# Popular Reverence and Commercial Publishing in Late Ming Hagiographic Literature

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**Abstract:** The turn of the seventeenth century saw a surge in the publication of illustrated hagiographic narratives (*chushen zhuan* 出身傳), or 'origin narratives', in the book meccas of Jiangnan and Fujian. These commercially published books recount the miraculous lives of widely-worshiped cult figures, from Buddhist deities and Daoist immortals to Confucian sages and local heroes. Highly entertaining yet encyclopaedic in scope, origin narratives repackaged the life and lore of their revered protagonists into 'vernacular' narratives (*xiaoshuo* 小說) that seem to have targeted a wide readership. The cultic worship and sacred geographies of the protagonists of origin narratives take centre stage in their main narratives and feature prominently in the paratexts of these books (such as prefaces, postfaces, and appendices), offering practical, current information on the reverence of the protagonists. The incorporation of 'religious' materials in the main texts and paratexts of origin narratives highlights the multiple roles that commercial publishers played in late Ming society as cultural agents and producers of knowledge. Origin narratives, I argue, provided commercial publishers with a particularly profitable platform to engage with local cults while promoting their own intellectual and worldly interests.

**Keywords:** hagiography, print culture, literature, immortals, Ming, Zhenwu, Lü Dongbin

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## Introduction

This short paper discusses a late-Ming vogue of commercially-published hagiographic narrative texts which I term 'origin narratives' (*chushen zhuan* 出身傳). Around the turn of the seventeenth century, the book markets of Southeast China saw the publication of several dozen illustrated narrative texts ('vernacular', *xiaoshuo* 小說) retelling the life stories of widely-worshiped deities, immortals, and folk heroes. These relatively-short narratives were commercially successful and remained in circulation during the following centuries, even as the production of new works in this subgenre declined after the Ming-Qing transition. Since the emergence of this phenomenon and its implications are closely tied to religious practice, literary writing, and commercial publishing, my methodological approach here is interdisciplinary and falls under the broad category of 'cultural history'. In this article, I will discuss some of the main characteristics of origin narratives and highlight the historical significance of this subgenre in the context of late-Ming book culture and religious practice.

## What are Origin Narratives?

The term I coined to describe this subgenre—origin narratives—is inspired by the term *chushen* 出身, used frequently in the titles and subtitles of these works alongside the name of the protagonist, their place of origin, and terms designating spiritual cultivation or attainment such as *xiuxing* 修行 (cultivation) and *dedao* 得道 (attaining the Dao). Works in this subgenre invariably focus on a single main protagonist who is the subject of a long, pre-existent cultic tradition. Celebrating the achievements and miraculous adventures of figures like Confucius 孔子, Guanyin 觀音, Mazu 媽祖, Guan Yu 關羽, Zhenwu 真武, and the Eight Immortals 八仙, among others, origin narratives are both entertaining and didactic. The trajectory of origin narratives follows a sole individual from before the cradle to beyond the grave, creating a complete outline of their lore, including a 'prehistory' and 'posthistory' that situate their extraordinary lives within

a larger cosmological framework. The structure of origin narratives is marked by a circular trajectory of a descent to the human world and re-ascent to heaven, a structure that echoes the trope of the 'banished immortal' (*zhexian* 謫仙).[1] Protagonists of origin narratives either descend voluntarily or are sent down to the human realm in order to embark on a series of journeys and trials that will eventually enable them to attain enlightenment and re-ascend to heaven to take up official posts in the divine pantheon. Some narratives also include a journey through the netherworld that mirrors this circular trajectory and serves as a rite of passage, leading to the final stage of deification.[2] Death is almost insignificant; it is either skipped completely or mentioned briefly in preparation for the next stage in the narrative. In any case, death is not the end, but a stepping stone.

Interestingly, even as these narratives focus primarily on the protagonists' experiences in this world, they depict these figures as inherently divine beings or as individuals whose ascension is predestined. In other words, it leaves very little room for spiritual 'mobility'. Humanity is the focus here in a different sense; it is through offering services to mankind that the protagonists are able to demonstrate their spiritual attainment and usefulness, and as consequence their worthiness of canonisation (and our veneration). This unusual focus on the life of a single individual allowed the authors of origin narratives to significantly expand pre-existing hagiographies, in some cases producing the longest and most comprehensive treatment of these icons in any media to date. Despite their overall narratorial coherence, these books are composite texts that weave an extensive array of pre-existing material into the main narrative. This compilation work included repackaging canonical hagiographies, adapting local folklore, and incorporating information about the protagonists' cults and practical instructions for ritual practice, among other things, into the narratives.[3]

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1 Ganany, *Origin Narratives*, 38–41; Li, *Xu Xun yu Sa Shoujian*, 9; Li, 'Chushen yu xiuxing', 85–86.

