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# Ethos and Karma: the Construction of Business Ethics and Social Ethics in Popular Novels from the 16th to 18th Centuries

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## Abstract

The common concept of karma and retribution in the general religious life of Chinese society was not only expressed in the popular literature that has flourished since the Song dynasty, but also reacted to society through the processing, refining, and deepening of popular fiction. Popular novels from the 16th to 18th centuries synchronized with the fresh ideas of New Chan Buddhism, New Daoism, and New Confucianism, which gradually developed an ethos and karma model. It used real life as a metaphor for explaining cause and effect in the construction of new business and social ethics that were urgently needed at the time. The business ethics it reflected and constructed not only included the affirmation of business and the advocacy of hard work to obtain wealth and promote fair competition, but also criticized blindly pursuing profits, especially emphasizing that wealth was determined by destiny and could not be forced. The core of the new social ethics was to establish rules connecting traditional morality and becoming rich, which not only stressed that scholars, farmers, craftsmen, and businessmen should do their parts, but also always put scholarly study as the highest pursuit; while criticizing social injustice, people still strongly desired to pass the imperial examination. This paper examines the great social changes that were occurring in the Ming dynasty, especially in the areas of business ethics and the perception of wealth, through popular literature from Ming China.

## Keywords

popular fiction – business ethics – social ethics – 16th to 18th centuries

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Since the Song dynasty (960–1279), Chinese society gradually underwent a period of modernization. Yu Ying-shih 余英時 (Yu Yingshi, 1930–2021) investigated this change according to Max Weber's (1864–1920) theory, and believed that the New Chan Buddhism, New Daoism, and New Confucianism carried out new constructions in both religious ethics and Confucian ethics, and brought about profound changes in the overall society.<sup>1</sup> Yu's views were very wise, but they did not address how the new theories constructed by Confucian ethics were transmitted and applied to the society. It is commonly known that, historically, Chinese politics put the most emphasis on top-down education, but before the Song dynasty, this kind of education could not narrow the gap between the various traditions. From the 16th to 18th centuries, Chinese society underwent major advancements. As Yu Ying-shih pointed out, the new ethics greatly affected the general concepts of society; although there were changes of dynasties and regimes led by ethnic minorities, overall progress was been interrupted,<sup>2</sup> and the socio-cultural community was continuously strengthened. Obviously, if we agree that the cultural superstructure had an interactive relationship with the development of business economy, the intensification of social mobility, and the stability of social community in modern times, the problem of how had the new ethical spirit acted on the general society and performed its functions must be resolved first.

Popular literature, which flourished in the 16th century, had a universal appeal because of its secularity and commodification, and it was an important spiritual force for spiritual construction. The constructive nature of popular literature was one of the core factors for the new ethical spirit to act on society: popular literature not only participated in the shaping and strengthening of the new ethical spirit to a great extent, but it also played the chief role of carrying and disseminating this new type of ethics, realizing the functions of communicating between the upper and lower classes and integrating traditions. For a long time, various studies have ignored this, not only making it impossible to understand how the mechanism of the new religious ethical spirit acted on the general society, but also making it impossible to truly understand the essence of this new ethical spirit. Obviously, the construction of popular literature in the modernization of Chinese society needs to be studied in depth. This article takes typical popular novels from the 16th to 18th centuries as examples to analyze the ethical spirit constructed by them.

1 See Yu Ying-shih [Yu Yingshi] 余英時, *Rujia lunli yu shangren jingshen* 儒家倫理與商人精神, vol. 3 of *Yu Yingshi wenji* 余英時文集 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2014), 234–357.

2 *Ibid.*, 162–212.

## 1 Ethical Construction Model of Popular Fiction and the Changing Concept of Causation

The idea of karma and retribution was formed by combining the foreign Buddhist theory of karma and reincarnation with the native Chinese belief that “accumulating kindness will bring fortune, accumulating evil will bring calamity”<sup>3</sup> 積善之家，必有餘慶；積不善之家，必有餘殃，as well as the ethical causation of ancestors and descendants mutually bearing the good and evil retributions. It became a core concept in the general religious life of Chinese society. Although elite literature had long advocated the notion of karma, the works that significantly carried forward this concept and made a difference to the society were popular literature, especially the popular novels that emerged after the middle of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). This was because popular novels were created in the hands of middle-class authors. They were a literary form that communicated the various traditions, elite literature, folk literature, and integrated general social concepts that resonated with ordinary people. Therefore, the concept of karma in general thinking naturally became a constant expression and enlightenment theme. At the same time, karma was not only expressed in popular literature, but the idea itself also reacted to the general society through the processing, refining, and deepening of popular literature.

