TENSION AND TRAUMA IN *IDLE TALK UNDER THE BEAN ARBOR*

by

LINDSEY WALDROP

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

June 2017

DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

Student: Lindsey Waldrop

Title: Tension and Trauma in *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*

This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures by:

Maram Epstein	Chairperson
Wang Yugen	Core Member
Roy Chan	Core Member
Michael Allan	Institutional Representative

and

Scott L. Pratt	Dean of the Graduate School

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

Degree awarded June 2017

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Lindsey Waldrop

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures

June 2017

Title: Tension and Trauma in *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*

As a genre, the *huaben* 話本 short story reassured readers of a Heaven who punished and rewarded human actions with perfect accuracy. Yet in the years before the Ming 明 (1368-1644) collapse, the genre grew increasingly dark. Aina Jushi wrote *Doupeng xianhua* 豆棚閒話, or *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor* (c. 1668), only a few years after the Manchus solidified their rule. The only full-frame story in pre-modern Chinese literature, the text is also notable for the directness with which it confronts societal and cosmological questions arising from the fall of the Ming dynasty. It was also the last significant *huaben* before the genre faded into obsolescence.

My dissertation asks three questions. Why was this the last major collection of the genre? How do the form and the content work together? And what does Aina contribute to the Qing cosmological questioning through a genre obsessed with an ordered cosmos? I argue that the text deserves further study because of the beautiful complexity of its narrative structure and voices and its direct confrontation of the fall of the Ming. I also argue that Aina questions if there really is a moral Heaven that rewards and punishes human action and if there is any greater significance to virtuous action. His doubts about

the presence of a moral Heaven increase as the text progresses but he is unwilling to completely discard Confucian relational ethics. This is shown by his loosening of the requirements of the *huaben* structure. The narratives become more incoherent and the content generally grows darker. By the final narrative, Aina drops the *huaben* form and presents an apathetic cosmos directly to the primary diegetic audience. The resulting cognitive dissonance causes the bean arbor to collapse and the audience to disperse. Aina offers us no moral certitude or clear didacticism.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Lindsey Waldrop

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene
Yale Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, New Haven
Southwestern University, Georgetown

DEGREES AWARDED:

Doctor of Philosophy, East Asian Languages and Literatures, 2017, University of Oregon
Master of Arts, East Asian Studies, 2011, Yale Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Bachelor of Arts, Chinese, 2010, Southwestern University

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Late Imperial Chinese Short Stories
Genre and Narrative Structure
Late Imperial Chinese Fiction

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Upper School Chinese Teacher, Pine Crest School, August 2016-Present

Graduate Teaching Fellow, University of Oregon, September 2011-June 2016

Chinese Bilingual Residential Assistant, Middlebury Interactive Languages, June-July 2012

PUBLICATIONS:

Waldrop, Lindsey, trans. "In Death, Commander Dang Beheads his Enemy." In *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor: A Seventeenth-Century Chinese Story Collection*, edited by Robert E. Hegel, 170-86. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express sincere appreciation to Professors Wang Yugen, Roy Chan, and Michael Allan for their support and ideas while I was writing this dissertation. Special thanks are due to my advisor Professor Maram Epstein for her tough love, inspiration, and careful reading of too many drafts. I am very deeply grateful for the support of my friends, family, and the community at Emerald Community Fellowship who celebrated with me in the joyful times and lovingly encouraged me in the worst moments of dissertation despair.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

Chapter Page

Chapter Page

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor (*Doupeng xianhua* 豆棚閒話, hereafter *Idle Talk*), a collection of twelve sessions of stories, was written sometime in the 1660s, or early 1670s at the latest.[1] The author, known only by his pen name Aina Jushi 艾衲居士, was probably a Hangzhou writer of fiction and drama during the Ming 明 (1368-1644) /Qing 清 (1644-1911) transition. His name was likely Wang Mengji 王夢吉, though we know little to nothing about his life or activities. Before *Idle Talk* came out, another text, a revision of *The Complete Account of Crazy Ji* (*Jigong quanzhuan* 濟公全傳 c. 1668) was published, under almost the same pen name and the same commentator, "The Purple-Bearded Crazy Stranger" (*ziran kuangke* 紫髯狂客), as appears in *Idle Talk.*[2] These are likely the only extant works that Aina Jushi wrote. After the publication of *Idle Talk*, three of the stories were converted to plays, which called for a bean arbor to be built on the stage.[3] The text was also reprinted fairly frequently throughout the eighteenth,

