Introduction

Reading for the Moral

Be filial to your parents.
Be respectful to your elders.
Live in harmony with your neighbors.
Instruct your sons and grandsons.
Be content with your calling.
Do no evil.

孝順父母, 尊敬長上, 和睦鄉里, 教訓子孫, 各安生理, 毋作非為。

—Ming Taizu, *Sacred Edict in Six Maxims*[1]

Perhaps there is no better way to begin a book about morality and its representation in late Ming vernacular stories than by taking a look at the moral exhortations attributed to its founder, known as the *Sacred Edict in Six Maxims* (*Shengyu liuyu* 聖諭六語). What is striking in Zhu Yuanzhang's bare-bones formulation of Confucian ideology is the emphasis on the hortatory injunctions, or the "do's," rather than the cautionary directive, the lone "don't" in the last maxim.[2] It is no exaggeration to say that many vernacular stories—a best-selling genre of China's long seventeenth century that is most readily associated with popular didacticism—may be read as so many commentaries on the last cautionary maxim, rather than elaborations on the hortatory instructions that precede it. Whereas the last maxim is at once bland and darkly ominous in its refusal to spell out what exactly constitutes evil (*fei wei* 非為), the vernacular stories often thrive in exploring and staging precisely that. What we read about in so many of Feng Menglong's (1574–1645) and Ling Mengchu's (1580–1644) stories are the endlessly intriguing or banal ways in which men and women *do* evil and are consequently punished for it—or, more rarely, find their redemption.

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In the modern age, the explicit moral message in these stories has often been dismissed as a perfunctory homage to a rather vague notion of "conventional morality," while the real focus and energy of the narration is supposedly located elsewhere: in the bold exploration of human desire, the frank depiction of sex, or the lurid details of crime stories. Literary critics tend to be fascinated with what they see as subversion rather than order, with transgression rather than conformity. Readers naturally find the colorful villains or the flawed heroes more interesting than the perfectly virtuous but perfectly boring heroes or heroines in didactic stories.[3]

The focus on the darker side of human action and psyche also fits well with what has been the modern dominant narrative of the late Ming, a narrative that has tended to depict it as a period characterized by subjectivity, individualism, and libertarianism.[4] As the narrative goes, starting from the sixteenth century, under the influence of Wang Yangming (1472–1528), scholars and writers began to move away from the dominant Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism, which emphasized the accumulation of knowledge and rigid observance of rites and principles, and began to shift toward more individualized approaches to self-cultivation. Wang Yangming's followers, particularly the members of the radical Taizhou school, continued to elaborate and popularize ideas of innate goodness, spontaneous intuition, and genuine expression. Li Zhi (1527–1602) vocally defended the legitimacy of desire and even the pursuit of individual profit. This had profound reverberations in the realm of literature and the arts. In the words of F. W. Mote, during the last century and a half of the Ming dynasty, "expressionism took form in the new poetry and literary essay; eroticism found a place in expression; trends towards abstraction appeared in the graphic arts; social freedoms were championed in radical thought; humor and pathos filled the new dramatic literature of human feelings; and a broadly ironic rhetoric marked the profoundly imaginative reworking of popular themes in the great works of Ming fiction."[5]

For all its merits, this narrative has drawn disproportionate attention toward selected figures and currents (Tang Xianzu, the Taizhou school, the "cult of feelings," etc.), which have been seen as representative of the entire late Ming period. In the literary arena, scholarly attention has been focused on the representations of human feelings, subjectivity, irony, and subversion in fiction and drama, while the undeniable didacticism of many literary works produced in this period has failed to generate a comparable amount of scholarly discussion.[6]

This book focuses on a group of vernacular stories that, by their very nature, complicate the dominant narrative of the late Ming I have just described. The last two decades of the Ming, in particular, saw

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the publication of a strain of story collections intensely concerned with Confucian moral exempla. Other similarly oriented collections appeared in the aftermath of the Qing conquest. While these collections include a fair number of cautionary tales, they often focus on examples of positive morality, thus reverting our attention toward the first five hortatory maxims in the *Sacred Edict*. The primary texts discussed in this study are *Exemplary Words for the World* (*Xingshi yan* 型世言, 1632) and *Bell in the Still Night* (*Qingye zhong* 清夜鐘, c. 1645), attributed to the Hangzhou brothers Lu Renlong 陸人龍 (fl. first half of seventeenth century) and Lu Yunlong 陸雲龍 (1587–1666),[7] but shared source materials and concerns are also found in *West Lake Stories, Second Collection* (*Xihu erji* 西湖二集, pre-1644) by Zhou Ji 周楫, *Stories of Figures from the Seventy-Two Domains* (*Qishi'er chao renwu yanyi* 七十二朝人物演義, c. 1640), and *Sobering Stone* (*Zuixing shi* 醉醒石) compiled by Gukuangsheng 古狂生 in the early Qing. After Patrick Hanan's seminal article on this group of story collections, which he termed "fiction of moral duty," little scholarly attention has been given to this corpus.[8] While a measure of explicit moral illustration has long been recognized as one of the staple features of the mature vernacular story as codified in Feng Menglong's enormously successful *San Yan* (Three Words), scholars have rarely probed deeply into the ethical dimension of these stories.