From the 16th to 18th centuries, the ethos novels had various sources of contents and rich descriptions of the real society, but the religious narrative of karma was still a core theme. The original intention of their compilations, whether it was Feng Menglong’s 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) “instruct the world” 喻世, “warn the world” 警世, and “awaken the world” 醒世 or Ling Mengchu’s 凌濛初 (1580–1644) “cautionary satires of vice” 主於勸戒, they were all essentially the embodiments of an education desire to pursue eternal peace. After the mid-Ming dynasty, the theme of persuasion and punishment in popular novels was becoming popular,<sup>4</sup> and it became more prominent after Zhou Ji 周楫 (1446–1505) wrote *Xihu erji* 西湖二集.

The education consciousness of the authors was divided into two groups: active and subconscious. With the deepening of separation between compiling and publishing, and the continuous participation of authors in higher education and high social status, the active enlightenment consciousness

3 *Songben Zhouyi* 宋本周易, annot. Wang Bi 王弼 and Han Kangbo 韓康伯, trans. Lu Deming 陸德明 (Beijing: Guojia tushuguan chubanshe, 2017), 14.

4 Liu Yongqiang 劉勇強, *Zhongguo gudai xiaoshuo shi xulun* 中國古代小說史敘論 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2007), 369.

became more obvious. *Gelian huaying* 隔簾花影, an anonymous novel from around the early 18th century, was one of the most typical reflections of this active consciousness. The education consciousness in the subconscious was more important, because it exerted its influence imperceptibly through the charm of literature itself. Early novels such as Shi Nai'an's 施耐庵 (1296–1372) *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳, Luo Guanzhong's 羅貫中 (ca. 1330–ca. 1400) *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義, Wu Cheng'en's 吳承恩 (1506–1582) *Xiyou ji* 西遊記, and the 18th-century novels such as Wu Jingzi's 吳敬梓 (1701–1754) *Rulin waishi* 儒林外史 and Cao Xueqin's 曹雪芹 (1715–1763) *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢, all contained some kind of educational concepts in the depths of consciousness in the creation of hope, allegory, and life experiences. Even for “books of street vendors” (*ditan shu* 地攤書) such as pornography, books of the strange and grotesque, and other books that were purely for making money, the owners of the bookstores often displayed a banner to the effect of “The way of heaven will punish those who are greedy for pornography” 天道禍淫, “The original intention of the books is to serve as a reference for those who are obsessed with pornography” 此說原為淫者戒, or “My heart is originally kind, and the book is passed on to good people to read” 吾心本善, 斯書傳與善人看 (inside the Qing-issue of *Rou putuan* 肉蒲團).

The existence of active and subconscious enlightenment concepts could explain why karma even became a theme in most popular novels from the Ming and Qing (1616–1911) dynasties to modern times. Regardless of whether a novel took karma as the fundamental theme, or whether its content was teaching history, supernatural things, love stories, or errant knights, the final text would always be framed in a karma structure. It goes without saying that, for authors who consciously educated themselves, their works would not only deliberately construct this model in terms of genre, content, and theme, but also clearly put forward the educational proposition of karma and retribution from the very beginning. As for the authors of subconscious education, they often embedded some patterned frame and formal introduction at the beginning, the end, or a certain key point of the work to express their endorsement of karma. As for those bookstore owners and hired writers, out of the need for remedial measures, or to avoid the criticism and prohibition of orthodoxy concerning “indulging in obscenity and stealing” (*hui yin hui dao* 誨淫誨盜), they would also inevitably take the initiative to add the formal element of karma in their compiled and edited works.

In the popular novels that gradually emerged since the 16th century, in addition to using this moral and ethical principle consciously to serve education, the specific content and manner of expression of karma underwent major changes.

