Vernacular Story in and as Archives:
(Re)Making Xingshi yan Stories in Early Modern China and Korea

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Abstract

This article examines the literary texts both as records transmitted through archives and as cultural sites recording preferred knowledge. It focuses on the late Ming (1368-1644) Chinese vernacular short story anthology Xingshi yan 型世言 (Exemplary Words for the World, ca. 1632)—only extant copy preserved in the Kyujanggak Archives in South Korea—and its Chosŏn (1392-1910) rendition in Korean alphabet, Hyŏngse ŏn, in the Jangseogak Archives. Xingshi yan, taking seriously the Chinese vernacular literature’s claim of being “unofficial history,” provides its own historical narrative of the Ming at the end of the Ming dynasty when it was threatened by the Manchus. Recording the notable Ming figures and affairs, this anthology creates a literary archive furnishing materials for the Ming history. In addition, this article points out the significance of the Kyujanggak Xingshi yan in solving the ambiguous textual origins of several Chinese vernacular story anthologies that were previously associated to the famous Second Amazement. Eventually, it traces the trajectory of how Xingshi yan was preserved in the Korean royal archives, appreciated by the royal family members, and how its stories were rendered into Korean alphabet for the cultural and literary preferences as well as intended audience of Chosŏn. The making and remaking of Xingshi yan stories in both China and Korea, this article argues, illuminate the varied knowledge preferences and selections in the forming of the two cultures’ respective literary archives.
Key Words: Xingshi yan, archives, vernacular literature, knowledge transmission, unofficial history