept across the Qi and Wei (present-day Shandong and Henan provinces) with thirty-six people and yet an official army of tens of thousands did not dare to confront them” 江以三十六人横行齊魏，官軍數萬無敢抗者 (Tuo-tuo 1977, 16:1114). Besides the standard dynastic history of the Song, some anecdotal accounts by Song scholars and officials also provide sources pertaining to Song Jiang’s uprising. Zhang Shou 張守 (1084-1145), a supervising censor during the Huizong 徽宗 reign, noted that Song Jiang “rallied some desperate fugitives to sack the counties and prefectures in Shandong” 噬聚亡命，剽掠山東一路 (1935, 189). Official histories and unofficial chronicles provide three versions as to the denouement of Song Jiang’s insurgency: the rebellion was crushed out and “all of the participants were killed” 悉誅之 (Hong 1981, 232); Song Jiang surrendered to the government, but his eventual fate is unknown after the surrender (Tuo-tuo 1977, 16:1114); Song Jiang and his followers surrendered and redeemed themselves by participating in the government’s quelling of Fang La’s insurgency (Li 1980, 452). The veracity of all these versions remains questionable. The place of Liang-shan-bo 梁山泊, the alleged epicenter of the uprising and a legendary place in popular culture, has never been mentioned. Compared to the much greater and elaborate records of Fang La, the scarcity and inconsistencies in the records of Song Jiang enable us to conclude that

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1 The term ideology I use here refers primarily to, first, a systematic body of ideas articulated by a particular group of people, and second, the cultural and textual practices of presenting either reality or history.

2 Song Jiang’s surrender cannot be dated precisely based on the existing historical records. Current historians usually treat the two uprisings as separate historical incidents. See Twitchett 2009, 622-643.
the Song Jiang uprising was not widespread. The significance of this uprising was largely a later invention of popular cultural discourse.

On the basis of “brush notes” (biji 筆記) or miscellaneous records written by Song scholars, legends of Song Jiang were already growing popular by the middle of the twelfth century when the Song court moved south. As seen in the anecdotes made by Zhou Mi 周密 (1232-1298), a well-known Song poet, “the accomplishments of Song Jiang were circulated in street talk and gossip without much credibility” 宋江事見於街談巷語，不足采信 (1988, 145). Even though this account expressed qualms about the legends’ “credibility,” it nevertheless continued to acknowledge that “such an able man like [the accomplished painter] Li Song still drew illustrations of Song Jiang and his followers, and literati offered no criticism” 雖有高如李嵩輩傳寫，士大夫亦不見黜 (Zhou 1988, 145). Judging from Zhou’s account, intellectuals of the Southern Song period did not partake in the creation of the legends relating to Song Jiang, but became aware of them when the legends spread in the vernacular.

The Song literati’s doubt about the “credibility” of the folk legends brings us to the issue of what distinguishes oral narrative tradition and official historiography in their treatments of the Song Jiang’s uprising. The Song folk tales have advanced the representation of the Song Jiang insurgency in two important aspects. First, folk tales, contrasting the official history, focus exclusively on the pre-uprising adventures. In other words, the uprising itself is not the focal point of folk tales. Second, folk tales pinpoint personal exploits, which are completely untouched in official records. Song Jiang is the only figure whose name appears in both official and folkloric narratives and, as such, registers as the only juncture where the two discourses meet.

Most of the early folk tales reflecting the Song Jiang uprising are preserved in Xuanhe yishi 宣和遺事 (Events of the Xuanhe Reign and After), a presumably fictionalized account of the downfall of the Northern Song in chronicle form. In this book, Song Jiang, known by his nickname hubaoyi 呼保義 (Guardian of Valor), is a magistrate’s clerk with a reputation for being extremely filial and generous in helping those in need. At that time, Liang-shan-bo is occupied by Chao Gai 晁蓋 and some bandits as a place to escape the persecution of corrupt and unjust officials. Actions compelling Song Jiang to turn to Liang-shan-bo

