

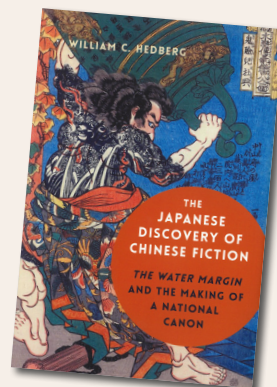
BOOK REVIEW

The Japanese Discovery of Chinese Fiction: The Water Margin and the Making of a National Canon

By William C. Hedberg

Columbia University Press, 2019
264 pages.

Reviewed by YAMAMOTO Yoshitaka



The Japanese Discovery of Chinese Fiction bridges gaps in more ways than one. In the process of tracing multifarious trajectories of the Chinese novel *Shuihu zhuan* (*The Water Margin*), Hedberg straddles nations, languages, time periods, and fields of specialization. The result is a subtly nuanced account of the ever-changing conceptions of the toponym “China” and the term “fiction” (*shōsetsu*) in Japan from the late seventeenth to the early twentieth century.

As Hedberg notes, Takashima Toshio has written a Japanese-language book on the reception of *Shuihu zhuan* in Japan from the Edo period to the Shōwa era.¹ Hedberg improves on Takashima’s work, not only by delving into theoretical questions surrounding periodization, reception, and nationhood, but also by researching and analyzing primary sources unexamined by Takashima, such as the eighteenth-century scholar Seita Tansō’s marginal notes in his personal copy of *Shuihu zhuan*, now held at the University of Tokyo’s Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, or the journalist Tokutomi Sohō’s travelogue on China, published in 1918.²

One salient feature of this monograph is its attention to historical detail. The four chapters, bookended by an introduction and an epilogue, proceed chronologically: the first two examine the Edo period, while the latter two focus on the Meiji and Taishō eras. Chapters 1 and 3 offer excellent historical overviews of nascent academic fields that provided the backdrop for the reception of *Shuihu zhuan* in early modern and modern Japan: namely, the study of contemporary, colloquial Chinese (*Tōwa*) in the eighteenth century and the “literary historiography” (*bungakushi*) of the late nineteenth century. In turn, chapters 2 and 4 explore specific examples of how Japanese intellectuals (as well as consumers of fiction and polychrome prints) engaged with *Shuihu zhuan* over the course of nearly three centuries.

While Hedberg uses the terms “early modern,” “Meiji,” and “Taishō” in his chapter titles, he does not treat time periods as immutable categories. In presenting his own research, he locates “a chronological division line” in the late 1880s and 1890s (Meiji 20s and early 30s), which he identifies as the period in which the emergent field of literary historiography inaugurated a new framework for comparing texts and genres (p. 13). As this hypothetical

1 Takashima 1991.

2 Tokutomi 1918.

temporal divide does not coincide with the Meiji Restoration of 1868, it serves as a powerful reminder that turning points in history do not necessarily correspond to conventional systems of periodization.

What then changed in the late 1880s and 1890s vis-à-vis the place of *Shuihu zhuan* in Japan? It is no easy task summarizing Hedberg's response to this question, as he presents complexities as they are, without oversimplifying them. Two factors seem to have been at play: a transformation in the toponymic conception of "China" and a rise in status of the genre of "fiction." As Meiji and Taishō Japanese intellectuals "triangulated" between "Chinese, Japanese, and Western conceptions of writing" (p. 101), they began to view *Shuihu zhuan* as an embodiment of a "dehistoricized, timeless Chinese character" (p. 161). In Japan in the late 1880s and 1890s, outstanding works of "fiction" like *Shuihu zhuan* came to symbolize a nation's essence, which supposedly remained unchanged from antiquity to the present. Hedberg's brilliant discovery here is that the discourse on *Shuihu zhuan*, a Chinese work of vernacular fiction, helped shape late nineteenth-century Japanese intellectuals' ideas of what a national literary canon was.

Although Hedberg deftly covers a lot of ground without skipping over the minutest details, a few questions remain unanswered. In the epilogue, Hedberg describes the near impossibility of creating "an encyclopedic and full account of *Shuihu zhuan*'s impact" on early modern Japan (p. 180). One wonders, however, if he could have provided at least a rough sketch of what had been left out, and the reasons for omission.

Two additional questions have to do with Hedberg's interpretations of specific passages in Tokutomi Sohō's travelogue. Hedberg suggests that "civilization" in Sohō's characterization of China as "a nation poisoned by civilization" specifically refers to "the stultifying effects of traditional Confucian culture" (p. 173). However, the original text by Sohō specifically mentions Su Qin and Zhang Yi, (non-Confucian) political and diplomatic strategists of the Warring States period, as two notable members of ancient Chinese civilization.³ Did Sohō perceive Su Qin and Zhang Yi (mistakenly) as Confucians? Regarding another instance where Sohō displays his anti-Chinese sentiment, Hedberg notes that Sohō's characterization of China as a "puzzle" has less to do with ascribing a quality of "Oriental inscrutability" to China than with pointing out his compatriots' indifference toward China (p. 171). Nevertheless, in his travelogue, in the subsequent chapter titled "Four Thousand Years of History," Sohō again calls "the Chinese" a "puzzle" (*meidai*), adding this time that they are "cunning" (*umi-sen yama-sen*) behind a friendly veneer (*ikanimo hada-zawari yoku*).⁴ As disturbing as it is to observe, isn't Sohō's vitriol directed at the Chinese, and is he not characterizing them as inscrutable here?

All in all, Hedberg succeeds in demonstrating, consistently on the basis of concrete historical examples, the mutability and plurality of cultural artifacts and terms. *Shuihu zhuan* has never existed as a single text, but in the forms of various editions, recensions, commentaries, retellings, and illustrations. Terms such as "China," "Japan," and "fiction" can have drastically different meanings depending on when, where, and how they are used. Hedberg's book stands out as a model of historically-informed transregional research that

³ Tokutomi 1918, p. 392.

⁴ Tokutomi 1918, p. 425.

scholars of comparative literature as well as “national” literatures—and in fact, participants in any type of humanities research—can only hope to emulate.

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