



DIGITAL HUMANITIES APPROACHES TO TRADITIONAL CHINESE STORY COLLECTIONS

Lisa Richardson (Prof. Margaret Wan)

Department of World Languages and Cultures

In the past, much of the study of Chinese narrative literature has focused on a very small sample of novels – usually those that were best known. This project’s aim is to broaden the scope of fiction studied. In order to accomplish this, Digital Humanities approaches were explored. Making data abstract allows for easier visualization and facilitates the study of patterns, rather than of details alone.

Ōtsuka Hidetaka’s A Bibliography of Chinese Popular Fiction was used to create a database which serves as the basis of all other work in this project, along with the other references cited below. In order to fully test some possible digital tools, six collections of Chinese vernacular short stories were chosen from this database for analysis. One in particular, Strange Views Old and New (Jīngǔ qíguān 今古奇觀) was of particular interest, as it seems to be one of the most popular works of vernacular fiction in Ming-Qing China, having 55 printed editions in total. For the purpose of analysis, information from the database was used to create graphs, and the text of these collections were run through “The Late Imperial Primer Literacy Sieve”. This tool allows for Chinese texts to be run against chosen primers, showing the percentage of unique characters that the subject would be able to read had they studied those primers. Supposing that the popularity of Jingu qiguan could be due to accessibility by wider audiences of readers, we chose the most basic primers- The Three-character classic (Sān zì jīng 三字經), Hundred family names (Bǎi jiā xìng 百家姓), and Thousand-character essay (Qiān zì wén 千字文) - in order to analyze of the relative accessibility of each collection of vernacular fiction.

A comparison of aggregate collections against chosen primers, the cross section representing the accessibility of the texts (on the left) if the subject had studied the primers (on the top).

	三 字 經	都	百 家 姓	千 字 文	數 字 方 向
警世通言	11	31	10	21	0
拍案驚奇	11	31	10	22	0
古今小說	11	32	10	22	0
一切今古奇觀	11	31	10	21	0
醒世恆言	11	30	9	21	0
二刻拍案驚奇	11	31	9	22	0

A complete view of output generated by the literacy sieve.

On the bottom left is a visual representation of the stats on the right, the reddened and blacked out characters being the ones unknown to a subject who had studied the selected primers.

The screenshot shows a web interface for analyzing primers. On the left, there are buttons to 'show' or 'exclude' various primers: 三字經, 都, 百家姓, 千字文, and 数字方向. Below this is a 'STILES' section with a 'hide' button and a large block of text where certain characters are highlighted in red and black. On the right, there is a table with columns for '三字經', '百家姓', and '千字文', and a '数字方向' column. The table lists 44 different primers with their respective counts in each column.

	三字經	百家姓	千字文	数字方向
第五卷呂大郎還金完骨肉	27	54	15	42
今古奇觀第三卷陳御史巧勘金銀錘	23	50	14	39
第四十一卷錢秀才錯占鳳凰窩	24	51	15	39
第十一卷惡船家計賺假屍銀狼僕人誤投真命狀	24	52	15	40
第七十一卷三郎五歲朝天	22	49	15	39
今古奇觀第四卷喬太守亂點鴛鴦譜	24	51	15	40
第三十八卷占家財狠賭妒侄延親服孝女藏兒	28	55	16	44
第三十五卷徐老僕義憤成家	25	52	14	40
第十七卷錢秀才一朝交泰	26	55	17	43
第二十二卷錢多處白丁橫帶運遇時刺史富筋	24	52	16	40
第十四卷趙縣君喬送黃相吳宣教乾涸白銀	21	47	13	37
第三十三卷詩妙術丹容提金	24	52	15	41
第七十九卷崔俊臣巧會芙蓉屏	24	54	15	42
今古奇觀第十七卷蔣與哥重會珍珠衫	21	47	13	37
第十八卷老門生三世報恩	28	58	18	44
第三十九卷蔡小姐忍辱報仇	23	50	14	38
第六十一卷唐解元玩世出奇	28	57	15	46
第六十五卷女秀才移花接木	23	51	15	40
今古奇觀第二十卷金玉奴棒打薄情郎	27	57	16	45
第四十三卷王嬌鸞百年長恨	24	53	15	41

Through the use of these digital tools, it was found that the accessibility of the texts tended towards an association with the time-period in which the story was written, the most accessible stories being those that were written in the middle period (ca. 1450-1550). However, the stories that were anthologized in the *Jingu qiguan* story collection were almost entirely late-period stories – those which our analysis showed were the least accessible of all the periods. The popularity of *Jingu qiguan* does not seem to be due to greater accessibility by a wider audience, so other explanations must be found. This brings to light some interesting questions and possible patterns relating to the process of anthologizing or transmitting of fiction, which may aid understanding of the history of the Chinese vernacular story.

References

- Brokaw, Cynthia. *Commerce in Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007.
- Burdick, Anne, et al. *Digital Humanities*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012.
- Hanan, Patrick. *The Chinese Vernacular Story*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, England:

- Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Hegel, Robert. *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998, pp. 63-65.
- Idema, Wilt. (1980). Reviewed Work: *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China* by Evelyn Sakakida Rawski. *T'oung Pao*, 66(4/5), second series, 314-324. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4528215>
- Moretti, Franco. *Atlas of the European Novel*. New York and London: Verso, 1998.
- _____. *Graphs, Maps, and Trees*. New York and London: Verso, 2007.
- Ōtsuka Hidetaka 大塚秀高. *Zōho Chūgoku tsūzoku shōsetsushomoku 增補中國通俗小説書目* [A Bibliography of Chinese Popular Fiction, Expanded Edition]. Tokyo: Kyūkoshoin, 1987.
- Schneewind, S., et al. (2013). The Late Imperial Primer Literacy Sieve. [online] Ctext.org. Available at: <https://ctext.org/tools/literacy-sieve> [Accessed 7 Apr. 2019].

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the University of Utah Office of Undergraduate Research.