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1Richard Irwin points out that the Song Jiang rebellion must have developed over a period of time, but we have no means of determining when the nucleus was formed (1966, 19).
are imbued with his intention to live up to his moral codes: one is to help Chao Gai find refuge in keeping with the code of brotherhood, and the other is to kill his concubine as a revenge for adultery. The accounts of the Liangshan heroes in Xuanhe yishi, however sketchy, provided the basis for two thematic aspects that have persistent importance in the later narratives of the Liangshan heroes. First, it emphasizes the passive nature of the heroes’ pursuits. As passive victims of circumstances, they are compelled to embark on a journey to quest for justice. This emphasis has eventually evolved into the unifying theme of “having been forced to turn to Liang-shan-bo” (bishang Liangshan 逼上梁山 Ci Hai bianji weiyuanhui, 1059) that characterizes virtually all separate careers of the Liangshan heroes. Second, characters in Xuanhe yishi are labeled under a dichotomized view of the villain (unjust officials, immoral individuals, etc.) and the victim, which blurs the line between law enforcers and law offenders. Many social and cultural themes have contributed to shape plot formulations and character dynamics in the stories of Liangshan, but none as persistent as the theme of traversing across the interlaced layers of legal justice and moral justice.

Tales of Song Jiang and other Liangshan heroes continued to flourish in dramatic performances, zaju 雜劇 (plays), during the Yuan dynasty 元朝 (1260-1368). This was a form of vernacular literature that brought the initial participation of wenren 文人 (men of letters) into the creation of tales about the Song Jiang uprising. It was in those dramas that the portrayal of Liang-shan-bo was rendered for the first time. Once a refuge in the previous folk tales, it is now shown as the place of “a thousand rivers and an area of eight hundred miles” 縱橫河闊一千條, 四下方圓八百里 with “a hundred warships” 百隻戰艦 and a “million army provisions” 百萬軍糧 (Fu 1985, 80). While embodying anti-authoritarian ideals, Liang-shan-bo, or the stage setting in dramatic performances, appears as a kind of “state.” On the contrary, the depictions of the historical state, which stood in opposition to Song Jiang’s uprising in history, are completely absent. The conflict between the state and Liang-shan-bo tends to dissolve when Liang-shan-bo itself is depicted as a form of the state.

Holding aloft the banner of “carrying out the will of Heaven” (ti tian xing dao 替天行道), Song Jiang and other Liangshan heroes, accordingly, are portrayed as graphic illustrations of justice enforcers, identical to the role that upright magistrates play in ancient Chinese

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4 The Yuan was a period during which men of letters and the common people were brought together as never before in China’s cultural history (Irwin 1965, 33). Yet, its market-oriented nature led it to entertain the mass’s tastes (Zheng 1988, 5:448).
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Court-case stories. Major characteristics of the plays, as epitomized in the genre’s representative works like *Hei Xuanfeng shuang xian-gong* 黑旋風雙獻功 (*Black Whirlwind’s DoubleFeat*) and *Huang-hua yu* 黃花峪 (*Yellow-flower Valley*), are as follows: local despots and iniquitous officials remain as the most negative figures or the most threatening forces in the everyday life of ordinary people. People under government oppression rely on Liang-shan-bo as a final resource for justice with Song Jiang dispatching Liangshan heroes to overcome evil. The plot of every play ends with the same scene: Song Jiang sits on a high chair in the Hall of Fidelity and Justice (*Zhongyi tang* 忠義堂), enumerates the villains’ extortion from common people, and celebrates the good deeds of the Liangshan heroes.

The Yuan *zaju*, pivotal in the evolutionary process of the narratives about Song Jiang and other Liangshan heroes, bring forward some new departures. As the heritage of the preceding oral literature, it advances the process from the factual to the fictional. A typical play of the Yuan *zaju* usually opens with a character’s brief self-introducing monologue in which he exposes his identity and background. The episodes recited by Song Jiang on stage in the opening verse normally bear a great deal of resemblance to the fictionalized accounts of the heroes in *Xuanhe yishi*. Recounting previous stories in the prefatory portion prefigured the thematic attention to the remainder of the play and, at the same time, prompted the dramatist to create more stories as the audience assembled in the theatre and the main act of the play began. Most of the Liangshan stories in the Yuan *zaju*, resembling Song folktales, take place in society rather than in Liang-shan-bo. The characters in the two genres, nevertheless, move in opposite directions. In Song folktales, Song Jiang and his followers have retreated from society to escape injustice in Liang-shan-bo, whereas in the Yuan *zaju* they have returned to society from Liang-shan-bo to establish justice.

