Aims & Scope

Journal of Chinese Humanities is an English-language extension of Literature, History and Philosophy (Wen Shi Zhé 《文史哲》), a famous Chinese journal published by Shandong University. The content is not restricted to one aspect of Chinese culture but rather spans important topics within the fields of Chinese history, philosophy, and literature. It covers both traditional and modern areas of research. Importantly, as opposed to most English language journals that treat on Chinese studies, this journal aims to represent the current research coming out of mainland China. Thus each issue will be composed primarily of articles from Chinese scholars working at Chinese institutions, while at the same time including a small number of articles from foreign authors so as to provide opposing perspectives. This way, top scholars in China can be read in the Western world, and our Western readers will benefit from a native perspective and first hand material and research coming out of China. Every issue will be theme-based, focusing on an issue of common interest to the academic community both within and outside China. The majority of articles will relate directly to the central theme, but each issue will also accept a limited number of articles not directly related to the current theme. This journal primarily targets academics in the English-speaking world who are interested in multiple aspects of Chinese civilization and humanities. It will be of interest to both scholars and advanced students, both specialists and informed readers. It is one of the best windows for western readers to deepen their understanding of Chinese literature, history and philosophy.

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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 Yaxi 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 turn continued to increase the demand for more works which sparked further literary creation.

Works Cited

Ming-Era Remittance Systems and Standard Cash in the *Xingshi Yinyuan Zhuan*

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### Abstract

The pre-modern Chinese novel *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* provides a wealth of information on the use of silver and copper cash in the economy of the late Ming dynasty. An analysis of the text reveals that there was no mechanism for remote remittance in the modern financial sense during this period. Therefore, it is necessary to reexamine several research works which have claimed the existence of remote remittance in financial history studies. Upon scrutinizing the various types of standard cash minted from the Jiajing to Chongzhen eras, it is evident that the popular “yellow-fringed coin” referred to in the *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* was actually an umbrella term that encompassed both yellow coins and lathed-rim coins. Furthermore, the decimal conversion coins mentioned in the text that were withdrawn from the market due to unusability were most likely the decuple coins in the Tianqi era universal currency. The political incompetence of the late Ming period also caused the common people to reject the universal currency of the period, which was more valuable than the universal currency of previous periods.

### Keywords

*Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* – silver – remote remittance – yellow-fringed coin – conversion coin
Xingshi yinyuan zhuan 醒世姻緣傳 (A Story of Marital Fate to Awaken the World) by Xizhousheng 西周生 is a novel that depicts the social conditions of China in the 17th century.1,2 Although mainly a portrayal of henpecking wives and cowering husbands, its detailed descriptions have become an invaluable source for studying social and economic history.3 This article investigates whether remote remittance (yuancheng huidui 遠程匯兌) occurred during the late Ming (1368–1644) period in the silver-dominated economy. Political unrest during the Tianqi 天啟 era (1621–1627) affected the circulation of standard cash (zhiqian 制錢) during that period. This article goes on to analyze the impact of political and economic factors on the psychology of the populace, while attempting to identify the type of yellow-fringed coins (huangbianqian 黃邊錢) and decimal conversion coins (dangshi zheziqian 當拾折子錢) referenced in the Xingshi yinyuan zhuan.

1 The Dominance of Silver and the Existence of Remittance

Like many other novels of the Ming and Qing (1636–1912) periods, Xingshi yinyuan zhuan depicts the transportation of large quantities of silver over long distances. This raises the question of why silver – not the most portable form of currency – was more commonly used in remote trading than gold. After the mid-Ming period, did remote remittance emerge to allow people to avoid having to travel with money, thus making it safer? This has been a topic of great interest to scholars of the economic and financial history of the Ming dynasty. For the purposes of this article, the author labels those who are convinced that there was remote remittance as “believers,” and those who are not as “non-believers.” The author will demonstrate that the evidence cited by the believers is not sufficiently reliable from a historiographical perspective.

Believers and non-believers alike cite the fact that the renowned Confucian scholars Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695) and Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682) both pointed out that in the late Ming period there did indeed exist an equivalent to the flying cash (feiqian 飛錢, a kind of promissory note) of the Tang dynasty (618–907). It was known as an “exchange note” (huipiao 會票), a term

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1 This article is funded by the Internationalization Project, School of Literature, Shandong University.
which is homophonous with “bill of exchange” (huipiao 匯票) in modern Chinese. Huang once wrote, “Paper money originated from the ‘flying cash’ of the Tang dynasty, which is equivalent to the ‘exchange notes’ of today. It was not until the Song dynasty that it was printed and issued by the government.”

Gu wrote, “Laws for paper money came about because the previous generation did not use silver as currency. Since coins were too heavy, laws for paper money were established. The ‘flying cash’ of Tang Xianzong is the same as today’s ‘exchange note.’” The economist He Liancheng 何煉成 (1928–2022) regarded Huang’s theory of exchange notes as an elaboration of the “leveraging balance of [supply and demand of] paper money” (chengti chaofa 稱提鈔法) of the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), and did not link it with remittance.

The historian Gu Jiguang 谷霽光 (1907–1993) attempted to take a moderate stance between the two extremes, acknowledging that remittance banks (piaohao 票號) were created specifically for the purpose of transferring money, while pushing the emergence of the banks in Shanxi 山西 back to a later date. He points out that the Ming dynasty official Shen Sixiao 沈思孝 (1542–1611) outlined Shanxi’s economic life in his book Jinlu 晉錄 (Records of Jin) during the Wanli 萬曆 era (1573–1620), but made no mention of Shanxi remittance banks. Arguably, this suggests that the banks could not have emerged before Shen’s time – instead, they must have come into existence during the late Ming to early Qing period.

A typical representative of the believers is Sun Qiang 孫強, a young scholar who has recently undertaken a study of the financial history of the late Ming. After discussing the meaning of the word “exchange note” in the economic context of the Ming dynasty, he concludes that there was indeed a considerable scale of private remittance in different places during the late Ming period, and that what Huang and Gu referred to as “exchange notes” are functionally equivalent to the bills of exchange of modern times. Sun Qiang argues that the remote remittance of late-Ming civil society can be seen in the discussions

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5 Gu Yanwu 顧炎武, Rizhilu jishi 日知錄集釋, collect commentary Huang Rucheng 黃汝成, annot. Luan Baoqun 樂保群 and Lü Zongli 吕宗力 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2006), 684.
8 Sun Qiang 孫強, Wanming shangye ziben de chouji fangshi, jingying jizhi ji xinyong guanxi yanjiu 晚明商業資本的籌集方式、經營機制及信用關係研究 (Changchun: Jilin daxue chubanshe, 2007), 246–51.
on the money law enacted under the severe cash shortage (qianhuang 錢荒) of the late Ming and early Qing period. In support of his argument, he cites the late-Ming scholars Lu Shiyi 陸世儀 (1611–1672) and Chen Zilong 陳子龍 (1608–1647) as cases in point. Lu once wrote, “Nowadays, some people want to transfer a large amount of money to the capital. Because of the inconvenience of traveling, they give the money to wealthy merchants in the capital and exchange a bill as a voucher. This bill is called an ‘exchange note,’ which is equivalent to what was once known as ‘flying cash.’” In light of this, Lu advocated the issuance of silver certificates to replace silver, writing, “The imperial court could issue bills, allowing merchants from all over the land to pay in silver and receive the bills as vouchers. After verifying the bills, they could exchange the silver they had paid. During this process, the imperial court could charge a little interest.” As for Chen, he once wrote, “Today, private usurers often use certificates, while merchants use bills so they can travel lightly, which is also why our predecessors used paper money. Is there any reason why the people can use them privately, while the government prohibits them?”

The “wealthy merchants in the capital” (jingshi fushang zhi jia 京師富商之家) mentioned by Lu clearly points to a form of private business. In his writing, the function of the “bills” (hui 會) is to allow “light travel” (qingji wanglai 輕賫往來). However, the purpose of the aforementioned “certificate” (quan 券) is not to enable light travel, since it has nothing to do with faraway places or travel. Rather, it is a savings certificate generated during the earning of interest on local savings – that is, “small interest” (ziqian 子錢, a form of usury). The “bill” referred to by Chen is actually a small-scale business partnership organization formed among merchants. Furthermore, it does not intend to serve the public and generate profit.

The author posits that the mid-to-late Ming period may have involved financial credit in the bills and exchange notes. However, this would have been confined to three potential scenarios. Firstly, long-distance transporters or retailers may have purchased goods from retail stores but lacked sufficient funds. In such cases, they would have written up bills as proof of payment at different times and places. Secondly, monetary funds may have been loaned

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10 Chen Zilong 陳子龍, “Chao bi lun” 鈔幣論, in Qianbi chuyan zhengli yu yanjiu 《錢幣芻言》整理與研究, ed. Wang Liu 王鎏, proof. and annot. Ma Linghe 馬陵合 (Shanghai: Donghua daxue chubanshe, 2002), 615. Xiao Qing 蕭清 also took note of Chen Zilong’s ideas when studying the pre-modern Chinese concept of currency. See Xiao Qing 蕭清, Zhongguo gudai huobi xiangshishu 中國古代貨幣思想史 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1987), 276.
out. Lastly, a physical pledge could have been used as cash, allowing the pledger to obtain local withdrawals from the merchant or withdraw at the merchant’s off-site business. This last scenario is most likely to be mistaken for an exchange of funds in different places in the “bills” mentioned above.

Lu and Chen may have had the intention of proposing a remote remittance system to the authorities, which would have been based on sporadic private currency turnover activities. However, given the historical context of their time, such a proposal would have been entirely impractical and unworkable. The Qing regime had supplanted the Ming dynasty by the time Lu was 33 years old, and even these profound views of his were included by the scholar-official He Changling 賀長齡 (1785–1848) in the Qing jingshi wenbian 清經世文編 (Collected Writings on Statecraft of the Qing Dynasty) during the late Qing period. In addition, Chen Zilong martyred himself out of loyalty to the Ming dynasty soon after the establishment of the Qing administration, which would have made it even more difficult to implement this financial concept. The private financial activities mentioned by Lu and Chen, the contents of the family letter written by the noted agronomist Xu Guangqi 徐光啟 (1562–1633) that was later cited in Sun Qiang’s book, and a tale related in the short-story collection Doubeng xianhua 豆棚閒話 (Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor) all describe what might be classified as currency turnover activities of private individuals or small groups, which is fundamentally different from a remittance business operated by the common people.

Many scholars who study pre-modern Chinese financial history lament that the starting point of China’s financial credit lagged behind Europe. With a compensatory mindset, they search the records and determine that Xu Jie 徐階 (1503–1583), the Chancellor of Huating (huating zaixiang 華亭宰相) of the late Jiajing 嘉靖 (1522–1566) era, can be regarded as the grandfather (shizuye 始祖爺) of the remittance system. They point out that his contemporary and fellow politician Yu Shenxing 于慎行 (1545–1607) wrote that, when Xu was appointed to the position of chancellor, “The Songjiang tax collector deposited local tax money at the Xu residence in Songjiang. Officials were sent to withdraw the money from the Chancellor’s mansion in the capital by way of an official certificate. The Chancellor summoned someone to distribute the money to the Minister of Agriculture at seven zhu per tael, but he could not appraise it.” Another scholar found a story from the literary work Yunjian jumu chao 雲間據目抄 (Jottings on Matters Eyewitnessed in Yunjian) by Fan Lian 范濂 (b. 1540) about a merchant surnamed Ma 馬 in Beijing who was deceived during the Jiajing and Longqing 隆慶 (1567–1572) eras. He argued

11 Yu Shenxing 于慎行, Gushan bizhu 谷山筆麈 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 39.
that this story proves that Xu had opened a private remittance business. The account is recorded thus:

[Su Kewen, a conniving businessman, said to Merchant Ma,] “I heard that you are embarking on a long and perilous journey. Aren’t you concerned about the safety of your money? I can deposit your money in a store owned by the Xu family in the capital and give you an exchange note as a voucher. When you arrive in Songjiang, you can take this bill to the Xu family, and they will give you your money in full. This will allow you to travel without the burden of carrying a large sum of money or worrying about thieves.” Merchant Ma was grateful for Su Kewen’s offer and gave him 150 taels of silver. Su Kewen went to the Xu family’s store under the guise of doing business for Merchant Ma. He presented the store with a fake exchange note and claimed, “The money has already been deposited.” The Xu family, suspicious of the note’s authenticity, refused to give him the money. Merchant Ma, desperate to retrieve his money, rushed from Songjiang to the capital and confronted Su Kewen, “If you lie to me, I can’t live anymore. What am I supposed to do now?” Su Kewen had anticipated this and had already devised a countermeasure. He created another fake exchange note and attached a forged letter from Xu Jie, which looked very convincing. Merchant Ma took these documents and went to Songjiang to exchange the money, but the Xu family still refused to do so.12

It is evident that, in the Ming period, there were tales of Songjiang tax collectors transferring local taxes directly to the Xu family, and officials visiting the Chancellor’s mansion in the capital to withdraw cash using an “official certificate” (die 軫) as a remittance voucher. Fan Lian himself even described being able to deposit money in Beijing for withdrawal in Songjiang. However, these stories cannot be taken as proof of remote remittance. Both are full of special cases and privileges, and they do not represent the norm. Yu Shenxing’s story is particularly interesting as it illustrates how Xu Jie used his power to enrich his own pockets. Yu expresses moral indignation that the Chancellor of Huating had become the “Minister of Wealth Extortion” (julian zhi chen 聚斂之臣), decrying, “How could this befit the righteousness of a minister?”13

12 Fan Lian 范濂, Yunjian jumu chao 雲間據目抄, Fengxian chushi chongkan 奉賢褚氏重刊, 1928. 3.12.
13 Yu Shenxing, Gushan bizhu, 39.
The story of Su Kewen acquiring 150 taels of silver by deception has been mentioned in almost every book on the history of China's financial credit. The commentators believe that it demonstrates at least two points. First, the Xu family financial credit business was privatized and targeted at ordinary people. Second, the business was able to identify fake bills of exchange twice, demonstrating that its practices were somewhat specialized. But to understand the significance of Fan Lian's story, one should first identify the nature of the text Yunjian jumu chao. As an example of the “note-form fiction” (biji xiaoshuo 筆記小說), it may be read as an exposé of the iniquities of the local officials and gentry in Wuzhong 吳中. It is said that “Fan Lian wrote the Yunjian jumu chao to intimidate venal officials and subordinates, just like Confucius compiled the Chunqiu to intimidate treacherous ministers and traitors.”

In writing about Su's deceit, Fan explained: “Su Kewen had been appointed and was waiting to be selected. Because his father and Xu Jie were family friends, he was able to become a retainer of Xu Jie's family.” Su Kewen was essentially a nonentity in the Ming histories, struggling on the peripheries of the Ming bureaucracy until the fifth year of the Longqing era. Assuming that we accept Fan's hypothesis of Su's identity, then, as Xu Jie's retainer and family friend in the heyday period, is it likely that he would have carried out financial fraud on his fellow villagers for a mere 150 taels of silver? Likewise, would he have committed forgery twice and tested the operational abilities of a bank opened by his master? If he had indeed forged the letter to the Xu family, was he not afraid of being exposed by them? This kind of unscrupulousness seems unlikely for a “senior grand secretary” (shoufu 首輔) with a bright future ahead of him. In addition, the ability of the Xu store to identify counterfeit bills does not necessarily indicate specialization of skill, because the parameters of the counterfeiting are unknown. Logically speaking, it does not make sense that a merchant surnamed Ma would have rushed from Songjiang all the way back to Beijing just to ask for 150 taels of silver, since the travel expenses alone would have exceeded that amount. And after he supposedly received the counterfeit note for the second time, why did he go to the Xu store in Songjiang only to be unceremoniously snubbed? The main purpose of Fan's writings is to vilify Xu Jie and his retainers in true fictional style. In Yunjian jumu chao, Fan is not at all clear about how the Xu store conducted its remote remittance. It is extremely imprecise to use such a private note that lacks specific business details and is written with a politically offensive purpose to conclude that China's first instances of remittance began then and there.

