
Fearing and Loving the Vernacular: late Qing Social Reform and the Power of Words

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Abstract

In this paper, I take a zealous social reformer of the late Qing, Yu Zhi (1809-1874), and explore his extensive written corpus, in order to see how Yu understood popular culture and vernacular literature not simply as social ills, but also as the starting point for whole-scale transformation of society. In doing so, Yu asked advocates of conservative Confucian statecraft to make tentative peace with popular literature in order to harness a potentially destabilizing power for good, even as he acknowledged the risks of such popularized discourse. In a nod to the widely held attitude among many elites, Yu's 1869 encyclopedia of philanthropic organizations, *Deyi lu* (Record of Obtaining [Goodness]), includes a section on the importance of banning of popular literature. Yu begins it by including an essay by mid-Qing philosopher Qian Daxin (1728-1804) in which Qian identifies *xiaoshuo* (fiction) as the fourth Chinese religion, and a particularly dangerous one at that. *Xiaoshuo*, Qian clarifies, is insidious because one does not need to be literate in order to be influenced by its immorality. Instead, by means of orality, it circumvents the ways Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism spread via canonical texts among the educated. Orality and comprehensibility, Qian proposes, create a dangerous situation where not even illiteracy is a barrier to the spread of socially destabilizing ideas. Yu endorses Qian's view in a subsequent essay, and writes two extensive lists of fiction and drama titles that ought to be banned immediately. How then, in light of this prevailing attitude towards the destructive nature of *xiaoshuo*, did Yu Zhi also justify the vernacular literature he wrote, edited, and promoted? In his Classical and vernacular works, Yu frequently took the opportunity to champion the salutary power of orality, and the value of being able to write and speak well for audiences who could only grasp concepts aurally instead of via print. With a different powerful metaphor, Yu turns orality into a type of egalitarian currency in the fight to transform the Chinese socio-moral landscape. In his 1853 text *The Precious Scroll of Lord Pan*, Yu has the titular protagonist remind the audience that all are capable of charitable acts, not just the wealthy. "Those with power should expend their funds," Lord Pan says, and "Those without power should spend their words."

What does it mean to spend words? What kinds of words are valuable enough to spend, and in what contexts? This paper will dig deeper into two sides of Yu's literary output, asking first how he explained and justified the need for "low" literature in his Classical writings for sophisticated audiences, and turning then to select examples from his precious scrolls, drama scripts, primary school textbooks, and plain-language lectures to see how he attempted to take the needs of unsophisticated audiences seriously.

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University of Colorado, Boulder since 2016. Her primary research and teaching interests are in late imperial Chinese vernacular narrative and performance literature, especially focusing on intersections between popular literature and religion. Her book manuscript, titled *Teaching and Transformation: Yu Zhi and Popular Confucian Literature in the Late Qing*, examines how individuals in the late Qing who hoped to restore political and social stability through a Confucian revival imagined and engaged with the masses whom they sought to teach and transform. She is also on the steering committee of the Chinese Religious Text Authority database project, which seeks to document, with thick bibliographic description, the width and breadth of religious publishing activities in the late imperial period.