First of all, the descriptions of the novels were very close to real life, not just simple presentations of the theme of karma. For example, the Feng Menglong's *San-yan* 三言 and Ling Mengchu's *Er-pai* 二拍 involved karma, although there were archetypal stories to follow, and the teachings were clear, even though most of the works also had real-life backgrounds and the plots were vivid. The original story of "Jiang xingge chong hui zhenzhu shan" 蔣興哥重會珍珠衫, and Feng Menglong's original intention of rewriting it was retribution; but after reading the novel, apart from the amazing coincidences, one can hardly notice the theme of karma in it. The reason was that the focus of the novel was on describing the state of the world. Whether it was the characterization of Jiang Xingge and his wife Sanqiao'er 三巧兒, or the detailed description of Chen Dalang's 陳大郎 seduction of women, they were all vivid and natural, in line with the conditions at the time. The lesson of admonishment was almost lost in the novel. Although Sanqiao'er made a mistake and changed her status from wife to concubine, she reunited with her husband in the end. The only possible villain, Chen Dalang, also died of love but not a karmic punishment. Therefore, even when the theme came first, if life could be an effective guarantee, its literary significance would not be reduced. Of course, there were also works with a heavy didactic meaning, such as some chapters in *Er-pai*, but there were also detailed reproductions of life in it.

The second was the important point that the beginning of karma was not limited to three generations of cause and effect, or the cycle of life and death, but more of retribution in this life, which greatly highlighted the reality of "accumulating kindness will bring fortune, accumulating evil will bring calamity." Of course, there were also chapters in the vernacular stories that used reincarnation and hell tours as karma theories, but they were rare; most of them were still based on stories of karma in this world. Scholars have pointed out the above characteristics, and attributed them to the fact that the karma of humans had replaced karma of heaven, and the causal relationship was reflected in human behavior and human relationships.<sup>5</sup> This was a wise point of view, which effectively revealed the ethical nature of karma in social life.

It is particularly worth noting that this kind of worldly karma was mainly manifested in "becoming rich and making a fortune" (*bian tai faji* 變泰發迹), and the concept of prosperity was mostly expressed through business enterprises and imperial examination. Ling Mengchu's so-called "talking about ethos and causations," in essence was through ethos to show the karma of prosperity, and ethos and karma were inseparable.

5 Sun Xun 孫遜, *Zhongguo gudai xiaoshuo yu zongjiao* 中國古代小說與宗教 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2000), 245-52.

In short, the idea of karma was that:

Good will be rewarded with good, evil will be rewarded with evil; it is not that it will not be rewarded, but the time has not come yet. That day's public operator will remember each deed clearly. Throughout the ages, he has not let anyone go.<sup>6</sup>

This idea was evidently expressed in popular novels in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The karma of ethos and causation in “Yiwen qian xiaoxi zao qiyuan” 一文錢小隙造奇冤, in *Xing shi heng yan* 醒世恆言 was different from the old religious fundamentalism that emphasized the karma and retribution and reincarnation. The secular nature of popular literature determined that its content must be synchronized with social change. Therefore, the changes in the manifestation of karma in popular novels in the Ming dynasty, especially *San-yan Er-pai*, were not just the general beliefs of society, they were also the embodiment of its purpose of construction according to societal needs.

## 2 The Birth of Business Ethics: Prosperity and Moral Causation

The rise of a commodity economy and the emergence of commercial capital in the mid-Ming dynasty brought about a clearer awareness of the social stratification between scholars, farmers, craftsmen, and businessmen, and the recognition of the merchant class, as well as phenomena such as abandoning Confucianism for business and the closer interaction between scholars and merchants.<sup>7</sup> All these were reflected in the ethos novels at the time and thereafter. The popular novels participated in the construction of business ethics, together with the religious principles and Confucian elite ideologies at the time.

Business ethics since the Ming dynasty had two main aspects. One was the contractual spirit, which emphasized honesty and fairness in transactions. The second was the ethics of commercial activities in general. That was to say, businesses must consider the public interest, and becoming rich must be not come at the expense of public welfare.

The first aspect of business ethics mentioned above was of course the concern of popular literature. Unlike Zhang Yingyu's 張應俞 (fl. 1500–1520) *Du*

6 Feng Menglong 馮夢龍, comp., *Xingshi hengyan* 醒世恆言, annot. Wei Tonxian 魏同賢, *Zhongguo huaben daxi* 中國話本大系 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1991), 766.

7 Yu Ying-shih, *Rujia lunli yu shangren jingshen*, 164–71.

*pian xinshu* 杜騙新書 which focused on exposing fraud, the stories in *San-yan Er-pai* basically showed business activities from a positive perspective. The best example was a story from *Chu ke pai'an jingqi* 初刻拍案驚奇, the theme of which was the story of a change of fortune achieved by overseas trade belts. As one of the very typical commercial chapters in *Er-pai*, it vividly reflected the essential characteristics of commercial trade activities and the external guarantees and internal principles.

