

Notes on The Colloquial Stories of The Ming Dynasty

—The Short Stories: The “Three *Yen's*” (1)—

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In this paper the author attempts to illustrate the various modes of woman life in the “Three *Yen's*”, which are the collections of colloquial short stories in the Ming Dynasty, classifying the stories into five groups, especially with set phrases or proverbs as a clue.

Under the old regime of China as the Confucian ethics ruled over, the most superlative virtue that woman had to maintain was “chastity”. Also woman was compelled to obey “the virtue of three dependences” —dependent upon her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and finally her son after the death of her husband, and it was regulated that woman could not have her own house and prosperity as a rule. Therefore, woman should have to observe those virtues to provide for banishment from the house.

1) The first group shows, it is the highest virtue for woman that “the woman once had her husband, although her father holds the right of choice, should be little interested in other men throughout her life.” However, as those women in this group are created just as incarnations of virtue, we find in them unreality to intend explicitly to educate people through stories.

2) It is noticeable in the second group that “woman desires to live a peaceful home life.” The prostitute was eager for marriage, for she did not have a home for peaceful living. She, therefore, exerted herself to be a wife in marriage, devoting her pure affection on the man, and consequently her chastity which was originally not the attribute of the prostitute is emphasized.

Here, the author examines general forms of marriage in the stories,

in accordance with the classification of marriage of the prostitute in one story.

3) In this groupe, a side of womanhood as "woman is unfaithful in love" is taken up in opposition to the first group. Particularly the illicit intercourses of wives of common families are described and that gives, though unconsciously, an account of the inhumane side of the virtue. Nevertheless, the story-tellers thought that those immoral conducts were caused by predistination. They did not have nerves to describe openly the sex of the womanhood, in particular such the restrained sex as the wife of merchant had when her husband was gone from home for a long time.

4) In the next group, the proverb, "the conjugal ties only lasts for one life," shows the resignation of man from the other side of the conjugal relationship. This depends upon the idea which as "husband and wife have been enemies to each other since five hundred years ago", they can do nothing but accepting this fate.

5) Finally, this group has the proverb, "the woman of ability surpasses man." Here, we notice the woman who exceled man with poetical genius, the prostitute who confuted a procuress and ran to her lover, the girl who at last avenged for the murder of her whole families despite of being sold from one brothel to another, the wife who assisted her husband to success, and so forth.

On these accounts the story-tellers seem to have arranged contrary proverbs as such with intent to grasp the extensive woman life, but we can evidently observe the process that the Confucian ethics as a premise, particularly the superiority of parental authority, declined gradually, and on the other hand the woman with economic power became independent and the girl who persisted in her own opinion against her parents appeared.