《東華漢學》第 5 期；頁 63-80
東華大學中國語文學系　2007 年 6 月

# Retribution and *li* in "Censor Chen Ingeniously Solves the Case of the Gold Hairpins and Brooches"

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## Abstract

In the ideology in pre-modern Chinese history, *li*, with ethics as its central part, had long been regarded as a regulative and cohesive force of society. The present study argues that the vernacular short story, "Censor Chen Ingeniously Solves the Case of the Gold Hairpins and Brooches", conveys such a pessimistic view that the *li,* as an institution, had been undergoing a gradational degradation through dynasties. The study reaches this conclusion through a careful comparison conducted firstly between the plots of the prologue story and the main story of the story and secondly among the portrayed main characters as well as the cited historical and legendary figures in the story. A chronological examination of the plots, characters, and figures uncovers such a historical view insinuated in the story that the later an era was, the more morally corrupted the society would

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become. A tentative discussion on the personal names of some main characters also supports this finding.

**Keywords:** *li* (禮), retribution, moral degradation through dynasties, social value

## INTRODUCTION

This study discusses the view on retribution and *li* 禮 presented in "Censor Chen Ingeniously Solves the Case of the Gold Hairpins and Brooches" 陳御史巧勘金釵鈿 (CCSCG henceforth), a Chinese vernacular story included in the *Yü Shih Ming Yen* 喻世明言, an anthology of vernacular short stories. Compiled by Feng Menglung 馮夢龍 (1574-1646) in the Ming dynasty, the anthology was originally known as the *Ku Chin Hsiao Shuo* 古今小說.[1]

In the present study, I will first argue that the author of this story, by telling and citing a number of stories of retribution, insinuated his view of social history as a process of *gradational* degradation in terms of justice and ethic values. I will then suggest that the author, through his frequent mention of *li* accompanied with his satirical and symbolic use of personal names, denounced the society of his generation as the most corrupted of all times. These two points in the present study are interrelated.

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[1] The Chinese edition of the anthology I use is a modern facsimile edition of the Tien-hsü Chai 天許齋 edition in the Ming dynasty. It was edited by modern scholar Li Tien-yi and published by *Shih Chieh Shu Chü* 世界書局 in Taipei in 1958. Unless otherwise noted, the translation of the short story in this study is drawn from the English version by Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang.

Like most other vernacular short stories in pre-modern China, CCSCG is composed of two parts, a prologue story and a main story.[2] The prologue story and its archetype are set in an unidentified time. Because, however, the archetype is generally known to have first appeared in such Yüan dynasty works as *Shan Chü Hsin Hua* 山居新話 and *Ch'o Keng Lu* 輟耕錄, it stands to reason to tentatively consider the tale as a signifier of the Yüan dynasty.

As for the latter, the main story, Hu Shih-ying 胡士瑩 acknowledges the validity of the view that the bureaucratic system in both the main story and its sources is typical of the Ming Empire. (541)[3] This provides one with considerable preliminary grounds to ascribe the main story to the Ming dynasty. A comparison between the two stories and, especially, a scrutiny on the main story leads me to identify a pessimistic view which the author or storyteller held towards the ethics of his time. Specifically, I will suggest that what the author suggested in the story was a general corruption of ethics by his time, the Ming dynasty. I will further point out that the author insinuated this view by presenting a variety of cases of retribution in the two stories as well as by relating *li* to the some mundane things in the prologue story and even to the wicked characters in the main story.

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[2] Hanan has point out that virtually all vernacular fiction has a prologue, "ranging from a mere poem to a whole complex of poem, prose introduction, and a prologue story, all of which serve as anticipatory comment." (Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 20)

[3] Hu. *Hua-pen Hsiao-shuo Kai-lun* 話本小說概論. Pei-ching: Chung-hua Shu-chü, 1980. Hu further suggests that the main story was by Feng Menglung. Regarding the source of this story, Hanan has accurately identified it to be primarily "Ch'en An-yüan Mai Pu Chuan Tsang" 陳按院賣布賺贓, which is a story included in a collection of "crime-case" stories known as the *Lien-ming Kung-an* 廉明公案 and compiled during the Ming dynasty (see Hanan, 1969, p. 198). In the course of this study, I will point out that significant elaborations were made by the author of the main story — be he Feng Menglung himself or otherwise — on the basis of this source.

