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The Relationship between Literati Livelihoods and the Development of Novels and Operas in the Canal Region during the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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Abstract

Along the Grand Canal and in adjacent areas, where the pursuit of livelihoods among literati was most concentrated and visible, were important centers for the creation and dissemination of Ming and Qing dynasty novels and operas. To a large extent, the pursuit of livelihoods among literati brought about the birth of a large number of literary works, particularly Ming dynasty and Qing dynasty novels and operas. On the one hand, literati earned a wage through their livelihoods, improved their living environments, and laid a certain economic backdrop for later Ming and Qing novels and operas; on the other hand, through reader acceptance and market feedback, the literati put forward requirements for literary creation that closely aligned with readers and the market, and to a certain degree brought about changes in the subject matter and artistry of novels and operas. It can be said that the fertile Jiangnan region and the Grand Canal gave birth to literary and artistic giants and works that have been passed down through the centuries. The present article is an analysis of the relationship between literati livelihoods and the development of Ming and Qing novels and operas in the Grand Canal region.

Keywords

canal region – literati livelihoods – Ming and Qing novels – Jiangnan – prosperity

During the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties, along the Grand Canal and in regions adjacent to it, particularly in the Jiangnan region, the literati's various means of livelihood became an important element of the literary and cultural history of the Ming and Qing eras. This reflected the conditions of life, values and trends informing literary creation among Ming and Qing literati. Although the literati's livelihoods differed in their reasons and aims, there was nonetheless an intimate connection between those pursuing material gain for an improved life and the creation and dissemination of Ming and Qing novels and operas.

The word "livelihood" (*zhisheng* 治生) appears in Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (145–90 BCE) *Shiji* 史記: "The first to engage in a livelihood was Bai Gui."¹ The term was later adopted by successive generations, and was used to refer to the pursuit of livelihoods through apprenticeships, travelling shows, the practice of medicine, fortune-telling, farming, commerce and so forth.

Ancient Chinese literati always focused on their livelihood. Confucius (551–479 BCE) stated that "If the search for riches is sure to be successful, though I should become a groom with whip in hand to get them, I will do so. As the search may not be successful, I will follow after that which I love."² That is to say, it is acceptable to consider a profession even if one seeks riches for the sake of one's livelihood, and even if that profession is viewed by ordinary people as lowly. Literati engagement in livelihoods can be traced to the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) and the Warring States period (475–221 BCE). For example, figures such as Zigong 子貢 (520–456 BCE), Fan Li 范蠡 (536–448 BCE), and Bai Gui 白圭 (370–300 BCE) are representative of literati who pursued livelihoods. The Four Lords of the Warring States period, i.e. Zhao Sheng 趙勝 (d. 251 BCE), also known as Lord Pingyuan 平原君 of the state of Zhao, Tian Wen 田文 (d. 279 BCE), who was Lord Mengchang 孟嘗君 of the state of Qi, Wei Wuji 魏無忌 (d. 243 BCE), Lord Xinling 信陵君 of the state of Wei, and Huang Xie 黃歇 (314–238 BCE), Lord Chunshen 春申君 of the state of Chu, accepted a wide range of followers. Many literati with skill in a particular field dedicated themselves to their tutelage, becoming important guests of their students. Literati often lived on the margins of society, and there was no lack of them who pursued livelihoods throughout the dynasties. However, there are relatively few written accounts of literati livelihoods before the Song dynasty (960–1279), which is probably related to the lack of recognition of their importance before that era. Thereafter, literati livelihoods gradually

1 *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 129.3259.

2 James Legge, trans., *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean*, vol. 1 of *The Chinese Classics* (Taipei: SMC Publishing Inc., 2001), 198.

became more discussed. During the Song and Yuan (1206–1368) eras and into the Ming and Qing eras, literati treated their livelihoods as a matter of urgency. An even greater diversification of livelihoods appeared during the Ming and Qing dynasties. By that time, the imperial examination system was highly sophisticated, yet because of the gradual adoption of a contribution system (*juanna* 捐納), which made official posts widely accessible, the ratio of literati in the first rank of successful candidates steadily declined, and competition for civil service posts became increasingly fierce. Outside education and politics, livelihoods appeared to become a matter of increasing urgency, and were vitally important. The phenomenon of literati livelihoods also had an increasing influence on the creation of popular literature. The present article is an analysis of issues in the relationship between literati livelihoods and the development of Ming and Qing novels and operas in the Grand Canal region.

