



The Didactic Elements of Late Ming Imitating Vernacular Novels

The Case of Madam Du Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger

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Abstract. With the purpose of studying the didactic elements of imitating vernacular novels in late Ming Dynasty, this paper gives insight into one of the most representative articles, *Madam Du Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger*. Through intensive reading of the text, it is evident that Feng Menglong laid emphasis on both political education and moral instruction, by extolling virtues of the authorities, preaching moral principles to people, etc. Therefore, novels from the late Ming are not solely emblems of bourgeois consciousness or reflections of progressive thinking; they still heavily incorporate feudal ethical ideologies and political teachings.

Keywords: Didactic Elements, Late Ming Imitating Vernacular Novels, *Madam Du Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger*, Feng Menglong

1 Introduction

The story of Du Shiniang, originating from actual events during the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty. This tale later inspired further works such as *Madam Du Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger* and *Legend of the Treasure Chest*. The most renowned version is the late Ming pseudo-storytelling novel *Madam Du Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger* found in Volume Thirty-Two of Feng Menglong's *Stories to Caution the World*. Madam Du Shiniang is a typical woman who upholds the dignity of women's personality, and she does not aim to "Renounce evil and embrace goodness" as prostitutes do in traditional literature, but uses her life to uphold her ideal of love and dignity, reflecting the humanistic trend of the late Ming society.[1] Despite its portrayal of the myriad facets of worldly relationships, the work subtly incorporates ethical views on loyalty, filial piety, integrity, and righteousness, along with moral exhortations to promote good and punish evil. These include both the deliberate or inadvertent expression of orthodox Confucian ideas and the emerging secular thoughts of the common townsfolk. Past research has rarely focused specifically on this aspect, and whenever mentioned, it was just as a supplement to ensure the comprehensiveness of the discussion.

2 Specific Manifestation of Didactic Element

2.1 Political Education

Firstly, *Madam Du Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger* begins with extensive passages that sing praises and extol virtues:

Clearing remnants, setting imperial bounds high; where dragons soar and phoenixes dance in the sky; Circling the ocean to the left, a heavenly band, to the right, the Taihang Mountains grandly stand. Spears and halberds guard the frontiers vast; Beyond the passes, their legends cast; Officials from nations, robes flowing with grace; Look up in awe, admiring governance by non-action. In times of grand peace, joy spreads wide, an ideal world, where only exists in dreams. Forever bound, in golden realms we dwell, sharing with the sun, its radiant spell. [2]

This poem solely praises the grandeur of establishing our capital in Yanjing (Beijing). The text employs bold strokes and vivid colors to speak of the Ming dynasty rulers' great achievements. The original story, *The Tale of the Unfaithful Lover (Fu Qing Nong Zhuan)*, begins with, "During the Wanli era, Li Sheng from eastern Zhejiang, a subprefectural magistrate's son, traveled north to Yong and fell deeply in love with Du Shiniang, a courtesan", which contains no political propaganda.[3]

Secondly, the novel reflects people's desire and emphasis on striving for success and reputation.

During the Ming Dynasty, the system of tribute in grain and horses enabled students to avoid the hardship of the tribute service by enrolling in the imperial academy, thus securing the status either of a student in the academy or a tribute student. This effectively provided a shortcut in the path to officialdom, making it easier to enter the ruling bureaucracy through the selection system.[4] The novel positively portrays the trend of families sending their sons to study in the academy while simultaneously depicting Li Jia's disinterest in pursuing an official career, which leads to neglect from friends and relatives. This serves both as an encouragement for scholars to take up official positions and as a call to action, thereby reinforcing the autocratic centralization of the Ming Dynasty.

Thirdly, the novel addresses themes of loyalty, filial piety, and righteousness, as well as the hierarchical relationships between monarch and subject, and father and son.

The old provincial governor heard at home that his son had gone to the brothel, and wrote several times to call him back. He was infatuated with the beauty of Shiniang and lingered all day. Later, when he heard that his father was angry at home, he dared not return even more.

Sun Fu said, "Even so, Li, men in the Jiangnan region are most afraid of losing face. If you leave your wife to live alone, there's no guarantee that she won't cheat on or betray you. However, if you take her with you, you will only increase your father's anger further. There seems to be no good plan for you. Moreover, the relationship between father and son must not be severed. If you offend your father for the sake of a concubine, and abandon your family for a prostitute, you will be regarded as foolish by the world. In the future, your wife will not recognize you as her husband, your brothers will not recognize you as their brother, and your comrades will not recognize you

as their friend. How then can you stand between heaven and earth? Li, you really need to think about this today”.