In so doing, I will examine not only the characters and themes of the prologue story and the main story, but also the legendary or historical figures, together with their stories that get cited in the entire CCSCG. Such figures are P'ei Tu 裴度 and Ch'ien Yü-lien 錢玉蓮, cited respectively by one character in the prologue story and one in the main story. If we sort the prologue story, the main story, and these two cited legends chronologically, what we get is a list of four stories setting in such four successive dynasties as the Tang (618-907), Sung (960-1279), Yüan (1271-1368), and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties. A comparative study on these stories leads me to notice that the author presented a time line along which justice through retribution gets gradationally weaker from Tang to Ming eras, hence my inferred view about the storyteller's afore-mentioned pessimism.

As noted at the start of the present study, the term *li* occurs frequently in CCSCG. Shun observes that "*li*," as a character, originally meant rites in sacrifice, but its scope of application had long been "extended to include other things such as norms governing polite behavior." Shun further points out that in the *Tso Chuan* 左傳,

> *Li is related to norms of conduct governing those in a higher and those in a lower position, to proper ways of governing a state, and to the proper relation between rulers and ministers, fathers and sons, and older and younger brothers, husbands and wives, and mothers and daughters-in-law. Proper observance of li is supposed to be the basis for an orderly society and the ideal basis for government.*[4]

[4] Shun, Kwong-loi. "Jen and Li in the 'Analects'," *Philosophy East and West*: 43 (3), 1993, pp. 457-458.

Indeed, cases can be found in the *Tso Chuan* where *li* is regarded as a regulative force that served to "manage the state and families, bring peace to the territory, bring order to the society, and bring benefit to later generations." 經國家，定社稷，序民人，利後嗣.[5] In the present study, primary importance will be accorded to this aspect of the notion *li* as a regulative force in human society, though due attention will also be paid to other aspects, such as ceremonial and even material aspects.

One may notice, however, that in CCSCG, there is no occurrence of the term *li* in the prologue story whereas frequent mention of the term concentrates in the main story. It is also of interest to note that, in the prologue story about a past incident, retribution justly befell all the characters of low social status, a society — in other words — that was the least influenced by the *li* across the social stratum. In the main story, by contrast, there is an elite society where the *li* was, supposedly, accorded great emphasis. But it is also, as we find it, a society in which daughter declares disobedience against her parent's arrangement for her marriage (e.g. Ah Hsiu 阿秀), wife has secrete scheme for daughter's marriage behind husband's back (e.g. Mrs. Ku), and friendship and marital bond were contingent upon the relative financial conditions between the parties (e.g. the Ku and Lu families). I will hence suggest that the storyteller presented *li* up to his time as an object of his satire. In this regard, the contrast set between the prologue story and the main story also confirms to us the authors' critical view that regards social history as a process of degradation.

The first part of the paper features a close study of the retributions in the prologue story. Proceeding from this close study, the second part will first compare between the cases of retribution in the prologue story and those in the

[5] *Tso Chuan*, Yin Kung Year 11.

main story. Then a discussion will be conducted in this part regarding the issue of *li* in the latter story. Finally, the conclusion in the third part will sum up the points in this study.

## 1. THE PROLOGUE STORY

The prologue story both begins and climaxes beside a latrine pit, which seems to be highlighting the plebian nature of the community to which the characters belong. A peddler named Chin Hsiao 金孝 once goes to use a latrine on his trip. Beside a latrine pit, he found a cloth belly wrapper with 30 taels of silver in it. With great joy, he took the silver home. But he soon returns to the place to look for the owner; because, at home, his mother told him that Heaven would bless only those who earned their living by honest means. The owner, however, rather than feel grateful and offer Chin a share of the silver as a token of his gratitude, falsely declares that he lost 40 to 50 taels and accuses Chin of appropriating half of his lost commodity. The case is soon presented under the jurisdiction of the local magistrate. As a judicious official, the magistrate points out that Chin Hsiao would not have been looking for the owner at the outset if he had been dishonest. To punish the deceitful owner of the silver, the magistrate pronounces Chin Hsiao to be the one that should keep the silver.