1 The Development of Ming and Qing Novels and Operas in the Canal Region

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, it was commonplace for literati in the Jiangnan 江南 region to pursue a livelihood. Primarily, they relied on their own abilities and expertise to make a living in ways that suited them, such as participating in the education market or the art market, and becoming involved in the book printing industry. They embodied certain cultural characteristics, which to a degree reflected the literati mode of living of that era. Although the pursuit of livelihoods among literati pervaded the whole of society, it was most concentrated and visible along the canals of the Jiangnan region, while adjacent areas were important centers for the creation and dissemination of Ming and Qing novels and operas.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Jiangnan was China's most economically and culturally advanced region, attracting literati and refined scholars on account of its reputation. For instance, Kong Shangren's 孔尚任 (1648–1718) "Guo Kuangshan Guangling zengyan xu" 郭匡山廣陵贈言序 commented on the "five metropolises under Heaven" that literati and scholars most liked to visit: apart from the capital Beijing 北京, four of these cities – Nanjing 南京, Yangzhou 揚州, Suzhou 蘇州 and Hangzhou 杭州 – are all in the Jiangsu and Zhejiang area. With the exception of Nanjing, which is adjacent to other canal cities, the remaining four metropolises are located along the canal. Literati and refined scholars would make multiple visits to the five metropolises:

Under Heaven there are five metropolises that literati like to come to: Beijing, Nanjing, Yangzhou, Suzhou and Hangzhou. ... When literati come

to these five metropolises, they go to great lengths to pay homage to historical figures. Most of the figures they interact with sing to each other in poetry and prose and exchange letters. The words written by these men of letters in praise of the local area are on the lips of all under Heaven. Therefore, the aim of men of letters in coming to the five metropolises is not only to indulge in cultural attractions but to make friends with local literati and gentry. Moreover, they are envious of the prestige of the five metropolises, so they visit often.³

Ming and Qing novels and operas were extremely popular. We can say that novels and operas enjoyed a golden era particularly beginning with the Wanli 萬曆 period (1572–1620) of the Ming dynasty. Chinese printing technology had developed during the Jiajing 嘉靖 period (1522–1566), reaching its peak during the Wanli period. It was precisely during the more than one-hundred-year period of the Jiajing, Longqing 隆慶 (1567–1572) and Wanli periods that full-length vernacular fiction (*zhanghui xiaoshuo* 章回小說) flourished, forming its most prosperous phase. Printing technology facilitated the engraving, printing and publishing of such novels.⁴ Following the mid-Ming era, novels and operas witnessed a great boom. In terms of both variety and quantity, an abundance of literary works was produced in this era, greatly surpassing those of the past. Furthermore, there were many literati, such as Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550–1616), Shen Jing 沈璟 (1553–1610), Ye Xianzu 葉憲祖 (1566–1641), Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646), who were engaged in the writing and editing of novels and operas. People of the time also kept many records, such as “Zalun xia” 雜論下, volume four of Wang Jide’s 王驥德 (1540–1623) *Qulu* 曲律, which notes that regardless of whether it was someone with an official post or one living in seclusion in the mountain forests, there were many people who enjoyed writing operas: “At present, there are countless people writing operas, from the wealthy and powerful and literati without fame to writers and poets living in seclusion in the mountain forests.”⁵ Shen Defu 沈德符 (1578–1642) also spoke in such terms: “Literati in recent years have been born in times of peace and prosperity, and have used their wit and talent to write operas” to indicate

3 Kong Shangren 孔尚任, *Kong Shangren shiwen ji* 孔尚任詩文集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 459.

4 See Zhang Tongsheng 張同勝, “Cong yinshuashu kan Ming dai changpian zhanghui xiaoshuo de chengshu wenti – yi *Sanguo zhi tongsu yanyi wei zhongxin*” 從印刷術看明代長篇章回小說的成書問題——以《三國志通俗演義》為中心, *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小說研究, no. 4 (2017): 4–19.

5 Wang Jide 王驥德, *Qulu* 曲律, in vol. 4 of *Zhongguo gudian xiqu lunzhu jicheng* 中國古典戲曲論著集成, ed. Zhongguo xiqu yanjiu yuan 中國戲曲研究院 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiqu chubanshe, 1959), 167.

how literati used their brilliance. Even scholar-officials who had resigned from their posts were passionate about writing operas. As Qi Que 齊愨 (real name Chen Yujiao 陳與郊, 1544–1611) said: “In recent years, scholar-officials have resigned from their positions to live among ordinary people, and most of them like to compose operas.”⁶ Wang Jide commented that after Gu Dadian 顧大典 (1540–1596) resigned his position as Fujian’s Vice Education Intendant (*tixue fushi* 提學副使) and returned to his farm, he “enjoyed opera as a hobby. His home supported performers, and he taught them how to sing. The operas he composed are *Qing shan* 青衫, *Geyi* 葛衣 and *Yiru* 義乳.” Even bookstore owners spurred the trend, going so far as to promote fakes to boost sales: “To make money, bookstore owners would falsely attribute authorship of certain works and pass them off as genuine; they would deceive people by arbitrarily misappropriating the names of famous ancient dramatists as the writers of operatic works. This phenomenon was very prevalent.”⁷

Following the rise of an anti-Neo-Confucian wave and of sentimental thought in philosophical and literary circles, people’s ideas underwent a change, and a re-examination of novels and operas began. Certain literati, including Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602), Wang Jide, Hu Yinglin 胡應麟 (1551–1602), Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558–1639), Xie Zhaozhe 謝肇淛 (1567–1624), Feng Menglong, Lü Tiancheng 呂天成 (1580–1618) and Qi Biaoqia 祁彪佳 (1603–1645), wrote pithy summaries of the content of novels and operas, investigated the rules of writing novels and operas, or wrote commentaries on novels and operatic works. Popular forms of literature such as novels and operas also catered to lower class tastes. Even some members of the nobility and the scholarly elite started to enjoy these forms; they permeated the arts and crafts, becoming a commodity. This demonstrated the enormous appeal of Ming and Qing dynasty novels and operas, as modern-day scholar He Yanjun 何艷君 has noted:

Popular literary art such as novels and operas blossomed gradually, becoming a cultural consumer product enjoying great popularity and a wide audience. The reason for the proliferation of folk kiln porcelain, extensively illustrated as it was with the stories of characters from novels and operas, was precisely that it catered to consumer demand; it sought recognition and acceptance in a commodity market guided by secular culture. In the late-Ming and early-Qing periods, popular literary art such as novels and operas continued to flourish; it gradually entered a new

6 Qi Que 齊愨, “Ling chi fu xu” 詵痴符序, in *Yingtao meng* 櫻桃夢, ed. Chen Yujiao 陳與郊, Ming Wanli jian Haichang Chen shi yuan keben 明萬曆間海昌陳氏原刻本.

7 Wang Jide, *Qulu*, 164, 169.

period of prosperity after porcelain painting that used performance content as a theme had experienced the stagnation of the early Ming period.⁸

Since the Tang dynasty, opera had developed from *canjun* drama⁹ (*canjunxi* 參軍戲) and the variety plays of the Jin (1115–1234) and Yuan dynasties into the tales of the Ming and Qing dynasties, with famous artists being prolific. Following changes in aesthetic preferences among the public, especially since the middle of the Ming dynasty, the four great voices of the Haiyan 海鹽, Yuyao 餘姚, Yiyang 弋陽 and Kunshan 崑山 styles were in full bloom. Ming and Qing tales may be divided primarily into the three broad categories of palace tales, folk tales and literati tales. Among these, literati tales were dominant; many literati were involved in the writing of sagas and scripts. Not only did these outnumber the rest, but they were the most widespread and influential. Operas were popular in the Jiangnan region; many operatic works came from the Jiangnan canal region, which produced a number of famous writers for opera. These included the Ming dynasty's Shao Can 邵燦 (dates unknown), a native of Yixing 宜興 in Jiangsu; Zheng Ruoyong 鄭若庸 (dates unknown), a native of Kunshan; Liang Chenyu 梁辰魚 (ca. 1521–1594), a Kunshan native; Tu Long 屠隆 (1543–1605), a native of Yin county in Zhejiang; Shen Jing (1553–1610), a native of Wujiang 吳江 in Jiangsu; Zhang Fengyi 張鳳翼 (d. 1636), a native of Changzhou 常州 in Jiangsu, and others. The late Ming and early Qing periods saw Wu Weiye 吳偉業 (1609–1672), from Taicang 太倉 in Jiangsu; You Dong 尤侗 (1618–1704), from Changzhou, Jiangsu, and others. The Qing dynasty produced Li Yu 李玉 (ca. 1610–ca. 1670) as the representative dramatist of the Suzhou school. Others included Zhu Suchen 朱素臣 (ca. d. 1644); Zhu Zuochao 朱佐朝 (ca. d. 1644); Bi Wei 畢魏 (ca. b. 1623); Ye Shizhang 葉時章 (dates unknown); and Chen Erbai 陳二白 (dates unknown). In addition, dramatists such as the Qing dynasty's Hong Sheng 洪昇 (1645–1704), a native of Hangzhou,

8 For a specific discussion, please see He Yanjun 何艷君, "Cong Ming mo Qing chu xiaoshuo xiqu lei renwu gushi cihua de xiaofei qingkuang kan shisu wenhua de yingxiang li" 從明末清初小說戲曲類人物故事瓷畫的消費情況看世俗文化的影響力, *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小說研究, no. 1 (2019): 57.

9 A popular performing art in the Tang and Song periods. During the Sixteen Kingdoms period, Shi Le 石勒 (274–333) of the Later Zhao dynasty responded to an army officer's corruption by ordering an entertainer to play the part of someone enlisting in the army, while another entertainer teased him from the sidelines. Thus it became a performance format. The teased character was called the enlister (*canjun*); the one doing the teasing was called the falcon (*canghu*). The two roles performed comic dialogue and acting. In the late Tang period, it developed into a multi-role performance, and included on-stage female roles. In the Song dynasty, the format was also known as *zaju* 雜戲 (variety plays).

in Zhejiang, and Li Yu 李漁 (1611–1680), from Lanxi 蘭溪, in Zhejiang, enjoyed popularity for a time.

In the early Ming period, the imperial court imposed restrictions on the content of operatic performances, only permitting the performance of works that contributed to public morals. In the mid-Ming era, the prohibitions of the early Ming period gradually fell away. There was a change in atmosphere among the court and its members, who developed a strong taste for the extravagant. Good theater was gaining traction. Many commercial opera troupes emerged among ordinary people, and hired performers for home celebrations and village theatrical performances for religious festivals were fashionable for a time. Moreover, administrators, scholar-officials and affluent families often maintained opera troupes either for their own enjoyment or for welcoming and entertaining guests. The operatic works of certain literati were often well-received, with the music and lyrics of Liang Chenyu being especially popular – from the imperial family to brothel singers. Everyone, even Daoist priests and monks, vied to sing his lyrics. This was stated in “Ping lun” 評論 of *Zhujia zaji* 諸家雜記, by the famous Ming dramatist Zhang Dafu 張大復 (ca. 1554–1630).¹⁰ Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526–1590) also had a poem that stated: “The prodigal gentry of the Suzhou area compete with each other to sing Liang Chenyu’s lyrics.”¹¹ In other words, the refined scholars of the Suzhou area were all fond of singing lyrics written by Liang, and it can be said that his music and lyrics were popular throughout the Jiangnan region.