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14 Ibid., 39.
The writings on remote remittance are all based on one detail in the *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan*. This detail can demonstrate – in reverse – that there was no remittance business in the Songjiang area in the middle and late Ming periods, at least not for ordinary government officials and common citizens. In the fifth chapter of the *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan*, the scholar-official Chao Sixiao was appointed as the county magistrate of Huating in Southern Zhili. He wanted to use the official status of Su and Liu to reach Chancellor Wang Zhen in the hopes of attaining the position of magistrate of Northern Tongzhou. He sent two trusted servants to the capital with 1,000 taels of silver to make a bribe. Together with the performer Hu Dan, he leased three large mules, and set off on a 28-day trek to the capital. The travel expenses for three people cost an additional 200 taels. If the remittance business had existed, why did Chao Sixiao fail to take advantage of the resources available to him as the county magistrate? Even if he had sent his servants and Hu Dan to the capital for the operation, there would have been numerous risks associated with transporting silver on the road. Even if they had managed to enter the capital for a brief stay, Hu Dan and his two servants would have been shouldering a tremendous responsibility, as they were carrying silver, and each would have been visibly anxious.

The rapid development of remittance banks did not occur until after the Daoguang era of the Qing dynasty. Prior to this, merchants would move large quantities of silver over long distances under the protection of a team of professional escorts. Many passages in Ming and Qing novels record the transportation of large amounts of silver on business or personal trips. This indicates that silver was still the most common medium for the bulk transfer of funds over long distances before the development of remittance banks. Naturally, gold could have also been used for the same purpose. In the *Ernü yingxiong zhuan* 兒女英雄傳, it is written that Deng Jiugong, believing that “the roads from east to west are unsteady, and walking will unavoidably attract attention,” presented “two hundred taels of premium, crimson-stamped gold flakes from Tongtai Bank.” Before presenting the gold, Deng said, “Is this for local or remote use? If it is for local use, there are ready-made banknotes in the county seat that can be used. If it is for remote use, it may be easier to carry ready-made gold.” Clearly, “banknotes in the county seat” denotes banknotes for local use that would be unusable for long-distance remittance. The story also

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15 Xizhoushen, *Xingshi yinyuan zhuan*, 33.
shows that the so-called “exchange note” is not a bill of exchange. Deng himself was an armed escort by occupation – if the remote remittance industry had actually developed, he would have lost his job long before.

The late-Qing novel *Lao Can youji*《老殘遊記》(The Travels of Lao Can) by Liu E 刘鹗 (1857–1909) also provides clear descriptions of bills of exchange. In the fourteenth chapter, Lao Can 老残 and Huang Renrui 黄人瑞 talk in the Qihe Inn about buying back the freedom of a prostitute named Cuihuan 翠环. Lao Can says that he still has 400 taels of silver stored in Yourongtang 有容堂 in the provincial capital Jinan which could be used for this purpose.17 It is clear that the Rishengchang Piaohao 日升昌票号 primarily engaged in remote remittance of silver, while the Yourongtang mainly dealt with silver deposits as a form of savings.

2 Yellow-Fringed Coins and Inferior-Quality Coins

Copper coins were still cast during the Yongle 永樂 (1403–1424) and Xuande 宣德 (1425–1435) eras, despite the implementation of a pure paper currency policy. Though the coins were reasonably well-crafted, they were primarily used to reward foreign envoys in the tributary system. The renowned explorer Zheng He 郑和 (ca. 1371–1433) even took a large amount of Yongle money with him on the Ming treasure voyages. Yet the homeland still lacked a stable form of currency, and circulation of counterfeit money among the people had begun to spread.18

The “Great Ming circulating currency certificates” (da ming baochao 大明寶鈔) had become unworkable, and this gradually became an irreversible trend. The laws for paper money (chaofa 鈔法) began to collapse from the Chenghua 成化 era (1465–1487). On the twenty-third day of the first month of the thirteenth year (1477) of the era, the Commander-in-Chief of the Daxing Left Guard (daxing zuowei zhihuishi 大興左衛指揮使) Zhou Guang 周廣 (n.d.) wrote, “The laws for paper money have been on the decline in recent years, with each string of one thousand treasure certificates only being able to be exchanged for four or five silver coins.”19 Thereafter, in the early Jiajing 朝 era, it is written that, “[Treasure] Certificates have long been defunct, and cash

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19 Ming Xianzong shilu 明憲宗實錄 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuan yanjusuo, 1963), 161.2951.
is significantly congested – only silver can be used.20 The silver-only system improved somewhat after considerable efforts were made during the Jiajing era. From the Longqing era, a currency system gradually formed in the Ming government that was dominated by silver and supplemented by cash. Notwithstanding some chaotic changes in the silver and cash laws, this form of currency circulation system continued to be maintained all the way through to the end of the Qing dynasty.

The cash congestion (qianyong 錢壅) in the early years of the Jiajing era was not a cash shortage – in fact, there was no shortage of cash among the people. Instead, there was a lack of good-quality cash. In addition, users lacked a basic belief in the hard currency of coins.21 During this time, there was a need to rebuild the money system and win the trust of the people. For the coins cast in the sixth year of the Jiajing era (1527), the biggest change was the use of copper-zinc alloy as the casting material, replacing the long-term use of tin bronze. Zinc comes from calamine with a zinc carbonate (Zn CO$_3$) composition, then known as “secondary lead” (woqian 倭鉛) or “water tin” (shuixi 水錫).22 The iconic yellow coin (huangqian 黃錢) was a masterpiece that was hard to copy and was produced during a pivotal moment in the history of coinage. The gold-back coin (jinbeiqian 金背錢) was crafted from high-quality brass that had been smelted four times, making it one of the most sought-after coins of the Ming dynasty. The small granular bulges on the back of the copper coin were often caused by turning it in sand, and created an illusion of solid gold when combined with the color of four-fire copper-gold.23 The color of the gold-back coin is pleasing to the eye, and there were even rumors among the people of the back being painted gold. The common people treasured it so much that it was considered an excellent gift. Fixed prices in the standard cash system dictated that ten wen was equivalent to one silver coin, yet the value of the gold-back coin in actual circulation was much higher than this. During the Wanli era, the Jiajing gold-back coin reached a value of four wen for one silver coin. Although the gold-back coins of the Longqing and Wanli eras were also highly valued, they still could not compete with the Jiajing gold-back coin.24

21 Hou Houpei 侯厚培, Zhongguo huobi yangeshi 中國貨幣沿革史 (Shanghai: Shanghai shuju, 1930), 100.
22 Song Yingxing 宋應星, Tiangong kaiwu 天工開物, annot. Guan Qiaoling 管巧靈 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2002), 207.
The copper material used in the production of fire-lacquer coins (huoqiqian 火漆錢) underwent only two rounds of smelting, resulting in a slightly lower quality and a black color similar to iron. Another type of coin, the lathed-rim coins (xuanbianqian 鏇邊錢), was created through lathing, melting, and grinding, resulting in a flat and shiny outer edge. Both fire-lacquer and lathed-rim coins were considered second-class money in the standard cash of the Ming period. The umbrella term "yellow-fringed coin" that is frequently mentioned in the Xingshi yinyuan zhuan encompasses gold-back coins (jinbeiqian 金背錢), fire-lacquer coins, and premium-quality lathed-rim coins produced before changes in craftsmanship were made. However, in a narrow sense, the term is limited to gold-back coins. All three types of coin were of high quality, aesthetically pleasing, and had sufficient weight and high copper content. The appearance of yellow-fringed coins played a crucial role in stabilizing people's belief in the money system and preventing private casting.

In the fifty-fifth chapter of the Xingshi yinyuan zhuan, Squire Di 狄員外 spends 24 taels of silver to purchase a maid from the house of Ran 冉 in the capital to cook for him. After the seller and agents sign the contract, the transaction is concluded. One tael is paid to the agents as a commission. Additionally, by the time the matter has been concluded, Squire Di has promised to give the agents two additional silver coins. Before that, to bring the maid to the house of Tong 童 for a visit, “Grandma Tong counts twenty yellow coins and urges him (the agent, that is, the son of Mrs Zhou) to go quickly, to ride back and forth on a donkey.” This demonstrates that it had become customary in the capital to use silver for the payment of regular wages or transactions and yellow coins for gratuities. The rarity and beauty of yellow coins made them such a coveted gift that presenting them alongside silver taels gave the same amount of face as offering silk would have.

Gu Yanwu praised the coin casting of the early Jiajing era as “the finest workmanship” (zui wei jing gong 最為精工) since the Hongwu 洪武 era (1368–1398). However, this was at the cost of low state seigniorage, or even loss of money. After the fortieth year of the Jiajing era (1561), even the Baoyuan Bureau (baoyuan ju 寶源局) in Beijing struggled to maintain the quality of their official castings. Everyone from the Vice Commissioner (fushi 副使), all the way

25 The conclusion of the transaction is given in detail: 狄員外取出一兩銀來，又叫狄週數上四錢銀子的黃錢與了兩個媒人。那個端茶的管家，趴倒地替狄員外磕了頭。狄員外知是討賞之情，忙叫狄週數上二錢銀子的黃錢與管家買. See Xizhou sheng, Xingshi yinyuan zhuan, 427.

26 Ibid., 424.

27 Unlike paper money, copper coins have actual metal value. The difference between the actual cost value and the issue value of a coin is known as “seigniorage” (zhuxi 鑄息).
down to the lower-ranking officials, minters, and craftsmen were all guilty of cutting corners. As a result, the empire’s coinage suffered a decline in quality, and private casting became widespread. However, during the Jiajing era, this issue was not as severe. It was only during the Tianqi and Chongzhen 昌禎 (1628–1644) eras that the problem became unmanageable.

3 Examining Decimal Conversion Coins

In the fiftieth chapter of the Xingshi yinyuan zhuan, a man named Di Xichen 狄希陳 travels with his son to the provincial capital Jinan to exchange silver for “conversion coins” (zheziqian 折子錢) to purchase the position of Jiansheng 監生 (student of the Imperial College). One tael of ordinary silver could be exchanged for 78 wen 文, while silver of standard purity (zuse wenyin 足色紋銀) could be exchanged for 80 wen. Much space is dedicated to describing the fine points of exchanging conversion coins, together with the encounter between Di and his old friend Sun Lanji 孫蘭姬, occupying a whole chapter in the book. Regrettably, research on the Xingshi yinyuan zhuan has failed to consider the historical value of this account of money exchange. In fact, it can be used to better understand the financial system of the late Ming period.

Di Xichen’s purchase of the position of Jiansheng was made in silver at the Provincial Administrative Division (buzhengsi 布政司) in the name of making a “contribution towards meals” (linshan nagong 廬膳納貢). Academic Registrar (xuedao zhang’an 學道掌案) Huang Qiwu 黃啟吾 had the following exchange with Di in consideration of the fact that he already had the title of “cultivated talent” (xiucai 秀才):

“Today, the decimal conversion coins are not circulating, and are to be withdrawn by imperial order. The authorities have issued a notice stating that if conversion coins are to be used as the sole payment method when purchasing the position of Jiansheng, there must be an exchange of ninety coins for one tael. During payment, eighty of them are taken for one.” Di Binliang 狄賓梁 asked, “Where can these conversion coins be exchanged?” Huang Guiwu replied, “There are many pawn shops in Qin Jingyu’s house at the east gate. If you have fine silver, you can exchange one tael of silver for ninety-two or ninety-three of them.”

28 Ibid., 384.
Subsequently, when Di Binliang and Di Xichen went to the pawn shop operated by Qin Jingyu 秦敬宇 – a merchant from Yiwu 義烏, Zhejiang 浙江, who married Sun Lanji as his “concubine-wife” (liangtouda 兩頭大) – they were told the following:

I am afraid that, while I do have three hundred taels, it is not enough, so I will look for them for you. But, these days, conversion coins are expensive. In the past, the imperial court accepted conversion coins, so all purchases to obtain office were made with them. Therefore, a family with conversion coins, upon hearing the news, wanted to eagerly get rid of their conversion coins, fearing that the authorities would soon again stop accepting them. They were willing to exchange ninety wen for one tael. If the total amount of exchange is large and the silver is fine, one hundred taels of silver could be exchanged for ninety-one or ninety-two coins. Now conversion coins have almost disappeared, and the local authorities are rigidly refusing to accept silver, so one hundred taels of silver cannot be exchanged for even seventy-seven or seventy-eight conversion coins.  

These two passages shed light on what happened when decimal conversion coins became unusable. Under these circumstances, the state had no choice but to restrict their use as a payment method to withdraw them from circulation. This practice of using dysfunctional forms of currency was criticized by Ming-period scientist Song Yingxing 宋應星 (1587–1666), who made the following remark with somewhat of a hindsight bias: “The malpractice of minting large forms of currency in the denominations of five and ten has only had the effect of conveniencing the private minters and harming the common people; thus, large forms of currency will only circulate temporarily at the central and local levels, before being immediately abolished.” However, the negative impact of large forms of currency extended beyond private minters and common people – it also had political implications for those in power and psychological effects on local populations.

The removal of conversion coins from circulation can be likened to the support that circulating currency certificates received during the early Ming period, when circulating currency certificates were constantly losing value, and the imperial court made efforts to protect them. To do so, the court ceased production of new certificates during the Xuande and Zhengtong 正統 (1436–1449) eras, increased taxes on payments made with them, and later imposed fines

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29 Ibid., 384.
30 Song Yingxing, Tiangong kaiwu, 207.
for their use. Unfortunately, these measures resulted in hyperinflation of paper money, which eventually led to the certificates being withdrawn from market circulation.31

Upon examining the era-name coins cast during the middle and late Ming periods, it becomes clear that only the circulating currency certificates of the Jiajing, Tianqi, and Chongzhen eras had decuple coins. The Baoyuan Bureau cast the Jiajing era coins based on the Hongwu cash system, but only 30,000 coins of denominations two, three, five, and ten were produced, and none was put into circulation. The Tianqi and Chongzhen coins were of poor quality due to the financial difficulties caused by internal and external troubles of the time. The coins of the Chongzhen era were first cast in 1628, and they are the most complicated type of Chinese coin due to their varied size, weight, thickness, and casting.32 Unfortunately, the disunity of the money system, increasing prevalence of counterfeit minting, and abuse of fake money in the market were all taken to be symptoms of a nation in decline. The authorities were unable to address these issues, let alone recycle the old money in a planned and large-scale fashion.