2 For a more detailed analysis of this trope, see Ganany, 'Journeys Through the Netherworld in Late-Ming Hagiographic Narratives', 137–78.

3 See my analysis of the textual composition of Deng Zhimo's origin narra-

Origin narratives are relatively short narratives written in a rather simple 'vernacular' prose occasionally dotted with verse.[4] Most origin narratives were illustrated when they were first published in late Ming, most often in the format of the 'picture-above-text' style (*shangtu xiawen* 上圖下文) that was extremely popular at the time.[5] One shared formal characteristic of origin narratives that I find particularly intriguing are their textual paratexts, that is, the various non-narrative texts that accompanied the books when they were first published around the turn of the seventeenth century, such as prefaces, appendices, advertisements, and lists. In addition to the author or publisher's preface and postface, the paratexts of origin narratives incorporated various kinds of knowledge pertaining to the lore of the main protagonist, including temple couplets, stone inscriptions, eulogies, ritual manuals, genealogies, and excerpts borrowed from liturgical and canonical texts.

Origin narratives are not only tales of venerated individuals leading miraculous lives, but they are also ruminations about the extraordinary (*xian* 仙, *feichang* 非常) and what distinguishes the extraordinary from the ordinary (*fan* 凡, *chang* 常). This distinction hinges upon two forms of conduct: self-cultivation and philanthropic action. The former encompasses a range of ritual traditions, among which Daoist inner alchemical methods are the most prevalent. The latter includes a variety of philanthropic and protective services, from alleviating poverty and curing epidemics to exorcising demons and preventing floods. Among the many services the protagonists offer mankind, it is the subjugation of the demonic that particularly dom-

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tives in Ganany, 'Writing and Worship in Deng Zhimo's Saints Trilogy', 15–36.

[4] On the burgeoning 'vernacular' in Ming literature and beyond, see Shang, 'Writing and Speech', 258–62.

[5] On the *shangtu-xiawen* format in late Ming, see St. André, 'Picturing Judge Bao in Ming shangtu xiawen Fiction', 43–73; Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China*, 315. Anne McLaren uses the term 'picture-strip format' in her book, *Chinese Popular Culture and Ming Chantefables*, 59. Interestingly, some works in this subgenre were reprinted during the Qing dynasty without illustrations.

inates the narratives, though the ways to deal with the demonic vary in accordance with the protagonists' hagiographic traditions. In *Xin qie Jindai Xu Jingyang dedao qin jiao tieshu ji* 新鍥晉代許旌陽得道擒蛟鐵樹記 [Newly Carved Narrative of the Jin-era Xu of Jingyang Attaining the Dao and Capturing the Dragon, the Iron Tree], for instance, the Daoist patriarch Xu Xun 許遜 subdues the malevolent dragon of Poyang Lake 鄱陽湖, whereas the saintly Sa Shoujian 薩守堅 of *Wudai Sa zhenren dedao Zhouzao ji* 五代薩真人得道咒棗記 [The Story of the Perfected Sa of the Five Dynasties Attaining the Dao, the Enchanted Date, hereafter *The Enchanted Date*] converts a harmful, illicit local god, and the warrior-god Zhenwu 真武 harnesses the power of the demonic to the service of the divine by enlisting thirty-six demonic beings to his army of converted heavenly soldiers in *Beifang Zhenwu zushi xuantian shangdi chushen zhizhuan* 北方真武祖師玄天上帝出身志傳 [Origin Tale of the Dark Emperor of the North, the Venerable Master Zhenwu, hereafter *Origin Tale of Zhenwu*] (see further discussion of this work in the next section).

