



Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary: Reading and Writing Between the Lines

David Rolston

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In the Ming and Qing periods, the Chinese read fiction in editions with extensive commentary printed on the same page as the fiction itself. This commentary was concerned less with helping the reader understand the “letter” of the text than with drawing the reader’s attention to its more notable aspects through emphatic punctuation (similar to our underlining, italics, or highlighting) and evaluative comments. Authors developed four different approaches to the challenges this type of commentary presented: they wrote their own commentary, they modeled aspects of their narrators on fiction commentators, they left space in their texts for readers to compose their own commentaries, or they combined these approaches.

This book is the first concerted effort to see how the existence of the commentary tradition affected the development of Chinese fiction. It aims to answer several questions, including: How prevalent were commentary editions of fiction? How important was the commentary in them? Were the comments actually read? What effect did they have on readers and future writers?

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