Those dual movements constitute a more comprehensive structure that contains two morallyistically polarized worlds: the corrupted society and Liang-shan-bo. This polarization embodies a deeply rooted understanding in ancient China, that is, the political apparatus must serve to uphold a higher moral principle (Weber 1951, 31). This belief furnishes a further conceptual basis for the later production of the literati novel, *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (*Water Margin*, also translated as *Outlaws of Marsh, Tales of Marshes*, or *All Men Are Brothers*), which formulates a new view of the relationship between the state and the individual in its rewriting of Song Jiang and other Liangshan heroes. In the Yuan *zaju*, actions of the Liangshan heroes still take the form of individual stories. This lack of unity in the narrative raises the issue of
whether the heroes coalesce in order to move toward a collective goal. Ways of addressing this issue, as I will discuss, have largely charted the orientation in the textual evolution of *Shuihu zhuan*.

Several editions of *Shuihu zhuan* emerged during two centuries from the late Yuan to the early Ming Dynasties (1368-1644). Judgments about the authorship of *Shuihu zhuan* have been divided. Among numerous assumptions, there are four prevailing theories: (1) some scholars adopt the theory of fourteenth-century authorship and believe that the novel was written by the dramatist Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中 during the Yuan; (2) some bibliographical evidence attributes the authorship to the novelist Luo Guanzhong of the same name during the Ming, (3) the novel was said by some to be authored by Shi Naian 施耐庵; (4) the authorship is credited to the joint work of Shi Naian and Luo Guanzhong. In spite of authorship uncertainty, literary historians are now generally agreed: First, the novel is not the creation of a single author. The composition of the novel involves gradual textual evolution over centuries based largely on folkloric legends and dramas. Second, the novel came into circulation at the latest during the 16th century between the Hongzhi 弘治 reign (1488-1505) and the Wanli 萬曆 period (1573-1619). Third, the novel reflects the cultural and intellectual concerns of the literati milieu.

Overshadowed by the popularity of the novel, no longer would the oral tradition contribute to the evolutional process of the Liangshan stories once the novel was in place. Song Jiang’s image was reshaped in terms of both a revised ethical basis and ramified personal traits in the novelistic production. Some major facets of this figure’s characterization can be traced with reference to *Xuanhe yishi*. One example is the episode

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5Chen Songbai 陈松柏 provides a fairly comprehensive account with regards to various assessments on the authorship of *Shuihu zhuan* (2006, 240-279). Andrew Plaks gives a lucid analysis of where the confusion and complication may lie in determining the authorship of *Shuihu zhuan* (1987, 279-303).

5Andrew Plaks acknowledges that not only would it be problematic if the novel is regarded as specific reflections of the Ming literati milieu while we are uncertain about the period of the novel production but also that the issues of editions and authorship will not substantially affect the study of the novel as “an independent literary phenomenon of great significance” (1987, 280).

5For the vicissitudes of the Yuan zaju during the Ming, see Irwin 1965, 61. In the Ming Dynasty, a huge number of folkloric tales and dramas about the Liangshan heroes were still being produced and circulated. The dramas preceding the novel appeared to have their own original structures, enthralling plots, and artistic conceptions. After the novel came out, the dramatists’ imaginations were prescribed by the novel, and no longer pursued fresh meanings in their works. This reveals a more general fate of popular literature in which mass imagination provides literati’s creations with sources, but literati’s creation in turn restrains the mass’s imaginations.
involving the release of Chao Gai, which constitutes the same plot component of the initial appearance of Song Jiang in both works. *Xuanhe yishi* provides a brief sketch of the episode: “Song Jiang, the clerk of the county magistrate's court, took the order and upon reading it, ran to the Stone Tablet Village to warn Chao Gai of his danger on that starlit night. Chao Gai and his partners fled under darkness” (Li 1967, 39-40). The description of the same episode in the novel, by contrast, exhibits more details that vivify the figure of Song Jiang by employing three points of view—those of the narrator, Song Jiang, and other characters. The image of Song Jiang is first communicated through a direct statement in a more detached third-person narrative. The reader is told of Song Jiang’s merits such as filiality to his parents (*yu jia da xiao* 養家大孝), holding fast to honor and generosity in aiding needy people (*zhangyi shucai* 仗義疏財), having an excellent command of indictments (*daobi jingtong* 刀筆精通), familiarity with administrative procedures (*lidao chunshu* 吏道純熟), and mastering many forms of martial arts (*wuyi duoban* 武藝多般) (Shi 1972, 198-201). Then, the narrative focus shifts to Song Jiang’s psychological activities through the first-person monologue, revealing brotherhood as his motive for releasing Chao Gai. Finally, corresponding to the narrator’s general introduction, the novel reiterates Song Jiang’s far-flung fame for dispensing favors to people through a dialogue between Chao Gai and other Liangshan heroes. Similar descriptions are scattered throughout the novel and project the figure of Song Jiang as the only one among all the heroes to acquire such composite merits.

