A Study of the Grand Canal Culture from *Stories from A Ming Collection*

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**Abstract.** *Stories from a Ming Collection* is a model work of "parodyscript" in the late Ming Dynasty. With the help of the rich plot and vivid narrative techniques, the author shows the moral values of the society at that time and the ordinary people's daily human relations. As an ancient north-south traffic artery, the Grand Canal had an important influence on the working ways and customs of the people along the coastland formed a canal culture with distinctive features. Based on the Canal story in *Stories from a Ming Collection*, this paper sorts out and summarizes the presentation of Canal Culture in the text and then analyzes the cultural elements contained in it, such as traffic, business and folk customs, etc., providing reference for understanding and carrying forward the contemporary value of the Grand Canal culture.

1. **Introduction**

The Grand Canal was an important communication hub between the north and the south of ancient China, providing conditions for regional trade and people exchanges, promoting cultural exchanges, and forming a unique canal culture. *Stories from a Ming Collection* is a classic work of vernacular novels in the Ming Dynasty, which reflects the real life and social atmosphere of the civilian class in the Ming Dynasty and contains various literary values. General Secretary Xi Jinping has also told the story of Feng Menglong, the author of "Three Words", on several occasions, and said of his experience in reading *Sanyan* that "I can memorize many of the warnings"\(^{[1]}\). In today's world of cultural self-confidence, it is of great significance to study the cultural values contained in *Stories from a Ming Collection*.

In China, the study of *Stories from a Ming Collection* has a wide range of perspectives and works. Nevertheless, most of the studies are more focused on the preservation and development of canal culture, which pay less attention on canal culture itself. The description of the Grand Canal and the daily life along the canal in *Stories from a Ming Collection* carries important reference value for the research of the Grand Canal culture. Combining *Stories from a Ming Collection* with the Grand Canal Culture, this paper is attempted to explore the canal culture contained in *Stories from a Ming Collection*, and further enriches the canal culture and digs out the practical significance of the construction of Contemporary Canal Culture Zone.

2. **Stories from a Ming Collection and Grand Canal**

The Grand Canal has a history of more than 2,500 years. It was first excavated by King Fuchai of Wu, and later dredged and excavated by the dynasties to connect the major river systems and finally
became a canal. The Grand Canal has made the Jiangnan area rich since ancient times and led to the economic prosperity of the cities along the canal, forming a unique canal culture.

Stories from a Ming Collection is composed of Sanyan (Illustrious Words to Instruct the World, Stories to Caution the World, Stories to Awaken the World) edited by the Ming Dynasty writer Feng Menglong, and Erpai (Amazing Tales-First Series, Amazing Tales-Second Series) written by his contemporary writer Ling Mengchu. It “traces the divergence of human emotions and worldly conditions, and prepares to write about sorrows and joys”[2] and is a representative of Ming Dynasty citizen literature, which "breaks the tradition and dyes the bottom of the society and ordinary people strong colors"[3] with its unique material and speech-book art creation method, and "truly expresses the outlook of the bottom class and the people in the city, and shows the real social atmosphere, which is loved by the public"[4].

Stories from a Ming Collection is composed of short stories, of which 120 pieces are Sanyan and 80 pieces are Erpai. "The novel has many themes and is quite mixed."[5] There are 48 canal stories, which make up a large proportion of the total. The descriptions of the Grand Canal in "Three Words and Two Pieces" can be divided into two categories: direct and indirect descriptive method. As in Mr. Lee’s rescue of the snake was rewarded, "seeing the scenery of Wujiang River in his boat and being delighted with the pictures of the beautiful city of Xiaoxiang, Li Yuanzhou ordered the boatman to park his boat near the side of the long bridge... and sat on the railing, with the sight at the view of evening of Taihu Lake."[6] Here the direct depiction shows the beauty of the magnificent Grand Canal's sky and rivers, which melt into one color. Similarly, in Le Xiaoshe abandoned life to find a mate, "...hundreds of people compete in the waves, up and down in the game."[7] The canal is used as a cultural carrier to indirectly describe the unique folk customs of the coastal cities, such as tide watching. "All scenes are words of emotions."[8] The frames of the canal's scenery and stories blend together, depicting countless touching scenes.

Describing the beauty of the canal's scenery, the bustling trade and commerce, and the prosperity of the cities along its banks, Stories from a Ming Collection stories recreates the urban life of the ancient people who lived near the canal's water, which rolled towards us like the water of the canal.

