**ABSTRACT**

Court-case fiction or *kung-an* fiction (公案小说), differing from Western detective and crime fiction but appealing to the same emotions, has long been popular in China. The late Ming period (1573-1628) saw the flourish of Chinese court-case fiction and one of the richest collections of these court-case stories is found in the famous Ming anthology, *San Yan* (三言), compiled by Feng Menglong (冯梦龙). Although court-case stories constitute one quarter of the hundred and twenty stories in the compilation, which are by far the second most numerous type of stories in the anthology (the first type being love stories), they have received very little critical attention. Hence, the aim of this thesis is to provide a critical analysis of the thirty-two court-case stories found in *San Yan*.

First, a general survey of the thirty-two court-case stories is provided, including close examinations on the characteristics of these stories, the nature of the crimes and their reflections on the Song, Yuan and Ming societies. Next, the intricate relationship among the various types of characters in the stories and the roles they played are discussed. Last, the basic narrative structure of the stories — the commission, solution, and the punishment of a crime — is exemplified and the narrative techniques used are explored in depth, helping to unveil the treatment of the theme of crime and punishment in the tradition of Chinese literature.

The study clearly reveals the ideal underlying these stories: (that is,) to eradicate social ills and crimes of the society through education of the masses. This can be seen by the authors' emphasis at the ending of every story that the bad will eventually be punished and the good, rewarded.