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Title:	From the Center to the Margins: The Shuihu zhuan and the Transformation of Vernacular Fiction in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries
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Abstract:	<p>The Shuihu zhuan, or The Water Margin as it is usually rendered in English, is one of the major vernacular xiaoshuo novels of the Ming dynasty, and continues to be widely read today. Though little is known about its author or the circumstances of the production of its text, it is known that printed editions of it began to appear on the cusp of a major expansion in publishing activity in sixteenth-century China, and that the vernacular fiction genre flourished along with publishing. The Shuihu zhuan is a major example of both this genre and this publishing trend. Yet behind the very familiarity of its received text are a number of editions that served varying functions in their milieus. The aim of this dissertation is to follow the transformations that the Shuihu zhuan underwent as it appeared in these various incarnations as a means of highlighting some of the major shifts in publishing and modes of consumption of vernacular fiction in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To do so, I employ both historical analysis of the circumstances around the editions' publication and close readings of paratextual materials included in the editions themselves. Though the novel would later be widely published at the hands of the commercial publishers and has come to be strongly associated with popular and commercial traditions, the earliest editions of the Shuihu zhuan were the products of official and private entities of the Jiajing-era elite. In the first two chapters of this dissertation, I contextualize the Shuihu zhuan in this setting and attempt to uncover the social functions a work of the nascent genre of vernacular fiction served within these elite social circles and within the book culture of the era. I examine the overall publishing projects of these entities in order to determine the social space occupied by their output. The following two chapters are concerned with later, commercial editions of the Shuihu zhuan. At the hands of editors and commentators, these editions were transformed in order to meet the tastes of wider audiences. Prefaces and commentaries aimed to shape the way the Shuihu zhuan was read. Secondary scholarship on the traditional fiction commentaries has typically treated them as an early form of exegetical literary criticism and an agent in the elevation of the vernacular fiction genre; in these chapters, I argue that the commentators appropriate elements of the novel in order to express their own ideas. Moreover, I show that by using vernacular fiction as a channel of expression, commentators reached large audiences outside the traditional literati class without governmental interference.</p>
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