The concept of "self-containment" and the struggle between abandon and temperance, which Keith McMahon has singled out as fundamental to the ideological fabric of seventeenth-century fiction in an early study, do not seem to adequately explain the dynamics at work in stories of moral exemplars, particularly those in which the very morality of the hero or heroine is displayed through *excess* and out-of-the-ordinary feats.[9] Timothy Wong's claim that morality is spectacularized for the sake of entertainment is likewise not entirely convincing, in that it tends to trivialize the kind of "superhuman morality" embodied in the stories as ludicrous.[10] Shuhui Yang has grappled with the apparent ideological inconsistencies found in the *San Yan* stories, by arguing that the degree of reliability of Feng's storyteller-narrator is predicated on "the nature of the moral message" he intends to impart to the reader in a given story.[11] Yang seems to assume that the storyteller's voice represents "conventional morality," while Feng's subtle manipulations of that voice may in turn confirm, problematize, or outright subvert the explicit message. Yet it is unclear to what extent Feng's celebrated friendship stories, for instance, where Yang finds a perfect alignment between the conventional storyteller's voice and Feng's own views, represent "conventional morality," a concept that remains elusive and undefined.[12] More recently, Tina Lu has offered

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penetrating and provocative analyses of a number of vernacular stories, including tales of filial "cannibalism" and tales that dramatize situations in which the five relations are terribly at odds with one another, but her work does not directly or systematically address morality per se.[13]

In contrast with these earlier approaches, this study brings morality into sharper focus, by arguing that the idea of "conventional morality" itself needs to be more rigorously unpacked and historicized. In the remainder of the introduction I will present the provenance of the stories under discussion in this book. I will then examine the key concepts that make up the Confucian moral universe as reflected in the stories: the Five Cardinal Relationships, the concept of retribution (*bao* 報) and its interplay with notions of virtue, the rhetoric of exemplarity, and the spectrum of positions regarding the role of nature vs. nurture in the shaping of the moral hero or heroine. I will also address the crucial role of the commentarial tradition in articulating the ideal readership and envisioning the social function of these narratives.

The Provenance of the Stories

The stories discussed in this book are primarily drawn from two collections, *Exemplary Words for the World* and *Bell in the Still Night*. Both collections have been attributed to the Lu brothers Renlong and Yunlong, although the attribution is more uncertain in the case of *Bell in the Still Night*. Readers interested in a more detailed discussion of the authorship and editions of these texts are referred to the appendix.

Exemplary Words includes forty stories. It is a carefully arranged and organic *collection* of stories. Whereas Western scholarship on the European novella tradition has historically paid much attention to the organization of story collections as *books*—perhaps not surprisingly considering the enormous influence of the *Decameron* and its elaborate architecture at the macro-textual level—it is only in recent times that the organizing principles of Chinese story collections have been studied. One reason may be the absence of a tradition of frame stories and similar devices, with the notable exception of the early Qing collection *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor* (*Doupeng xianhua* 豆棚閑話). Shuhui Yang has shown how paired stories in *San Yan* often mirror or contrast with each other in significant ways.[14] The pairing device as a structuring principle also operates in *Exemplary Words* stories. For example, Story 3 tells of a filial man who swaps his foolish wife to ransom his mother, while Story 4 is about a filial girl who slices her flesh to save her grandmother. Story 5 tells of a righteous man who kills a lecherous adulteress who happens

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to be his own lover, while Story 6 portrays a chaste young widow who is driven to commit suicide by the machinations of her corrupt mother-in-law. Further, Stories 4 and 6 are based on historical records, while Stories 3 and 5 are adapted from fictional sources. Clearly these stories have been carefully arranged as pairs and they mirror one another on multiple levels: the gender of the main character, the main virtue illustrated in the story, the fictionality or historicity of the characters and events.

What makes *Exemplary Words* especially appealing for this study is that morality functions as an organizing principle. The collection appears to be neatly organized into two distinct halves. The first twenty stories are devoted to positive examples of moral behavior, while the latter twenty consist mostly of cautionary tales of the kind more commonly found in the *San Yan* and *Er Pai* collections. The last three stories deal with the supernatural, in the form of fox spirits, dragons and oysters, and a gibbon in a vain quest for immortality. The moral impulse is still present in the second half—one could chart the stories as tales of upright officials (*qingguan* 清官), skilled generals (*liangjiang* 良將), and the like—but in these stories the focus is not so much on the exemplarity of the good characters, but rather on the twists and turns of the plot. This book focuses on the stories from the first half.