Emperor Guangzong 光宗 (r. 1620), father to Emperor Xizong 熹宗 (r. 1620–1627), lived a short life. On the throne for a mere 29 days, he died suddenly in the infamous conspiracy known as the “Case of the Red Pills” (hongwan an 紅丸案). Since there was not adequate time to mint coins with his era name Taichang 泰昌, his son made up for it by minting circulating currency with the characters taichang tongbao 泰昌通寶 (circulating currency of the Taichang era). However, the common people of the era declared that, “Emperor Tianqi (i.e. Xizong) does not follow the Way of Heaven; warn each other not to use Tianqi coins,”33 and subsequently boycotted Tianqi coins of various denominations. Coins that were minted during the late years of Tianqi era were thin and brittle. One tael of silver could be exchanged for five or six thousand wen.34 But the quality of money in the early stage was not all poor. In jinling suoshi 金陵瑣事 (Trivial Matters of Jingling) by Zhou Hui 周暉 (n.d.) it is written:

During the early years of Tianqi era, copper coins were produced by mixing zinc from the storehouse with copper. These coins were known as

32 Han Jianye 韓建業, Wang Hao 王浩 and Zhu Yaoting 朱耀廷, Zhongguo gudai qianbi 中國古代錢幣 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2007), 207.
33 Sun Zhilu 孫之騏, Ershen yelu 二申野錄 (block-printed edition, 1781), vol. 7.
white-sand coins due to their pure white color and clear outlines. A coppersmith could craft a small teaspoon using only two wen of white-sand coins and sell it for ten wen. This made the quantity of white-sand coins scarce, and private minters were unable to produce them independently.35

This narrative serves as evidence to support the perspective of economist Li Jiannong 李劍農 (1880–1963), who posited that the Jiajing monetary system adhered too strictly to the theory of Kong Ji 孔贒 (416–466) from the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589). This theory maintained that “the production of currency cannot be accomplished by prioritizing the value of copper over labor.” When the copper content in valuable currency exceeds the acceptable limit, private minters will resort to clandestine melting and casting to extract the metal. Consequently, the remaining unaltered currency is concealed within the masses, making it difficult to distinguish between genuine and counterfeit money.36 Huang Renyu 黃仁宇 (1918–2000) believed that Li Jiannong was essentially suggesting that bad money drives out good, as is the case under Gresham’s law. Huang found Li’s argument to be reasonable, but not entirely satisfactory, as he believed that Li overlooked the quantitative factors and government management of coinage during the 16th century.37

During the Tianqi era, a collection of coins was produced, including decuple coins. These coins were crafted from cupronickel, which was a superior quality material. The minting of these coins began in the second year of the era, and later halted in the fifth year. There were several varieties of the decuple coin made, with the obverse inscribed with the characters tianqi tongbao 天啟通寶 (circulating currency of the Tianqi era) and the reverse with different inscriptions such as shi 十 (ten) in the upper part, shi in the upper part and a star in the lower part, shi in the upper part and yiliang 一兩 (one tael) in the left part, fu 府 (government) in the upper part, zhen 鎮 (county) in the upper part and shi in the lower part, as well as shi in the upper part, yi 一 (one) in the left part and mi 密 (referring to Miyun county where the coin was made) in the right part. It is no wonder that contemporary coin collectors complained that in

35 Peng Xinwei 彭信威, Zhongguo huobishi 中國貨幣史 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1958), 490.
37 Huang Renyu 黃仁宇, Shiliu shiji mingdai Zhongguo zhi caizheng yu shuishou 十六世紀明代中國之財政與稅收 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2001), 90.
terms of copper quality, weight, shape, and characters on the face of the coin, the Tianqi decuple coins were not inferior to those of previous eras.38

It would be unfair to solely attribute the downfall of Tianqi decuple coins to the public’s discontent with the political climate of the era. The resistance towards the coins was actually due to Zhou Shunchang 周順昌 (1584–1626) of Wu county 吳縣 befriending and sheltering members of the Donglin Clique (Donglin dangren 東林黨人). He was arrested and killed by underlings of Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢 (1568–1627), which later aroused a civil uprising in Suzhou 蘇州, which is what Zhang Pu 張溥 (1602–1641) in his renowned piece of prose Wuren mubei ji 五人墓碑記 (The Epitaph for the Five Martyrs) designated the “Rebellion of the People of Wu” (wu min zhi luan 吳民之亂).39 Because Zhou was killed, the people of Wu united to boycott Tianqi coins. “All the prefectures and counties responded one after another, accumulating countless quantities of Tianqi coins. It was not until after the departments put up notices one after another to enforce compliance that they started being put back into common use. The private boycott lasted about ten months.”40 However, the civil uprising in Suzhou took place in the sixth year of the Tianqi era (1626), so it seems to be an unreasonable explanation for the poor circulation of Tianqi coins as a whole. To interpret people’s daily economic behavior, it is necessary to be able to see the economy behind the politics, and the politics behind the economy.

There is a characteristic of the value setting of standard cash of the Ming dynasty – the circulating currency coins of the reigning emperor were priced higher than those of previous emperors. This practice was initiated in the 32nd year of the Jiajing era by Emperor Shizong 世宗 (r. 1521–1567). He set the value at 70 wen of Jiajing coinage for one cent of silver, which is twice as much as Hongwu coins and miscellaneous coins of previous generations.41 Under such a premise, when an emperor ascended the throne, if the government was stable, and the economy was healthy, the people would naturally be happy to use the circulating currency of that dynasty; if the situation were reversed, the people would resist using it.

Although the Tianqi era lasted only seven years, it was marred by pent-up public grievances from beginning to end due to the incompetence of Emperor

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38 Nie Shuinan 聶水南, Qianbi yanjiu yu shoucang 錢幣研究與收藏 (Beijing: Zhongguo jingji chubanshe, 2013), 31–3.
40 Sun Zhilu, Ershen yelu, 7.16.
41 Sun Guanghui 孫光慧, Zhongguo jinrong jianshi 中國金融簡史 (Lanzhou: Gansu kexue jishu chubanshe, 2010), 57.
Xizong. In the first year of Tianqi era, Nurhaci 努爾哈赤 (1559–1626) captured Shenyang 沈陽, and the Ming dynasty continued to lose ground with each passing year. By the third year of Tianqi era, Wei Zhongxian had complete control of the Eastern Depot (dongchang 東廠), leading to various localities building shrines (shengci 生祠) to honor him as second in command to the emperor (jiuqiansui 九千歲). Thereafter, “Six Gentlemen of the Donglin Clique” (Donglin liu junzi 東林六君子), including Yang Lian 杨漣 (1572–1625), Zuo Guangdou 左光斗 (1575–1625), and Wei Dazhong 魏大中 (1575–1625), lost their lives as victims of injustice. The Ming historian Meng Sen 孟森 (1869–1938) lamented that, “After the middle of the Ming dynasty, the success or failure of major events in the court depended on whether the eunuchs were good or not.” He also offered commentary on Madame Ke 客氏 (1587–1627), the treacherous nanny to Emperor Xizong, who conspired with Wei Zhongxian during the Wanli era to drive Wang An 王安 (d. 1621), the loyal eunuch and companion of the eldest son of the emperor, to death. The contemporary politician Hou Zhenyang 侯震暘 (1569–1627) also commented on the the great and undue influence Madame Ke had on Emperor Xizong. Palace rumors of this type were particularly susceptible to spreading among the populace, ultimately leading them to conclude that Emperor Xizong had become a tyrant. Adding to the speculation, the emperor had no male heirs, and the crown prince was nowhere to be found. His father, Emperor Taichang (i.e. Guangzong), had died on the 29th day of his reign, providing ample evidence that the emperor might be short-lived. In the fifth year of the Tianqi era, the army of the Later Jin (houjin 後金) captured Lüshun 旅順. Amidst the looming decline of the empire, the common people vehemently opposed the use of Tianqi money. This resistance can be likened to stock speculators who disdain a particular stock and abstain from investing in it. A similar scenario occurred during the decline of Chongzhen circulating currency.

In summary, after the removal of the decuple coins from the circulating currency during the Jiajing and Chongzhen eras, and the subsequent impracticality of the decuple coins during the Tianqi era, a new practice emerged. This practice involved the Bureau receiving large-denomination coins for the purpose of re-casting them (shou daqian fa ju gai zhu 收大錢發局改鑄). There is no doubt that the conversion coins mentioned in the Xingshi yinyuan zhuan

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42 Meng Sen 孟森, Meng Sen mingshi jiangyi 孟森明史講義 (Changchun: Jilin renmin chubanshe, 2013), 286.
43 The scene was described in detail as 道路指目, 咸曰奉夫聖人客氏, 靡不舌撟眼張者. See Hou Zhenyang 侯震暘, “He Keshi shu” 劾客氏疏, in Huangming jingshi wenbian 皇明經世文編, ed. Chen Zilong 陳子龍 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 49,5508.
must have been decuple coins of the Tianqi circulating currency. This withdrawal of high-quality money from circulation cannot be fully explained by economic theory, and must be viewed in tandem with the political environment of the Tianqi era.

4 Concluding Remarks

The Xingshi yinyuan zhuan illustrates the success of several high-quality currencies during the Jiajing era in the case of yellow coins and yellow-fringed coins, which formed a system of circulation dominated by silver and supplemented by cash. The text also reveals the instability that arose when decuple coins were withdrawn from the market, as well as the price of the coins when exchanged with silver, which reflects the official regulation of cash. The tumultuous Tianqi era serves as a prime example of how politics and economics can interact with the psychology of local populations, leading to irrational financial decisions and the withdrawal of high-quality money from circulation.

Translated by Carl Gene Fordham

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The Evolution of Money Culture and the Transformation of Narrative Culture in Pre-modern Chinese Fiction

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Abstract

The money culture of a given time and place can have a profound influence on literature, a medium that allows for the artistic expression of aesthetic taste. This article takes money culture as its analytical lens to explore the cultural transformation of literary concepts that were prevalent in Chinese novels. It will delve into the transition from agricultural production and lifestyles, which were focused on productive and consumptive survival, to industrialized production and lifestyles, which were centered on monetary survival. Additionally, it will trace the evolution from farming literature, which is rooted in Confucian morality, to commercial literature, which is characterized by themes of wealth, lust, and the search for novelty.

Keywords

money culture – Chinese fiction – narrative culture – farming literature – commercial literature – transformation

This article explores the relationship between changes in the concept of money and literary expression, beginning with an examination of the pre-modern
Chinese understanding of money culture. This understanding was informed by various views on the nature of money, such as whether it was alive or dead, appreciable or depreciable, and how it should relate to life in general. While this understanding differs from Marx’s metaphysical proposition of the value of money, it does contain the same attributes. The Chinese concept of money had a direct impact on popular attitudes towards spending, which in turn shaped people’s life values and aesthetics. This understanding is reflected in the images, stories, and artistic expression of literary works, forming a corresponding system of literary expression. By examining money culture, this article seeks to uncover the relationship between changes in the concept of money and literary expression.

1 Money Culture and Literary Concepts in Productive and Consumptive Survival

During the era of slavery and feudalism in China, the stage of incidental commodity exchange was dominated by an agricultural economy, where land production determined all other production and held a dominant position in the social economy. The main items of exchange had the characteristics of an agrarian economy, consisting of food (grain) and use (goods). People survived by obtaining the necessities of life through a state of living that centered around the production and consumption of wealth. The money culture of the time was also closely linked to land production, as people relied on the land to sustain their livelihoods.

Under the agrarian mode of production, the main form of currency used – grain and its substitutes (paper money and metal money) – invariably decreased in value as it was spent. This necessitated the development of a new concept of money: food and goods were no longer a viable form of currency, as their mass would diminish with each transaction. To ensure the preservation of value, it was necessary to be able to receive and store money instead of only trading and spending it.

As the Ming politician Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525–1582) once said, “There is a finite amount of wealth in the world, and the pursuit of it does not increase it. The only way to ensure that there is enough wealth to go around is through frugality.” Therefore, people called for the preservation of wealth by obstructing (zhàng 障), keeping (shòu 守) and receiving (shòu 收) it:

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The lack of commodities and inadequate supply can lead to price hikes and public scrutiny. When goods are plentiful and abundant, prices tend to decrease. When items are costly, this can result in the importation of similar goods from far locations. Conversely, when items are inexpensive, this can lead to local products being transported to other areas.2

It is precisely due to this situation that those who received and preserved wealth were viewed as mentally and physically superior. “There are periods of scarcity and periods of abundance, so food prices fluctuate accordingly ... If the land is distributed evenly, those with strength are adept at managing it; when the wealth is distributed evenly, those with wisdom are adept at accumulating it.”3 The idea that money is finite, that it loses value with each transaction, and that it can be saved to maintain its worth, is a hallmark of agrarian societies.

A concept of consumption associated with this type of money culture quickly developed. Having emerged from an agricultural background, society advocated for the elimination of extravagance and the adoption of thriftiness. The success of agricultural production is largely dependent on the climate. In many parts of the Central Plains of China, crop failures are more common than bountiful harvests. As the saying goes: “There are four kinds of natural disasters: floods, droughts, famines, and barrenness, and they can strike at any moment.”4

The underlying assumption is that if food supply is only prioritized in good years, then starvation is likely to occur in bad ones. To avoid running short, it is essential to live frugally and use resources sparingly. In this way of thinking, extravagant consumption is seen as the source of poverty among the people and a detriment to the nation. As Guanzi 管子 (ca. 720–645 BCE) once said, “Having few agricultural products and many luxuries is the mark of a profligate state. The extravagance of the state leads to wasteful spending, which in turn leads to impoverishment.”5 Note, also, the words of Xunzi 荀子 (ca. 313–ca. 238 BCE): “Heaven is incapable of enriching the state if agriculture is neglected and expenses are extravagant.”6

This anti-luxury, pro-frugality consumption concept not only reflected the values of the era, but it also had a profound impact on how people judged what

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3 Ibid., 22.360.
5 Guanzi, 5.74.
6 Xunzi 荀子, vol. 2 of Zhuzi jicheng, 11.205.
was right and wrong, and even what constituted good and evil. It shaped the way people viewed their own self-interest and morality. As Confucius (ca. 551–ca. 479 BCE) once said, “A man of integrity knows morals; a man without integrity knows interests.”7 Mencius (ca. 372–289 BCE) also once said, “People who get up as soon as the rooster crows and tirelessly do good deeds are people like [Emperor] Shun; people who get up when the rooster crows and tirelessly seek profit are people like [the bandit] Zhi.”8 Again, the words of Xunzi provide food for thought: “When morality prevails over self-interest, it is an era of stability; when self-interest prevails over morality, it is an era of chaos.”9 In these passages, the notion of commending justice and denigrating profit is laid bare. The emphasis of righteousness over profit was directly derived from the economic and political campaign of supporting agriculture and suppressing commerce. This policy, known as zhongbenyimo 重本抑末, was designed to cultivate the compliant character of the people, which was seen as essential for the stability of the family unit and society as a whole. By promoting justice and discouraging profit, this campaign sought to create a more harmonious and secure environment for all. In the Lüshi Chunqiu 呂氏春秋 it is written:

The ancient sage-kings were able to teach the people because they devoted themselves first to agriculture. Agriculture is not only carried out for the cultivation of the land, but for the cultivation of the people. People who farm are simple-minded, and the simple-minded are readily put to use. The simple-minded being readily put to use, the borders are kept peaceful, and the dignity of the ruler is maintained. The people, being engaged in farming, remain staid; being staid, they are less likely to practice favoritism; with less favoritism, public law is established, and the people’s energies will be devoted to farming. If the people work in agriculture, they will be rich in assets; being rich in assets, they will not move easily. They will stay where they live all their lives, without a change of heart. ... [legendary hero] Hou Ji said: “The ancient sage-kings took up farming and weaving to use it as fundamental education.”10

Along with the pro-frugality and anti-extravagance consumption concept espoused by the land producers, it is clear that righteousness was prioritized over self-interest. This political philosophy placed a strong emphasis on

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8 Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, Mengzi yizhu 孟子譯註 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 312.
9 Xunzi, 19.330.
10 Lüshi chunqiu 呂氏春秋, vol. 6 of Zhuzi jicheng, 26.331–32.
agriculture and suppressed commerce, advocating for simplicity and integrity. This money culture was centered around survival through production and consumption, and was underpinned by the precepts of morality, propriety, and stability – particularly the stability of land. It is written that, “In all the things under heaven, if there is new, there will be old. A house, once lived in for a long time, will eventually collapse. Clothes, if worn for a long time, will eventually wear out. Servants and maidservants, worked for a long time, will grow old and die, just like cattle and horses.”