3. Canal culture in Stories from a Ming Collection

Canal culture can be regarded as a kind of reconciliation between farming and maritime culture, which retains both the restraint of farming culture and the openness and innovation of maritime culture. In the series of Stories from a Ming Collection stories, the canal culture is presented from multiple angles and levels through a series of fascinating and creative folk stories.

3.1. Culture of River Transport

The Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal began to be excavated from the Spring and Autumn Period to the initial formation of the Sui dynasty, which witnesses the prosperity of the Tang and Song dynasties, the diversions in Yuan dynasty and dredging works during Ming and Qing dynasties, and finally became a canal. Throughout the years, the Grand Canal, a major water transportation route, has provided many conveniences for transportation along the canal and for north-south traffic. What’s more, the Grand Canal provided a waterway of choice for people to travel, migrate and fight armies. In the story of The Oil Seller Takes the Oiran, "from then on, the land routes were synchronized and the water routes were in the same boat... to draw the troops across the river... so they took advantage of the boats to Runzhou... from Bianjing to Lin'an, more than three thousand miles..."[9] People changed from travelling by carts and horses on the land only to water and land,
and armies could cross rivers in battle. The original lakes and paddy fields were crisscrossed and
difficult to travel by land along the canals, relying on the advantages of river ditches into canals, the
development of river transportation. On the other hand, the Grand Canal opened up a water route
for the exchange of goods and north-south trade along the river. In the story of Jiang Xing-ge
Rejoins the Pearl Shirt, "...... encountering downwind, we can travel to the ground at Fengqiao,
Suzhou not two months. The Maple Bridge there is the businessmen to get together, and there must
be a lot of merchant out of stock"[6][15]. In the article, Jin Ling Shi's beautiful maidservant rewards
her child, “the merchants called for a boat to go to Hangzhou to buy incense, and this morning they
both went out.... ...and slipped away: '...takes a load from Hangzhou, to go for a month's business.'[7][125] The ship-owners receive transport business to and from the canal.

It is often said that the first step for the economic development of a region is to build a local road.
The truth is that the development of transportation throughout the ages verifies the validity of this
truth. Compared with that in the past that the Grand Canal made it accessible for the movement of
mobility to go through north and south, today there are railways running through the Qinghai-Tibet
Plateau, tunnels revealing the riddle hidden from the deep valleys and huge mountains in Sichuan
and the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge connecting all sides. When the transportation really
facilitates the people's life and business exchanges, this land and water will take the first step
towards openness, tolerance and exchange.

3.2. Economy and Trade Culture

The cities along the canal developed the economy and trade of the area along the canal, taking
advantage of the water transport facilities provided by the Grand Canal, creating a unique economic
and trade culture along the canal. In Song Xiao Guan Reunion Broken Hats, "......drove a large boat,
carrying passengers and goods to various provinces......there are many people who live on this in
Jiangnan region."[7][231] Shipowners along the canal often spent their ancestors' savings on wooden
boats and hurried along the canal with a large boat. In the book The Charm of Old Evil in Yan Guan
Eup,"a monk from the monastery asked, 'Where do you come from? Where are you going?' The
merchant replied, 'I have crossed the river at Yangzhou, bringing some money with me to a small
shop in the capital. It is getting late, and we are mooring here at ......'"[10][231] This is a further
example of merchant groups from all over the world taking up residence on the canal. The canal's
accessibility by land and water greatly facilitated trade and commerce between the cities along the
canal and the areas which it radiated from and contributed to the economic development and urban
formation of these areas. Yangzhou in the Sui and Tang dynasties, between Hangzhou and Luoyang,
became a hub for north-south transport and was regarded as the richest city in Jiangnan region. At
the same time, the affluence of the entire Jiangnan region was inextricably linked to the
convenience of trade brought about by the canal traffic.