Some literati, whether local or not, reaped significant profits through their music and lyrics. These included Zhang Fengyi, Li Yu 李漁 and Jiang Shiquan 蔣士銓 (1725–1785). Zhang Fengyi, a native of Ming dynasty Changzhou, Suzhou prefecture, courtesy name Boqi 伯起, passed the provincial-level (*juren* 舉人) examinations in the 43rd year of the Jiajing period (1564). He excelled at calligraphy, and in his later years he disliked socializing with dignitaries and sold books to support himself. Composing operas was a hobby of his, and he enjoyed a quite a reputation. His opera *Hongfu ji* 紅拂記 was a sensation at the time, with dignitaries offering him large sums of money to compose, as noted by Shen Defu:

As a young man, Zhang Fengyi composed *Hongfu ji*, which was a hit around the country and performed by people everywhere ... In his later years, when the court was touting its achievements, such as the quelling

10 Liang Chenyu 梁辰魚, *Liang Chenyu ji* 梁辰魚集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1998), 633.

11 *Ibid.*, 606.

of rebellions, an important general of Hubei origin named Li Yingxiang 李應祥 invited Zhang to compose music in praise of his exploits. Conscious of the fact that the remuneration was a little excessive, he could hardly stop broadcasting his own importance. It seems that this work, this paean, became a mere footnote to his career, and remains unpopular to this day.¹²

Jiang Shiquan, courtesy names Xinyu 新余 and also Tiaosheng 荇生, was a Qing dynasty native of Yanshan 鉛山 in Jiangxi. He passed the palace examination in the 22nd year of the Qianlong 乾隆 period (1757) and bearing the title of presented scholar (*jìnshì* 進士), was a junior compiler (*bianxiu* 編修) at the Hanlin Academy (*Hanlin yuan* 翰林院), was well versed in poetry and ancient texts, and enjoyed composing music. His worth was recognized by Ma Yueguan 馬曰瑄 (1688–1755), who engaged him to work at his private school to write lyrics. This became a much-told tale for a time:

Jiang Shiquan was skilled in the writing of operas. The great salt merchant Ma Yueguan hired Jiang to work as a composer at his premises, Linglong shan guan 玲瓏山館. In the mornings he would compose, and in the evenings start rehearsing. To this day, Jiang Shiquan's refined literary talent is widely known among the people of Yangzhou.¹³

Apart from having an itinerant lifestyle, Li Yu 李漁, from Lanxi in Zhejiang, also ran a bookstore called “Yisheng Tang” 翼聖堂, which mostly sold novels and operas, letters written by celebrities and so forth. He himself also created and critiqued many novels and operatic works and edited, published and distributed them. Furthermore, he personally led a family opera troupe that made money by performing widely.

During the Xianfeng 咸豐 (1851–1861) and Tongzhi 同治 (1862–1875) periods of the Qing dynasty, Suzhou native Li Yong 李湧 (1830–1860), grew up in poverty and his character acting was remarkably true to life. The then Surveillance Commissioner (*Ancha sishi* 按察司使), an official by the surname of Zhu, wanted to recruit him into the government, but Li Yong declined, as he was earning a solid income from acting every year:

12 Shen Defu 沈德符, “Zhang Boqi chuanqi” 張伯起傳奇, in *Wanli ye huo bian* 萬曆野獲編 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 25,644.

13 *Tongzhi xu zuan Yangzhou fu zhi* 同治續纂揚州府志, in vol. 42 of *Zhongguo difang zhi jicheng: Jiangsu fu xian zhiji* 中國地方志集成: 江蘇府縣志輯 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1991), 15,839.

Li Yong was from an impoverished family. He was a talented actor and particularly skilled at character acting. Most of the people he interacted with were celebrities. The official Zhu Jun 朱鈞, the then Surveillance Commissioner, admired his virtues, and wanted to recruit him as an official aide, but Li Yong declined the offer. Li was earning a solid income every year from performing, but used most of it to support his parents and gave his wife just 500 coppers a month as spending money.¹⁴