Peasants who relied on the land for their livelihood had a deep connection to their home. However, long-standing laws and public morality were essential for communities to remain rooted in one place. Additionally, there were expectations of moral character placed on the individual – to be judicious when managing affairs, honest when interacting with others, and to reject money and small profits when conducting business. Evidently, the money culture of the time that focused on the promotion of virtue and propriety was closely intertwined with land production. As a result, it was characterized by the inherent stability of the land, providing a sense of security and assurance to those who depended on it.

The stability of this farming culture can be observed in the political and ideological systems of Chinese antiquity. The political system, which was based on land production, declared that “all land under heaven is the territory of the sovereign.” This patriarchal hierarchy was characterized by the unshakeable seniority of male members, and all power was concentrated in the parents. Stability was at the core of land production, and long-term social stability was seen as the ultimate goal. Although the forms of political power have changed throughout China's long history, the pursuit of stability has remained constant, and has only become more and more pervasive over the centuries.

Ancient Chinese thought was deeply rooted in the stability of farming culture, manifesting itself in the form of asceticism. Chinese thinkers of all schools believed that, while the desire for food and other necessities was a natural part of human nature, indulgence was detrimental and that only by restraining irrational desires could one achieve a state of goodness or enlightenment. This moral ontology, which regarded kindness as a fundamental part of human nature, was another distinctive feature of ancient Chinese thought. Both of these tendencies originated from the land production mode, with the

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idea of abstinence stemming from the concept that money is hard-won and decreases with use, and the concept of frugal consumption born from this. Additionally, the concept of marriage and love, as well as the propriety system that maintained family stability, also contributed to the ascetic and moral ontology that advocated virtue and ritual. Despite the many changes that ancient Chinese thought underwent to meet the needs of different historical periods, the core values of asceticism and moral ontology remain fundamentally unchanged.

When farming literature expressed cultural concepts originating from agriculture in a literary form, it embodied its unique stability centered on morality and propriety. This stability can be divided into three distinct levels. The first level is the pursuit of moral character, which includes revering men of virtue, rebuking debauched rulers, cherishing loyal ministers, despising corrupt officials, advocating frugality, prohibiting extravagance, remaining married until old age, bemoaning capriciousness, punishing the wicked, and encouraging the good.

The second level is the structural form of contradictions formed by the cohesive force of morality and the external tension of emotion. This includes struggles between loyalists and traitors, conflicts between ideality and reality, conflicts between individuals and groups, and conflicts between emotion and reason.

These two levels of farming literature illustrate the unique stability of morality and propriety, which is essential for comprehending the cultural concepts of agriculture. Although these contradictions and conflicts manifest differently depending on the literary work and time period in question, they all come down to one fundamental point – that one should vent emotions but cease when they reach the point of ritual and propriety. Emotional attachment to morality and righteousness is seen as far more powerful than its outward tension and destructiveness. In other words, emotions in literary works invariably oscillate along the main line of value in farming culture – that of advocating morality, ritual, and righteousness.

The third level is the aesthetic level, that of the beauty of moderation, which is characterized by grievance without anger, mourning without grief, pleasure without indulgence, gentleness and genuineness, being at peace with the world, and harboring neither prejudice nor partiality.

This kind of literature is known as farming literature, and it is a type of writing that takes propriety and righteousness as its spiritual core. In its pursuit of the beauty of moderation, it manifests harmony, generosity, and stability.
Money Culture in a Monetized State of Existence

In a socialized petty commodity economy, the mode of production transitions from land-based production to handicraft production. At this time, the necessities of life are acquired through the exchange of commodities, as self-sufficiency can no longer be fully achieved. Ultimately, cities become completely dependent on market exchange.

As Marx and Engels famously argued, all commodities, activities, and relations can be exchanged for a third item – money – which can be exchanged for anything without distinction. As money becomes more essential to people’s lives, they become increasingly driven to wealth, thus entering a monetized state of existence. This phenomenon emerged in China sometime between the late Jiajing 嘉靖 period (1522–1566) and the Wanli 萬曆 period (1573–1620) of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), in cities with highly developed industries of commerce such as Hangzhou 杭州, Suzhou 蘇州, Yangzhou 扬州, Nanjing 南京 and Linqing 臨清, and in some families who ran business ventures from bases outside their home provinces, such as those from Shanxi (晋商) and Huizhou (徽商). The citizens of the empire shifted from land production to mainly engaging in handicraft production and commercial operations. Despite land production and ownership remaining dominant, the concepts of money, spending, life values, and aesthetics shared by citizens exchanging money for daily necessities underwent significant changes, becoming new cultural concepts that drove the trend of the times.

From the late Jiajing period to the early Wanli period, a series of major events occurred in the history of money in China. In the 43rd year of the Jiajing period (1564), the scholar Xu Jie 徐階 (1503–1583) wrote to the emperor, requesting that the Baoyuan Bureau (寶源局) halt the casting of copper coins. Twenty-eight thousand taels of silver minted each year would be used for the expenditure of official salaries, so that all official salaries could be replaced by silver.

In 1581, during the ninth year of the Wanli period, Zhang Juzheng implemented the Single Whip Law (yitiaobian fa 一條鞭法), which allowed for the uniform collection of silver for fiscal obligations instead of grain or copper cash. This reform had a profound effect on the Chinese economy, as it induced

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13 Xu Jie 徐階, “Qing tingzhi Baoyuan ju zhuanqian” 單止寶源局鑄錢, in Ming jingshi wenbian 明經世文編, ed. Chen Zilong 陳子龍 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 244–251.

14 See Ming Shi 明史, vol. 298 of Jingyin wenjuan ge siku quanshu 景印文淵閣四庫全書 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1982), 78.240.
officials to put all their money onto the market in silver. Furthermore, taxes and corvees were required to be paid in silver, forcing land producers to convert a large number of agricultural products into silver by means of the market. This ultimately led to the silverization of Chinese currency. More importantly, the silverization of taxes and corvees forced the self-sufficient natural economies of the rural areas to gradually link with the market, and this extended to some commodities to a certain extent, thus promoting the rapid development of urban commodity economies, with silver as the main medium.

The development of urban commodity economies brought about a monumental shift in the monetary concept of local populations. This transformation was evidenced in two ways. First, the role of money underwent a transformation. Silver was no longer a mere reflection of the value of agricultural products, but rather a special commodity that served as a universal equivalent and had universal exchange value. It was said that: “Silver is the most reliable medium for the circulation of goods under heaven. All the goods in the world, regardless of their value or size, are measured in silver, even the most precious and rare items.”

Zhu Zaiyu 朱載堉 (1536–1611), a descendant of the royal family, expressed this change in poetic form, writing of money in the form of silver:

> With you [money], there will be lavish feasts; with your presence, there will be knowledge and sophistication; with your help, almost any issue can be resolved; with your assistance, situation after situation can be remedied. ... When you are around, everyone beams with joy; with you, the mundane can become extraordinary; with you, you can sit at the superior seat; with you, you can assume a position of power.

It is evident that, by this time, money had taken a firm hold on the minds and souls of the people, and society had become monetized.

Second, silver currency was acquired through the production and exchange of commodities, and its value increased during the process of production, exchange, and circulation. The scholar-official Zhang Han 張瀚 (1511–1593) recounted the remarkable growth of his family’s wealth, noting how a single ingot of silver had multiplied into tens of thousands of pieces of gold:

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16 “Ti qian” 题錢 in Lin shi yi xing 林石逸興 by Xue Lundao 薛論道 (1531–1600) is quoted from Lu Gong 路工, Mingdai gequ xuan 明代歌曲選 (Shanghai: Shanghai gudian wenxue chubanshe, 1956), 97.
When I returned home, I lit a candle and was surprised to find a piece of silver. This discovery prompted me to abandon my liquor-selling business and invest in a loom. I began to weave linen of various colors with exquisite craftsmanship. My work was so impressive that people would flock to purchase it, allowing me to make a profit of one-fifth. After 20 days, I had acquired more than 20 looms. My quarters were soon filled with merchants eager to buy my cloth, and I was overwhelmed with the demand. Since then, my family business has flourished, amassing tens of thousands of pieces of gold.17

This concept of value-added money – multiplication through reproduction – was previously unheard of. It represented a radical departure from the traditional view of money – that it was static, that it diminished with use, and that its value could be maintained by hoarding it. In tandem with this new concept of money, people’s consumption habits also shifted from thriftiness to extravagance, thus creating a social trend of luxury. The Quzhou fuzhi (Gazetteer of Quzhou Prefecture) of the Tianqi 天啟 (1621–1628) era records the changes in the prefecture’s consumption trends thus:

The people of Quzhou have long been renowned for their honest, frugal, and simple customs. This quality of character has been deeply rooted in the land since ancient times. Before the eras of Chenghua and Hongzhi, every family was prosperous and had more than enough to live comfortably. Thousands of grains and copper coins were stored in their households. However, during the Longqing and Wanli eras, people began to develop a taste for extravagance. They wore headscarves so high they seemed to reach the clouds, sleeves so long they swept the floor, socks of velvet instead of felt, shoes of red instead of plain, clothes of luxurious silk instead of hem, and ate sumptuous meals instead of simple ones.18

This shift towards luxury was not limited to the necessities of life; rather, it was characterized by extreme indulgence and exuberant extravagance in all aspects of life, from emotion to belief and entertainment. It was said that:

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18 “Minsu Zhi” 民俗志 in Quzhou fuzhi 衢州府志, quoting from Fu Yiling 傅衣凌, Ming-Qing shehui jingji bianqian lun 明清社會經濟變遷論 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1989), 178.
By the Longqing era, people had developed a preference for decadence and degeneration. Youngsters sang and played day and night, filling the streets from east to west with song, dance, opera troupes, and brothels. Towering pavilions and exquisite, delicious food were abundant, with fruit in winter and vegetables in spring so plentiful that no one thought it a pity to discard them. The rewards bestowed by the emperor amounted to the tens of thousands.19

Accompanying this shift in consumption culture was a change in values. This change involved four aspects. First, there was a move away from a deeply-considered relocation from one’s native soil to a more casual migration to the outside world. Merchants who were willing to venture to distant lands to conduct business were viewed as being unfaithful to their ancestral homes. Second, there was a transformation in moral character, from a stable and honest personality to a more daring and even cunning one. When merchants from Huizhou ventured outwards to conduct business, it was remarked: “Once the business [conducted by Huizhou merchants] fails, their money is stolen, vanishing without a trace, like a field sinking into the sea. Moreover, they do not actually farm the fields themselves, but rather hire people to work on them. When their money is stolen [due to business failure], there is nothing left to repay the owner, leaving the Huizhou merchants to die with their wealth.”20 Therefore, it was seen that the most successful businessmen were those who could play with money intelligently and prudently. Others commented that, “People in the villages, both young and old, are becoming increasingly frivolous and untrustworthy. When they encounter their honest and straightforward counterparts, they shame them with mockery.”21

Third, money became not just the standard for determining the value of things, but also the yardstick for assessing the value of people. The veneration of money supplanted the reverence of propriety and morality, while prioritizing profit over virtue replaced the emphasis on morality and the devaluation of profit. Scholars renowned for their moral integrity decried this phenomenon: “Because of you [money], people can lose morality; because of you, people

19 Sun Chengze 孫承澤, Tianfu guangji 天府廣記 (Beijing: Beijing guji chubanshe, 1982), 35-489.
21 See “Fengsu” 風俗, in Huicheng xianzhi 惲城縣志, quoting from Fu Yiling, Ming-Qing shehui jingji bianqian lun, 7.220.
can sever ties and abuse kindness; because of you, people can forget loyalty and honesty."

Fourth, group consciousness and hierarchical concepts were transformed into individual consciousness and equality concepts where money measured everything. With everyone having equal access to the same amount of money, a humble oil salesman by day could moonlight as the most renowned courtesan in a brothel by night. A merchant named Shen Hong 沈洪 felt that he was no worse than the scholar Wang Sanguan 王三官, writing, “Wang Sanguan is just an ordinary person, as am I. He has money, as do I. How could he excel me?”

The insurmountable status and rank in farming culture were solidified by the power of money. The underlying sentiment of the aforementioned changes in the values of business culture and life is a yearning for transformation that is not content with the status quo and seeks to break free from it.

In brief, the evolution of commodity production and exchange practices led to a transformation in people's understanding of money, spending, and life values. As Marx argued, the ancient, patriarchal, and feudal systems would be replaced by the emergence of commerce, luxury, money, and exchange value, while modern society would be shaped by these developments. The shift to commercial literature was marked by a desire for innovation, setting it apart from the traditionalism of agricultural literature.

3  The Transformation of Fiction Narrative Culture

After the mid-Ming dynasty, literary works became increasingly accessible to the general populace. Gradually, literary works emerged that shifted the concept of money, spending, and life values from those typically found in agrarian literature to those more commonly seen in commercial literature. The so-called “marketplace novels” (shijing xiaoshuo 市井小說) of the late Ming that portrayed the lives of urban commoners were the best examples of this genre. They illustrated the ebbing and appreciative nature of money through their depictions of characters. For example, the 56th chapter of Jin Ping Mei cihua 《金瓶梅詞話》(The Lyric Tale of Plum Flowers in the Golden Vase) features

22 "Ti qian" quoted from Lu Gong, Mingdai gequ xuan, 97.
23 Feng Menglong 馮夢龍, comp., Xingshi hengyan 醒世恆言, annot. Yan Dunyi 嚴敦易 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1956), vol. 3.
25 See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Jingjixue shougao, 103.
a dialogue between Ying Bojue 應伯爵 and Ximen Qing 西門慶 in which the restless nature of money is described in considerable detail:

Bojue said: “The people of antiquity were benevolent, treating wealth as unimportant. Their descendants, however, built tall houses and gates, expanding the estates of their ancestors. Owing to their miserliness, they accumulated vast amounts of treasure. Unfortunately, their descendants have not been able to maintain the same level of prosperity, and even their ancestors’ tombs have fallen into disrepair. This serves as a reminder that the way of heaven is ever-changing, just like the cycle of samsara.”

Ximen Qing said: “Money tends to move; it does not like to stay put. How could it be hoarded in one place? Money is a gift from the heavens that is meant to be used by people; some individuals amass it, while others are deprived of it. Consequently, it is wrong to hoard wealth and not put it to good use.”

This dialogue not only further reveals that, in the minds of businessmen, money is seen as a restless and divinely-bestowed resource, but also further explains the two ways in which money is believed to be bestowed by heaven. The first is the idea that one should think little of wealth and dedicate oneself to good deeds, such as helping those in need, in the belief that one good deed will be rewarded with another. The second is the notion that money is self-generating and increases in value through reproduction and circulation.

This transition reflects a move away from the traditional concept of frugal consumption, which focuses on earning more and spending less, to a more indulgent approach of earning more and spending more for pleasure and luxury. In the marketplace novels, money is associated with leisurely activities in romantic locations, and living a life of opulence and extravagance in luxurious gardens and pavilions constructed with lavish expenditures. The commoners even compare themselves to their noble counterparts, splurging on social events to portray themselves as magnanimously generous. When selecting attire for everyday wear, they disregard social standing and vie for opulence without any qualms about overstepping their authority. For example, on the day Ximen Qing took office in the 31st chapter of Jin Ping Mei cihua, he adorn himself with a priceless belt owned by the high-ranking official Wang Zhaoxuan 王招宣. See also the 28th fascicle of Erke pai’an jingqi 二刻拍案驚奇.

