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# Xingshi yan (Stories to Rectify the World) as a Textual Space for Knowledge Dissemination and Social Dialogue

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## Abstract

*Xingshi yan* (Stories to Rectify the World, ca. 1632), the collection of vernacular stories (*huaben*) compiled by the Hongzhou writers/publishers Lu Yunlong and Lu Renlong, has mostly been discussed as literature of moral exemplars since its discovery in Kyujanggak Archives in the 1980s. But for the late Ming readers, was moral teaching the only message they received when reading this story collection? What might be the other elements that attracted them? Or how did the Lu brothers design the book to increase its appeal to the late Ming reader?

This paper investigates these questions by focusing on stories no.1 and no. 8 in *Xingshi yan*, both of which narrate the actions and choices of several early Ming officials involved in the four-year civil war that ends with Zhu Di taking over the throne of his nephew, the Jianwen Emperor, to become the Yongle Emperor. The author will first situate the two stories within the late Ming reader's strong interest in learning about the major events and prominent characters of their own dynasty (*benchao*) and in rediscovering the stories of the Jianwen loyalists which had been suppressed earlier to avoid controversy over Yongle's political legitimacy.

The author will then analyze how the Lu brothers utilize (quasi)-historical records for rewriting and incorporate various artistic forms including illustrations, calligraphy, and seal engravings, to create a textual space that simultaneously provides the reader with historical knowledge, critical comments, visual representations, and situational scenarios that invite deeper moral contemplation. Reading the stories in *Xingshi yan*, therefore, is not just to passively receive moral indoctrination, but to cultivate "practical wisdom" by observing and weighing human actions in the face of moral dilemma and personal, social, or dynastic crisis. Reading such a work can be understood as an act of participating in shared historical/political knowledge and social discussions.

Finally, the author will discuss how the moral story compendia (*leishu*) such as *Riji gushi* (Stories of the Past for Daily Learning), which had developed since the Yuan Dynasty for elementary education, and *Renjing Yangqiu* (Mirror for Conduct of Life from History, ca. 1600) published by the renown Huizhou publisher Wang Tingna, may have informed the conception of novellas of moral exemplars like *Xingshi yan*. This will enable us to reconsider the nature of the "didactic literature" which mushroomed during the Ming-Qing transition. Chiung-yun Evelyn Liu is Associate Research Fellow at the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, Taiwan. She specializes in Ming Qing literature. Her

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research interests include literature of the fantastic, historical memory, book culture and knowledge production. She is completing a book manuscript investigating how moral politics, literary invention and commercial media worked together in shaping and transforming historical memories. Her next project explores the function of sentiment in the process of knowledge reception and reformulation, particularly how Chinese literati coped with turbulent dynastic transitions and unsettling cross-cultural encounters through encyclopedic writing as means of reordering and comprehending the changing world.