Furthermore, in *Shuihu zhuan* the figure of Song Jiang is transformed as an exemplar of the literati, obviously intellectualized as a man who claims that “in youth I studied hard classics and history; as I aged, I grew up shrewd and intelligent” (Shi 1972, 454). Among all Liangshan heroes, Song Jiang is the only one who demonstrates proficiency in literary composition. *Junzi* (君子), a term used in Confucian texts, is variously construed as “the righteous man” or “the scholar” (Legge 1971, 150; Legge 1971, 170). Throughout the centuries, the image of Song Jiang, once a bandit in official histories, has been gradually transformed into a *junzi*. By ascribing the nature of *junzi* to Song Jiang, *Shuihu zhuan* distinguishes Song Jiang from other characters. In the preceding folk narratives of the Liangshan heroes, no special moral or ideological weight was given to a particular hero. Among the twenty-three Liangshan plays in the Yuan *zaju*, for example, Song Jiang and Li Kui 李逵 play the title role in four and twelve dramas, respectively. Measured against the plays of the Yuan *zaju*, the
characterizations of other major heroes in Shuihuzhan largely remain unchanged, but Song Jiang’s image is almost re-created. The figure of Song Jiang possesses, more or less, a void or a lack of moral quality that could be overcome by rallying with Song Jiang. To fill this void, a fundamental tie among the characters, on the one hand, and a structural uniformity of the novel, on the other, is established. This is a task that the preceding creation of folk tales and dramas never accomplished.

This void also registers a more general issue concerning the connection between junzi and xia (chivalric knights) in China’s cultural tradition. Chivalric knights and Confucian scholars may rise from the same social origin of the noble class in the Spring and Autumn period (403-221, B.C.).

“The terms ‘knight’ and ‘gentleman’,” according to Yang Lien-sheng, “pointed to one and the same noble” (Yang 1968:308). Those who dedicated themselves to ritual and education became scholars, and those who dedicated themselves to warfare became chivalric knights (Yu 1998:5). Chivalric knights and Confucian scholars appeared to be polar opposites in relationship to the state; yet, to qualify as a chivalric knight, a person must live up to a set of ethical standards and demonstrate a certain moral consensus with Confucian scholars. This cultural congeniality between Confucian scholars and chivalric knights provides a historical reference through which the composite image of Song Jiang as an intellectualized bandit, and the added term “loyal and chivalrous” (zhongyi 忠義) in the title of the novel, Zhongyi shuihu zhan 忠義水滸傳 (The Tale of the Loyal and Righteous in the Water Margin), can be understood.

In keeping with ethically schematized lines, Song Jiang has evolved into a central figure around which the tales of other Liangshan heroes revolve. Liangshan heroes’ separate careers have been eventually aligned with the process leading up to the point of attaching themselves to Song Jiang.

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8For the origin of chivalric knights as a social group, see Liu 1967, 1-4. According to James Liu, the Chinese term xia is etymologically cognate with the other verb xia, “to force” or “to coerce.”

9For the issue of how chivalric knights came into being as a matter of social necessity in a turbulent situation, see Chen 1992, 3-11.

10As David Roston points out, the chapters describing the figure of Song Jiang in Shuihu zhan appear in widely separated bunches to bracket the stories of other Liangshan heroes (1990, 196).
Liangshan heroes, especially the most memorable ones that take place on the way before joining Liang-shan-bo, echoed the adventures of “wandering knights” (youxia 漫遊) in earlier Chinese historical writings and stories. Yet, as noted by literary historians, in both historical and fictional writings of China, few “wandering knights” wandered throughout their lifetimes; most attached themselves in the end to an authoritative power such as a noble, powerful clan, imperial magistrate, or the state. It is often the case that a chivalric knight undertakes self-appointed pursuits that ideally call for sacrificing his selfhood in the service of those authoritative powers, and Liangshan heroes are no exception.