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26 See Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 蘭陵笑笑生, Jin Ping Mei cihua 金瓶梅詞話 (Hong Kong: Taiping shuju, 1982), 56.1514–15.
(The Second Collection of Slapping the Table in Amazement) which describes a wealthy man from Huizhou surnamed Cheng 程:

Possessing a vast family fortune, [he] truly embodies the notion that material comfort breeds sexual desire. His heart is filled with nothing but lust for women. Whenever he spots a pretty lady, he will do whatever it takes to make her his. He is willing to spend whatever it takes to get what he wants.27

What is sought is the indulgence of luxury and the pursuit of pleasure.28

The value system of characters in marketplace novels shifted from emphasizing morality over self-interest to venerating money, prioritizing self-interest, and diminishing the importance of morality. The 37th fascicle of The Second Collection of Slapping the Table in Amazement describes the customs of the people of Huizhou 徽州:

Because Huizhou merchants specialize in business operations, their fellow clan members, friends, wives and relatives only value the business success they bring home. Those who have been successful are met with admiration and praise, while those who have not are met with disdain and mockery.29

Ximen Qing from Jin Ping Mei cihua believed that money was the ultimate source of power; he had no regard for either rank or religion. Wu Yueniang 吳月娘 attempted to persuade him that “it is wiser to pursue fewer endeavors that are motivated by greed and desire.” However, Ximen dismissed her advice as mere words of envy, retorting in Chapter 57,

I heard that the Tathagata Buddha in the Western Paradise also needs to pave the ground with gold, and that the Hall of Yama in the underworld also needs people in the mortal world to burn hell money to make offerings. All I need to do is dissipate my wealth and do more good deeds.

28 What needs to be explained is that the aforementioned consumers of luxury and pleasure share a common trait: they are citizens who can earn and spend without causing harm to others. They differ from the archetypal prodigal son, who only knows how to indulge in excesses like feasting, boozing, whoring and gambling, without any regard for the consequences of his actions. This archetype is often criticized in novels of the period.
29 Ling Mengchu, Erke paı̂n jingqi, 420–22.
Even if I raped Chang’e and Zhinü, kidnapped Xu Feiqiong, and stole the daughter of the Queen Mother of the West, it would not change the wealthy life I lead.\textsuperscript{30}

These words may read like bravado. However, Ximen did exhibit the haughtiness of the affluent and the drive to constantly take possession of high-status women. This call to prioritize money over virtue is unprecedented in previous literary works.

Another important manifestation of the money culture of monetized existence is the unscrupulous pursuit of wealth and erotica by the characters in the novel. In the traditional ascetic farming culture, the four cardinal vices of “liquor, lust, avarice and temper” (\textit{jiu-se-cai-qi} 酒色財氣) are regarded as the source of suffering in life, and chaos in society. Li Hong 李宏, a gifted scholar in the story “Su Xhixian luoshan zaihe” 蘇知縣羅衫再合 (A Shirt Reunites Magistrate Su with His Family) in the twelfth fascicle of \textit{Jingshi tongyan} 警世通言 (Stories to Caution the World), however, had a different theory, writing,

\begin{quote}
Three glasses of liquor can reconcile a multitude of things, and when consumed, can provide relief from all kinds of sorrows. Yin and yang [men and women] come together to create offspring, while orphans, widows, and divorcees are left without descendants. Money is a powerful tool to bring harmony and prosperity to a family, and a peaceful atmosphere is the key to good fortune. It is absurd to think that helping people achieve what is in line with their nature should be despised.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

Surprisingly, he claims that there are numerous advantages to the aforementioned cardinal vices. Characters in marketplace novels are often portrayed as impulsive, dismissive of moral principles, and audacious enough to pursue their desires without hesitation.

The story “Yao Dizhu bixiu rexiu” 姚滴珠避羞惹羞 (Yao Dizhu Flees from Disgrace Only to Incur More Disgrace) contained in the second fascicle of \textit{Chuke pai’an jingqi} 初刻拍案驚奇 (Part One of Slapping the Table in Amazement) by Ling Mengchu 凌濛初 (1580–1644) features the heroine Yao Dizhu 姚滴珠. Two months after their wedding, Yao’s husband has left home on business. Yao decides to run away, being unable to tolerate the cruel words and behavior of her in-laws. However, shortly after, Yao is abducted. When the

\textsuperscript{30} Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 蘭陵笑笑生, \textit{Jin Ping Mei cihua} 金瓶梅詞話, annot. Tao Muning 陶慕寧 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin chubanshe, 2000), 702.

\textsuperscript{31} Feng Menglong, \textit{Jingshi tongyan}, 131–35.
abductor presents her to another merchant surnamed Wu, Yao is taken by the tranquility and comfort of her new home. Unconcerned with her reputation, Yao joyfully accepts the role of the merchant’s mistress and lives a contented life.32

Miss He, the heroine in “Wu Yanei linzhou fuyue” 吳衙內鄰舟赴約 (Meeting with Master Wu on a Nearby Boat), “cannot help but give into her selfish motives” and “obsesses to the point of wanting to cut her guts open ... and itches to rush to Master Wu’s side and confess her love to him.” In the end, disregarding life and death, she elopes with Master Wu in the boat.33 For men, however, this cultural tendency mostly manifests as a desire for money, and wanting to obtain freedom and happiness in the consumption of money and the possession of love. It is these kinds of values and proclivities that spawned an entire array of erotic and commerce-themed novels fixated on money and sex.

This kind of restless change that is characteristic of commercial culture presented two levels of development in the marketplace novels of the late Ming period. The first is the characters’ conscious striving for change, driven by their dissatisfaction with the status quo. In the “Prologue” (ruhua 入話) to the story “Wu Jiangjun yifan bi cho” 烏將軍一飯必酬 (General Wu Repays the Debt of One Meal) related in the eighth fascicle of Part One of Slapping the Table in Amazement, it is written that the widowed mother Yang 楊 instructed her nephew Wang Sheng 王生 to go out to do business. Every time he took out thousands of taels of silver to buy goods, he was robbed by “bandits that roam rivers and lakes” (shuidao 水盜). But the Yang family was perseverant, and never being discouraged, “in less than a few years, became a wealthy family.”34 Except for Wu Yueniang, none of the women in Jin Ping Mei cihua is content with the status quo. They constantly look for new ways to change their lives – at the expense of their good name, and even their lives. These are the most illustrative depictions of restless change in the marketplace novels of the late Ming.

Secondly, the marketplace novels of the late Ming period tended to employ lifelike, mass-appealing, individualistic forms of expression. By “lifelike,” it is meant that the author positions descriptions of the pursuit of money and sex as the main body of the novel’s narrative. Avarice and lust are not only placed in the center stage, but also become the true temperament of the characters in the novel and the intention and motivation of their life’s pursuit. This kind of

32 Ling Mengchu 凌濛初, Chuke pai’an jingqi 初刻拍案驚奇, ed. Zhang Peiheng 章培恒 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1982), vol. 2.
33 Feng Menglong, Xingshi hengyan, 582.
34 Ling Mengchu, Chuke pai’an jingqi, 8.135.
narrative perspective of wealth and power contributed to the mass appeal of the novel, which is itself an inevitable product of money culture.

As the German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918) noted, money serves as a benchmark for gauging socioeconomic and even personal value, permeating economic, cultural, and spiritual life with the orientations of objectification, quantification, and averaging. Thus, money becomes an integral part of life, providing a common language for understanding the value of goods and services, and allowing for the comparison of individual worth. This penetration is achieved through exchange. Currency reflects its unique equivalence nature in exchange, allowing all commodities to be equalized by the equivalent currency. Simmel also argued that money balances all kinds of things, expressing all qualitative differences between them through the difference in price thus equalizing all qualitative differences and making them cease to exist.

Since money has the capability to level out material disparities, it has the potential to bring about a more equitable social hierarchy through exchange. Simultaneously, it pushes the more refined and sophisticated forms of culture towards homogenization, simplification, and popularization in a commodity-based economy. This mass appeal is clearly manifested in the marketplace novels of the late Ming dynasty, ranging from heroic stories to mercantile stories, signifying the end of a period of heroic climaxes and the beginning of an era of commercial-focused and urban-centered literature.

The gender of the characters in this new era of literature shifted from predominantly male to predominantly female, marking a significant milestone in the depiction of women’s lives. This shift was driven by a newfound awareness of equality, which was a natural consequence of the awakening of individual consciousness. In a town with a developed commodity economy, the relationship between individuals and others is regulated by the exchange of commodities. This exchange is primarily designed to satisfy the desires of the individual holders of the money. Here, the individual is primary, and others are secondary. It is the individual-first value concept produced by this universal commodity exchange between individuals that quietly shifts the values of those involved in the exchange, ultimately placing the individual at the center of the narrator’s attention and capturing the inner world of the characters.

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37 Chen Rongnü, “yizhe daoyan,” 7.
This allows for the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the characters to be vividly portrayed. Not only is the story transformed from a basic outline to a detailed masterpiece, the details are carefully distributed and slang, colloquialisms, and allegorical sayings are seamlessly woven into the text. This constitutes a revolutionary change in the vernacular language, from writing about heroes and men to writing about boudoir slang and makeup. The techniques of narrative, lyric and freehand brushwork in the novel are made more vibrant. Common lyrical and entertaining stylistic forms such as operas, ditties, poems, drinking games, lantern riddles, and jokes, along with scenes of monetization in liquor stores and teahouses, are abundant in novel narratives. These are employed to create characters, which not only enhances the narrative of the novel, but also enriches and enlivens it.

It is particularly notable that the marketplace novels of the late Ming did not entirely eradicate the restrictions of farming culture. Moreover, the monetary culture – with its distinctive features of mercantile culture – is distinct from agrarian culture, which was based on rewarding virtue and punishing vice, and was presented within the ethical framework of reincarnation. For example, the author of Jin Ping Mei cihua showed his attitude towards the characters in the book through the “dear readers, please listen” (kanguan tingshuo 看官聽說) device and the repeated rhyming of chapter titles. However, the work captivates the reader not through moralizing, but by narrating the characters’ lives and their pursuit of carnal, material, and interest-driven desires. From ordinary human relationships to those between men and women, these stories start and end with the profit motive. The author also brings a unique perspective to retributive justice, using karmic theory to illustrate the rationale behind carnal, material, and interest-driven desires. For example, the author of “Meeting with Master Wu on a Nearby Boat” clearly states:

In ancient times, men and women became acquainted in private and married that way. This would result in the husband being honored and the wife becoming wealthy. It was a beautiful story. How could divine calculation ever be wrong? Dear readers don’t know it, but those who spoke ill and acted badly were remembered for their wrongdoings, and the consequences of their behavior were far-reaching. If it hadn’t been predetermined by the heavens for them to be married five hundred years ago, and if Yuelao had not tied their feet together with a red rope, their fate would have been determined by their previous lives and could not have been changed by their own actions.\(^\text{38}\)

\(^{38}\) Feng Menglong, Xingshi hengyan, 28.578.
That is to say, seeking a mate based on personal preference and engaging in debauchery became permissible and justifiable under the protection of the retribution theory, had it not been predetermined by the heavens for them to be married five hundred years ago. This demonstrates that the author’s longing for genuine emotions and material gain surpasses the moral teachings and value judgments of Confucianism. Furthermore, it reveals that the ideal standards of emotion and propriety in farming literature have been replaced by a spirit of wealth and desire in commercial literature, which is driven by the pursuit of money and is characterized by emotion, linked to interests, and distinguished by etiquette and righteousness.

This analysis of late Ming marketplace novels reveals a new concept of money: that it is alive and increases in value when exchanged and circulated. This shift in the money concept was accompanied by changes in spending, values, and aesthetics, which resulted in a literary expression that was more lifelike, mass-appealing, individualistic, and realistic. This spirit of commercial literature, which is focused on the pursuit of material and carnal desires and characterized by novelty-seeking, stands in stark contrast to the morality-focused farming literature that is characterized by stability.

Translated by Carl Gene Fordham

Works Cited


Huizhou fuzhi 徽州府志 (Kangxi 康熙 period), photocopied edition.


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
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.\(^1\) 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,\(^2\) 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.

\(^2\) 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”³ 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,⁴ 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

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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 archetypical 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. 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.

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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.  

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. 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

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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.” 8 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. 9 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.” 10 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.
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” (*caifen 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” (*yili* 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.”\footnote{Yixuan Zhuren 怡軒主人, “Yu mu xing xin bian xu” 娱目醒心編序, 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.} The establishment of the causal law of morality and wealth required a very suitable storyline. In this regard, “Wang yuwen sheng chong san bao, bai shui seng dao wu sang shuang sheng” 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 ru ne 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.”\footnote{Feng Menglong, Xingshi hengyan, 370.} 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.”\footnote{Ibid.} 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,”\footnote{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.} 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,\footnote{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.} 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...
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. 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

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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* 举人) and presented scholar (*Jinshi* 进士) 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,17 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

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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 in *Yuzhiji*, 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 taosheng 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 huaku,” 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 father, Pan Baiwan, is nouveau riche, and his family affairs are flourishing day by day,” whereas Xiao Ya's father, Lieutenant Governor Xiao Biejia, 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*). 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 ji” 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 rewar ded 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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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.” 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.” 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.
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), 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 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, 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 period (1572–1620) of the Ming dynasty. Chinese printing technology had developed during the Jiajing 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 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.
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.” 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, Ge yi 葛衣 and Yi ru 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.”

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 Biaojia 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

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6 Qi Que 齊愨, “Ling chi fu xu 詈痴符序,” 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 攸陽 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 (1553–1619), 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 毕魏 (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,

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8 For a specific discussion, please see He Yanjun 何艷君, “Cong Ming mo Qing chu xiaoshuo xiqu lei renwu 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). 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.” 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

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10 Liang Chenyu 梁辰魚, Liang Chenyu ji 梁辰魚集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1998), 633.
11 Ibid., 636.
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 向生, 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 (jinshi 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 馬曰琯 (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:


\(^{13}\) 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*
Xulu 嘯亭續錄, Qing dynasty imperial clansman Zhaolian 昭槤 (1776–1830) said that many literati had been enthusiastic critics of novels since the time of literary critic Jin Shengtān 金聖嘆 (1608–1661). Critiqued novels such as Shuihu zhuan and Jinpingmei were frequently displayed on desks in the homes of scholar-officials.  

During the late Qing dynasty, certain novels were adapted for pingju 評劇 opera and became widespread. 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.  

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 白雲道人 (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.

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,

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19 Huoshi Daoren 霍市道人, Xing fengliu 醒風流 (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1984).
indicated by the word *yuan* 緣 (fate).\textsuperscript{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”\textsuperscript{21} and popular preferences, and “especially the preferences of the scholar-officials,”\textsuperscript{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 waisi* and *Liaozhai zhiyi*. 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.\textsuperscript{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


\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 50.