The Ming and Qing dynasties were also a time in which novel writing, including novels with parts in verse, flourished. Many famous works were produced at that time, such as *Sanguo zhi tongsu yanyi* 三國志通俗演義, *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳, *Xiyou ji* 西遊記, *Jinpingmei* 金瓶梅, *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢, and *Rulin waishi* 儒林外史. There were novels and short stories, novels in verse, vernacular and classical Chinese, romance novels and erotic novels. There was a great variety of themes and types, particularly in the Jiangnan region, which formed the heart of popular novel writing. When we consider the important centers of literary output in the Jiangsu area in the Ming and Qing dynasties, the late Yuan and early Ming eras were the prelude; the middle and later Ming were boom periods; the Qing dynasty Shunzhi 順治 period (1638–1661) to that of Yongzheng 雍正 (1723–1735) were times of ongoing development; the Qianlong (1736–1796) and Jiaqing 嘉慶 (1796–1820) periods were peaks; the Daoguang 道光 (1821–1851), Xianfeng and Tongzhi periods, as well as the Guangxu 光緒 period (1875–1908) up to its 23rd year, were residual; and the 24th year of the Guangxu period to the third year of the Xuantong 宣統 period (1909–1912) was a time of transformation, which highlights its prominence as an important time in novel writing.¹⁵ Ever since the mid-Ming dynasty, dignitaries, literati and the lower classes had become fond of novels. *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義, for instance, appealed to the cultural psyche of the masses; it uses a storyline in which characters use others' resources for their own ends, and folk songs and popular ditties with which they communicate with each other. The story has been passed down to the present day in Mongolia and translated into Mongolian. Some literati thus wrote a large number of novels, which spread to the imperial court and to ordinary folk. Many critics also emerged, as did novels with commentaries by famous writers, which were widely appreciated. For instance, in *Xiaoting*

14 Min Erchang 閔爾昌, comp., *Bei zhuan jibu* 碑傳集補, vol. 100 of *Jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan* 近代中國史料叢刊, ed. Shen Yunlong 沈雲龍 (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe youxian gongsi, 1973), 54.

15 Feng Baoshan 馮保善, "Lun Jiangsu Ming Qing xiaoshuo chuanguo de lishi fenqi" 論江蘇明清小說創作的歷史分期, *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小說研究, no. 1 (2018): 4–18.

xulu 嘯亭續錄, Qing dynasty imperial clansman Zhaolian 昭槿 (1776–1830) said that many literati had been enthusiastic critics of novels since the time of literary critic Jin Shengtian 金聖嘆 (1608–1661). Critiqued novels such as *Shuihu zhuan* and *Jinpingmei* were frequently displayed on desks in the homes of scholar-officials.¹⁶

During the late Qing dynasty, certain novels were adapted for *pingju* 評劇 opera and became widespread.¹⁷ The subject matter of some novels made them absolute bestsellers; this promoted collaboration between bookstores and literary producers, including Suzhou's Feng Menglong and Ling Mengchu 凌濛初 (1580–1644) from Huzhou 湖州. Feng's stories in *San-yan* 三言, selected from much-loved Song and Yuan vernacular stories, were enormously popular. Because of this, after he had failed the imperial examination, Ling compiled *Er-pai* 二拍 in Nanjing at the request of a bookstore owner and based on Feng's style.¹⁸

Erotic novels had been prevalent since the late Ming dynasty. Some unconventional literati wrote and sold erotic novels to bookstores for a profit. Among these shameless people was one who went by the sobriquet Baiyun Daoren 白云道人 (dates unknown); at the request of bookstores, he specialized in concocting this type of vulgar writing. He wrote in succession such erotic novels as *Saihua ling* 賽花鈴, *Chundeng nao* 春燈鬧, *Taohua ying* 桃花影, and *Chundeng mishi* 春燈迷史. One person complained bitterly about the books' shortcomings:

Their drawbacks lie in their lack of substance and use of trickery to describe obscene plots. They do not hesitate to use bizarre and obscene descriptions for the sake of making money, yet do so without knowing that they are instead bait for the wicked mind.¹⁹

Erotic novels were relatively popular during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Ming dynasty erotica originated in palace intrigues, labelled as *shi* 史 (history). It also originated in love novels depicting the private lives of the emotions,

16 Zhaolian 昭槿, *Xiaoting xulu* 嘯亭續錄 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 2.427.

17 Zheng Xiuqin 鄭秀琴, "Lun Cheng Zhaocai pingju dui Ming Qing xiaoshuo de gaibian" 論成兆才評劇對明清小說的改編, *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小說研究, no. 2 (2018): 138–52.

18 Ling Mengchu 凌濛初, *Erke pa'an jingqi* 二刻拍案驚奇, comp. Zhang Peiheng 章培恒, annot. Wang Gulu 王古魯 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1983).

19 Huoshi Daoren 霍市道人, *Xing fengliu* 醒風流 (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1984).

indicated by the word *yuan* 緣 (fate).²⁰ Although the imperial court repeatedly issued book bans, such books continued to circulate; there were many reasons for this, but it is beyond doubt that “the huge external force of commercial profits”²¹ and popular preferences, and “especially the preferences of the scholar-officials,”²² were among them. Literati took pleasure in commenting on and writing prefaces to erotic fiction such as that found in the well-known classic novels *Sanguo yanyi*, *Shuihu zhuan*, *Xiyou ji*, *Honglou meng*, *Rulin wai-shi* and *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異. Although their commentaries and prefaces mixed praise with criticism, to a certain degree they nonetheless promoted the creation and dissemination of erotic novels. In scholarly circles, erotic fiction was categorized under novels of manners. This category of fiction was particularly in vogue in Jiangnan, and there was a vast amount of it. The Qing dynasty imperial court’s four largest bans on erotic novels all occurred in Jiangnan. Feng Baoshan 馮保善 holds that:

There was a multitude of readers of erotic fiction in Jiangnan. There was an exceptionally broad established consumer market for novels of manners, a fact that should be beyond dispute. Although this is not the sole reason, it is nonetheless a key factor that explains why novels of manners in Jiangnan was in a league of its own.²³

It is difficult to argue against this statement.