The young master was forced again and again, and had to speak with tears, “I am poor and wandering in the world, and I am grateful that you do not abandon me and follow me with all your heart. It is truly a great virtue. But after thinking repeatedly, my father is in a high position and is bound by etiquette and law. Moreover, he has always been strict, and I am afraid that he will become anger and I must be dismissed and expelled. Where will you and I end up if we are dismissed and expelled? The joy of husband and wife is difficult to guarantee, and the relationship between father and son is also broken. During the day, I was invited by Mr. Sun from Xin’an to drink, and he discussed this matter for me, and my heart was like been cut.”

The repeated emphasis in the text on Li Jia’s fear of his father, Mr. Li-provincial governor, is in fact the result of the suppression and discipline of people by patriarchy and the monarchy based on it. Although Sun Fu’s words were intended to deceive Li Jia, they also imply the recognition and maintenance of Confucian ethical concepts by society. In addition, the novel praises the love between Li and Du, comparing the love between a prostitute and a client to the kindness of a married couple, which seems to require the modification of legalized words, and may also indirectly reflect the conservatism of the author’s concept.

2.2 Moral Instruction

Firstly, by utilizing ancient sayings and folk proverbs to preach, expounding the simple truths of human relationships and society.

Friendships forged for profit will dissipate once the profit ends.

Talk about money, and the bond disappears.

Capturing a tiger on the mountain is easier than speaking candidly to someone.

Converse moderately with others; don’t reveal your entire heart right away.

Secondly, directly praising or criticizing characters, focusing on evaluating their morality.

The vastness of the sea is immeasurable, laughable are the pious ladies with ill intentions; foreseeing the penniless scholar’s depleted purse, challenging it is to win the beauty’s favor with lavish gifts.

Commentators later opined that Sun Fu, who squandered a fortune for beauty, was hardly a gentleman. Li Jia, oblivious to Du Shiniang’s deep devotion, a mediocre talent of no note. Unique praise, however, is given to Du Shiniang, hailed as a heroine across the ages. Yet she mistakenly chose Young Master Li.

Third, the plot design reflects the view of karmic retribution.

Li Jia, on the boat, after seeing a noble young lady, reminisces about Du Shi Niang, and is consumed by remorse day and night, eventually succumbing to a madness that he never recovers from. Sun Fu, since that frightful day, falls ill, bedridden for over a month, constantly seeing Du Shi Niang beside him scolding, and weakly passes away—a consequence many believe to be retribution from the river.

Regarding Liu Yuchun, after completing his time in prison in the capital, he packed up and returned to his hometown, stopping his boat at Guabu. One day, while washing

his face by the river, he accidentally dropped a copper basin into the water and sought a fisherman's help to retrieve it. When it was retrieved, it turned out to be a small box. Upon opening the box, Yuchun found it filled with bright pearls and precious treasures of incalculable value.

Good deeds beget good outcomes, while evil acts bring their own punishment. All these narratives, whether employing traditional moral ethics to persuade and reform people's conduct or using Buddhist and Taoist philosophies to curb and dissolve malevolence, are conveyed through potentially fictional stories that either commend virtue or penalize vice. Key in these tales is the aspect of teaching - aiming to enlighten: the former shaping behaviors, the latter cautioning hearts. Feng Menglong's perspectives on righteousness and emotional ethics are also reflected herein, advocating for a balanced emphasis on both justice and benefit, emotion and reason.

3 Analysis of Reasons

3.1 Historical Origins

In the pre-Qin period, a literary view centered on "teaching through poetry" had already been formed. The Han dynasties established the orthodox literary concept of "using literature to cultivate morals among the lower classes and criticize the upper classes", with Huan Tan's *New Discussions* (*Xin Lun*) being the first to explicitly propose the didactic role of fiction. Since the Yuan dynasty, Gao Ming had asserted that "if it does not relate to moral education, even the finest work is in vain", clearly emphasizing the educational significance of drama on society's morals; Tang Xianzu in writings like *Records of the Qingyuan Master Temple of Theater Deities in Yihuang County* (*Yi Huang Xi Shen Qing Yuan Shi Miao Ji*) regarded drama as "using the full extent of human emotions for the greatest joy of moral teaching".[5]

After the mid-Ming dynasty, literati and scholar-officials became the main authors of vernacular short stories. They drew upon classical notes, legendary tales, operas, historical stories, and even societal rumors to independently create new works, referred to as imitated vernacular novels. From the perspective of stylistic features, novels are more suited for didactic purposes than poetry and prose. First of all, the language is straightforward, deriving from everyday speech, which makes it vivid, lively, and naturally engaging. Second, it appeals to a wide audience, primarily involving the lower classes and their lives. Third, it excels in narration, utilizing dramatic and comedic plotlines to fulfill its educational function. Master Xiao Hua in the preface to *Spectacles of Antiquity and Modernity* evaluates Feng's *Ancient and Modern Tales* as follows: "It thoroughly depicts the complexities of human emotions and conditions, capturing the essence of joy, sorrow, separation, and union."[6]

From the establishment of the concept of advocating virtue and punishing evil in novel writing through Confucian culture, to the inheritance of this concept by official and historical cultures, as well as the promotion of Buddhist concepts, the idea of moral education has become an important ideological concept in Chinese literature. Novels in the form of imitated stories from the late Ming Dynasty also fall within this context.