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 shilüe 中國小說史略 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), 39.
prominence for a time, being considered a representative work, it was soon a 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 *Jinpíngmei*, 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; *Jinpíngmei* 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

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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* 三國演義, Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 (181–234) “worked as a farmer in Nanyang 南陽 with his younger brother Zhuge Jun 諸葛均” 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 庞統 (179–214), Xun Yu 荀彧 (183–212), Xun You 荀攸 (157–214), Jia Xu 賈詡 (170–207), and Guo Jia 郭嘉 (170–207) were all outstanding advisers who attached themselves to heroes in turbulent times. In *Jinpengmei*, Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng 蘭陵笑笑生 (dates unknown) depicts several literati, such as the principal graduate (*zhuangyuan*) Cai Yun 蔡蘊, the presented scholar An Chen 安忱, and cultivated talents (*xiucai*) Wen Bigu 溫必古 and Shui Xiucai 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 Qin’s 西門慶 mansion to sponge on him; the unknown cultivated talents Wen Bigu and Shui Xiucai, 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* 連城璧, Li Yu 李漁 describes how


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 屋樓志, Yuling Laoren 庾嶺 劳人 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, “Luocha haishi” 罗剎海市 depicts Ma Ji 马驤, 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.

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. 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, fourteen of the works contained in Er-pai depict the Grand Canal. 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 Xiao chuang ziji 小窗自紀 by Wu Congxian 吳從先. Building on this foundation, Qing dynasty operatic writers Huang Tubi 黃圖珌 (b. 1699) and Fang Chengpei 方成培 (1713–1808) each adapted the story into the Kunqu operas 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.”

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).
31 Wang Jue 王珏, “Cong Baishe zhuan’ gushi tanjui Ming Qing Jiangnan Dayunhe liang’an chengzheng 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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With What Voice Does China Speak? Sinology, Orientalism and the Debate on Sinologism

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Abstract

The arrival of postcolonial theory in China and the country’s global rise came with the realization that its self-image is often distorted by Western ideological discourse, conveyed through Western Sinology. Drawing from Edward Said’s Orientalism, some Chinese scholars have classified the ideological dimensions of Western Sinology as Sinologism, and have pointed out its implications for China’s capacity to think of itself on its own terms. The concept has sparked debate mainly inside Chinese academia about the objective quality of Western Sinology. This article will attempt a critical overview of two major formulations of Sinologism, underlining its major presuppositions and placing the notion in the broader context of China’s anxieties of “academic colonization” by Western intellectual practices. It will conclude by arguing that attempts to discredit Western Sinology rely on some problematic assumptions and suggests East-West comparative studies as an alternative way of dialectically constructing Chinese identity.
Keywords

Sinology – Sinologism – Orientalism – academic – colonization

In recent decades, new perspectives on the implications of politics, colonialism, and power in the field of epistemology have exerted a profound influence amongst scholars and researchers of the cultures of the so-called “Orient.” The objectivity and even the validity of academic discourses on civilizations such as the Egyptian, Indian, and Chinese have been the object of increased scrutiny, to the point that it is now impossible to employ the term Orientalism in a neutral way. At the same time, the gradual and seemingly inexorable rise of the East and the decline of the West bring the need for Eastern nations to reshape their self-image and take control of an academic discourse that has, until now, taken place in Western terms. Such a reaction is especially noticeable in China, where efforts to rebuild the country’s self-image and achieve cultural self-confidence have received increasing attention in political and academic circles. The realization that China’s self-image is often distorted by Western discourse and that China speaks about itself using a “Western voice” by employing Western concepts and methodologies has led Chinese academics to wonder about the ways Western hegemonic discourse makes its way into China’s self-image. Western Sinology, understood as the production of knowledge about China by Western scholars, cannot but be an object of scrutiny.

One of the laudable achievements of Edward Said’s (1935–2003) Orientalism, which first came out in 1978, is that it provided a preliminary framework for the analysis of past and present Western discourse about the Orient. A multitude of critical theories regarding Western knowledge of oriental cultures has sprouted from this seminal work, some heavily based on it, others more indirect and creative. The same has happened in China, where a number of theories have appeared in recent years that try to shed light on perceived biases and misperceptions in past and present Sinological discourse, as well as on the way these have contributed to create a distorted image of China. It is the purpose of this essay to make a critical presentation of one of these theories, that of Sinologism (Hanxue zhuyi 漢學主義). In doing so, we shall take as our point

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2 While the author is aware of its simplistic and essentialist nature, he shall, in this article, consciously follow the example of the majority of the authors cited and employ the term West (and its adjective Western), without quotation marks, to signify Western European countries, as well as the United States and Canada.
of departure the post-modernist thought on the interpenetration of knowledge and power that serves as the basis for Said’s *Orientalism*. We shall proceed with a critical description of the concept of Sinologism by two of its major proponents and analyze a couple of problematic assumptions that underlie it as a critical theory, namely that Western methodology is an obstacle to the formation of China’s self-image, and that it is possible to make a clear-cut distinction between Chinese and Western studies of China. We argue that both assumptions are problematic and propose, as an alternative to Sinologism, studies of the sort practiced by Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 (1910–1998) and, more recently Zhang Longxi 張隆溪, that place both traditions on equal terms and in a mutually illuminating dialogue, free from ideological and political prejudices.

1 Orientalism and the Postmodern Take on the Possibility of Objective Knowledge

The notion that truth is a social construct and not found like a nugget of gold in nature is one of the most famous and polemical aspects of the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). It is not surprising to find the German thinker at the source postmodern thought, just as it is no coincidence that postmodern thought makes up the theoretical foundations not only of Orientalism and postcolonial theory, but also of all modern thinking about discourse and power in the humanities and social sciences. By turning its efforts to thinking historically, to “take the temperature of the age without instruments,” postmodern thought serves as the basis for challenging dominant discourses and structures of power and for questioning established narratives. For instance, Jean-François Lyotard’s (1924–1998) *The Postmodern Condition* signaled a shift away from attempts to ground epistemology in metanarratives and set out to uncover the problems of legitimacy within the discourse of human-engineered progress led by science. Even scientific discourse, he said, was unable to find legitimation within itself and had to resort to the same sort of metanarratives it once discredited and suppressed for not obeying scientific regimes of proof. The epistemological condition of postmodernity, for Lyotard, would be characterized by an evaporating of “grand narratives,” “the overarching ‘story line’ by

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means of which we are placed in history as beings having a definite past and a predictable future.”

Taking a discursive approach to the formation of culture, thinkers like Michel Foucault (1926–1984) focused on representation as a source for the production of knowledge. Even if the way we represent our reality is showcased by language, it must be noted that at any given moment in history, some people have more power to speak than others. As such, reality, including our understanding of the past, is a place of war and conflict, not only of peoples but also of discourses. Far from being a mere utterance that can be analyzed by itself, a discourse can be detected because it displays a certain systematicity of ideas that result from a particular historical context and produce certain effects on human behavior. The effects of discourse are interlinked with what we consider to be truth and knowledge. For Foucault, “Truth is of the world; it is produced there by virtue of multiple constraints ... Each society has its own regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth ...” Foucault’s idea that nothing exists outside discourse, instead of denying the existence of the materiality of things, denies the possibility of their intrinsic meaning. And since we can only have knowledge of things if they have a meaning, it is discourse, not the things-in-themselves, that produces such meaning and, by extension, knowledge. It follows that, since discourse is subject to the structures of power and the ways of thinking (episteme) of a given time, knowledge is subjected to power. The linking of knowledge to power not only allows the formation of “regimes of truth” (the closer to “Truth” we can get), it also allows power to enforce itself as truth. As Stuart Hall (1932–2014) summarizes “There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge,
nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute, at the same time, 'power relations.'

Foucault’s theory of Power/Knowledge, along with Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s (1891–1937) thoughts on hegemony, is widely recognized as one of the main conceptual pillars of Edward Said’s Orientalism. In short, Said argues that Orientalist knowledge offers us not a true picture of the Orient but a representation, a re-presentation and a reconstruction of it, created by the colonizers to make sense of the colonized and designed to confirm the West’s own distinctive identity and superiority. The production of Orientalist knowledge had as its analogue in the world of empirical politics the exercise of colonial power over the Orient and its “acquisition by Europe.”

The philosophical developments above, belonging to what we now consider postmodern thought, contribute to the impression that Western historical consciousness may be little more than a theoretical basis for the ideological position from which Western civilization views its relationship not only to the cultures and civilizations that preceded it, but also to those contemporary with it in time and contiguous with it in space.

2 From Sinology to Sinologism via Orientalism

If we started our discussion with a survey of postmodern thought on truth and knowledge, it is because proponents of Sinologism believe that a critique of Sinology can only be made alongside the critique of the discourse of Modernity, in other words, through postmodern discourse. By Sinologism we understand a form of critique of the production of knowledge about China in its different aspects by Western scholars, which we will call Western Sinology. Although different proponents of Sinologism have their own variations, they take Edward Said’s Orientalism as the point of departure and direct their criticism to the political and ideological grounds that sustain Western discursive

10 Cit. in Ibid., 49.
hegemony. New theories arise in response to new problems and changes in the intellectual milieu, and it is in light of their ability to address these problems and changes that they should be evaluated. For this reason, it is important to start by trying to understand the intellectual context from which the notion of Sinologism emerged.

The need for a critical view of Western production of knowledge about China came about in the context of the academic globalization of the 1990s. The arrival of postmodern and postcolonial theories in China, along with an awakening of “cultural consciousness” that is part and parcel of an increasingly globalized world, triggered the need to reevaluate the state of the intellectual relationship between China and the rest of the world (particularly with the West). Moreover, the increasing influence of China on the global stage has led to the need to rebalance its relationship with the West, including in terms of knowledge production. The increasing attention Chinese academia has dedicated to Western knowledge of China, alongside a kind of reflective criticism over the biases and misperceptions contained in this knowledge, can be viewed as part of an effort to establish China’s self-image. This reflective exercise has triggered what has been called an “anxiety of the thinking subject” derived from the prevalence of Western academic practices in Chinese academia. At the same time, the increasing popularity of the study of Western Sinology in China, particularly with the translation of an increasing number of works into Chinese, sparked fears of “academic colonialism” within Chinese academia. A number of critical frameworks thus appeared which attempted to make sense of the discrepancy between ontology and epistemology in the study of China.

Sure enough, when taking Western Sinological production as an object of study, one would be tempted to arm oneself with the theoretical framework provided by postcolonial theory and analyses of Orientalist discourse. In truth, although the current state of the debate on Sinologism has already vastly outgrown the theoretical framework laid out by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, we can still say with confidence that without Said’s work, critical scrutiny of Western knowledge of China would not have taken its present form. Professor Zhou Ning 周寧, one of the scholars we will examine below, takes Said as his point of departure in claiming that Sinology fits within the Orientalist critique, and he is far from being the only one to believe so. In Zhou’s understanding, Sinology, as a field of inquiry that has as its object an Eastern civilization, has

no way to escape Said’s critique. However, applying it wholesale to the analysis of Western discourse about China ends up making us feel like we are trying to fit a foot inside a glove. As a great number of Chinese scholars, including some proponents of Sinologism, recognize, Orientalism poses important questions for Sinology, but it also has limitations when applied to the Chinese context. Therefore, even if we agree that Western discourse on the Orient (including Sinology) in the 18th and 19th centuries was produced over a background of colonial expansion and is part of an epistemology of power, some aspects of Said’s Orientalism do not fit well when applied to Sinology. Local circumstances and the particular history of engagement between China and the West need to be taken into account.

There is no lack of reviews of Said’s work, ranging from lavish praise to complete rejection, and such a task will not be pursued in these pages. Be that as it may, we cannot move forward without pointing out some of Orientalism’s limitations when applied to the Chinese case.

We can start by recognizing that Said considers Sinology a part of Oriental Studies because, despite almost exclusively targeting French, British, and American Orientalism towards the Middle East, “the scope of Orientalism exactly matched the scope of empire.” Moreover, the book contributes to the perception of Orientalism as a consistent and monolithic discourse that is geographically homogeneous and historically continuous, which is remarkable coming from someone so heavily influenced by Foucault. It also omits the agency of the “Oriental” in its response/resistance to orientalist discourse, something Said himself would later recognize. By taking hegemony as a unilateral and overarching relation of domination and not as a process, he seems to omit all possible counter-hegemonic thought both in the West and in the colonized East. This last point is particularly important because, as we will see below, the proponents of Sinologism also seem to take Western ideological discourse as monolithic, all-encompassing, and incapable of being permeated by

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18 Said, Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient, 104.

other subaltern discourses. It is thus easy to fall into the temptation of con-
ceiving China simply as an “object” free from an ideology of its own and that
offered itself passively to Western reading and interpretation.

It was precisely the need to acknowledge that Sinology constitutes “a set of
‘knowledges and assumptions’ about the study of China,” alongside the rec-
ognition that Orientalism showed inadequacies when applied to China, that
led Bob Hodge and Kam Louie to propose the term “Sinologism” as a replace-
ment for Sinology, which they considered obsolete.20 These “knowledges”
and assumptions consist, namely, in taking “major tendencies within Chinese
culture” and turning them “into absolute values, essential truths about ‘chi-
neseness’ or ‘sinicity.’”21 One of these is intimately related with the Chinese
language. Its cultural status as the “true Wall of China” is not only brandished
by foreign Sinologists as the key that grants access to all things Chinese, but it
was also understood by the Chinese themselves, especially those that resisted
its reform in the recent past, to be the very essence of “Chineseness.”

Assumptions like these, Hodge and Louie claim, are still felt in the rela-
tively secluded corners of Chinese departments in universities, although the
tendency is for new and more diverse generations of researchers to replace
the older Sinologists, in whose minds these assumptions are deeply rooted.
In this, the two authors are more optimistic than the Chinese proponents of
Sinologism we will see below.

3 Questioning the Objectivity of Sinology: Zhou Ning’s Sinologism

Zhou Ning, of Xiamen University, is one of the earliest and most vocal pro-
ponents of Sinologism in China. His formulation of Sinologism has deep
similarities with Said’s Orientalism, his project being to relate Sinology to
Orientalism in order to challenge the former’s claim as a legitimate form of
knowledge. Unlike Hodge and Louie, he does not use the term Sinologism
as a substitute for Sinology, but rather states that Sinology is trapped within
Sinologism and “comes closer to a narrative, a type of discourse that dynamically

20 Bob Hodge and Kam Louie, Politics of Chinese Language and Culture: The Art of Reading
21 Ibid., 13. For example, Michael Puett points out a persistent tendency to attribute to
China and the West two different and irreducible cosmologies: in opposition to Western
thought, it was believed that Chinese thought had no notion of abstractions and of tran-
scendental realities. See Michael J. Puett, To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and
Self-Divinization in Early China (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center for the
Harvard-Yenching Institute, 2002), 7–8.
and actively selects, expresses, structures, and generates meaning.”

Although it is generally accepted as a branch of knowledge and learning, it is still an ideology and an instrument for the exercise of power.

A first consideration has to do with what Zhou Ning understands by Sinology, which he conceives in a broad, as well as in a narrow sense. He calls “Sinology in the broad sense” the knowledge of China “that failed to break free from fantastic and exotic ‘imaginings’” and that drew heavily on reports from merchants, diplomatic envoys and, more importantly, missionary writings.

On the other hand, “Sinology in the narrow sense” pertains to “studies of China and Chinese culture as part of Oriental studies, within the modern Western discipline system.” In doing this, Zhou seems to closely follow Said, who conceived of Orientalist scholarship and the mainstream image of the Oriental “other” as two overlapping dimensions of Orientalism. The problem lies in the fact that Zhou’s conception of Sinology is too broad and ends up creating confusion between these two overlapping but ultimately distinct dimensions. In practice, he equates scholarship on China penned by Western scholars specializing in Chinese history, culture and, above all, language, with literary works and works of social thinking that mention China as part of broader, often global, enquiries.