The focus on self-cultivation and servicing mankind as crucial conditions for deification is not only interesting in itself, but it could also tell us something about the perception of, and expectations from, cultic figures, or at least the writers and publishers' understanding of them. The hagiographic visions propagated by origin narratives diverge from the protagonists' pre-existing lore even as the narratives borrow their 'building blocks' from centuries-old traditions. While it is unclear what directed this divergence, it is possible that this standardised hagiographic vision was a by-product of the process of their composition, an attempt to conform to the constraints of *xiaoshuo* writing at the time and appeal to a wide readership by meeting their 'horizon of expectations'.

## Texts and Paratexts

The textual tapestry of origin narratives provided a wide readership with unprecedented access to doctrinal and liturgical materials. The producers of these works drew on previous hagiographies of these cultic figures and expanded them, while also weaving various mate-

rials associated with their lore into the narrative, including texts from the Daoist canon, Buddhist sūtras, spells (*zhou* 咒), curses (*zhu* 祝), edicts, poems, and instructions for inner alchemy, among many other materials. The scale of this compilation work—a process of selection, adaptation, and moulding a vast corpus of pre-existing materials into *xiaoshuo* narratives—produced a renewed vision of these deities' and immortals' lore. Through this process, the authors and editors of these works offered their own views of the cults and their own interpretation of the teachings that came to be associated with the protagonists and how they related to their cultic veneration.

The paratexts of origin narratives offer an even clearer indication of this link between writing, publishing, and reverence. Take *Baxian chuchu dongyou ji* 八仙出處東遊記 [Origin Tale of the Eight Immortals and their Journey to the East, hereafter *Tale of the Eight Immortals*] for example, an entertaining retelling of the life stories of the Eight Immortals and how they came together as a group. By incorporating a summary of each member's identifying details, such as their iconography, emblems, personal history, and traits, the narrative offered a kind of hagiographic guidebook to their lore. Moreover, when the book was first published circa 1600 by the Shuangfeng tang 雙峰堂 publishing house, managed at the time by Yu Xiangdou 余象斗, it concluded with a twenty-five-page long appendix comprised of prose essays, poems, temple couplets, and revealed messages produced through spirit writing. Many of the materials included in this appendix are attributed to Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓, one of the Eight Immortals, either directly (by adding his signature) or indirectly (by alluding that he was the source of the poems and messages). Significantly, this appendix relates explicitly to the local cultic reverence of the Eight Immortals as a group and to Lü Dongbin worship in particular. For instance, the appendix includes local news about Eight Immortal temples, as well as thank-you notes to patrons for donating the funds to build new temple halls and for financing the carving of printing blocks. Although I was unable so far to find any information about the recipients of Lü Dongbin's poems and revealed messages, the mere fact that they are mentioned by name, alongside news and dedications to donors and other materials, highlights the multifunctionality of this work (and similar publications at the time) as wor-

ship aids, local media, platforms for the publishers to further their own social agendas, and of course as a form of entertainment.

Another interesting example is the abovementioned *Origin Tale of Zhenwu*, which reframes the life story of the warrior-god Zhenwu as a series of incarnations leading up to his life as a prince who renounces the world and attains enlightenment on Mount Wudang 武當山, after which he takes up the post of a protective deity. Much of the narrative is devoted to mapping Zhenwu's 'sacred geography', providing narrative rationale for the importance of various sites in his cult. The narrative ends with a description of the founding of Zhenwu's cult centre on Mount Wudang and the imperial tour of the Yongle 永樂 Emperor (r. 1402–1424) to the mountain (which is not supported by historic evidence outside of Zhenwu's myth-cycle), stressing the importance of continuous imperial patronage of this cult centre. This book is intriguing for a number of reasons. Not only is this the longest and most elaborate retelling of Zhenwu's life story, but it also provides a kind of manual for Zhenwu's cultic reverence. The book concludes with a six-page long appendix that includes extremely detailed instructions for the worship of Zhenwu: a list of offerings, taboos, rules of conduct, and a timetable of Zhenwu's descents to the world. The directions in this appendix echo canonical texts and worship manuals included in Ming dynasty gazetteers of Mount Wudang.[6] It also includes a eulogy borrowed almost verbatim from the Daoist canon.[7] The appendix furthermore insinuates that the main narrative as a whole was 'revealed' through spirit writing, and it ends with a statement propagating the production and circulation of the book as a way to avoid evil and earn merit—a typical ending among religious tracts of spirit-medium cults. Taken as a whole, this book offers an all-encompassing reference book for the Zhenwu lore, including his life story, his iconography, his sacred geography and cult centre, and directions for his worship, all within the general framework of a highly entertaining, illustrated *xiaoshuo*.

