Abstract

The Late Ming period of imperial China saw the birth of a distinctive genre of Chinese vernacular fiction (xiaoshuo) whose theme revolved around crime, punishment, lawsuits and justice called ‘courtcase fiction’ (gongan xiaoshuo). The earliest known collection, the Baijia Gongan, first published in the year 1594 (the 22nd Year of Emperor Wanli’s reign) is the focus of this dissertation.

The focus of my thesis is upon two key elements common in these courtcase stories – the elements of spectacle and violence. To be specific, this paper aims to examine the latent connotations of the excessive display of spectacle and violence in Late Ming courtcase fiction.

It asserts that such a phenomena is fundamentally related to the yearn for a Utopian world of legal justice, in which both social justice as well as ‘Heavenly Justice’ exist and prevail. It also contends that the author, through the amplification of the elements of spectacle and violence in the stories, was attempting to instil some of his moral and legal values in his readers. One such legal value is his supportiveness for the use of spectacle and violence as a political means to control the people.

This thesis hopes to be of some contribution to enhance future studies on other literary works of courtcase fiction in the Late Ming era.