2 The Influence of Literati Livelihoods on Novel and Opera Writing

To a certain extent, the pursuit of livelihoods among literati fostered the creation of a large number of literary works, especially Ming and Qing dynasty novels and operas. These two factors formed a sound interaction. On the one hand, by pursuing livelihoods, literati could receive a salary, improve their living

20 Li Xiaolong 李小龍, “Ming dai yanqing xiaoshuo yi ‘shi,’ ‘yuan’ erzi mingming shixi” 明代艷情小說以“史”、“緣”二字命名試析, *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小說研究, no. 4 (2018): 123–36.

21 Wang Junming 王軍明, “Yanqing xiaoshuo liuxing xianxiang toushi yu Qing dai xiaoshuo xuba” 艷情小說流行現象透視與清代小說序跋, *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小說研究, no. 1 (2014): 50.

22 *Ibid.*, 50.

23 Feng Baoshan 馮保善, “Lun Ming Qing Jiangnan shiqing xiaoshuo chuban de xiaoshuo shi yiyi” 論明清江南世情小說出版的小說史意義, *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小說研究, no. 1 (2015): 83–97.

environments in the Ming and Qing eras, and lay a certain economic foundation for later Ming and Qing novels and operas; on the other hand, through reader acceptance and market feedback, they put forward requirements for literary creation that closely aligned with readers and the market, and to a certain degree brought about changes in the subject matter and artistry of novels and operas. The pursuit of livelihoods among literati also had a certain positive effect on the transmission of literary works. On the one hand, via co-operation between literati and book sellers, the former established sales and distribution channels for their works, and promoted the development of the publishing industry. Ming and Qing novels and operas in particular constantly won social recognition and approval, broadening the acceptance of novels and operatic works. On the other hand, following the continued spread of Ming and Qing novels and operas, booksellers' profits continued to expand, and literati salaries continued to climb, furthering the creative impetus among them.

In terms of the subject matter of novels and operas, there was a departure from Tang dynasty *canjun* drama and Tang tales (*chuanqi* 傳奇). Ming and Qing dramas and vernacular fiction came into being on a foundation laid by "consciously created"²⁴ Yuan variety plays and Tang tales. The rise of vernacular fiction in particular conformed to the literary aesthetic tastes of the urban classes. There was a trend toward diversification of subject matter; full-length vernacular fiction and vernacular stories collections appeared in great numbers. In terms of the types of fictional content, Ming and Qing vernacular novels were rich and color: novels of romance, the supernatural, chivalry, current affairs and manners were largely either unknown to previous dynasties or just beginning to emerge. The storylines and framework of the novels in the integrated storybook series *San-yan*, which were Song and Yuan storybooks collected by Feng Menglong, and of *Er-pai*, the collection of fictional stories compiled by Ling Mengchu, were mostly drawn from the literature of previous eras. Nonetheless, both Feng and Ling were able to use the vernacular to rework these creations to varying degrees. These aligned with the aesthetic preferences of the people of the time, and were universally loved. They had a lasting influence on later generations' storybook writing; subsequent storybooks and fictional stories have largely failed to break out of their mold. The four most remarkable novels of the Ming dynasty – *Sanguo yanyi*, *Shuihu zhuan*, *Xiyou ji* and *Jinpingmei* pioneered the four themes of full-length vernacular fiction in their own ways, and had a deep influence on later generations' development of that format. Although *Liaozhai zhiyi*, written in classical Chinese, later rose to

24 Lu Xun 魯迅, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shiliie* 中國小說史略 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), 39.

prominence for a time, being considered a representative work, it was soon spent force, and it was difficult to imagine that classical Chinese fiction would ever recover the glory of its Tang tales heyday.

With respect to distinct artistic features, literati made many innovations in order to satisfy the demands of the cultural marketplace, such as “chasing the strange and the beautiful,” colloquialization, the use of slang and so forth. In *Sanguo yanyi*, for example, there are numerous hair-raising descriptions of war scenes and strategies; the Three Kingdoms culture thus lives on in perpetuity. The legendary story of the heroes of Mount Liang 梁山 as described in *Shuihu zhuan*, the thrilling adventure of acquiring scriptures in India as described in *Xiyou ji*, and the descriptions of social norms in *Jinpingmei*, are compelling and thought-provoking. *San-yan* and *Er-pai* mainly depict the world in its numerous forms, and were loved by the lower classes. In terms of language, vernacular fiction adopted easily-understood words, including many colloquial terms, slang and local dialects, dramatically closing the gap with the lower classes. *Honglou meng* is a masterpiece among novels of manners, and is known as the pinnacle work of pre-modern Chinese vernacular fiction. Its descriptions of the rise and fall of a feudal noble family and of the love between Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉 and Lin Daiyu 林黛玉 are profound and sobering. *Rulin waishi* explores the details of the scholarly life, and makes readers sigh again and again with emotion.