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6 Among them are the *Xuantian shangdi qisheng lu* (*DZ* 958) and *Chi jian dayue taihe shan zhi*, 82.

7 *Yuqing wuji zongzhen Wenchang dadongxian jingzhu* (*DZ* 103).

## Publishing, Religion, and Local Society: Some Preliminary Conclusions

In an era of literary experimentation that saw the emergence of new genres and new formats, the commercial success and cultural impact of origin narratives highlight the malleability and multifunctionality of *xiaoshuo* in late Ming. As a cultural phenomenon, origin narratives are rooted in three concomitant trends in late-Ming publishing: the rise of 'vernacular' *xiaoshuo* narrative writing, a penchant for collating and anthologising in Ming print culture, and a renewed interest in hagiographies. This period also marked a highpoint in the institutional imperial patronage and lay veneration of the cults of the protagonists of origin narratives (like the abovementioned Xu Xun, Zhenwu, and Lü Dongbin, for instance). Origin narratives contributed to their popularity not only by propagating entertaining portraits of these icons within the main narrative, but also by providing news about their temples and practical information for their worship in their paratexts. In this respect, this subgenre underscores the cultural impact of commercial writers and publishers, whose work as producers of knowledge for a wide audience put them in a unique position to shape popular reverence.

Authors and publishers of late-Ming origin narratives explicitly discussed the educational and moral goals that steered the production of these works. In his preface to *The Enchanted Date*, the author Deng Zhimo 鄧志謨 claimed that he devoted himself to the composition of this work in order to help laypeople cultivate their minds and to provide them with ways to revere the gods. While publishers often commented that they were motivated by moral duty to educate the masses, they also imply that there was great demand for this kind of writing and clearly employed didactic moralising as an efficient marketing tool that would guarantee profit. The publisher Yu Xiangdou notes somewhat apologetically in his preface to the *Tale of the Eight Immortals* that although producing narratives such as the *Wuxian lingguan dadi Huaguang tianwang zhuan* 五顯靈官大帝華光天王傳 [The Tale of the Heavenly King Huaguang, the Emperor of Five Manifestations] generated much profit, it is not the profit itself that spurred him to continue working on similar works, but his aspiration

to allow readers to transcend the 'world of dust'. Whether or not these works were indeed regarded at the time as instructional guides to self-cultivation, the profound impact of origin narratives on writing and worship in the past four centuries is evident. Cultic worship of the protagonists of origin narratives embraced these books in various ways, some more easily delineated than others. Reprints of origin narratives are still sold or distributed free of charge in temples of these cultic figures in contemporary China and Taiwan, and current views of their lives, iconographies, and relationship to the practices, sects, and doctrines that they came to be associated with are deeply indebted to late-Ming origin narratives.

The lasting impact of origin narratives on local and transregional reverence highlights the historic significance of liminal publications such as these that bridge the realms of 'religion' and 'literature'. One useful paradigm in recent scholarship is Mark Meulenbeld's notion of 'literature of canonization', as part of his analysis of *Fengshen yanyi* 封神演義 [Canonisation of the Gods] which he regards as a work that emerged from a specific ritual environment and is deeply rooted in Daoist ritual practice, a representative of what he terms 'para-liturgical' writing that functioned as a kind of 'religious chronicle'.[8] Another productive lens is Vincent Durand-Dastès's discussion of hagiographical narrative texts as representing an 'alternative lay canon'. As part of his examination of works centring on the Qizhen 七真 (the Seven Perfected), he suggests that 'hagiographic vernacular novels' of the Qing fulfilled two didactic roles: transmitting religious messages and showing holy characters.[9] Origin narratives, I argue, offered informative, practical, and entertaining sourcebooks for the reverence of beloved cultic figures. The encyclopaedic scope of origin narratives would not have been possible without the social networks of commercial writers and publishers, their access to textual sources and local folklore alike, and above all their motivation to propagate various types of knowledge—including 'religious' knowledge—to a diverse lay readership.

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8 Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare* and *idem*, *Civilized Demons*.

9 Durand-Dastès, 'A Late Qing Blossoming of the Seven Lotus', 78–112.

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### Abbreviations

*DZ* *Zhengtong Daozang* 正統道藏. See Secondary Sources, Zhang et al., eds.

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