Business activities were based on market principles, and between the two sides of a transaction, the game must be ethical in order to form a good business environment. “Shi runze tanque yu you” 施潤澤灘闕遇友, in *Xing shi heng yan*, expounded this truth from the opposite side: Shi Fu’s 施復 second profit was due to a house transaction. It is natural for a house seller to bargain for a higher price, but they deliberately made things difficult in the negotiation, even going so far as to dismantle the house when they left. Because of this, the unvirtuous seller lost the gold buried in the ground under the house, and the virtuous Shi Fu gained a fortune. After Shi Fu got the gold, he became more philanthropic, and “in less than 10 years, his family wealth increased by thousands of pieces of gold.”<sup>8</sup> Here, karma became an important force of belief in regulating the rules of the game.

In popular novels represented by works such as *San-yan Er-pai*, more important was the second aspect of business ethics, which was the expression and construction of social business ethics. Although commerce in the mid and late Ming dynasty was developed, it was still a low-level commerce relying on regional economies and local monopolies.<sup>9</sup> Huge profits led to the emergence of nouveau riche. Wang Shixing 王士性 (1547–1598) in the Wanli 萬曆 period (1573–1620) said that “Millionaires have appeared in Jiangnan.”<sup>10</sup> Under such circumstances, the phenomenon of being rich and unkind was bound to happen. At the end of the Ming dynasty, at least in the southeast region of China where commerce was developed, the mentality of blindly seeking wealth began to appear, and the pursuit of pleasure had become the fashion of scholars. Inequality between the rich and the poor, class oppression and social and political corruption were getting worse. All of these posed new challenges to traditional social morality.

8 Feng Menglong, *Xingshi hengyan*, 364.

9 Lin Feng 林楓, “Mingdai zhonghouqi shangye fazhan shuiping de zai renshi” 明代中後期商業發展水平的再認識, *Zhongguo shehui jingjishi yanjiu* 中國社會經濟史研究, no. 4 (2003): 43–51.

10 Wang Shixing 王士性, *Guang zhi yi* 廣志繹, annot. Lü Jinglin 呂景琳 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), vol. 2.

Facing the rapidly changing social reality, there were two different attitudes: criticism of traditional ideas, and welcoming emerging ideas. However, these two opposite attitudes also had one thing in common – the call for an active construction of new ethics. At the same time, different classes had different ways of responding to these, and naturally there were also various directions of construction. The middle class and the popular literary works created by them were undoubtedly the most important in terms of their influence on the overall society.

Popular fiction made two key contributions to the social ethics of business.

The first was to create a positive attitude towards commerce, businessmen, and especially towards wealth in general. It encouraged making money from business as an important means of raising a family. This differed from the traditional ideas of scholar-bureaucrats who looked down upon merchants. Examples abound in Ming era novels. One story was “Xu laopu yifen chengjia” 徐老僕義憤成家, in *Xing shi heng yan*, which showed that a weak person who had been treated unfairly could become rich quickly through business and redeem his social standing. Another story was *Gufeng* 古風 quoted in “Yang laoba yue guo qi feng” 楊老八越國奇逢, in *Yu shi ming yan* 喻世明言, which showed a deep understanding of and an infinite sympathy for businessmen.

Of course, these works without exception criticized the phenomenon of unjust gain, and applied the principle of “wealth is determined by destiny” (*cai fen tian ding* 財分天定) to oppose greed for excessive wealth or ill-gotten wealth. But this kind of criticism did not constitute a negation of the previous attitude, but rather a strengthening of it. The reason was that the ancient Chinese concept of “righteousness and benefit” (*yi li* 義利) was consistent in their core. After all, the affirmation of profit in business was based on moral justice, so the profit of public interest was not opposed to the profit of righteousness.

Many of these stories established a pattern of causation between morality and wealth: obtaining wealth in the wrong way would not only be harmful, but also one's wealth would not last long. On the contrary, if one was kind and philanthropic, one would eventually become rich, and the blessings would reach one's offspring. This law was not new, and it could be said to be the consistent moral connotation of karma since ancient times. The problem was that it was precisely this moral law that was ruthlessly broken by the rise of capitalism after the mid-Ming dynasty. A middle class with widespread resentment and a sense of frustration demanded the reconstruction of a more ethical economy and business environment. This was obviously an ideal and unavoidably illusory, but the power created by ideals was infinite, so authors relied on their only tool of expression – popular literature – to create and elaborate.



