
Reading *zidishu* in the early 19th century

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Abstract

Zidishu was a genre of verse narrative that flourished as both a literature and a performing art in 18th and 19th century north China. This presentation takes a close look at the earliest dated manuscript in this genre, copied 1815 in Beijing and titled *Yu Boya shuaiqin xie zhiyin zidishu* (Yu Boya smashes his zither to mourn a friend, a youth book), which is outstanding for the preface and commentaries added to the text by its copyist cum reader. In contrast to the vast majority of *zidishu* manuscripts that we can see today, which do not contain such commentaries, this manuscript reveals the markings of a fashionable, educated reader, who presents the minor genre as worthy of literary attention. The commentaries quote a range of contemporary anecdotal literature, while in style they also refer to the practices of fiction and drama criticism well-developed by this time. An appendix containing an intriguing collection of "Axioms on friendship" further betrays the commentator's familiarity with late Ming discourses on friendship. The presentation concludes with speculations on the elite early readers of *zidishu*, linguistic features of the *zidishu* genre, and what they might tell us about this "popular" genre and its readers in the Qing and Republican eras. Zhenzhen Lu is a lecturer in the department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Pennsylvania, where she received her PhD in 2017 with a dissertation on vernacular works attributed to Pu Songling (1640-1715). In 2017-2019 she was a researcher at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures at the University of Hamburg, working on the scribal production of entertainment literature in 19th century Beijing. She maintains an active interest in comparative manuscript studies, print history, popular culture, and the history of collecting and literary scholarship in East Asia.

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