Bell in the Still Night was published sometime during the Longwu reign (1645–1646) of the short-lived Southern Ming.[15] With the original edition including sixteen stories, it is much more modest in scope than *Exemplary Words*. Like the latter, *Bell in the Still Night* is a thematically organic collection of stories, with a prevalence of stories on loyal ministers. However, the stories do not have an individual preface, nor do they have the abundance of marginal and final commentaries that characterize *Exemplary Words*. The final commentary is limited to a line or two. Some scholars believe that the author of the final commentaries is Lu Renlong, although there is no definitive consensus.[16]

The Lu brothers, whose names are connected in the capacity of compiler and commentator to both *Exemplary Words* and *Bell in the Still Night*, were active in the world of commercial publishing during the last two decades of the Ming. Lu Yunlong, the elder brother, is the better known of the two. Like many others of his generation, he had attempted to pass the civil service examinations several times, without success. He later founded his own publishing house in Qiantang (modern-day Hangzhou), called Zhengxiaoguan 崢霄館 (Lodge of Lofty Clouds), which specialized in poetry and prose anthologies and works of fiction. The output of Zhengxiaoguan appears to have been comparatively modest, but it includes titles such as *Informal Essays by Sixteen Eminent Authors of the August Ming* (*Huang Ming shiliu mingjia xiaopin* 皇明十六名家小品), a

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best-selling anthology of *xiaopin* (informal essays, or vignettes) by Ming authors, which continues to be widely available, in modern editions, to the present day.

Lu Yunlong's activity as editor, or, more precisely, *pingxuan jia* 評選家 "specialist in producing anthologies with commentary," is noteworthy. Virtually all the books published by Zhengxiaoguan bear his substantial interventions, in the form of prefaces and commentaries. This body of comments provides material that allows us to reconstruct Lu Yunlong's literary sensibility and, more broadly, his cultural allegiances in the turbulent decades preceding the fall of the Ming.[17] Lu Yunlong is also attributed the authorship of *The Story of Wei Zhongxian: A Book of Indictment* (*Wei Zhongxian xiaoshuo chijian shu* 魏忠賢小說斥奸書, 1628), one of the many works written during that period that have been categorized as "instant fiction," or more literally "fiction on current events" (*shishi xiaoshuo* 時事小說).[18] Indeed, Lu Yunlong's activity as both author and editor/publisher bespeaks a clear commitment to contemporary times, ranging from a celebration of the literary giants of the mid and late Ming in his best-selling collection of *xiaopin* (informal essays), to a harsh indictment of the eunuch faction, visible not only in the novel on the notorious Wei Zhongxian but also in the letters and essays included in his *Recent Words by Cuiyuge* (*Cuiyuge Jinyan* 翠娛閣近言) (Cuiyuge, or Hall of Azure Entertainment, was one of Lu Yunlong's sobriquets). Lu Yunlong's stance seems to have been sympathetic to the Donglin party, a loosely organized association of scholar-officials who opposed the eunuch faction and advocated a kind of puritanical Confucianism. He also professed to be a great admirer of the Yuan brothers' Gong'an school, which advocated spontaneity and individual sensibility in poetry.

We have but scant information on Lu Renlong, the younger brother and the compiler of *Exemplary Words*. In 1630 his forty-chapter novel *A Record of Fervent Loyalty in the Liaodong Peninsula* (*Liaohai danzhong lu* 遼海丹忠錄) was published by Zhengxiaoguan, followed in 1632 by *Exemplary Words*. The novel, a piece of "fiction on current events," tells the story of the controversial late Ming general Mao Wenlong 毛文龍 (1576–1629) and his military exploits against Nurhaci (Qing Taizu, 1559–1626) in the Liaodong region.[19] In the novel, Mao is portrayed as a faultless patriot heinously murdered by Yuan Chonghuan 袁崇煥 (1584–1630), although the story ends on a note of hope as Mao's legacy is taken up by his successors. It is conceivable that Lu Renlong's fascination with Mao Wenlong may be partly derived from the fact that Mao also hailed from Hangzhou. Lu Renlong, as mentioned above, was also involved for a number of years in his brother's editorial activity. However, there is a complete silence around Lu Renlong after the year 1635 in the available sources.

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Lu Minshu's biography of his father Lu Yunlong alludes to some kind of disagreement among the brothers, after which Lu Renlong withdrew from the publishing house.[20]

Prefaces and Commentaries: Staging the Ideal Readership

Literary analysis that focuses on morality is inevitably concerned with the issue of readers' response—whether actual (rare) or implied. In this sense, the tradition of fiction commentaries, while subject to its own generic conventions, offers precious material for analysis. Among mid-seventeenth-century story collections, *Exemplary Words* is remarkable for its rich and varied paratextual apparatus; but all the story collections discussed in this book have at least one kind of commentary (eyebrow commentaries, which run on the upper register of the page atop the main text, were typical of late Ming editions, while brief tail commentaries seem to be preferred in wartime and early Qing editions).[21] Prefaces and commentaries frequently provide insight into how the actions of contemporary or near-contemporary characters were linked with paradigmatic examples, how specific choices and traits were appraised from a moral standpoint, and what kind of moral lessons readers were supposed to extrapolate from the texts. In this sense, these texts are packaged in a way that not only anticipates but actually stages the enactment of their desired social function.