Although Chin Hsiao's mother told him that retributions would eventually come down from the Heaven, all the retributions in the prologue story befell through the local magistrate's arrangements. Because of his initial greediness for the silver, Chin Hsiao was, at first, punished by the owner's false accusation. Then he was rewarded with the silver by the magistrate for his honesty. As the most honest character, Chin's mother shared this reward with Chin. The owner, by contrast, in permanently losing his own silver in the

end, received punishment for his deceit. This punishment was arranged, again, not by the action of Heaven but, too, by the magistrate, a human being. In such a human world, everyone got his/her due retribution that was, as it seems, measured out to an inch. Yet one can nonetheless detect a trace of degradation of human society in this tale.

In her admonitory teaching to Chin Hsiao, Chin's mother cited the virtuous deed of P'ei Tu 裴度 as an example to follow. A man of virtue in a historic period previous to Chin Hsiao's time, P'ei Tu once returned three jeweled belts he found to their owner, and thereby saved the latter's family. Tradition has it that it was by dint of retribution for this honest deed that P'ei later ended up in a high official post.[6] This legend of P'ei Tu is evidently a better version of Chin Hsiao's story in that P'ei never thought to keep the treasure as Chin did, he was more abundantly rewarded by retribution than Chin Hsiao was, and that, unlike the owner of the silver in Chin Hsiao's story, the owner of the belts was anything but ungrateful. In fact this owner, out of her gratitude, offered P'ei one of the belts, which P'ei declined. But Chin Hsiao and his mother eventually took home the treasure that actually did not belong to them. What is more, the reward to P'ei Tu's honest deed is presented in the lore as more by some celestial arrangement than by any magistrate in human society. Human action and its retribution were thus apparently more closely related in P'ei's time than in Chin's. All such contrasts seem to convey to us readers a message that human society had already been badly corrupted

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[6] As a historical figure, P'ei Tu (756-839) has his biographies in such pre-modern dynastic histories as *Chiu T'ang-shu* 舊唐書 and *Hsin T'ang-shu* 新唐書. But this legend of P'ei can be found only in fictions. Hu Shih-ying traces the source of this legend back to a story of P'ei in Volume 4 of the *T'ang Chih Yen* 唐摭言, which is a *pi-chi hsia- shuo* 筆記小說 (notebook fiction) compiled by Wang Ting-pao 王定保 (870-940?) (see Hu, p. 543).

by Chin Hsiao's time; even though such a period of corruption could nonetheless count as a "good old time" if compared with the era in which the main story was set. In other words, compared with P'ei Tu's time (i.e. the Tang dynasty), the period where Chin Hsiao found himself (i.e. the Yüan dynasty) should be considered as one step down the slope of human degradation.

But a further step down is to be traced in the main story, which, to recall, was set in the Ming dynasty.

## 2. THE MAIN STORY

In the prologue story, retribution rewards men and women alike, so long as they have performed virtuous deeds. As a virtuous woman, for example, Chin Hsiao's mother enjoyed as much reward as Chin himself did. In the main story, however, the only rewarded women were T'ien-shih 田氏 and Ch'ien Yü-lien 錢玉蓮, with the latter being, again, a virtuous person of a relatively earlier and better time (i.e. the Sung dyandsy).

It is to be noted that Ch'ien Yü-lien is not a character *per se* in the main story. Her story is only briefly mentioned by *the* tragic figure in the main story, Ah Hsiu, daughter of Inspector Ku. As if predictive of the lack of favor from retribution for most female characters in the main story, Ch'ien Yü-lien's story told through Ah Hsiu's mouth ends right after the part where Ch'ien committed suicide. Without investigating on the legend of Ch'ien in *Ching Ch'ai Chi* 荊釵記, it would not be known to us that, as a virtuous woman, Ch'ien Yü-lien eventually married the scholar she loved. And partly as a reward to Ch'ien Yü-lien through retribution, that formerly humble scholar had emerged into fame and glory by the time when they met again and got married. With this happy ending cut off in Ah Hsiu's citation of the story, the

introduction of this lore would add a tragic touch to the positive characters — especially the female ones — in CCSCG.