The authors of popular novels were certainly devoted to the discussions, but they all knew that the main method to construct commercial social ethics was the realistic narrative of karma, and the “reason of karma is hidden in the horror stories.”<sup>11</sup> The establishment of the causal law of morality and wealth required a very suitable storyline. In this regard, “Wang yuweng she jing chong sanbao, baishui seng dao wu sang shuangsheng” 王漁翁舍鏡崇三寶，白水僧盜物喪雙生, in *Er-ke pai'an jingqi* 二刻拍案驚奇, and “Shi runze tanque yu you,” in *Xing shi heng yan*, were two typical examples. These two works were based on the same motif: “money is either spiritual, or under the manipulation of the gods, so it grows its own legs to walk (or appear) where it should be; nobody can change its destination.”<sup>12</sup> had examples of coincidences in life and utilized typical and refined plots, using a perfect narrative to show that “money chases people and cannot be waved away; what is not destined to exist, one cannot force to come.”<sup>13</sup> The ideological theme was that “being deceitful and greedy for other people’s belongings, those things could not be used and the people would be punished,”<sup>14</sup> which proved the charm of literature to influence people’s minds.

Generally speaking, the construction of commercial social ethics in popular novels was in sync with the construction of religious ethics in the social and religious life of China at the time, such as a registry of good and evil deeds, enlightenment books, and treasured scrolls of exhortations to kindness. Both social and religious ethics belonged to a common religious consciousness of the people that transcended the differences between officials, commoners, rich and poor,<sup>15</sup> therefore the fundamental core connotation of the karma principle was completely consistent.

### 3 Construction of Social Ethics: Social Mobility and Retribution

In general, the degree of social mobility in historic China was not high. However, some major changes occurred starting from the Ming dynasty

11 Yixuan Zhuren 怡軒主人, “Yu mu xing xin bian xu” 娛目醒心編序, in *Ming Qing xiaoshuo ziliao huibian* 明清小說資料彙編, ed. Zhu Yixuan 朱一玄 (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 2012), 948.

12 Feng Menglong, *Xingshi hengyan*, 370.

13 Ibid.

14 Ling Mengchu 凌濛初, *Er-ke pai'an jingqi* 二刻拍案驚奇, annot. Shi Changyu 石昌渝, *Zhongguo huaben daxi* 中國話本大系 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1990), 683.

15 Sakai Tadao 酒井忠夫, *Zhongguo shanshu yanjiu* 中國善書研究, trans. Liu Yuebing 劉岳兵 (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2010), 18.

due to the development of society, politics, and the economy, especially the commodity economy. Ho Ping-ti 何炳棣 (He Bingdi, 1917–2012) conducted a comprehensive study on this topic, and concluded that, throughout the Ming and Qing eras, the social system was fluid and flexible compared to earlier eras, and there were no effective laws or social obstacles to prevent individuals and families from changing their social status. In the early Ming dynasty, due to the increasingly sophisticated imperial examination and honor-granting system, the popularization of schools, and other political and social conditions, the new social system allowed for mobility that was unprecedented in Chinese history. The trend of upward mobility for civilians declined sharply during the 16th century, and reached a low point in the late Qing dynasty. However, due to the doubling of the population and the stagnation of technology, the long-term downward trend of social mobility had always existed.<sup>16</sup> Although some research has questioned or supplemented this, Ho Ping-ti's viewpoint is widely accepted.

The mobility of upper and lower classes and changes in the status of scholars, farmers, craftsmen, and businessmen could be said to have become an important part of social change from the 16th to 18th centuries, and there was no significant interruption due to the change from the Ming to Qing dynasties. This can be verified not only from the analysis of historical materials, but also in popular novels. Although fictional novels cannot be used as material of historical reality, they are the best portrayal of historical situations. They not only reflected the mores and mentality of the society, but also expressed the views of the main body of literature on social phenomena and the pursuit of ideals. During the period of relatively intense social transformation, facing the reality of the ups and downs of social prosperity and decline, along with their own life experiences, the authors of popular literature had to think about these issues. Another important part of the content construction of karma in ethos novels was the reshaping of social mobility ethics.