As noted earlier, the Lu brothers worked as a team in crafting *Exemplary Words*. Lu Renlong was responsible for redacting the text of each story, while Lu Yunlong contributed prefaces and commentaries. Lu Renlong's act of compilation is designated through a variety of terms: *yan* 演 or *yanyi* 演義 (spin out; expound the meaning), *ji* 輯 (compile), *zhuan* 撰 (compose), and *bian* 編 (edit). These terms point to varying degrees of re-elaboration of pre-existing source materials. As for Lu Yunlong, he contributed the prefaces, final commentaries, and in all likelihood, the marginal or "eyebrow" commentaries beneath the variety of pseudonyms under which they appear.[22] Individual story prefaces—an unusual feature among story collections of the time—are clearly separated from the texts of the stories and printed in a variety of calligraphic styles (fig. I.1.1–I.2.2). The commentators' pseudonyms, such as Staunch Man from Yanguan (Yanguan mujiangren 鹽官木強人) in Story 1 (fig. I.3.1), the Hero among Women from Qinhuai (Qinhuai nüzhong zhangfu 秦淮女中丈夫) in Story 6, or the Old Lady who Understands Poetry from Wulin (Wulin jieshi ao 武林解詩媼) in Story 10, are clearly linked with the story content and establish the commentators as model readers who stand in a metonymical relationship with the story.

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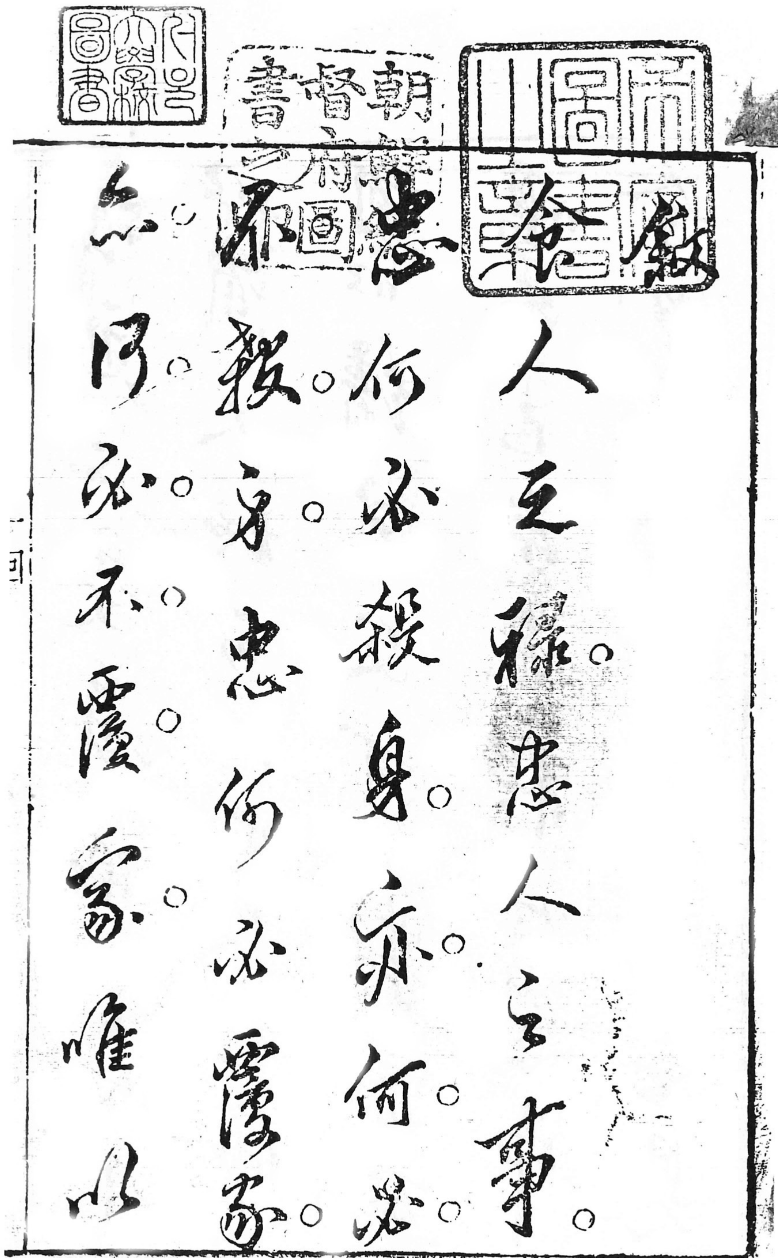

敘

人之祿。忠人之事。忠何必殺身。亦何必不殺身。忠何必覆家。亦何必不覆家。唯以

Figure I.1.1. Page 1 (recto) from Lu Yunlong's preface to the first story in *Exemplary Words*, printed in calligraphic script. Kyujanggak edition. Reproduction courtesy of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica.