[1] I use the word "session" here to represent each narrated meeting under the bean arbor, which correlates to the chapter number, in order to eliminate confusion between dissertation and text chapters and to match the terminology used by the translation mentioned below. Patrick Hanan dates the text to around 1668, "Aina," in *The Chinese Vernacular Story* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1981), 191. Robert Hegel, however, has offered a date of around 1660 based on the illustrations and other fragments. "Gossip and Exaggeration" in *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor, A Seventeenth-Century Chinese Story Collection*, ed. Robert E. Hegel (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 26-27.

[2] Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 191.

[3] The plays are still extant and call for a bean arbor to be constructed on stage. Hanan asserts that they are less ambiguous and more overtly moralizing than their *Idle Talk* counterparts. See Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 191.

nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, suggesting that the text maintained some level of popularity long after it was written.[4] Indeed, many sentences from the preface are copied almost exactly into the preface of an 1805 printing of *Honglou xumeng* 紅樓續夢, a sequel to *A Dream of the Red Chamber (Honglou meng* 紅樓夢).[5]

Idle Talk is unique amongst its *huaben* (話本 short story collection) peers in many ways: it is the first example of a true frame story in all of known late imperial Chinese literature; it is the only text of its time in which the audience is individualized;[6] the text rewrites old stories in new ways, a predecessor to Lu Xun's *Old Stories Retold* (*gushi xinbian* 故事新編 1936; Lu Xun 魯迅 1881-1936);[7] and, perhaps most

[4] The earliest extant version we have is from 1780. Fifteen to twenty years later, the Qing writer and artist Zeng Yandong (曾衍東 1751-1827) published a text called *Little Bean Arbor* (*xiao doupeng* 小豆棚), which seems to indicate some familiarity with the text of *Idle Talk*. In the introduction to the text, Zeng is preoccupied by the concept of *xian* (閒 leisure), a concept that is valued and elaborated upon in *Idle Talk*. (For an example of this, see the background narrator's discussion of *xian* in the fifth chapter). Though Zeng Yandong's included stories are more in the style of Pu Songling's (蒲松龄 1640-1715) *Liaozhai zhiyi* (聊齋志異, *Strange Tales from Liaozhai Studio*), the title does not indicate its influence, nor does Zeng mention anything that would bring that text directly to mind. As a result, it seems likely that though both texts were an influence on Zeng's writing, not only was *Idle Talk* still in circulation but was also read with and against the more famous collection by Pu Songling.

Little Bean Arbor was published again in 1880, and that edition contains a preface by the editor in which he mentions having a copy of *Idle Talk* in his home and notes his appreciation for the text's originality. He continues to note that his knowledge of *Idle Talk* is what piqued his interest in *Little Bean Arbor* (小豆棚) which he calls "*Xiao doupeng xianhua*" (小豆棚閒話 *Little Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*), asserting a belief in a relation between the texts. He then compares the two texts, emphasizing the advantages of *Little Bean Arbor*. *Idle Talk* seems, then, to still have enjoyed popularity and circulation more than two hundred years after it was written, making it perhaps a more valuable text for our consideration than has previously been acknowledged.

[5] Hegel, *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*, 27.

[6] Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 192-93.

[7] For example, they both rewrite the story of Boyi and Shuqi.

significantly, the text engages rather directly with the fall of the Ming dynasty, a relatively rare phenomenon.[8] Indeed, because *Idle Talk* was written in the 1660s or early 1670s, within a decade of the final collapse of the "Southern Ming," and because it is so narrowly focused on the end of the Ming, it should be read as literature of the transition, of the type that would fit well in scholarly anthologies.[9] Yet Western scholars have given the work remarkably little attention, at least until very recently.