As a justly rewarded woman in the main story, T'ien-shih's status is no less questionable. Her major virtuous action was performed merely in her action of splitting up with her husband, the villain Liang Shang-pin 梁尚賓. Such a choice, admittedly, was made partly out of her sense of righteousness, and yet partly out of her concern for her own safety. She had been in fear of getting involved in Liang's crime. "I was," said she, "Liang Shangbin's [i.e. Liang Shang-pin's] wife, already divorced before his arrest, because I was afraid of implication in the evil doings of that vile husband of mine."[7] Compared with such a more virtuous and unselfish woman as Ah Hsiu, T'ien certainly did not deserve her retribution of a happy marriage with Lu Hsüeh-tseng 魯學曾 in the end. As a case of retribution, that happy marriage was simply out of measure for her.

In this regard, T'ien in fact functions more as a medium of retribution than an object of it.

The short story begins with a poem, of which the last two lines read "Watch how in the end man is fairly judged. When has heaven ever failed the good at heart?" [8] Along this line of argument, the author or storyteller starts the main story by declaring that the story he is going to tell is about a married man lost his wife to an unmarried man, which, from the perspective of "Heavenly Law" (*t'ien-li* 天理), was parallel to the prologue story, where the owner of the silver lost the silver to Chin Hsiao. As the story tells us, the marriage between T'ien-shih and Liang Shang-pin was arranged by Lu Hsüeh-tseng's family. Yet the ungrateful Liang cheated, and later caused the

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[7] Feng Meng-lung. Trans. Shuhui Yang, and Yunqin Yang. *Stories Old and New: A Ming Dynasty Collection*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000, p. 73.

[8] Feng Meng-lung, p. 48.

death of, Lu's fiancée. According to the Heavenly Law, therefore, Liang owed the debt of a spouse to Lu. The eventual marriage between T'ien and Lu was thus not quite a heavenly reward to T'ien's righteousness but rather a shift of ownership of T'ien as a heavenly punishment to Liang's crime. Unlike the case in the prologue story, rewarding all virtuous characters was no longer on the top of the Heavenly Executor's agenda by T'ien's time; though a woman might occasionally benefit from the punishment that the Heavenly Executor gave to a bad man.

As for other female characters in the main story, they were even less rewarded than Ch'ien Yü-lien and Mrs. T'ien Liang. Ah Hsiu died miserably in spite of her virtue. Liang Shang-pin's mother died in anger and fear despite her sense of righteousness. In losing her only child, Lady Ku, though a benevolent figure, suffered exactly the same misfortune as did her snobbish and unworthy husband.

Not only so, in the beginning of the main story, the death of Lu Hsüeh-tseng's father, an official "untarnished by greed," would be sufficient to suggest that unfair retribution was not limited to female characters. In contrast with this righteous official, the snobbish Inspector Ku had seen a happy ending. Lacking an heir as he had done originally, the inspector eventually had a grandson from Lu Hsüeh-tseng to "carry on the name of" the Ku family. Noticeably enough, such worship was a constituent of the *li*, a system of social value, norm, and practice that was supposedly more indigenous to this elite society than to the society of commoners in the prologue story.

In this genteel society, however, *li* was often associated with and conditioned by one's financial state. As is generally known, wedding in China has been an important occasion for social orientation of *li*. But, in the main story, *li* is often reduced to commodity. After the death of "Pure Water Lu," the Lu family gradually became impoverished. Inspector Ku, "regret[ting]

having made the betrothal" between Lu Hsüeh-tseng and his daughter, said to his wife, "It looks like that the penniless Lu will not be able to complete the 'six [matrimonial] preliminaries' [*liu-li* 六禮]." And he stated that he could compel Lu to write a statement "declaring the betrothal null and void" simply by making him realize that the lack of financial means to complete the wedding ["*hsing-li*" 行禮] would mean disgrace to the Lu family.[9] Such a link between *li* and commodity, though established by a snob, was later recognized and confirmed by Lu Hsüeh-tseng himself, who said to Madam Lu: "My straitened circumstances have caused me to be remiss in my observance of proper etiquette ["*li-shu*" 禮數]."[10] Last but not the least, after being seduced by Liang Shang-pin (who falsely claimed to be Lu Hsüeh-tseng in front of Ah Hsiu), Ah Hsiu, the virtuous female character, said to Hsüeh-tseng to the effect that she no longer deserved to be in a position of offering him material help, not to mention marrying him. What is interesting here is her slightly condescending attitude in front of the indigent Hsüeh-tseng. In juxtaposing the marriage with financial help in her statement, she seems to consider the marriage as a favor that is *extended* from the basis of material support.