The core content of these ethics was that the upward and downward mobility of society was determined by the accumulation of good and evil that there was a law of karma between traditional morality and social mobility. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the most important way of upward mobility was to become a scholar through the imperial examination, and the donations of wealthy families or businessmen were nothing more than gaining fame or an official position. Similarly, if the family failed to pass the imperial examination

16 Ho Ping-ti [He Bingdi] 何炳棣, *Ming Qing shehuishi lun* 明清社會史論, trans. and annot. Hsu Hong [Xu Hong] 徐泓 (Taipei: Lianjing chuban shiye gufen youxian gongsi, 2013), 316–26.

many times, and they had no money to donate to the government or to the prison, downward mobility was inevitable. Therefore, in the vast majority of Ming and Qing novels, the result of good karma was always to become rich, or for their children to pass the imperial examination.

Almost all novels about reality in the Ming and Qing dynasties used the imperial examination as an important content module. *San-yan Er-pai* and other imitative stories came first, followed by “scholar-beauty” (*caizijiaren* 才子佳人) novels in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, and *Rulin waishi* reflected this theme to the highest level. It is worth noting that the scholar-beauty novels also established a basic story mode that after encountering ups and downs, the characters finally passed the imperial examination and became scholar-officials to realize retribution in the end. This mode emerged, such as in “Zhang tingxiu taosheng jiu fu” 張廷秀逃生救父, “Zhang shu'er qiao zhi tuo Yang sheng” 張淑兒巧智脫楊生, in *San-yan*. This kind of good story structure with the reunion ending, success in the imperial examination, and consummation of a marriage, essentially reflected a collective ideal of the middle class: to pass the imperial exam to be promoted to the upper class.

The imperial exam was the only way to upward mobility, but it was extremely difficult, and most importantly, there was unfairness in it. Therefore, the authors of the novels especially emphasized that some of those who got lucky in the exam had no real talent or learning. *Xihu erji* Volume 20: “Qiao ji zuo fu chengming” 巧妓佐夫成名 borrowed the words of the prostitute Cao Miaoge 曹妙哥 that almost all the graduates (*Juren* 舉人) and presented scholar (*Jinshi* 進士) whom she served in her life were unbearable, which was a typical example. In “Si caizi shu xu” 四才子書序, Tianhuazang Zhuren 天花藏主人 especially cited the rarity of talent and talented people,<sup>17</sup> which was another good example. The emphasis on talent was essentially a hope for the fairness of the imperial examination and the dissatisfaction with many dark realities. Therefore, works such as *Ping shan leng yan* 平山冷燕 exaggerated the “talent and love” of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies to the extreme, and at the same time beautified the ending to perfection, which not only satisfied the author, but also the readers who had the same mentality as the author.

The expectation of fairness determined the specific value orientation of the law of karma that “accumulating kindness will bring more celebrations, accumulating evil will bring more calamities.” Kindness had many aspects: for scholars, abiding by etiquette, studying diligently, and not being greedy were

17 Tianhuazang Zhuren 天花藏主人, “Si caizi shu xu” 四才子書序, in *Ping shan leng yan* 平山冷燕, ed. Di'an Shanren 荻岸山人, annot. Feng Weiming 馮偉民 (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1983), 1.

the greatest guarantee for success in the imperial examination. For officials, honesty and integrity were enough to ensure that their descendants would succeed, even if they were orphans and widows and their families were poor, such as the eldest grandson Xiao 肖 in *Yu zhi ji* 玉支磯, who went through hardships and finally achieved first place in the imperial examination, received a high salary, and married a wife and had a concubine. For women, if they kept chaste and fulfilled their filial piety, their sons would be admitted to the imperial court and would obtain honor for their mothers, as in “Cai ruihong renru baochou” 蔡瑞虹忍辱報仇, in *Xing shi heng yan*. For a small businessman or a craftsman, as long as he was an honest and good person, his children and grandchildren studied hard, they also had progress, as in “Zhang tingxiu tao-sheng jiu fu,” in *Xing shi heng yan*. Even the son of an oil seller could “become famous through reading,” as in “Mai you lang duzhan huakui” 賣油郎獨占花魁, in *Xing shi heng yan*. Of course, evil did not simply refer to the great evil, because the retribution for evil deeds was beyond the punishment of downward flow. In the descriptions of ethos novels such as *San-yan Er-pai*, the evil was often greed, luxury or pleasure, prostitution, gambling, and other bad behaviors. For example, “Liang xianling jing yihun gunü” 兩縣令競義婚孤女, in *Xing shi heng yan*, Pan Hua’s 潘華 father, Pan Baiwan 潘百萬, “is nouveau riche, and his family affairs are flourishing day by day,” whereas Xiao Ya’s 蕭雅 father, Lieutenant Governor Xiao Biejia 蕭別駕, died in his office, and “the family has nothing to spare.” “It’s becoming more and more desolate.” But after marriage, Pan Hua devoted himself to whoring and gambling, and finally his family’s wealth was exhausted; while Xiao Ya studied hard, passed the imperial exam, and became an official with the position of Minister (*shangshu* 尚書). Obviously, the specific connotation of “good” and “evil” embodied the changing social milieu and reflected the subjective attitude of the authors of popular novels.