Ancient China had a long history of valuing the peasants and suppressing the merchants. From
the explicit restrictions of state laws to the ideology of the common people, the image of "merchants
valuing profit over separation" was a stereotype in people's minds. But instead of focusing on the
rich and powerful, the story of Stories from a Ming Collection focuses on the hard-working lives of
thousands of ordinary businessmen and travellers. In General Wu Must Be Rewarded with a Meal,
Chen Dalang's Three Men Reunite, it is stated that "Yangzhou's cloth is easy to sell. After buying
the cloth in Songjiang, he brought some silver and bought up rice and beans, which was very
convenient."[10][72] The merchants transported and sold the cloth from one place to another, and the
canal witnessed their haste; in *Cheng Yuanyu's shop paid for the cloth, and Eleventh Niang, a warrior of the Yungang and Tan,* the merchant said, 'Sixty miles from here is the town of Yang Song, a place where merchants can rest. There is no shelter anywhere near it.' The merchants stopped to rest along the way, and the coastal town took in their hardships of the long journey. The characteristics of the merchants in the *Stories from a Ming Collection* enrich the image of the "merchant", whose honesty, hard work and hardship formed the foundation of trade and commerce along the canals and the blocks of economy and life.

### 3.3. Urban Folk Culture

It is often said that all literature is a reflection of the economic and social phenomena of a particular era. The system of land and water transport formed by the canals, the trade economy along the canals, the canal markets, the festivals, the food and the marriage culture are all rooted particularly in the Grand Canal’s transportation and economy.

*Stories from a Ming Collection* spent a large amount of writing on the rich and vivid culture and life of the citizens along the canal, covering everything in ordinary people’s life. In *Jin Yunu Beats the Lover Boy*, it is written about the culture of beggar gangs: "Although Lin'an is a land of capital and affluence, there are still many beggars here. The beggars had a head of the gangs, called "Tuantou", who managed all the beggars ......they are still be viewed as beggars no matter how much they earn." As affluent as Lin'an, the beggars could also make a fortune, earning land, which was unparalleled in most parts of the country the same period. In addition to the culture of beggar gangs, *Stories from a Ming Collection* also outlines the distinctive culture of the whoreshouse along the canal: "Famous prostitutes such as Du Shiniang, Yu Tangchun, Zhao Chun'er, etc., were all sexual and artistical, and they were in harmony with the scholarly people, both in terms of talent and beauty, as well as in terms of poetry and taste." In *Yu Tangchun Encountered Man when in the Accident*, "The lanes of flowers, the willow alleys, the embroidered pavilions and the vermilion. Every house is voiced with bamboo and silk." In a prosperous place, there is always a lot of noise and lust and horses and flowers. It is only when the necessities of material life are satisfied that people seek metaphysical enjoyment. The sound of silk and bamboo in the greenhouses and the lingering sound of singing songs reflect the economic and cultural prosperity along the canals.

In addition to the culture of the city, the festivals and folklore along the canal are depicted in *Stories from a Ming Collection* as an important reflection of the canal culture. There are grand but no less common festivals of the Lantern Festival and the Dragon Boat Festival, as well as the unique "Mourning Liu Qi" along the canal. In *Zhang Shunmei Win a Beauty Lantern Festival*, "the night of the Lantern Festival was a time of peace and the moon was reflected in the ball of lanterns for ten miles. It is said that in Bianliang, Dongjing, Emperor Huizong of the Song dynasty set off lanterns for the market and became very rich." In *Hanging Liu Qi by the Spring Breeze of All Famous Concubines*, it was said that "Every year after the burial, around the time of the Qingming Festival, the spring breeze would blow, and all the famous concubines would prepare their own rituals and go to Liu Qi's grave, hang paper money and pay respects, and call it 'Mourning Liu Qi'". This is one of the most famous of the Song dynasty's many stories, and it is one of the most famous of the Song dynasties. After the death of Liu Yong, all the concubines took it upon themselves to pay their respects around the Qingming Festival, which became a trend that only stopped after Emperor Gaozong of the Song Dynasty came to the south. Whether it is the traditional
Lantern Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival or the popular 'Liu Qi' festival, the variety and prosperity of folk festivals reflect the colourful culture and the flow of fresh folk culture.

The folk tales of *Stories from a Ming Collection* reflect an important kind of marriage culture, and the more open cultural attitudes along the canal can be analyzed from the point of view of the concept of marriage. In *Shan Fu Lang's Couple from Jeonju*, "Whenever the officials heard of Feiying's marriage to a prostitute, they all thought that he was righteous, and they told each other stories about it, all of them adding their respect and admiration to the story......and the story is still well known in the Qing dynasty."[6][16] The fact that Tai Changqing took a prostitute from the whorehouse, instead of being ridiculed and gossiped about, was seen as an act of righteousness and was greatly admired by the public. In the book *Zhao Chuner Flourished Cao's Village*, it is said that "there was a famous local prostitute called Zhao Chuner ...... who was really a beautiful flower with a beautiful moon and jade moonlight ...... Cao Kecheng fell in love with her and stayed with her for a whole month, spending money on his house. It's a great way to get the most out of your money. ......"[7][28] Whether it is the love between a prostitute and a scholar or between a prostitute and a landlord, the bonds of worldly boundaries are broken, and the social atmosphere is more tolerant and accepting of such cross-class love.