As previously mentioned, individual adventures of the Liangshan heroes are justified in the works of the Yuan zaju by their punishments of evil despots or unjust officials. By the time all the heroes have gathered at Liang-shan-bo to “join in the same great cause” (gongxing dayi 共興大義), the collective will of the band, or the “same great cause,” needs to be redefined. The apogee of the Liangshan power comes into view in the novel as a result of having interwoven three parallel lines intrinsic to its overall structure: the heroes’ quests are accomplished on an increasing scale from separate adventures (with some basis in the oral tradition) to group activities, Song Jiang’s life has undergone a fluctuating course from a fugitive (with some basis in the oral tradition) to the Liangshan leader, and the heroes’ motivations behind their various exploits (protection of the family’s name, execution of evil ministers, punishment for the sin of adultery, etc. each with some basis in the oral tradition) have been dictated by Song Jiang’s code of the ultimate honor of fighting for the imperial cause.

In this light, the figure of Song Jiang, portrayed as a moral paragon, is vital to rectify the ethical codes previously imbedded in the mass creation of the Liangshan heroes. As seen in virtually all the classical Chinese chivalric and historical novels, one of the primary ways to restrain chivalric knights, besides military suppression, was to reshape the chivalric knights’ conception of the quest’s goal. Chivalric knights,

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11 See Yu 1998, 14-32. James Liu asserts that “it is best to regard the knights-errant...simply as men of strongly individualistic temperament, who behaved in a certain way based on certain ideals” (1967, 4). Here, it is James Liu’s insight to perceive chivalry as a kind of temperament. The term “individualistic,” nevertheless, is a vague concept which confuses, rather than clearly defines the characteristics of the knight-errant. Furthermore, it does not tally with the historical facts that chivalric knights’ actions were often performed as group endeavors and that chivalric knights were frequently conscripted by legitimate or authoritative powers.
under this restraint, often became liminal figures who, although they may form integral groups outside of established political order, acquired a conception of the world from another group within the order. Such liminal figures provide the common pool from which the “heroes” were often drawn in traditional Chinese novels. In *Shuihu zhuan*, the “great cause” of the Liangshan band is presented through the creation of Song Jiang’s “original heart” (*chuxin*). The novel, identical to the previous folk tales, still views its principle characters as passive victims of government oppression, but projects the tales of the characters in a new discourse of dealing with dynastic authority and its rebels. As professed by Song Jiang in his honorable intentions to the imperial Marshal, “I had no alternative but to become an outlaw and take refuge for a moment in Liangshan marsh. I am waiting for an imperial amnesty so that I may devote my services to the country” (Shi 1972, 693). This honorable intention is recapped by Li Zhi with the phrases of “having dedicated his heart to the imperial court while living in the marsh” (“Zhongyi Shuihu zhuan xu” in Chen 1981, 28). It is with the creation of Song Jiang’s “original heart” that the novel forms the links between folkloric creation and literati writing, on the one hand, and between Liangshan band and the state, on the other.

Once these links have been formed, the novel was elevated by Ming scholars as a work identical to the ancient classics “made by the sages in their indignation” (*saints’ indignation*) (Z. Li 2002, 171). Earlier, Song scholars acknowledged Song Jiang’s tales as folkloric production but disputed their “credibility.” Ming scholars, by contrast, expressed the opposite. They inclined to bypass the contribution of folkloric literature, but acknowledged the credibility of the tales as a representation of historical truth. The pseudonymous critic Tian Hai Zang, Li Zhi’s contemporary, concluded, “the Song Dynasty had fallen into decay and right principles had dwindled away …the gigantic influence [of Liangshan] could even blot out the sunlight and swallow the sky” (Tian 2002, 192). The remarks made by the Ming Scholars on *Shuihu zhuan*, in terms of both dramatization and moralistic bent, coincide remarkably with those in the Song and Yuan folkloric literature. Nevertheless, the scholars made an equivalent of folkloric literature’s moralistic reproach to “sage’s indignation” of which the fiction itself was an expression. This fictional expression, furthermore, is interpreted as a manifestation of authorial intention. As said by Li Zhi, “although [the authors] Shi Nai’an and Luo Guanzhong lived in Yuan, their hearts belonged to Song; although they were born in Yuan,
they were indignant at Song” 施、羅二公, 身在元, 心在宋; 虽生元日, 實愴宋事 (Z. Li 2002, 171). Implicit in the reshaping of Song Jiang’s image, both in the production of *Shuihu zhuan* and its critical reception, is a line that converges three types of “original hearts”—those of the character (Song Jiang), the authors, and the sagas in China’s intellectual history.

Readers today have little knowledge about the historical Song Jiang given the scarcity of historical sources. What has become known, as traced in the above discussion, is the fact that the metamorphosis of Song Jiang’s image has been designated by different social and political groups as the representative of themselves in their own narratives, respectively presented as the agent of the state (fighting against the Fang La uprising) in official history, the agent of the masses (fighting against corrupted officials and evil people) in folkloric literature, and as the agent of the literati (prescribing a new ethical significance) in the novel.