In terms of ideological content, Ming and Qing novels and operas possess a strong sense of the times. For instance, Ming dynasty novels and operas castigate repulsiveness and foster patriotic feeling via interpretations of representative figures from history such as powerful and treacherous court officials, which is especially evident in the story of “karmic retribution against Qin Hui” and interpretations based on the image of Jia Sidao 賈似道 (1213–1275).²⁵ *Sanguo yanyi* denounces Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220) and glorifies Liu Bei 劉備 (161–223); *Shuihu zhuan* describes the Mount Liang heroes attempting to carry out “Heaven’s justice”; *Xiyou ji* depicts fearlessness; *Jinpingmei* portrays the rise and fall of the Ximen 西門 clan; the *San-yan Er-pai* collections show urban culture; *Honglou meng* depicts the rise and fall of a great clan; *Rulin waishi* illustrate explorations of scholarly life; and the “scholar-beauty” (*caizi jiaren* 才

25 For specific discussions, please see Tan Xiao 譚笑, “Ming dai xiaoshuo xiqu zhong ‘Qin Hui mingbao’ gushi de yanbian” 明代小說戲曲中“秦檜冥報”故事的演變, *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小說研究, no. 2 (2019): 102–14; Zhang Chunxiao 張春曉, “‘Quanjian’ de Ming dai yanyi – yi tongxu wenxue zhong Jia Sidao xingxiang shanbian wei zhongxin” “權奸”的明代演繹——以通俗文學中賈似道形象嬗變為中心, *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小說研究, no. 2 (2019): 88–101.

子佳人) novels express wonderful yearning. Whether these works used a previous dynasty as a pretext or directly portrayed the times in which they were written, most of them bear the imprint of the Ming and Qing eras.

Some writers not only earnestly practiced their craft and were engaged in the pursuit of livelihoods; in the process of creating literary works, they also depicted literati livelihoods themselves, to varying degrees. The descriptions of the careers of the literati in Ming and Qing literary sketches were reflections of the realities of literati and their livelihoods. For instance, in Luo Guanzhong's 羅貫中 (ca. 1330–ca. 1400) *Sanguo yanyi*, Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 (181–234) “worked as a farmer in Nanyang 南陽 with his younger brother Zhuge Jun 諸葛均”²⁶ before leaving his rustic retreat to assist the ruler Liu Bei. Other well-known figures, such as Xu Shu 徐庶 (dates unknown), Pang Tong 龐統 (179–214), Xun Yu 荀彧 (163–212), Xun You 荀攸 (157–214), Jia Xu 賈詡 (147–223), and Guo Jia 郭嘉 (170–207) were all outstanding advisers who attached themselves to heroes in turbulent times. In *Jinpingmei*, Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 蘭陵笑笑生 (dates unknown) depicts several literati, such as the principal graduate (*zhuangyuan* 狀元) Cai Yun 蔡蘊, the presented scholar An Chen 安忱, and cultivated talents (*xiuca* 秀才) Wen Bigu 溫必古 and Shui Xiucan 水秀才 as all engaging, to varying degrees, in some form of livelihood. Cai Yun and An Chen, the two newly presented scholars, arrive at Ximen Qing's 西門慶 mansion to sponge on him; the unknown cultivated talents Wen Bigu and Shui Xiucan, owing to life's predicaments, take up teaching posts at the same mansion.²⁷ In *Yushi mingyan* 喻世明言, Feng Menglong describes Yang Balao 楊八老 as approaching thirty years old. Having failed an imperial examination, Yang trades the scholarly life for a life of commerce and travels to Fujian and Guangdong for business. In *Chuke pai'an jingqi* 初刻拍案驚奇, Ling Mengchu tells the story of Suzhou native Wen Ruoxu 文若虛. Wen, who lived during the Chenghua 成化 period (1465–1467), was initially poor at business and squandered his inheritance. Later, he follows some friends overseas. Mid-journey, his luck turns, and he sells tangerines to make his fortune. In chapter three of *Huanxi yuanjia* 歡喜冤家, Xihu yuyin Zhuren 西湖漁隱主人 describes how intellectual Wang Wenfu 王文甫 failed in his studies but inherited ancestral property, gave up the scholarly life and left home to go into business. In chapter six of *Liancheng Bi* 連城壁, Li Yu 李漁 describes how

26 Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中, *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義, ed. Hou Ying 侯穎 and Guo Junfeng 郭俊峰, comment. Wang Ailan 王愛蘭 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), 1: 216.

27 See Xu Yongbin 徐永斌, “*Jinpingmei cihua zhong de wenshi zhisheng*” 《金瓶梅詞話》中的文士治生, *Nankai xuebao* 南開學報, no. 5 (2013): 73–77.