Thinkers ranging from the Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755) to Johann von Herder (1744–1803) and from Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) to G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), in attempting to formulate social and historical theories through which to understand Europe’s development and place in the world, were forced to consider and account for the “non-synchronous experiences of Europe’s Other,” namely China, but could only do so through second and third-hand sources. It seems dubious, to the author of this article, to consider works of this order, such as Montesquieu’s Le Esprit des Lois or Max Weber’s (1864–1920) Konfuzianismus und Taoismus under the label of Sinology,

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23 Although the conventionalized equivalent of the term “Western Sinology” in the Chinese language is 漢學, the latter’s existence precedes Western Sinology by more than a millennium and was used to refer to the classical philology of the Han dynasty practiced by Chinese literati.

24 Zhou Ning, “Sinologism’: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Sinology as Knowledge,” 8.

25 Ibid., 9.


much less to use the distortions of such works, borne out of a very superficial understanding of the subject matter, as a reason to attack Western Sinology as a whole.

It must be conceded that the writings of these philosophers and social thinkers are the reflection of an intellectual zeitgeist and are at the root of the shifts in European images of China.28 However, we should not let these works represent Western Sinology as a scholarly field. To be sure, a degree of complementarity can be seen between Sinology itself and the larger scholarly discussion that happened to mention China, such as when Hegel modified his outline of Chinese religion to include Taoism and Buddhism after he met French Sinologist Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832) in Paris in 1826.29 This complementarity seems to indicate that, even in the earliest stages of the discipline, Western Sinologists were more knowledgeable about China than other philosophers and social thinkers who wrote about it.30

In a long article titled “A Critical Analysis of ‘Sinologism’,”31 first published in 2015 in the Journal of Shanghai Normal University, Professor Zhang Xiping 張西平 emphasizes the need to distinguish between the myths and fantasies that circulated in cultural thought at a given point in history and that are not academic in nature, and professional Sinology. According to Zhang, by placing both of these under the umbrella of Sinology, even if “in the broad sense,” Zhou


30 In his essay submitted for the degree of B. Litt at Oxford in 1935–1937, Qian Zhongshu 也 seems to suggest a distinction between “humanistic” and “pragmatic and philological” interest in China, stating that, had the latter been established earlier, “China could not have appealed to seventeenth and eighteenth century English writers so much as a country to which distance and ignorance had conspired to lend enchantment.” See Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書, “China in the English Literature of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in A Collection of Qian Zhongshu’s English Essays, ed. Yangjiang 杨绛 (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2005), 85.

Ning creates unnecessary conceptual confusion around Sinology as an object of study.³²

Zhou Ning argues that the “imaginings” that constituted mainstream images of China can be traced back to the works produced by Jesuit missionaries, which he considers to be eminently theological in nature and mainly preoccupied with finding points of contact between Christianity and Confucianism for the expansion of the former.³³ These missionary works were to become the foundation of Sinological studies in subsequent centuries, both in terms of methodology and of study materials. But while it is true that the Jesuits’ need for support and patronage from Europe was a real concern and accounts for the images of an immensely rich and populous China ripe for conversion, we find it somewhat debatable that these first works about China could be classified as mere “imaginings.” Jesuit missionaries received rigorous humanistic training and were, in earlier stages, highly committed to a policy of accommodation that, although at the service of European Christian ideology, privileged close contacts with the Chinese literati.³⁴ It is this accommodation policy that leads Arthur Wright (1913–1976) to argue that the missionaries did not have total control over the image of China they transmitted to Europe.³⁵ The civilization amongst which they lived had its own intellectual tradition, to which the Jesuits had to conform and adapt to if they wanted their mission to succeed. In studying the Chinese language and classics, mingling with Chinese intellectuals and even living in the Imperial Palace, the missionaries acquired a positive image of China that was, to a great extent, a reflection of the Chinese literati’s positive image of their own civilization. To fail to acknowledge that China, as the West, also had its own form of ideology risks taking the former as a passive object that simply presented itself to the “reading” of Western missionaries. It seems appropriate to understand the encounter between China and Europe as a process of mutual interaction in which the object bears a relationship with the subject’s cognition. The image the Chinese intellectual elite had of China colored the missionary’s understanding of it and provided the techniques and the textual references through which Chinese civilization was to be studied during the following centuries.

Thanks to Jesuit missionary accounts, it was as a utopian civilization that China first became a part of European commonplace knowledge and,
subsequently, of Enlightenment culture. As early as the 1590s, the assumption of the superiority of the Chinese political system was pretty much established and, half a century later, China had also become the prime example of morals, a trend that saw its peak with the publication of the Latin translation of the Confucian classics in *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*. However, views of China often reflected the ideological stance of their author, and China itself was understood in relation to political and social circumstances in Europe. It should come as no surprise that, in a given historical period, we see praise for China side-by-side with its demonization. When sinophobic discourse finally gained the upper hand, a phenomenon that Zhou sees happening around the 1750s, China was still the same China, but Europe was no longer its former self.

Due to the ambivalence of Europe's self-image since the Renaissance and, particularly, the Reformation, images of China changed accordingly: in times of insecurity and instability, China's stability provided a positive example; in times of confidence and progress, and since every positive stereotype bears within it the possibility of a negative alternative, this stability came to be seen as “backwardness.” Consequently, as far as “Sinology in the broad sense” is concerned, there is merit in Zhou Ning’s understanding of Western Orientalism as comprising both “utopian” and “ideological” variants, particularly when he points out the dialectic relation between the political situation in Europe and shifts in European images of China. This duality of Western Orientalism also overlaps nicely with the distinction between “utopia” and “ideology” proposed by Karl Mannheim (1893–1947): when the political and social situation in Europe called for change, a utopian image of China emerged to serve as a role-model; when the intellectual climate changed and Europe became sure of its path of development, ideological thinking took root in order to preserve the status quo, and the China of the Enlightenment narrative was reimagined as the losing pole of three different historical struggles: freedom vs. despotism, progress vs. stagnation, and rationalism vs. empiricism. In short, images of China were used to establish and reinforce European identity in contrast to the Chinese “other.” We can thus say Zhou Ning is mainly right in classifying these images as dependent on the West. However, we must bear in mind that

40 Zhou Ning, “Sinologism: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Sinology as Knowledge,” 8; Zhou Ning 周寧,“Zongxu”總序, in *Shijie zhi Zhongguo–Yuwai Zhongguo xingxiang yanjiu*, 1–2.
such images are but one dimension of the phenomenon of Orientalism, one which overlaps with, but is distinct from, academic Sinological studies, which Zhou Ning calls “Sinology in the strict sense.”

Regarding what Zhou Ning has to say about academic Sinology, he defines it as “studies of China and Chinese culture as part of Oriental studies, within the modern Western discipline system.”

We have seen above that, as China is encompassed by the Western concept of the “Orient,” Zhou likewise includes Sinology in “Oriental Studies” in the European academic system. As such, according to him, the critique of Orientalism cannot but also apply to Sinology, and the methods and concepts of Sinological discourse are also permeated by a colonial ideology that ultimately alienates its object of study.

It is recognized that the official “birth” of European academic Sinology took place in December 1814 with the foundation of the Chaire des langues et de littératures chinoises et tartares-manchoues (Chair of Chinese and Tartar-Manchu Languages and Literatures) in the Collège de France. This first wave of scholarly construction was made, says Zhou, over a purely textual and “dead” China, reflecting the way Europe saw China as a civilization stagnating in the past and with no present reality.

He points out that the place of Sinology in the Western disciplinary system, separated from the rest of the social sciences and their spatial and temporal dimensions, reveals the “ideological or discursive elements” hidden within that disciplinary system and unveils the “implicit ideology of institutionalized Sinology in the narrow sense.”

In accordance with this scheme that alienates China both geographically and historically, Zhou Ning claims that Sinology “resembles a narrative, a type of discourse which dynamically and actively selects, expresses, structures, and generates meaning (...) within a specific cultural and ideological context.”

This “context” is, of course, that of European colonial expansion and domination, which Zhou understands as the background to the development of Sinology as a branch of academic knowledge, as well as the factor behind Sinology’s position within the Western academic system.

Be that as it may, simply equating the practice of Sinological studies with colonial discourse does not seem adequate, because while Oriental Studies is a purely Western academic field, practiced and monopolized by Western scholars, the study of China has much deeper roots and is based in well-established academic traditions.

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41 Zhou Ning, “Sinologism’: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Sinology as Knowledge,” 9.
45 Zhou Ning, “Sinologism’: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Sinology as Knowledge,” 10.
canons and practices, most of which originated in China itself. In a classic answer to Said’s *Orientalism*, renowned Sinologist Pierre Ryckmans (1935–2014) also mentioned that “Western Sinology in its entirety is a mere footnote appended to the huge Sinological corpus which Chinese intellectuals have been building for centuries up to this day.”\(^{46}\) What this meant in practice is that when Abel-Rémy first occupied the chair of Sinology in the Collège de France, he already had at his disposal methods of inquiry and a large quantity of scholarly instruments developed by Chinese intellectual elites through the centuries.\(^{47}\) When observing the practices and materials employed in these earlier stages of Western Sinology, it is illuminating to see how close they are to Chinese traditional intellectual practices. For instance, the methods employed belonged to the philological and commentarial traditions,\(^{48}\) and Abel-Rémy’s lectures during his tenure at the Collège de France consisted of grammar and explication of texts mainly belonging to the Confucian canon. This clear prevalence of Confucian texts over Daoist and Buddhist ones, inherited from the Jesuit missionaries who in turn inherited it from the Chinese intellectual elites, reflects the significant role Chinese intellectual culture had in shaping the object and practice of Western Sinology.\(^{49}\) Moreover, if the study of China managed to develop beyond the philological and textual tradition that Zhou finds typical of the study of dead civilizations, it was thanks to the Western Sinologists who started joining hands with the then-emerging social sciences.\(^{50}\)

With this we try to show that Western Sinology cannot be discounted as simple “imaginings” or Western ideology. Of course, this is not to say Sinology, particularly during the 18th and 19th centuries, was any different from other Orientalist disciplines in that it fell prey to unconscious assumptions and a romantic tendency to establish farfetched parallels between Chinese culture and, for instance, the Egyptian one.\(^{51}\) However, while most civilizations of the Middle East studied under the aegis of Oriental Studies were effectively interrupted civilizations, the same cannot be said of China. As Zhang Xiping points


\(^{48}\) Cheng Zhangcan also notices that the philological methods employed by these Sinologists were reminiscent of those practiced by Chinese literati. See Cheng Zhangcan 程章燦, “Hanxue zhuyi, Zhongguoxue zhuyi yu guoxue zhuyi” 漢學主義、中國學主義與國學主義, in *Hanxuezhuyi lunzheng jicui* 漢學主義論爭集萃, ed. Gu Mingdong 顧明棟 and Zhou Xian 周憲 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2017), 110.


\(^{51}\) Ibid., 35–39.
out, “Westerners were never the creators or discoverers of traditional Chinese culture, nor did they build its systems of knowledge.”

Moreover, one has to keep in mind that, when considering Western Sinology, we are not looking at a closed, self-contained, and purely “Western” system. There was also a considerable degree of dialogue and cooperation between Western Sinologists and Chinese intellectuals. Abel-Rémusat might have never set foot on Chinese soil, but his successor Stanislas Julien (1797–1873) made use of recent Chinese scholarship on his studies of Chinese grammar. It is also well known that James Legge’s (1815–1897) landmark translations of the Confucian canon resulted from his cooperation with Wang Tao 王韬 (1828–1897). Edouard Chavannes (1865–1918), Henri Maspero (1883–1945), Marcel Granet (1884–1940), Bernhard Karlgren (1889–1978), and Joseph Needham (1900–1995), among other renowned Sinologists, have also, to different degrees, maintained close contact with Chinese intellectuals. Thus by discounting Western Sinology as ideological imaginings created in the service of imperialism, without taking into account the complexity of the methods, historical conditions, geographies, and individual practitioners involved, one runs the risk of failing to recognize that Western scholars produced a number of invaluable insights that are far more than lies and fabrications. For example, the aforementioned translations by James Legge were based on glosses by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), while Karlgren’s achievements in historical phonology and Paul Pelliot’s (1878–1945) research on Dunhuang manuscripts are all undeniable contributions to global Sinology.

Zhang Xiping summarizes his critique of Sinologism by saying that its proponents “lack knowledge on the history of Western Sinology,” and “have clear inadequacies in the application and analysis of cross-cultural theory”; moreover, the “theoretical foundation upon which [Sinologism] relies is Said’s Orientalism,” with no awareness of the limitations of Said’s and postcolonial theory. His comments clearly sum up some aspects in which Sinologism oversimplifies the history of Sinology and of the intellectual relations between China and Western countries. However, we believe his criticism ends up

53 Honey, Incense at the Altar, 31.
55 Sang Bing 桑兵, Guoxue yu Hanxue – jindai zhongwai xuejie jiaowanglu 國學與漢學——近代中外學界交往錄 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1999), 41.
missing the bigger problem behind the proposal of Sinologism: it is not so much about proving the ideological properties of Western knowledge production about China as it is about finding a way to come to terms with Western Sinology while drawing a boundary between Western discourse and Chinese identity. We will return to this topic in the last part of this essay.

