

The Development of the Ming Literary Society through the Organization of Literary Communities

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This paper attempts to explore the social activities inspired by literature, especially the poetry, in order to examine the formation and development of the Ming literary society. We first examine literary activities from the view points of socio-cultural history, exploring in what form literary activities were performed to inspire the corresponding development of social relationships and thus to construct different literary groups. Secondly, through literary activity forms, we hope to explore the formation of literary groups and the evolution of “literary society” in the history.

This is a socio-cultural study, of which the emphasis lies not on the evaluation of literature’s inner beauty but its social meanings. With literature as a media of social relationships, we therefore explore the social activities inspired by literature and examine the development of culture.

The Ming literary activities were once going still at the early stage, and activated again in Chiangnan till the Chingtai-Chenghua period. Literary groups during that period were a gathering mainly of wealthy gentlemen, which could be called “a aficionados gathering.” These recreational activities can be defined as the operation of esthetic living with a certain reclusiveness and coziness. The literary society they performed was full of qualities of wealth and elegance. It can be explained as a “noble society” without a wide social basis, isolated from the general society. Shen Zhou, listed in Yin-I Biography in Ming History, is the representative of this literature, and Wu Kuan is the main character to bring it to Beijing.

While Wu Kuan promoted the recreational literary activities from Chiangnan to Beijing, Li Dongyang directed a literary group other than that. Under the imperial examination system, He took elites from the imperial examination system as disciples at Hanlin Yuan and specifically cultivated them upon a literary standard set up for them to bring forth their self-identity consciousness. A realistic literature denomination was therefore established. As a result, he developed a literary group certainly with specific philosophy and identification, in which people were not just literary aficionados but comrades. This mainstream literary group during Hongzhi period was a literary denomination encored with elites chosen from the imperial examination system, embodied with scholar-bureaucrats, and gathered by the ethics of the students and the faculty in the imperial examination system. The emerging of Chaling school during Hongzhi period had started the Warring States of the Ming Literature. The literary society had stepped out the time of elegance and recreation into that of competitions between schools.

Li Mengyang had started the first war between the literary denominations. As a rebellion, he called out other literates against the Taiko literary style of Chaling school. He broke through its elite spirit from imperial examination system, gathering complex literary group members across the

capital regional limit and the hierarchy of the scholar-bureaucrats, and opened up a wider social level for literary society. Accordingly, the literary population in the mid-Ming society has gradually increased as well, especially that of those who refused the imperial examination. They joined the literary society and aggressively explored literary social activities with the intention to reconstruct personal meanings and values of life through literature. They brought strong intention into the literary society, which alienated literature from imperial examination. Stage by stage, the literary society, divorcing from the imperial system, tended towards a self-produced value. This social tendency provided Wang Shizhen the social basis to construct the “kingdom of literature.”

The literary type invented by Li Mengyang was up to its highest level when Wang Shizhen led the literary society. He broke through limited boundaries of the literary society and put it on the basis of unlimited general society. With a set of literature standard and through the publishing propagation, he integrated national literary groups, deep into basic literates; moreover, he adroitly adjusted the core group of the literature. Consequentially, a kingdom of literature covering over the country was established by his continuous evaluation and the expanding acceptance of literates. And even more, through his integration, the valuing system of literary society was firmly asserted with the result that lots of its members were able to self-identify to settle down and get on with his pursuit in the kingdom. Though the standard has caused disagreement, sarcasm and even some with the intention to substitute the kingdom, the social attribute and cultural meaning of the literary society he has created outside the imperial examination system were almost firm and unmoved. Hereafter, literates of Gong'an and Jingling schools disputed on the comments and denominations normally in this form and scale.

With the development of product economics and the abundance of city life, the literary society established by Wang Shizhen and stand-alone from the imperial examination system became more and more thriving at the later stage of Ming. Beside the participation of literates failed on the imperial examination to enrich its content, many merchants purposely associated with the literates after the economic dominance. As a result, the merchants enriched their lives by literature while the literates took the profits by the merchants with their accomplishments. Also, that provided the literary society a stronger social basis. And further, the development of the publishing put it on an even stronger system for a sustained development. Aside from the hard work on creations by single talents, the development of the whole literary situation in the society was as well the key causes influencing the development of Ming literature. This paper concerns about and makes an initial attempt to explore how the form and content interact to inspire the development of the culture.