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Figure I.1.2. Page 1 (verso) from Lu Yunlong's preface to the first story in *Exemplary Words*, printed in calligraphic script. Kyujanggak edition. Reproduction courtesy of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica.

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Figure I.2.1. Page 2 (recto) from Lu Yunlong's preface to the first story in *Exemplary Words*, printed in calligraphic script. Kyujanggak edition. Reproduction courtesy of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica.

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Figure I.2.2. Page 2 (verso) from Lu Yunlong's preface to the first story in *Exemplary Words*, printed in calligraphic script. Kyujanggak edition. Reproduction courtesy of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica.

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崢霄館評定通俗演義型世言卷之一

錢塘陸人龍君翼甫演

鹽官木强人　評

第一回

烈士不背君　貞女不辱父

不兢嘆南風。徒抒捧日功。

堅心誠似鉄。浩氣欲成虹。

令譽千年在。家聞一夕空。

九嶷遺二女　雙袖濕啼紅。

型世言　第一回

Figure I.3.1. First page of the first story in *Exemplary Words*. Kyujanggak edition. Reproduction courtesy of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica.

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Scholars have argued that the arrangement of the stories in the collection may also be due to Lu Yunlong.[23] The division of labor is interesting in that the stories themselves are practically devoid of narratorial asides, simulated dialogue with the audience, and the usual formal features of vernacular stories. The narrator's comments are usually confined to the introduction and conclusion of the story. As a result, much of the explicit evaluative comment rests on the commentators' shoulders. This study will pay special attention to the dynamics between these different voices and levels, and their interpretive claims toward the narrative.

Because the copy of *Exemplary Words* rediscovered by Chan Hing-ho at the Kyujanggak Library is missing the first fascicle (*ce*), which must have included one or more prefaces to the collection as a whole, we can only speculate on the kind of rhetorical pronouncements the compiler and/or commentator would have offered there. We can, however, turn to the preface of *Illusion* (*Huanying* 幻影), an anthology that appropriated thirty stories from *Exemplary Words*. The preface is signed by a Mengjue daoren 夢覺道人 (The person of the Way awakened from dreams) and dated 1643.[24]

> After closing the gate, and having nothing better to do, I picked up some tattered volumes, and got hold of one or two unofficial histories. Just as I was about to fall prey to boredom, I chanced upon [these stories], which are for the most part about loyalty, filial piety, chivalrous behavior, and heroism. In the midst there are also a few cases of greed and depravity, treachery and evildoing. Observing how people endure contempt and bear humiliation, until the true circumstances are finally revealed, is sufficient to stir people to a profound awakening. In general, the moral principles governing the bonds between ruler and subject, husband and wife, elder and younger brothers, and between friends should be recognized as true (*zhen* 真), whereas the accidents of high and low status, failure and success, and the cardinal vices of wine, lust, money, and anger, ought to be regarded as illusory (*huan* 幻). One moment is all hustle and bustle, the next turns to emptiness—only shadows of all sorts of good and evil deeds are left behind. These have been widely circulated among the people, until an aficionado has elaborated them [into vernacular stories]. Future generations will be filled with reverence for the noble deeds or moved with indignation at the ugliness and perversity [portrayed in these stories]. Amazing and surprising, are these not all

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extraordinary cases? Today, I have especially selected a few of the most outstanding among these stories to be printed, and this is not without significance.

A guest paid a visit and reproached me thus: “This country is currently troubled by so many calamities—if we are not plagued by drought and flooding, then we have to suffer from conflicts and wars. So why don’t you draw up a plan to revive [those who are languishing in] ditches and gullies, or perform a meritorious deed to reconstitute our defeated army, instead of vainly babbling about popular tales and unofficial histories and busying yourself with inessential tasks?”

I could not help but sigh as I replied, “Not only do you not know me, but you also do not know what it really means to serve the country! The disorder in the country originates entirely from the fact that people cling ignobly to their life and pursue personal profit, turn their back on king and kin, and flout the principles of virtue and rightness. So in the end it all comes to this grand illusion. Was there ever an army that, not being plagued by internecine strife, failed to fight against enemies on the outside? Today everyone thinks that the army ought to stop [fighting], so that there would be relief from violence and famine. Yet, in the end, they cannot be of any help. Isn’t it sad! But since *they* are completely useless, why should they be vexed with *my* babbling? My own plan consists in using this book to bring remedy. If people read it, they will be able to follow the principles, rectify their feelings, and awaken to the truth. They will realize that ruler and father, teacher and friend, each have their own prescribed place, and that wealth and honor, profit and success, each have their greater principle. Therefore, although my narration of past people is at times based upon hearsay, if my stories can edify the crowds, I will truly have fulfilled my innermost desire. Who can say that this is of no use to the world?”