Literature Review

To date, the most thorough discussion of *Idle Talk* in English is the final chapter of Patrick Hanan's book *The Chinese Vernacular Story* (1981), which summarizes the key characteristics and plots of the text, notes the abruptness and ambiguity of *Idle Talk*'s ending, and discusses Aina's experimentation with a new style of *huaben.*[10] Though very useful overall, Hanan's chapter makes one point that is especially meaningful. He argues that for Aina,

> His gaze is fixed on the larger, philosophical issues of the nature of historical causation . . . The reason for his anguished concern—it appears indirectly from his fiction—was the Manchu invasion and occupation of China. Under the shock of this inexplicable event, his fiction questions the very basis of belief in a morally determined universe. His concern is with the way men should conduct themselves in the new situation—not merely

[8] Tina Lu notes that many *huaben* of this time period seem to almost pretend as if nothing had happened. See *Accidental Incest, Filial Cannibalism, and Other Peculiar Encounters in Late Imperial Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 72.

[9] One example of a transition anthology with no discussion of *Idle Talk* is *Trauma and Transcendence in Early Qing Literature*. See Wilt L. Idema, Wai-yee Li, and Ellen Widmer, eds., *Trauma and Transcendence in Early Qing Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2006). The "Southern Ming" refers to the transition period between the fall of Beijing in 1644, and the final defeat of Ming loyalist armies in 1662. See Lynn A. Struve, *The Southern Ming, 1644-1662* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

[10] The abruptness of this ending will be explored in more detail in the conclusion.

> whether they should accept or oppose, join or stand aloof, but how they can adjust their minds to a new perception of cosmic order.[11]

Hanan implies that *Idle Talk* has lost a basic concern for the entertainment and didactic function of the *huaben* genre in the wake of its new context. Instead, it focuses solely on how to exist in this new cosmic order. Hanan's assertion is, in many ways, the foundation of my project. I agree that Aina's fiction "questions the very basis of belief in a morally determined universe."

My work builds upon Hanan's foundation by closely analyzing six of the stories to explore how Aina uses the form of the *huaben* to explore cosmic moral order. I do not believe that Aina completely rejects or accepts any specific notion of greater order, nor that he is an agnostic. Instead, I suggest that the inconsistent visions of moral order presented in the text work to show Aina's own personal struggle with the cosmological crises stemming from the Ming fall. Aina, I suggest, poses the question, can the genre of *huaben* offer survivors of the Ming fall any successful way of coming to terms with the horrific violence that accompanied the transition? And if greater cosmological forces are uncertain or unpredictable, how can we come to terms with the relative importance of secular relational ethics such as filial piety (*xiao* 孝), chastity (*jie* 節), or state loyalty (*zhong* 忠)? Though *huaben* generally reassure readers of perfect karmic balance and order, Aina, in the aftermath of the Ming/Qing transition and the increasing loss of belief

[11] Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 195.

in correlative cosmology, is unable or unwilling to connect with a form that stands for perfect order and correspondence between action and meaning.[12]

Yenna Wu and Keith McMahon have also written about *Idle Talk.* The second chapter of Wu's book *The Lioness Roars: Shrew Stories from Late Imperial China* provided the only full translation in English of any of the stories until this year, and her *The Chinese Virago: A Literary Theme* ties Aina's rewriting of the wife of Jie Zhitui into the Chinese literary theme of shrews. More significantly, her two articles on the work, "The Debunking of Historical Heroes in *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*" (1992) and "The Bean Arbor Frame: Actual and Figural" (1995), offer useful insights on, respectively, the satirical rewriting of historical figures in the Boyi and Shuqi story of session seven and the complex layers of narration in the unique frame story of the text.[13] Keith McMahon also briefly notes the presence of a frame story and what he considers to be the ironic detachment of the text. For McMahon, *Idle Talk* is an embodiment of the decline of the *huaben* genre after the fall of the Ming, though he gives only a very limited

[12] Scientific developments in the late Ming and early Qing and the shock of the Ming/Qing transition resulted in a general skepticism toward and loss of belief in correlative cosmology among late imperial Chinese thinkers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See John B. Henderson, "Early Ch'ing Scholars and the Seventeenth-Century Intellectual Transition," in *The Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 149-76.