It is to be admitted that the term *li* can connote material — as in *sung-li* 送禮, *li-wu* 禮物, etc. But it must be noted that, within *li* as an ideological system, material was supposed to be valued on the primary basis of its capacity to symbolically confirm the propriety and norm which the system set forth. Once the commodity value of material was established as a precondition for other aspects of *li* — such as rite, the material would be alienated from the system.

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[9] Feng Meng-lung, pp. 51-52.
[10] Feng Meng-lung, p. 61.

Moreover, in this story, the ancient seems to be invoked by the satirical use of personal names in the story.

Hu Shih-ying pointed out that there had been, among other sources, a *ch'uan-ch'i* 傳奇 titled *Ch'ai Ch'uan Chi* 釵釧記 that told a story similar to CCSCG, "only the characters' names were different."[11] But Hanan has identified the primary source of the main story to be "Ch'en An-yüan Mai Pu Chuan Tsang".[12] The characters' names in this source — the Ch'en An-yüan story — are the same as those in the main story, but CCSCG constitutes a much elaborated version of the source story. For one thing, as a story presumably meant more to be read in privacy than orally narrated to an audience, the source story lacks a prologue story. There is, in addition, no mention of P'ei Tu and Ch'ien Yü-lien in the Ch'en An-yüan story. The elaborations found in CCSCG, as I now argue, can be suggestive of both its author's recognition of the sarcasm implied by the characters' names in the source story and his intention to deepen the sarcasm by adding a historical dimension to it. Now let us first look at what some of the characters' names in CCSCG as well as the Ch'en An-yüan story may imply. Then I will explore the possible significance in the elaborations that the author of CCSCG made on the basis of the source story.

In both stories, the name of Lu Hsüeh-tseng 魯學曾 can be reminiscent of Tseng-tzu 曾子, a disciple of Confucius and a native of the state of Lu 魯. Tseng-tzu has been, as is generally known, traditionally ascribed to the authorship of the Confucian classic, *The Book of Filial Piety* (i.e. the *Hsiao Ching* 孝經). Also, as discussed above, the affairs in the main story largely

[11] Hu Shih-ying, p. 541.
[12] See Footnote 2.

center round Lu Hsüeh-tseng. This can also remind us that Tseng-tzu is, similarly, one of the central figures in the *Li Chi* 禮記 (i.e. *The Book of Rites*).

As another character in CCSCG, T'ien-shi is said to be, like her father, of chivalrous bend of mind. Since her family name is T'ien 田, it will inevitably remind those who are familiar with Chinese culture that, of all the historic figures throughout the entire Chinese history, Lord Meng-ch'ang 孟嘗君 of the Warring States period is the best known for his chivalry. And this lord's surname was none other than T'ien 田.

If personal names do carry such significance, then the plot can be even more satirical than it seems. To practice *li* (i.e. the wedding ceremony), for example, Lu Hsüeh-tseng, a Tseng-tzu figure, had no choice but borrow from Liang Shang-pin 梁尚賓 for attires. Liang Shang-pin, as a personal name, puns on *liang shang pin* 樑上賓, meaning "a guest on the beam," and by extension, a *liang shang chun-tzu* 樑上君子, which in turn means "a gentleman on the beam." It is a common Chinese euphemism for "thief." Finally, as mentioned above, the ultimate function that a Tseng-tzu figure (Lu Hsüeh-tseng) and T'ien the Chivalrous (T'ien-shih) jointly performed was to help "carry on the name" of such a snob as Inspector Ku. All this seems to indicate that personal names were assigned at random in neither CCSCG nor the Ch'en An-yüan story.[13]

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[13] Symbolic use of names in Chinese literature can be arguably traced back to the allegories in the *Chuang-tzu*, where one can encounter characters named Hun-tun 渾沌 (in the chapter of "Ying Ti Wang" 應帝王), Chih知, Wu-shih 無始, Wu-yu 無有, Wu-wei 無為, and Wu Wei-wei 無為謂 (in the chapter of "Chih Pei Yu" 知北遊). Given the fundamental differences between ancient allegories and vernacular short stories, what the characters' names in the allegories connotes, as is the case in CCSCG we discuss here, contributes to casting light on the course of actions that the characters take.