4 “An Alternative to Orientalism”: Gu Mingdong’s Sinologism

Although our discussion so far has focused on Sinologism as understood by Professor Zhou Ning, we deem it necessary to make a brief detour in order to give due attention to the treatment of Sinologism by another prominent scholar, Professor Gu Mingdong 顧明棟. Also a proponent of Sinologism as a critical framework for the study of Western Sinology, Professor Gu has, in recent years, published so far the only major work in English regarding Sinologism, titled *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism*.57

From the title of his book, we can easily conclude that Gu is aware of the limitations of Orientalism and postcolonial theory when applied to Western Sinology and sees the need for an alternative to apply to the Chinese context. For him, Sinologism is not merely Orientalism applied to Sinology, but a form of academic knowledge, as well as a practical theory of knowledge production.58 He justifies divorcing Sinologism from its origins in Orientalism by addressing a problem we mentioned above, namely the particular position of Sinology amongst the other Orientalist disciplines: while Orientalism refers to Oriental Studies as a mainly Western field of inquiry, the object of Sinologism is Sinology itself, the knowledge accumulated by Chinese and non-Chinese thinkers during thousands of years of continuous civilization.59 It intends to be a much less politically-charged concept than Orientalism, since it does not conceive of a clear-cut separation between the subject and the object of Sinology: its roots are not to be found in Western imperial bureaucracies, but in the Chinese practice of *guoxue* 國學 (Chinese learning), an intellectual tradition of more than 2000 years.60

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58 Ibid., 6.
60 Ibid., 49.
While Zhou is more focused on the ideological properties of Sinology throughout history, Gu is more directly concerned with the praxis of contemporary Sinological production. He asserts that, when speaking of “ideology,” we need not have in mind the strictly political, Marxist use of the term, but a broader and epistemological one, namely “a series of positions, convictions, views and methods of scholarship arising in the field of China-West studies that influence scholars in the production of China knowledge.”\footnote{Gu Mingdong 顧明棟, “The Theoretical Debate on ‘Sinologism’: A Rejoinder to Mr. Zhang Xipin,” \\textit{Contemporary Chinese Thought} 49, no. 1 (2018): 59.} In taking this much broader definition of “ideology” as an operative concept, Gu is trying to transcend the opposition between subject and object of representation that we find in Said’s \textit{Orientalism} and to focus on an epistemological critique of scholarship, taking Sinologism as an “intellectual ideology centering on academic research, particularly with respect to epistemology and methodology.”\footnote{Ibid., 60.}

Briefly, the two ideas that constitute the conceptual grounding of Gu’s Sinologism are “cultural unconscious”\footnote{The term draws heavily on Fredric Jameson’s “Political Unconsciousness,” only with more emphasis placed on cultural, instead of class, divisions. See Jameson, \textit{The Political Unconscious}; Gu Mingdong 顧明棟, “Zhongxi yanjiu de zhengzhi yishi” 中西研究的政治無意識, in \textit{Lishi yujing yu wenhua kongjian 歷史情境與文化空間}, ed. Zhou Xian 周憲 and Cong Cong 從叢 (Nanjing: Sanlian shudian, 2015), 16.} and “alienation of knowledge,” the former being the source and the latter the end-product of Sinologism. “Cultural unconscious” is connected with Gu’s broader understanding of “ideology,” as per the following definition:

> Sinologism is primarily an implicit system of ideas, notions, theories, approaches, and paradigms, first conceived and employed by the West in the encounter with China to deal with all things Chinese and to make sense of the bewildering complexity of Chinese civilization. As the political and intellectual spectrum has been dominated by the West, and the world has to observe China and consume knowledge about China through the Western lens, Sinologism has been complicated and enriched by the non-Western peoples’ perceptions, conceptions, and evaluations of Chinese civilization. Because the ways of observing China and producing knowledge and scholarship on China are controlled by an inner logic that operates frequently beyond our conscious awareness, Sinologism is basically a cultural unconscious in China-West studies and cross-cultural studies.\footnote{Gu Mingdong, \textit{Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism}, 7.}
Gu’s “cultural unconscious” is an attempt to provide a deeper explanation to the superiority/inferiority complex that he says plagues thought about China and that is at the source of tendencies to either beautify or demonize it. He sees these two opposite tendencies as the result of the pervasiveness of Western models of thinking which, as we have seen above, have a direct correspondence with the tendencies of sinophilia and sinophobia in European views of China. In practice, there is a tendency either to idealize and exaggerate the value of Chinese traditional culture, or to demonize it when it deviates from a “Western norm” of Modernity. In both cases, Western standards are being applied, often unconsciously but with a concrete impact on the concepts and methodologies we use to understand China. What is important to note is that this is not a phenomenon exclusive to Western academia, as “it is also the Chinese who employ Western epistemology and methodology to look at the world, their own culture, and themselves.”

Gu also states that the defining characteristic of Sinologism, what sets it apart from Sinological knowledge itself, is its alienating quality: “Sinologism should be redefined as alienated knowledge in general and alienation of Sinology and China-West studies in particular.” Here, he admittedly follows Hegel, Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Ludwig Feuerbach’s (1804–1872) conceptions of “alienation” as something that, being created but then separated from its creator, ends up controlling him. Alienation is thus “self-alienation,” separation from one’s nature and one’s work. Applying this concept, Gu believes that the original purpose of Sinology was the production of “scholarship and knowledge on China for information and education.” However, due to the influence of “various forces, political, ideological, ethnic, and academic,” this knowledge and scholarship on China became an intellectual commodity that deviated substantially from this original purpose. The appearance of Sinologism coincides, says Gu, with the spread of capitalism and colonialism, as missionary writings about China, although also distortive, were not as stained with hegemonic intentions and China was even, in most aspects, seen as superior to the West.

Gu’s Sinologism aims to deconstruct the current practice of Sinology and expose the inner logic behind what he sees as the “cultural unconscious” that afflicts its methodological and epistemological foundations. It tries to go against the phenomenon of “self-colonization” that he calls Sinologization.

65 Ibid., 6.
66 Ibid., 216.
67 Ibid., 217.
漢學主義化，68 that is, the “undeclared but tacitly administered institutionalization of the ways of observing China from the perspective of Western epistemology that refuses, or is reluctant, to view China on its own terms, and of doing scholarship on Chinese materials and producing knowledge on Chinese civilization in terms of Western methodology that tends to disregard the real conditions of China and reduce the complexity of Chinese civilization into simplistic patterns of development modeled on those of the West.”69

Although he takes pains to avoid the political implications of Said’s Orientalism, Gu’s notion of Sinologism is still very much political in his demand to study China using Chinese methods and his warnings against intellectual colonization.70 Therefore, Gu’s is also not without methodological issues that arise from Sinologism’s emphasis on ideology, which will be developed below.

5 Transcending Sinologism: the Alternative of East-West Studies

As seen above, the common problem both proponents of Sinologism try to address is the perceived influence of Western discourse in the way China thinks itself. This is, in the opinion of this author, where the main point of discussion lies. It is no surprise that both Zhou Ning and Gu Mingdong voice concerns regarding the pervading influence of Western theories when one talks about China, speaking respectively of “academic colonialism”71 and “intellectual colonization”72 in Chinese thinking. That such a state of affairs triggered an “anxiety of the thinking subject” is an indication that, in Said’s formulation, “discourse is not only that which translates struggle or systems of domination, but that for which struggles are conducted.”73

However, rejecting the totality of Western Sinology as an ideological narrative would entail the rejection of all Western contributions to knowledge of China, something that would be detrimental to the search for objective

70 See a similar critique in Viatcheslav Vetrov, “China’s New School of Thought-Masters (Xinzixue): An Alternative to Sinologism?” Asiatische Studien · Études Asiatiques 70, no. 3 (2017): 743–44.
71 Zhou Ning, “Sinologism: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Sinology as Knowledge,” 11.
self-knowledge and lead to sinocentrism. Despite often applying its own methods and concepts to China, Western Sinology, and Western theories and methodologies more broadly, need not be seen as a danger to the construction of Chinese national self-image. They can, in contrast, be an important instrument for doing so critically. The ironic fact that Sinologism relies heavily on Western theories to challenge dominant Western-centric discourses on China seems to indicate that Western theoretical contributions can be applied productively in different contexts and geographies. When two cultures meet, it is expected that one – normally the one that is dominant at the time – will exert a disproportionate amount of influence over the other. Still, this does not mean this influence has to be absorbed and adopted passively. As Wang Ning pointed out some decades ago, through cultural translation, dynamic reception, and creative construction (not to mention application), these theories and concepts can be “metamorphosed” and used to challenge any underlying bias and ethnocentrism. The fact that China itself still embraces as its political orientation its own version of a Western theory, namely Marxism, should serve as a clear example of this potentiality.

As such, proponents of Sinologism seem to overlook the possibility of Chinese scholars employing Western discourse in order to make their own voices felt. In doing this, they replicate one of the problematic aspects of Said’s theory, namely that in participating in Western discourse, the subaltern cannot but participate in its own Orientalizing. They also seem to understand Western discourse as something reified and monolithic, continuous (to the point of becoming unconscious), and impenetrable to other discourses. Such understanding seems to exclude the possibility of the existence of “intermediaries,” scholars and intellectuals who, versed in both the Western and their native traditions, are able to break the illusion of the impenetrability of the dominating discourse by engaging actively in the Western-dominated academic milieu and making their own voices felt. Curiously, Gu Mingdong

75 This fact is not lost on Zhang Xiping, who mentions it in his critique of Sinologism. See Zhang Xiping, “A Critical Analysis of Sinologism,” 51.
77 Said, Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient, 325.
78 This notion was partly inspired by that of “contact zones” employed by Mary Louise Pratt. See Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 4.
could be considered an example of such a scholar, as his recent work on comparative poetics and aesthetics is a prime example of how to address Western misconceptions regarding Chinese language and literary criticism through pure scholarship instead of ideology.\textsuperscript{79} The excessive emphasis placed on ideology by the proponents of Sinologism seems to the author of this essay a way of perpetuating the very problem it seeks to overcome. Taking as a starting point the inferiority of a civilization in relation to another is conducive to reinforcing such inferiority, not to overcome it.

The impenetrability of Western discourse to which we alluded above has another problematic implication when transposed to the context of Sinology and the study of China. At a certain point of his defense of Sinologism, Zhou Ning concludes that “[i]f Western Sinology is a certain form of truth, then the divisions of Chinese and Western learning are meaningless. If, however, Western Sinology, as a constituent part of Western learning, is itself a discourse reflecting Western cultural hegemony, then it is not only necessary to differentiate between Western Sinology and \textit{guoxue}, but also to assume competition, conflict, criticism, and supersession.”\textsuperscript{80} However, if we take into account not only the current context of globalization but also the history of extensive intellectual contacts between China and the West in the domain of Sinology which we briefly touched upon above, we might ask whether such a division between Western Sinology (\textit{hanxue}) and \textit{guoxue} is productive or even tenable. Borrowing the question posed by the Indian philosopher Anindita Balslev to Richard Rorty (1931–2007) on the possibility of comparative philosophy, is “the cultural boundary between the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ of a given intellectual tradition so conceptually conditioned that it automatically transcribe[s] itself into a disciplinary boundary?”\textsuperscript{81}

As Benjamin Hammer noted in a related essay, a dichotomy between an “insider” \textit{guoxue jia} 國學家 and an “outsider” \textit{hanxue jia} 漢學家 presupposes not only a difference in the concepts and methodologies employed by its practitioners, but also the very incommensurability of the cultures involved. The opposition of East and West once celebrated by Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) and still actively applied by thinkers like Francois Jullien might be appealing to those who dream of the Orient as an exotic \textit{heterotopia}, but in intellectual terms, this distinction has long stopped making sense. During the past


\textsuperscript{80} Zhou Ning, “Sinologism’: Rethinking the Legitimacy of Sinology as Knowledge,” 11.

century, thinkers like Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927), Feng Youlan馮友蘭 (1895–1990) or even Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) himself would give us pause should we try to insert them in either the guoxue or hanxue camp. They would fit somewhere in between, and once several examples of such scholars have been found, we have reason to be suspicious of a clear-cut distinction between a “pure” guoxue and an ideologically tainted hanxue.82

Another major example of such a scholar that defies distinctions of guoxue and hanxue is Qian Zhongshu. In his scholarly masterwork Guanzhui bian 管錐編, Qian places the Chinese and Western literary and intellectual traditions on an equal footing and makes extensive comparisons between them, thereby constituting a truly “unsystematic system.”83 What results from these exercises is the realization that many ideas and concepts deemed Western can also be found in ancient Chinese thought and that there is much of what is universally human to be found in Chinese letters. In Du La'aokong 讀拉奧孔 (On Reading Laokoon), for example, Qian points out that the ancient Chinese had already come to the conclusion that painting, as spatial art, is able only to represent moments, while poetry, as temporal art, can compose pictures that transcend visual representation, which is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s (1729–1781) main thesis in Laokoon.84 At other times, the investigations in Guanzhui bian end up exposing Western misconceptions about China, such as Hegel’s claim that the Chinese language was not suited for logical thinking and, unlike German, was unable to contain opposite meanings in a single word.85 Taking as point of departure the potential of both cultures for “mutual illumination,” Qian Zhongshu’s writings challenge the presupposition of the incommensurability between China and the West. Moreover, the fact he applies Western concepts to the Chinese tradition (and vice-versa) while writing in classical Chinese and in the form of reading notes (zhaji 剖記) extends this commensurability to the linguistic and formal domains.

82 Hammer, “The End of Western Sinology.”
Zhang Longxi has also long been militating against the notion of incommensurability between East and West. In such works as *The Tao and the Logos* and *Unexpected Affinities*, Zhang makes Zhuangzi join ranks with Heraclitus (544–483 BCE) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) in affirming the pragmatic quality of language, applies Jacques Derrida’s (1930–2004) *Grammatology* to the Chinese language in a productive way, and compares the use of similar metaphors in works of Western and Chinese literature. Such exercises go beyond understanding China through western theory and place East and West in a dialogue of equals. Such a dialogue, more than highlighting differences and affinities between both traditions, signals above all the possibility of constructing Chinese identity without the need to clearly separate it from the West as implied by Sinologism.

6 Conclusions

The debate on Sinologism is still ongoing and the concept is being expanded and explored by scholars from various academic backgrounds. This naturally influences the channels through which these scholars become aware of Sinologism, as well as their definition of the phenomenon and of the ways it makes itself manifest. Although we chose to start with Zhou Ning’s Sinologism and followed through with Gu Mingdong’s own interpretation, this by no account implies that the second represents a higher degree of perfectibility or sophistication over the first. However, both scholars meet at the same point, that of the need to counter “Sinologization” and academic colonization in knowledge about China.

To conclude, some points must be made. Firstly, when talking about Western Sinology, one must have a clear awareness of what one is talking about. It is debatable whether, like Zhou Ning, we should consider as Western Sinology the works of social thinkers that, while a product of the Western “image” of China, cannot represent the seriousness and engagement with Chinese language and culture of Western scholarly Sinologists. Regarding the latter, their contributions to knowledge about China cannot be dismissed even if it is imbued with ideological properties as the proponents of Sinologism convincingly point

87  Ibid., 32.
out. Even if a certain degree of bias and prejudice is always present when the West looks at China, this should not serve to completely discard the validity of Western Sinological knowledge, just like a reader’s prejudices do not, by themselves, invalidate the product of the interpretative process.89

That said, if we admit that ideological prejudice is inevitable in the production of knowledge, trying to defend or attack Western Sinology based on this fact seems to serve little purpose. What one cannot do is let such prejudices and biases become unassailable under pretenses of science and objectivity.90 One would do well to take Hans Hågerdal’s advice regarding Orientalism: “what matters is having a consciousness about the problem, being constantly prepared to pose questions on the presence of an ‘Orientalist’ style of thought, whether we like Said or not.”91

The question of Sinologism is relevant to the current state of Chinese studies because it emerged not as a mere epistemological problem but as a result of the country’s fear of academic colonialism. The present article, however, has tried to show that one should not base a critique of Western Sinology on ideological grounds. The myths of cultural reification and incommensurability must be overcome and Chinese and Western scholarship past and present must converge in order to compose a complete understanding of China that avoids the Scylla of Sinologism and the Charybdis of Sinocentrism. To this effect, it is important not only to be receptive to various theories and methods but, above all, to apply them critically.

A couple of final comments are in order. Both formulations of Sinologism display a somewhat unsettling tendency to employ the abstraction “the West.” One should be careful of such generalizations in order to avoid falling in the opposite practice of “Occidentalism.” Moreover, dealing with “the West” as a totality raises a number of questions: can we find discursive properties specific to the Sinology of certain Western countries? How do we define “Western scholars” in a context of increasingly complex and elastic identities? What do we make of Western scholars, for example Bob Hodge and Kam Louie, that write about Sinologism? As Benjamin Hammer once noted, one should avoid

90 Gu Mingdong 郭明棟, “Hanxuezhu yi: Zhongguo zhishi shengchan de fangfalun zhi pipan” 漢學主義：中國知識生產的方法論之批判, Qinghua daxue xuebao (Zhexue shehui kexue ban) 清華大學學報（哲學社會科學版）26, no. 2 (2011): 140.
judgements based on superficial assumptions or on nationality or political affiliations.92

Finally, care must also be taken so that Sinologism does not suffer the same fate as Orientalism and become a weapon of political correctness, or a way of policing adherence to politically enforced official narratives. An impartial and uninterested scholar (if indeed there is such a thing) should not be blindly subservient to official narratives, and Sinologism must take caution not to stand in the way of free and standard-based inquiry on all sorts of topics. In other words, Sinologism must not, like Orientalism, be placed at the service of cultural relativism or exceptionalism. Tainted with political and ideological connotations, Sinologism risks becoming part of the problem instead of an attempt at a solution.

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