Posited in various discourses through the ages, the figure of Song Jiang registers a dual image as both a law offender and a law enforcer. The ethical ambiguity inherent in this image, however, could never be complete, owing to its differing relations to state power. This conflict in descriptions explains, at least partially, the multiplicity of Song Jiang as a fictional figure in *Shuihu zhuan*. In the seventeenth century, the Qing scholar Jin Shengtan 金圣嘆 (1608-1661) dramatically edited, annotated, and modified *Shuihu zhuan*. Jin Shengtan cited many contradictions in Song Jiang’s personality (as a rebel while loyal to the throne) as exposure of this figure as a hypocrite. Besides incoherence in characterization, Jin also noticed the inconsistency in the novel’s overall style: the heroes’ adventures before turning to the Liangshan outlaw band are narrated biographically to a great extent, whereas their post-amnesty campaigns to combat other outlaw bands are chronicled in the continuous time of history. Both issues are correlated in the query of whether the individual stories of the novel are coalesced to signify the sense of *zhongyi*. In place of previous criticism’s encomium on the Liangshan heroes’ moral superiority, Jin Shengtan reinterpreted the novel’s hidden message of *zhongyi* which, as recapitulated by David Rolston, “stressed the importance of the words *shuihu* [marsh] in the title, claiming that the author’s intent was to emphasize the banishment of the outlaws to the margins of the empire” (1997, 34).

In his criticism of *Shuihu zhuan*, Jin Shengtan noticed the stylistic discrepancies of the novel, but did not pursue the issue through the novel’s origin as an assembly of various types of historical sources, popular legends and literati creations. Instead, he removed the last fifty chapters to foreground the Liangshan heroes’ pre-assembly adventures or the “marsh.” In terms of content material, and perhaps the moralistic
bent as well, the Jin Shengtan version of Shuihu zhuan demonstrates the closest proximity to the folkloric creation of the Liangshan tales. Yet, Jin declared his edition to be restoring the earliest prototype written by the original author, Shi Nai’an. Thereafter, Jin’s edition has been widely accepted as the standard or the final text for Chinese readers.

In the textual evolution of Shuihu zhuan, the literati’s rewriting and interpretation have developed in parallel with a continual interest in the idea of “originality”: original author[s], original intent of the author[s], original hearts of the character, and the novel itself as a representation of an original history. Song Jiang, as the central figure of the novel, always stands as the integral role in making the myth of these “originals.” The idea of “original” here reaches far beyond the textual evolution of a novel. It is in such pursuits for originals that folkloric literature’s original contribution is negated. Emerging from separate records and fragmentary tales of the Song, the ultimate coherence and the ultimate fictionality are bound inextricably to each other in Jin Shengtan’s edition of Shuihu zhuan. In representing a history or a historical figure, people attempt to search for a higher level of coherence and synthesis, yet it is precisely in this effort to reach for a higher level of narrative coherence that fictionality has been made. In this regard, it might not be erroneous to regard Jin Shengtan’s edition as an original one.

The metamorphosis of Song Jiang’s image in China registers a long process whereupon a history and a historical figure have been fictionalized and recycled in official, intellectual, and mass discourses. As a historical figure, Song Jiang represents a historical sign with which people have engaged in a dialogue with history and by which people imbue their own narratives with the semblance of depicting historical truth. As a fictional figure, the creation of Song Jiang’s image has involved various political and social groups, and turned out to be a meeting ground of different ideological practices. In this sense the figure is also an ideological sign. These signs constitute different contexts that, historically and intertextually, interweave the past and the present as well as fiction and history. It is in these contexts that Song

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12 The moral criticism expressed by Jin’s commentaries resonates remarkably with that in the previous folkloric literature. Here is one example which comes from his commentary to chapter 31 of Shuihu zhuan: “Alas! The world belongs to the imperial court; the masses of people are the court’s helpless infants. At a time when countless tigers and wolves are allowed to indulge their insatiable appetites on the people and to oppress them without restraint until the bodies of their victims fill innumerable streams and gullies, how could one possibly hope that the people would not rebel and that the state would not fall” (Chen 1981, 952). Translation is adopted from Robert Hegel’s The Novels in Seventeenth Century China (1981, 67).
Jiang’s image has been created and recreated, and different ideologies have been formed and deformed.

References


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