掩關無事, 簡點廢帙, 得一二野史。煩倦之頃, 偶抽閱之, 多忠孝俠烈之事。間有貪淫奸宄數條, 觀[其含垢][25]蒙恥, 敗露情狀, 亦足發人深醒。總之君臣、父子、夫婦、兄弟、朋友之理道, 宜認得真; 貴賤、窮達、酒色財氣之情景, 須看得幻。當場熱哄, 瞬息成虛, 止留一善善惡惡影子, 為世人所喧傳, 好事者之敷演。後世或因芳躅而敬之, 或因醜戾而憤之。驚驚愕愕, 奇乎不奇乎? 今特撮其最奇者數條授梓, 非無謂也。

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> 客有過而責余曰:「方今四海多故, 非苦旱潦, 即罹干戈, 何不畫一策以蘇溝壑, 建一功以全覆軍, 而徒嘵嘵于稗官野史, 作不急之務耶?」予不覺嘆曰:「子非特不知余, 並不知天下事者也！天下之亂, 皆從貪生好利, 背君親, 負德義所至, 變幻如此。焉有兵不訌于內, 而刃不横于外者乎? 今人孰不以為師旅當息, 凶荒宜拯, 究不得一濟焉。悲夫！既無所濟, 又何煩余之饒舌也? 余策在以此救之, 使人睹之, 可以理順, 可以正情, 可以悟真; 覺君父師友自有定分, 富貴利達自有大義。今者敘說古人, 雖屬影響, 以之喻俗, 實獲我心, 孰謂無補于世哉?」[26]

The manner in which Mengjue daoren promotes the stories in *Illusion* stands in striking contrast with Feng Menglong's well-known defense of the vernacular story articulated in his preface to *Stories Old and New* (*Gujin xiaoshuo* 古今小說, aka *Yushi mingyan* 喻世明言, 1620), the first installment of the *San Yan*. Feng was primarily preoccupied with defending the vernacular story from the classical tale, and proving its worth alongside canonical genres of literature represented by the classics and histories. "Fiction rises when orthodox historiography is on the wane" 史統散而小說興, he famously wrote.[27] Feng Menglong's apology for the act of collecting, redacting, and reading vernacular tales was thus mostly *literary*. Mengjue daoren, on the other hand, defends the legitimacy of vernacular stories not in literary terms, but rather vis-à-vis public service. The compilation of these stories for print is here defended not against other literary pursuits, but rather against social action and concrete endeavors for the benefit of the country—a country which, as the disapproving fictional guest quoted in the preface says, is plagued by unruly armies, drought, flood, and famine, and thus urgently in need of concrete action. Mengjue daoren argues that the moral benefit provided by his stories is more far-reaching than any concrete plans to repair the dams or provide famine relief. While it is not uncommon to find gestures toward the general moral malaise of the time in many story collection prefaces, the preface of *Illusion* is remarkably forceful in its detailed articulation of the country's troubles.

The preface of *Illusion* is by no means unique, though, in emphasizing the ideal social function of vernacular stories, and popular fiction in general. The prefaces of *San Yan*, when read in chronological succession, exhibit a progressive emphasis on moral instruction. The prefaces of *Common Words to Warn the World* (*Jingshi tongyan*, 1624) and *Constant Words to Awaken the World* (*Xingshi hengyan*, 1627) explicitly frame the vernacular stories as uniquely powerful carriers of moral messages—powerful because stories, by means of their accessible language and memorable plots, can

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move the audience in ways that classics and histories cannot. But much energy in the preface of *Common Words* is still directed toward carefully clearing the literary terrain, so to speak, and exonerating fiction from its potential charges of moral dubiousness—moral dubiousness because fiction deals with events or characters that are false (*yan* 贗). The moral purport of the collection itself is at one point phrased in negative terms: "if there is no offense against decency, no deviation from the teaching of the sages and worthies, and no breach of the morals taught by the classics and histories such as the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of Documents*, why should these [works of fiction] be discarded?" 不害于風化, 不謬于聖賢, 不戾于詩書經史。若此者, 其可廢乎?[28] When it is articulated in positive terms, the moral purport seems to comprise a rather catholic range of ideals, from virile, physical courage to the Mencian spirit of compassion elicited at the sight of a child about to fall in the well, as mentioned in the preface of *Constant Words*. In a broad analogy, Buddhism and Taoism are also cavalierly co-opted and presented as complementary to Confucianism.[29]

The preface of *Illusion*, on the other hand, takes the reader squarely into the world of scholastic Confucianism. Twice are the Five Relationships mentioned, at the beginning and at the end of the piece, and they are presented as the core moral message. Intriguingly, the focus is on the moral and social duty of the superior member in the relationship (father, ruler, teacher), which can perhaps be read as a need to reassert the role of authority figures. In the author's words, not only can literature instruct the masses, it can literally save the world.