young intellectual Qin Shiliang 秦世良, whose family's prospects were bleak, could not make ends meet, and was forced to abandon the scholarly life and go into business. He first opened a small shop, and later went into maritime trade, which made him immensely wealthy. In *Shenlou zhi* 蜃樓志, Yuling Laoren 庾嶺勞人 describes how following the death of his father, Su Jushi 蘇吉士 inherited family assets, and without hesitation gave up the scholarly life to go into business; he refused an imperial summons and was unmoved by the temptations of high office, becoming an outstanding representative for young southern Chinese overseas merchants in the Qing dynasty. In *Liaozhai zhiyi*, Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715) also wrote several stories with plots involving intellectuals who, for various reasons, give up a life of scholarship for a life of business. For example, “Luo cha haishi” 羅刹海市 depicts Ma Ji 馬驥, from a merchant family, whose aging father “closes up his business and returns to his hometown.”²⁸ Ma Ji's father persuades his son to carry on his business, giving up scholarship for commerce; “Lei cao” 雷曹 describes how, after repeated examination failures, Le Yunhe 樂雲鶴 is confronted with the question of his livelihood, and has no choice but to give up the scholarly life and go into business. Six months later, he achieves a modicum of success; “Fang Wenshu” 房文淑 describes how Deng Chengde 鄧成德 opens a private school, but finds that teaching is no easy way to sustain a livelihood. Feeling ashamed about returning home, he then abandons his teaching career for a life of business away from home. After four years, he makes a profit and returns home. In “Shushen zuosui” 書神作祟 of *Xieduo* 諧鐸, Shen Qifeng 沈起鳳 (b. 1741) describes a Jinling scholar born into a Confucian family; book learning does not bring him wealth, so he gives up the scholarly life and goes into business. The majority of these novels' descriptions of literati forging their careers are dependent on the need for fictional characterization and storyline construction; they are not the focal point of the narratives. It can be said that these descriptions merely set the tone for the novels. *Honglou meng* and *Rulin waishi* are the most outstanding examples of full-length vernacular fiction that depict literati forging their careers. To varying degrees, both portray magnificent scenes of literati developing livelihoods in cities and towns along and adjacent to the Grand Canal. In terms of their depictions of literati livelihoods, the two novels, particularly *Rulin waishi*, also correspond relatively closely to the environment in which career-forging literati lived during the Ming and Qing periods.

28 Pu Songling 蒲松齡, *Quanben Liaozhai zhiyi* 全本聊齋誌異, annot. Zhu Qikai 朱其鏗, Li Maosu 李茂肅, Li Boqi 李伯齊, and Mou Tong 牟通 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1989), 1: 4.480.

3 Conclusion

The pursuit of careers among literati was a cultural phenomenon that played a certain positive role in the creation and spread of Ming and Qing novels and operas. It surpassed previous dynasties both in terms of subject matter and artistic flavor, and in ideological and cultural content; it ushered in an age of splendor for Ming and Qing popular literary art and played a positive role in the inheritance and transmission of traditional Chinese culture. From this standpoint, conducting research into literati livelihoods, specifically the circumstances among literati based in Jiangnan cities and towns along and adjacent to the Grand Canal during the Ming and Qing dynasties, helps us look at the development of Ming and Qing literary art from a lateral perspective. This is due to the fact that many Ming and Qing literary works were written by literati from Jiangnan or those from other areas who had taken up residence in the region; furthermore, the majority of these literati either lived along the canal or traveled back and forth in the area or its adjacent areas.²⁹ Among them, Feng Menglong and Ling Mengchu were not only representative of literati who pursued livelihoods, but certain of the works in the *San-yan Er-pai* collections depict the Grand Canal. Based on a statistic from Miao Jing 苗菁, fourteen of the works contained in *Er-pai* depict the Grand Canal.³⁰ Among the stories created in the fertile soil of the Jiangnan canal region was the widely-told love story between Bai Niangzi 白娘子 and Xu Xian 許仙. “Baishe chuanshuo” 白蛇傳說 has been recounted many times in such storybooks as the Song dynasty’s *Xihu santa ji* 西湖三塔記, *Xihu youlan zhi* 西湖遊覽志 by Ming writer Tian Rucheng 田汝成 (1505–1553), and *Xiaochuang ziji* 小窗自紀 by Wu Congxian 吳從先. Building on this foundation, Qing dynasty operatic writers Huang Tubi 黃圖琿 (b. 1699) and Fang Chengpei 方成培 (1713–1808) each adapted the story into the Kunqu operas 昆劇 *Leifeng ta chuanqi* 雷峰塔傳奇 and *Leifeng ta* 雷峰塔; it was again adapted for Shaoxing opera in the late Qing and early Republican eras. Hangzhou, Suzhou and Zhenjiang, settings for Feng Menglong’s *Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言, “are all situated precisely on the Grand Canal; in this story, the style of social life along the banks of the Grand Canal in the Jiangnan region unfolds before our eyes.”³¹ We can say that

29 Zhao Weiping 趙維平, *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yu yunhe wenhua* 明清小說與運河文化 (Shanghai: Shanghai sanlian shudian, 2005).

30 Miao Jing 苗菁, “San Yan Er Pai’ zhong de Ming dai gushi yu Jing-Hang Dayunhe” “三言二拍” 中的明代故事與京杭大運河, *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小說研究, no. 1 (2018): 106–114.

31 Wang Jue 王珏, “Cong ‘Baishe zhuan’ gushi tanjiu Ming Qing Jiangnan Dayunhe liang’an chengzhen de shehui shenghuo” 從“白蛇傳”故事探究明清江南大運河兩岸城鎮的社會生活, *Ming Qing xiaoshuo yanjiu* 明清小說研究, no. 4 (2019): 46.

Jiangnan, or the fertile soil along the canal, gave rise to these literary giants and their enduring works.

Translated by Damien Kinney

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