There was also an important content in the karma ethics that popular novels strived to construct, which was the advocacy that the change from high to low and poor to rich could happen in the blink of an eye and destiny was determined by heaven and could not be forced, which was related to “wealth is destiny” in business ethics. This was particularly evident in *Er-pai* where it was intended to enlighten, and it was also emphasized in other Ming and Qing novels. However, this was not a reaction to social mobility and its corresponding causal laws, but rather a complement to it. When upward and downward mobility occurred in an unfair situation, especially when power and wealth became the decisive force, it would inevitably cause a rebound from traditional forces, and those who violated morality and chased fame and fortune would be denied in the religious ethics.

“Zhang Xiaoji Chenliu ren jiu” 張孝基陳留認舅, in *Xing shi heng yan*, had a long discussion in the first chapter. The idea was that social stratification was a fact, and there was also a significant upward and downward mobility, but Confucian scholars were still the “upper class,” whereas farmers, craftsmen, and businessmen still had to work hard. The reason that scholars, farmers, craftsmen, and businessmen could carry out their businesses was the law of karma at work: “wealth is destiny and cannot be obtained by persistency, and hard work will help establish a family whereas prostitution and extravagance will destroy a family.” This paragraph could be used as a summary of the connotation of social ethics discussed in the section.

#### 4 Conclusion: New Ethics and Limitations of Popular Fictions from the 16th to 18th Centuries

The ethos and ethical karma reconstructed by popular novels from the 16th to 18th centuries were in sync with the changes in the ideologies of “New Chan Buddhism,” “New Daoism,” and “New Confucianism.” It emerged from the need for ethical construction in social mobility, and at the same time, it was a reflection of changes in the general concept of religious life in society, so it was a typical manifestation of the interactions among the economic base, social conditions, and religious thought.

From the point of view of the spirit of religious ethics that popular literature reflected, constructed, and transmitted, the business ethics that was constructed and reflected through ethos and causation included not only the affirmation of business, but also the advocacy of hard work to become rich by fair competition. Meanwhile, it also criticized the social fashion of blindly pursuing profit, and more importantly, it emphasized that wealth was determined by destiny and could not be forced. The core of social ethics was to establish the law of a connection between traditional morality and becoming rich, which not only emphasized that scholars, farmers, craftsmen, and businessmen should do their part, but also always put reading as the highest priority. While criticizing various unhealthy phenomena in society, especially the unfairness of the imperial examination, it was still strongly hoped that the imperial exam would be a perfect system for upward mobility. On the whole, it was obvious that there was a strong tension or dilemma. This situation showed that even if some kind of merchant spirit was formed in the Ming and Qing dynasties, it obviously had irreconcilable conflicts, and its core value was still based on traditional moral ethics. The dominant tendency was to replace the pursuit of profit in the business economy with the religious ethics that wealth

was determined by destiny and could not be forced. Under the causal law of “kindness is rewarded with kindness,” wealth was emphatically reflected as a reward from heaven for kind deeds, rather than a reward for hard work or good management. Correspondingly, although businessmen had become important members of the social group, only by donating and meritorious service could one obtain opportunities for upward mobility. Just as scholars never gave up doing things to support their families, getting a high rank in the imperial examination was always the most fundamental goal of the people at the time. These social ethics not only did not completely deny the traditional social class distinctions, but maintained them all the time. Obviously, although such business ethics and social ethics were not without new ideas, they failed to completely break through the tradition. This could also explain why the Ming and Qing dynasties failed to produce real capitalism, and why social stratification did not fundamentally change.

*Translated by Donia Zhang*

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