Prefaces are self-serving, highly wrought endorsement pieces typically written (or presented as if they were written) by someone other than the author or compiler. The preface of *Illusion* clearly reflects the aims of the editor, whoever he was. Even if all the stories in this anthology are lifted from *Exemplary Words*, they have been radically rearranged, the titular couplets rewritten (with few exceptions) and the individual story prefaces and eyebrow commentaries omitted.[30] In reducing the number of stories from forty to thirty-four, the editor privileged cautionary stories from the second half of *Exemplary Words*, while omitting some of the most striking exemplary tales found in the first half, such as the story of the filial granddaughter Chen Miaozhen who cuts her liver to save her grandmother (*XSY* 4), that of Wang Yuan who travels in search of his father (*XSY* 9), and the story of the young widow who commits suicide with her mother's acquiescence (*XSY* 10). In so doing, the editor reshaped the collection to be more in line with the preference for cautionary examples shown in widely popular collections such as Ling Mengchu's *Two Slaps*.

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The tone of the preface of *Bell in the Still Night*, signed by a Weiyuan zhuren 薇園主人 (Master of the Fern Garden; believed to be Lu Yunlong), is considerably more somber than that of *Illusion*. The author describes his contemporaries as constantly bustling about like "ants swarming on rankish meat," a self-deluded mass wallowing in mental and moral confusion. If the preface of *Illusion* took the dichotomous pair truth (*zhen* 真) and illusion (*huan* 幻) as its main trope, the preface of *Bell in the Still Night* turns to the concept of dream (*meng* 夢) and awakening (*xing* 醒) as its central metaphor, which is then developed into the image of "clapper" (*duo* 鐸) and "bell" (*ling* 鈴)—as well as the eponymous alarm bell (*zhong* 鐘)—as tools for "waking up" the befuddled audience and bringing them back to their senses. The audience is envisioned as "the masses" (*da zhong* 大眾), and the social function of fiction is to serve as a tool of moral enlightenment that will awaken the readers to "loyalty and filiality," "sagehood and wisdom."[31]

The Debate on the Five Cardinal Relationships

The Five Cardinal Relationships (*wu lun* 五倫)—the bonds between father and son, ruler and subject, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and friends—not only constitute the way in which interpersonal relations were understood, but represent the very means through which moral cultivation was performed in traditional Confucian ethics. With each bond is associated a "cardinal virtue," namely, filial piety, loyalty, chastity, brotherly deference, and trustworthy friendship. While it is certainly true that these bonds and their concomitant virtues were continuously invoked throughout imperial Chinese history, contributing to sense of unchanging and stagnant society, it is important to keep in mind that their precise nature, scope, and ranking were far from immutable since the time of their earliest formulations in the *Mencius* and the *Record of Rites* (*Liji*). As Tu Wei-ming has noted, in their original formulation the five relationships were understood as fundamentally reciprocal.[32] One can trace a general evolution toward an increasingly absolutistic understanding of the five bonds and a de-emphasis on the reciprocal, however asymmetrical, obligations pertaining to each (with the exception of friendship).

The five relationships were usually not theorized as discrete relationships, but rather seen as part of an integrated, harmonious whole, where each bond ideally mirrored the others. This homologous or "parallel conception of society," to use Norman Kutcher's phrase, was generally

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recognized at all levels of society.[33] Yet plays and novels often poignantly dramatize situations where bonds are at odds with one another, for example in the conflict between brotherhood and political loyalty in *The Three Kingdoms*, or between filial piety and conjugal fidelity in *Injustice to Dou E*. In contrast, Ming didactic plays such as *Wulun quan bei* 伍倫全備 (*Five Relationships Perfected and Completed*), showing a perfect fulfillment of all five bonds, were traditionally dismissed as pedantic and lackluster works.[34]

The late Ming represented an important moment in the evolution of the discourse on the cardinal relationships. If many compilations reaffirmed the traditional sequence (ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, friends),[35] some writers began to question and reorder that sequence. In particular, the husband-wife and the friendship relations were given primacy by different authors—or sometimes by the same author in different writings.

The writer who most famously emphasized the husband-wife relation is perhaps Li Zhi, the *enfant maudit* of late Ming philosophy. In his *First Collection by the Pond* (*Chutan ji* 初潭集, 1588), a collection of anecdotes modeled after Liu Yiqing's *New Accounts of the Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語),[36] Li Zhi organized the entries according to the five relationships. But instead of following the conventional order, Li adopted a radically re-organized sequence that started with husband and wife and ended with ruler and subject. He explained his reason in the prefaces and in the general introductory essay, titled "On Husband and Wife" (Fufu zonglun 夫婦總論, 1588).[37] Quoting from the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing*), Li Zhi writes:

> Husband and wife are the beginning of human relations.[38] It is only after there are husband and wife that father and son can exist. It is only after there are father and son that elder and younger brother can exist. It is only after there are older and younger brother that hierarchical distinctions can exist. Once [the relationship between] husband and wife is correctly established, none among the ten thousand events and ten thousand things will fail to be correctly established. In this way the relationship between husband and wife is the beginning of all things.
>
> 夫婦, 人之始也。有夫婦然後有父子, 有父子然後有兄弟, 有兄弟然後有上下。夫婦正, 然後萬事萬物無不出於正矣。夫婦之為物始也如此。[39]