3.2 Real-world Anxieties

In *Brief History of Chinese Novel*, Lu Xun points out, “Although Song dynasty marketplace stories did occasionally incorporate moral lessons, their primary aim was to narrate everyday affairs of the marketplace for entertainment. When it came to the works imitated by people during Ming dynasty, they were filled with admonitions, loud and overpowering the main idea, and often glorified flamboyant fortune and defended the literati.”[7] The difference in the didactic nature of Song and Ming dynasty vernacular novels is closely related to their respective era’s background and social context.

Firstly, the Ming Dynasty *rulers* particularly emphasized moral education more than before. Zhu Yuanzhang once stated, “Intimidating people with laws is not as effective as guiding them with heart. Promoting trust, righteousness, power, and shame are the roots of civilizing the people” (Recorded in Volume 66 of *The Veritable Records of Ming Taizu*), placing moral education at the forefront of state governance and long-term stability.[8] In the realm of ideology, they implemented strict controls over thought for an extended period. Throughout the Ming Dynasty, from the reign of Hongwu to that of Chongzhen, the court continuously issued various types of admonitory books such as *Great Admonitions- Three Editions* (*Da Gao San Bian*), *Civic Instruction Edicts* (*Jiao Ming Bang Wen*), *Exemplary Acts of Filial Piety* (*Xiao Shun Shi Shi*), *Books of the Five Relationships* (*Wu Lun Shu*), *Moral Instruction for Women* (*Nv Xun*), etc., often written in forms easily acceptable to the common folk, significantly impacting popular education.[9]

Secondly, during the late Ming period, the political situation was severe, and the currents in humanistic thought were changing. Neo-Confucianism faced stern challenges from secular life, and scholars vigorously promoted and utilized orthodox religious ideas to educate societal customs, aiming to maintain and restore the traditional social, cultural orders, and values. Gong Pengcheng’s book *Thoughts on Late Ming Dynasty* points out the biases in past studies of the Late Ming era.

3.3 Author’s Thoughts

Feng Menglong was a native of Changzhou (modern-day Suzhou). He is emblematic of the late Ming literary trends that favored emotional expression, truthfulness, and societal compliance. Raised under the influence of Confucianism but growing up in the economically vibrant city of Suzhou, he frequently visited brothels and taverns in his youth, making him intimately familiar with the lives of ordinary citizens.

Feng Menglong’s thoughts on novel writing can be seen in the preface of *Stories to Caution the World*. Starting from the didactic function, he believes that the emotional impact of classics such as the *Analects* and *Classic of Filial Piety* is not as “direct and deep” as that of novels. He argues, “The classics articulate principles while historical records recount events, aiming towards the same goal. However, not everyone scrutinizes the principles deeply, nor do all immerse themselves in the breadth and elegance of history”. He further states, “As long as the events are truthful and the principles genuine - or even if the events are fabricated but the principles remain true - as long as it does not corrupt morals, mislead the wise and the virtuous, or contradict the teachings

of poetry, books, classics, and history, then how could it be deemed unnecessary?" From this perspective, Feng's view on literature emphasizes its utilitarian value. Regarding the naming concept, the titles of the *Three collections of inspiring novellas (San Yan)* - "Instruction Stories to Enlighten the World (Yu Shi Ming Yan)", "Stories to Caution the World (Jing Shi Tong Yan)", and "Lasting Words to Awaken the World (Xing Shi Heng Yan)" - explicitly reveal the didactic intention of advocating good and punishing evil, praising morality, and rectifying the morals and hearts of society.

4 Conclusion

The case of *Madam Du Sinks Her Treasure Chest in Anger* allows us to peek into the political and moral didacticism characteristic of the pseudo-novella genre represented by the *Three Collections of Inspiring Novellas (San Yan)*. This includes praise for the deeds of rulers, aspirations towards joining the governing elites, emphasis on filial ethics, moral criticism of the characters, and the promotion of the concept of karmic consequences. The primary reasons for this are essentially threefold: the historical origins of the concept of literary education, the gloomy political landscape and societal unrest during the late Ming period, and the utilitarian literary view held by the author Feng Menglong. The pronounced educational color highlights the social function of literature, which, while boosting the novel's stature, also somewhat reduces its aesthetic value. Novels from the late Ming are not solely emblems of bourgeois consciousness or reflections of progressive thinking; they still heavily incorporate outdated ethical ideologies and political teachings, making their progressive interpretations of utility and emotional doctrine particularly notable to subsequent scholars.

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