Then one may find that the elaborations on the part of CCSCG function to deepen the sarcasm in the Ch'en An-yüan story in more ways than one. As noted earlier, by introducing P'ei Tu (T'ang dynasty), Ch'ien Yü-lien (Sung dynasty), and Chin Hsiao (Yüan dynasty) into the story, the author of CCSCG added a historical dimension to the social criticism and presented the social corruption of his time as the last and worst phase in a gradational social degradation. This social corruption, needless to recall, has been partially implied through the afore-mentioned artful use of personal names.

If, in both CCSCG and the Ch'en An-yüan story, the name Lu Hsüeh-tseng is reminiscent of Tseng-tzu, the disciple of Confucius who is often said to have authored the *Hsiao Ching*, then it may not have been incidental that, in the prologue story of CCSCG, a counterpart of Lu Hsüeh-tseng was added with the name of Chin Hsiao 金孝.[14] Note that many mid-southern Chinese dialects lack a distinction between "*ching*" 經 and "*chin*" 金 in pronunciation.[15] Noticeably in this added personal name, the *chin* — literally meaning gold or commodity currency — is placed before the *hsiao*, a character that means filial piety.

Another added detail in CCSCG is an interesting false excuse that Censor Chen made up. In both the Chen An-yüan story and CCSCG, Censor Chen approached the suspect under the disguise of a merchant in his investigation of the case. But, in CCSCG alone, the merchant that the censor disguised himself

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[14] There are no personal names mentioned in the archetype of the prologue story (Hu Shih-ying, p. 540). One is thus justified to think that the name Chin Hsiao was conceived and given by the author of CCSCG.

[15] In fact, 20th-century scholar Fan Wen-lan 范文瀾 suggested that the character *ching* 經 sometimes functioned as a loaned graph in place of the character *chin* 金 in some Chinese classics (e.g. the *Kuo-yü* 國語). See Fan, *Wen-hsin Tiao-lung Chu* 文心雕龍注 (Pei-ching: Jen-min wen-hsüeh ch'u pan she, 1962), p. 24.

into was one who needed to hurry back home for his father's burial ceremony. Such ceremony was, as a matter of course, another major occasion in the Chinese society to practice *li*. But the fake merchant's freedom to depart for the ceremony was solely dependent upon his success in a transaction of commodity. "I won't be free to go," says the fake merchant, "if I sell at retail. If only a rich man will come along and buy all this stuff wholesale, I'll give him a good price."[16] Hence a link of contingency is once more established between *li* — which is now a matter of one's filial piety — and commodity. Given that this was all made up by Censor Ch'en (the fake merchant), what is of exceeding significance is that this false excuse for his delay in performing his duty in filial piety made perfect sense to all the bystanders who were listening to him. There was not even one bystander who accused this "merchant" of according priority to his business over his filial piety. Absolutely no one who was listening to the "merchant" urged him to disregard his business for the sake of *li*. The author of CCSCG, presumably, wished to show that what had been inconceivable in the "golden times" of the ancient era had unfortunately become the reality in the time of the story.[17] It is said in the chapter "the Conveyance of Rites" (禮運) in the *Book of Rites* that the catastrophes of a state, a family, or an individual would, of all certainty, begin

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[16] Feng Meng-lung, p. 69.

[17] Although there is such a phrase in the first chapter of the *Book of Rites* that "[the application of] *li* is not to be extended down to the commoners" 禮不下庶人, the priority of filial piety was nonetheless required of all members of a society. Besides, my English translation here is merely based on one common interpretation of the phrase. What the phrase exactly means is still open to further discussion and debate. Ts'ai Shu-heng 蔡樞衡, for instance, takes the verb *hsia* 下 to mean "to reduce" and thereby suggests that the phrase be interpreted as "*li* should not be applied to commoners in any reduced terms." (Cf. Ts'ai. *Chung-kuo Hsing-fa Shih* 中國刑法史. Pei-ching: Chung-kuo fa-chih chu-pan she, 2005, p. 180)

with the relinquishment of the *li* (“故壞國、喪家、亡人，必先去其禮。”). In examing this added detail from this perspective, we may detect the storyteller’s pessimism about his generation.