He also argues that the husband-wife relation is the key to the correct understanding of the Five Constant Norms (*wuchang* 五常):

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> I say that only if [one understands] the husband and wife relation can he understand the Five Constant Norms. If the Five Constant Norms are discarded, how could there be an alternative foundation for speech and conversation, affairs of the state, and letters and scholarship?
>
> 言夫婦則五常可知, 豈有舍五常而別有言語政事文學乎?[40]

The notion that the relation between husband and wife ought to take pride of place among human relations is also often found in fictional narratives, classical and vernacular.[41] It figures importantly in the work of Feng Menglong. In the second preface to *History of Love* (*Qingshi* 情史, ca. 1628–1630), an anthology of classical language tales selected and organized around the topic of love or feelings (*qing*), the compiler affirms the primacy of the husband-wife relation by citing evidence from the full spectrum of the classics.

> The teachings in the Six Classics are all founded on feelings [*qing*]: the *Changes* esteem the relationship between husband and wife; the *Odes* opens with the poem "Ospreys"; the *Documents* begins with a passage on the wedding of Yu; the *Rites* pays close attention to the distinction between union completed through engagement or elopement; the *Spring and Autumns* offers a detailed discussion of the marital relations between the Ji and Jiang clans (i.e., between Qi and Lu). Is this not because, since feelings begin with the relation between man and woman, everyone must first start from here, and the Sages must therefore also lead through feelings?
>
> Is this not also the reason why the Sages have led through feelings, so that they would not fall into neglect, and therefore they flow abundantly in the relations between lord and minister, father and son, elder and younger brother, and friends?
>
> 六經皆以情教也。《易》尊夫婦, 《詩》有《關雎》, 《書》序嬪虞之文, 《禮》謹聘、奔之別, 《春秋》於姬、姜之際詳然言之。豈非以情始於男女, 凡民之所必開者, 聖人亦因而導之, 俾勿作於涼, 於是流注於君臣、父子、兄弟、朋友之間而汪然有餘乎！[42]

The primacy of the conjugal bond is likewise illustrated in many of Feng's celebrated *San Yan* stories.[43]

Li Zhi was also a great proponent of the importance of friendship.[44] Although he placed the "Husband and Wife" section at the beginning of

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First Collection, over a third of the book is dedicated to the "Teacher and friend" (*shiyou* 師友) section. Gu Dashao 顧大韶 (1576–?), who edited Li Zhi's writings in a monumental collection, also wrote in no ambiguous terms about the centrality of the friendship bond. Gu Dashao argued that the bond between friends is superior even to that between father and son.[45] According to Gu, friendship should be considered "the mainstay of human relations" 朋友者, 五倫之綱也, and as "a bond that transcends the five relations and completes them" 我所謂朋友, 謂其超五倫者也, 謂其成五倫者.[46] The most hallowed figures of antiquity who are traditionally considered as paragons of the first four bonds (such as Yao and Shun, King Wen and his consorts, the Duke of Zhou) are recast by Gu as supreme examples of friendship. Thus Yao and Shun, King Wen and the Duke of Zhou, King Wen and his virtuous consort are not just paragons of the ruler-minister relation, father-son relation, and husband-wife relation respectively, but rather should be regarded as exemplary friends.[47] By rereading the whole history of Chinese civilization under the lens of friendship, Gu Dashao is in fact advancing a view of friendship as the central axis of moral cultivation, a role traditionally played by filial piety.

How is the debate on the nature and ranking of the five social bonds reflected in the stories that are the object of this study? In many ways, stories in *Exemplary Words* and other collections may be read as a traditionalist reaction against some of the more radical pronouncements in the essays by Li Zhi, Gu Dashao, and others, but also against some of the more daring *San Yan* stories. There is hardly space in their moral universe for a fallen-then-redeemed heroine like Wang Sanqiao in "The Pearl-Sewn Shirt" (*YSMY* 1),[48] or for the kind of moral acrobatics of Zhang Tingxiu (*XSHY* 20), who accumulates as many as three fathers and somehow manages to be filial to all three of them. Loyalty and filial piety loom large in the first half of *Exemplary Words* and in *Bell in the Still Night*. Friendship is exalted and celebrated in Stories 13 and 14 of *Exemplary Words*, for example; but it is carefully reconciled with or subordinated to family duties. One of the stories included in the post-Conquest collection *Sobering Stone*, quoting a passage from the *Record of Rites*, draws a fundamental distinction between the duties of subject toward ruler and son toward parent on one hand, and the obligations toward a lesser kin or a friend on the other. While the former are seen as absolute and unconditional, admitting no exception, the latter are presented as if they should be based upon careful deliberation and exercise of discernment—lest one fall into ridicule, or worse.[49]

The redactors and commentators of vernacular stories seek to bridge the gap between universal principles and particular narratives,

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