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Introduction: Ming and Qing Dynasty Novels and Commercial Society

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For much of the history of the Chinese-speaking world, poems were considered the highest form of Chinese literature. They were the orthodox literary form and the best representative of literary culture. This changed in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1616–1911) dynasties. One reason was that, during this time, government officials and scholars alike advocated a new model of literary orthodoxy: prose should emulate the Qin (221–206 BCE) and Han (206 BCE–220) eras' poetry should emulate the High Tang (713–755) 文必秦漢，詩必盛唐.¹ This revivalist attitude became the mainstream of literary creation, and a direct result was the rise in status of non-poetry works, such as prose and plays. The second reason for poetry's fall from grace was that well-written novels increasingly attracted the attention of the scholarly world, and eventually the public at large. During this period of time we see the emergence of masterpieces such as the Four Great Novels (*Journey to the West*, *Legends of the Marsh*, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), and *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, as well as other more common vernacular novels, popular fiction, and romance novels. They were an easily accessible form of literature, in that the reader did not need to be exceedingly well-educated or highly literate to understand them, and they reflected social reality in a way that ancient poetry could not. The 19th century French realist author Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) attempted to capture the essence of his social reality in his collection of novels *La Comédie Humaine*. Fredrick Engels famously remarked that "I have learned more [from Balzac] than from all the professional historians, economists, and statisticians put together." In the same vein as this, the Ming and Qing dynasty popular novels give us an

1 *Mingshi* 明史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), 286.7348.

invaluable glimpse into the society and economies of those eras. These windows into the Ming and Qing era economies touch upon a wide array of themes and topics – from the daily consumer habits of the citizens, money production, and money exchange, to the more abstract culture of money, including business and social ethics.

The flourishing of popular novels did not only reflect the economic realities of that time, but the novels themselves were a part of the changing economy. Particularly in the Jiangnan area, educated men would write vernacular novels as a means of livelihood, and their growing popularity directly contributed to the growth of the printing industry. The burgeoning printing and book industries in turn created more demand for popular novels. The four main articles in this issue deal with the topics broached above, namely the relationship between Ming and Qing era popular novels and commercial society.

In “Ming-Era Remittance Systems and Standard Cash in the *Xingshi Yinyuan Zhuan*” by Liu Xiaoyi 劉曉藝, the author takes the famous novel *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* 醒世姻緣傳 as her starting point to discuss attitudes toward money in the Ming dynasty. She references various sources of historical material to investigate how silver and bronze money were used in the late Ming economy, and corrects errors in previous research on this topic. She also points out that the so-called yellow-fringed coins (low quality copper coins) often alluded to in the novels were in popular use and higher quality coins made of more valuable metals fell out of use. The corruption and incompetence of the late Ming dynasty court caused the populace to lose faith in the rulers and the national economy in general, which led to them embrace these low value coins. According to the author, this demonstrates the important lesson of “trying to understand the economy behind the politics, and the politics behind the economy.”

In Xu Jianping 許建平 and Zhang Yaxin’s 張亞欣 article “The Evolution of Money Culture and the Transformation of Narrative Culture in Pre-modern Chinese Fiction,” they analyze the changing perception of money in literature. The authors place their research in the context of late Ming dynasty popular novels, and they look at how changing social and economic modes led to changes in values and the perception of money. As China continued to move from an agrarian-based life style, represented by the trade of food and goods for survival, toward an industry-based life style, represented by a cash economy, the popular novels of that time reflected a noticeable change in people’s attitudes towards traditional values versus economic wealth. Previous literature representing older values mostly depicted rural life with its emphasis on stability, morality, and propriety in the community; the late Ming popular

novels, however, saw wealth and lust as frequent themes, and they began to extol the virtues of progress, commerce, and financial wealth.

In Zhao Yi's 趙益 "Ethos and Karma: The Construction of Business Ethics and Social Ethics in Popular Novels from the 16th to 18th Centuries," the author looks at Ming and Qing era popular novels to examine the dominant social ethics, with particular emphasis on business ethics. This research is further expanded by considering traditional religious beliefs and how they interact with the newly emerging business ethics. The traditional Buddhist belief in karma led to a rise in the idea that wealth is distributed fairly and the people who became wealthy, far from being deceitful and unscrupulous on their way to riches, probably deserved it. Despite the emergence of the idea of business ethics, and its liberal attitude towards business and wealth accumulation, Zhao Yi concludes that the authors of the Ming and Qing popular novels could never go so far as to totally repudiate the values of traditional society.

The final article is "The Relationship between Literati Livelihoods and the Development of Novels and Operas in the Canal Region during the Ming and Qing Dynasties" by Xu Yongbin 徐永斌. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, men of letters often turned to writing popular novels and plays to make a living, and this activity was most concentrated in the areas along the Grand Canal. As this endeavor became more lucrative, the quantity and quality of such literary works grew. Increased reader feedback and market demands naturally led to an evolution in these genres, both in theme and style. Thus, we see a pattern of mutual influence among many agents and factors: the authors collaborated with book sellers to common benefit, and this strengthened the printing and publishing industry. All of this in turned continued to increase the demand for more works which sparked further literary creation.

Works Cited

Mingshi 明史. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013.