Additionally, the Ch’en An-yüan story does not specify what kind of clothe Lu Hsüeh-tseng had to borrow from Liang Shang-pin. But, according to CCSCG, what Lu borrowed from Liang was a *tao-p’ao* 道袍, meaning a gown. A twisted but literal interpretation of this Chinese word can be “the (exterior) attire of the Tao,” with “Tao” meaning “the Sage’s Way.”

With all the above taken into consideration, one has reason to suspect that the author of CCSCG had taken note of the satirical nature in the personal names in the Ch’en An-yüan story and thus made effort to deepen the social criticism. Hanan is certainly right in his observation that the Chen An-yüan story is, “for all its ingenuity, a crude piece, an imaginative scenario that had to be developed into a literary work.”[18] The task of turning the crude piece into a work of art is well accomplished in CCSCG.

## CONCLUSION

This study has discussed the social degradation and *li* as depicted in CCSCG. As I argued in the above, the story was meant to convey its author’s pessimism about the society where he found himself. It is perhaps worth noting that such social criticism is directed to the society of his time, but not to *li*. This can be seen in his portrayal of P’ei Tu and Lu Hsüeh-tseng.

As a well-educated gentleman, P’ei Tu had indubitably undergone strict training in *li*. According to the legend about him, P’ei was rewarded with good retribution. Similarly, Lu Hsüeh-tseng, a scholar and the protagonist in

[18] Hanan, 1981, p. 108.

CCSCG, also ended up in a happy marriage.

As we have discussed, the author's pessimism is insinuated through a chronological social degradation that he presents in the story. The degradation is distinctly traceable in a chronologically well ordered sequence of events that are narrated and cited. P'ei Tu's story, set in the Tang dynasty, is clear of negative characters. The stories of Ch'ien Yü-lien and Chin Hsiao, set respectively in the Sung dynasty and Yüan dynasty, [19] begin to have villains in them. But the harm that those villains do stopped short of seducing an innocent woman and causing her death, which are crimes to be committed by the villain in the main story in the Ming dynasty. Hanan once noted that the function of a prologue "is to direct the reader's attention to a particular angle of interpretation."[20] The angle or point of view to which we, as readers of CCSCG, are directed is a critical and pessimistic one, where history is perceived and presented as a process of social degradation. The author's effort to direct our attention to this angle is attempted in a parallel that he presents between the prologue story and the main story. In such a parallel, we encounter first Lady Chin's citation of P'ei Tu's legend in the prologue story and then Ah Hsiu's mention of Ch'ien Yü-lien in the main story. The author's adoption of the symbolic use of personal names functions to present the condition of *li* in his time as — by comparison with the said previous dynasties — something that reached by far the most ridiculous and corrupted stage of development in history

If "the historian is not so much a collector of facts as a collector and

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[19] According to the story of Ch'ien Yü-lien in *Ching Chai Chi*, Ch'ien was married to Wang Shih-p'eng 王十朋 (1112-1171 A.D.), a real person in the Sung dynasty.

[20] Hanan, 1981, p. 23.

relater of signifiers" (Barthes 18),[21] then perhaps still less would be a writer of literature. In narrative literature, however, the meanings and lessons are hardly as often articulated as they are presented through plots, character developments, and ways in which stories are related. In CCSCG, the story of Lu Hsüeh-tseng and Ah Hsiu alone seemingly depicts a world in which there is still more or less justice to speak of in retribution. But the story teller's invocation of the legends in three successive earlier dynasties evidently provides the audience with an opportunity to compare the degrees of both the justness in the retributions and the moral values in the societies which the main story and those legends individually represent. It goes without saying that same opportunity has been provided for us to also compare the different ways in which the legends and stories are presented. As one may find through such comparisons, the *presented* gradational difference in the degrees of social justness and people's integrity through the dynasties, insinuates the story teller's pessimistic view about social history.

[21] Barthes, Roland. "The Discourse of History." Trans. Stephen Bann. *Comparative Criticism* 3 (1981): 7-20.