The vivid folk tales in *Stories from a Ming Collection* reflect people's pursuit of worldly pleasures, fame and fortune, as well as their vision of free love and equal relationships. These desires and aspirations stemmed from the freedom of thought and individuality brought about by the rapid development of society and the highly developed commodity economy of the Ming dynasty. Engels, speaking of Marx's understanding of the laws of human history, said: "Just as Darwin discovered the laws of development of the organic world, Marx discovered the laws of human history, that is, the simple fact that has always been concealed by a complex ideology: people must first eat, drink, live and wear clothes before they can engage in politics, science, art, science, art, culture, etc.; so that the direct production of the material means of life, and a certain stage of economic development of a people or an age, formed the basis from which the institutions of the state, the views of the law, the arts and even religious ideas of the people developed"[12]. The canal culture, which developed along the Grand Canal traffic and formed a trade and economic belt along the canal, is a more open, inclusive and communicative flowering of culture in an agrarian civilization.

4. The Contemporary Value of *Stories from a Ming Collection* to the Cultural Construction of the Grand Canal

Today, with the rapid development of air and land transport, the Grand Canal is no longer used for trade and commerce but as a carrier of Chinese culture, which has been given more cultural value. The State is vigorously promoting the construction of a cultural belt along the canal to organically integrate traditional culture along the canal internally and to communicate with the Maritime Silk Road externally, promoting the integration of domestic and foreign excellent culture. The Grand Canal stories in *Stories from a Ming Collection* have further enriched the connotation of the canal culture, which is of great significance to the promotion of the cultural construction of the Grand Canal in terms of cultural propaganda and tourism resources construction.

"It is a major trend of the times to integrate the development of cultural tourism, and to create tourist attractions with the Grand Canal culture as the main line to highlight the cultural and
educational functions of tourism resources in addition to leisure and entertainment, while tourism resources also provide conditions for cultural experience"[13] The establishment of experience pavilions and exhibition halls related to the canal stories in the *Stories from a Ming Collection* and the use of modern technology to design the canal stories can make canal culture which possess abundant history stories present in a new way and attract more young people's attention. In addition, the Grand Canal stories in *Stories from a Ming Collection* can expand the cultural connotation of the canal and add a new cultural experience to cultural tourism. The development of canal culture-based experience projects in ancient towns and cities along the canal, such as the making of traditional food and drink and folk culture festivals, can further enhance the cultural experience.

Nowadays, the main way to pass on canal culture is still traditional forms such as literature and opera, which are not close to the public life in the Internet era. Canal culture can be promoted online with the help of new media, or it can be concretized in the form of song and dance, so that the canal stories in *Stories from a Ming Collection* can become the cultural support and carrier for the dissemination of canal culture. The stage play "Encountering the Grand Canal" brings the story of the canal to the stage, and its tour has introduced China and the world to the charm of Grand Canal culture. The cultural industry, in the process of promoting and developing canal culture, not only generates commercial value, but also injects new living water into the culture of the Grand Canal and traditional Chinese culture as the source of culture, so that the vicissitudes of canal water are still fresh and surging today after thousands of years, nourishing and irrigating modern culture and flowing far and wide.

5. Conclusion

*Stories from a Ming Collection* shows the openness, inclusiveness and communication of the cultural flowering of the Grand Canal culture in the agrarian society from different angles and at varieties of levels. Tracing the canal culture and the folk customs along the canal contained in the *Stories from a Ming Collection* is conducive to the restoration of history and the nourishment of canal culture for literary creation. At the same time, it is also an effective attempt to respond to the national efforts to excavate and sort out the cultural heritage of the Grand Canal. This article combining *Stories from a Ming Collection* with the Grand Canal could be regarded as a systematic study of the relationship between the two, further clarifying the cultural characteristics of the canal and looking ahead to the new historical mission of the Grand Canal.

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References