[13] Yenna Wu. *The Lioness Roars: Shrew Stories from Late Imperial China* (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1995) and *The Chinese Virago: A Literary Theme* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1995). Yenna Wu, "The Debunking of Historical Heroes in "*Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor.*" *Selected Papers in Asian Studies* (Western Conference of the Association for Asian Studies) 43 (1992): 1-27. Yenna Wu, "The Bean Arbor Frame: Actual and Figural" *Journal of Chinese Language Teachers Association* 30.2 (1995): 1-32.

discussion of the text before hastening to finish his final chapter in *Causality and Containment*.[14]

Most recently, Robert Hegel has offered an overview of Aina and the collection in his introduction to the collaborative complete translation of the text, titled *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor, A Seventeenth-Century Chinese Story Collection.*[15] His introduction mainly restates and elaborates upon Hanan's previous description, but he does make some interesting new observations about the tension of humor and sardonic narrative in the stories.[16] He also points out the later misunderstanding of the final story and its inclusion in Du Halde's *General History of China*, which was highly influential in eighteenth-century Europe.[17] Hegel claims that the final session (and even the text as a whole) calls "into question the entire orthodox neo-Confucian (*lixue* 理學) intellectual project" and also claims that the stories are predominantly about the ability of social and political power to corrupt any person and the way that a few self-interested individuals can make the lives of others miserable.[18] For Hegel, "Aina seems utterly disaffected with the dominant political ideology and with Confucian personal ethics as well."[19] While I agree with Hegel about Aina's general skepticism, I point out in my dissertation that Aina

[14] Keith McMahon, *Causality and Containment in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Fiction* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1988), 143.

[15] Robert E. Hegel, *Idle Talk*,, 10-30.

[16] Ibid., 22.

[17] Ibid., 27-28.

[18] Ibid., 17, 18, and 24.

[19] Ibid., 24.

hesitates more in his questioning of Confucian ethics than seems apparent at first reading. Aina is certainly pessimistic, so much so in fact that he is hesitant to completely disregard traditional ethics because he is not sure with what to replace them.

Otherwise, *Idle Talk* has felt like an academic elephant in the room. McMahon and Hanan both considered it an important enough text with which to end their books, and many other scholars of Ming/Qing literature have noted its unique qualities. In *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China,* Robert Hegel notes the more creative and allusive set of illustrations in the text,[20] and in *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary,* David Rolston makes note of the high level of individualization of audience characters[21] as well as the commentator's written visualizations of Aina Jushi writing *Idle Talk*.[22] Finally, Tina Lu describes *Idle Talk* as striking for its lack of narratives of separated families, noting that such tragedy was probably too much of a reality for writers like Aina in the wake of the Qing conquest.[23]

There has also been a comparatively small amount of Chinese scholarship on the text. Zhao Jingshen 赵景深 (1902-1985) was one of the first to mention *Idle Talk* as an

[20] Robert E. Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 206. A copy of the image is provided on 210. Hegel is the only scholar I know of who mentions the illustrations.

[21] David L. Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary: Reading and Writing between the Lines* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 308 note 87.

[22] Ibid., 122 note 54.

[23] Tina Lu, *Accidental Incest,* 72.

important work of fiction early on in her *Xiaoshuo luncong.*[24] Similarly, Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898-1958) discussed the work briefly, suggesting that Aina was a Ming loyalist and the author of *Xiyou bu.*[25] Zhao Jicheng 赵继承, discussed below, has also offered new insights into the structure of *Idle Talk.*[26] Other authors have commented on individual stories and I will discuss their contributions as relevant.

Most scholarship on the *huaben* has focused on authors Feng Menglong (冯夢龍 1574-1646) and Li Yu (李漁 1610-1680). Hanan's *The Chinese Vernacular Story* gives a historical overview of the changes and continuities in the genre from the middle Ming collections through 1670. In doing so he gives the most thorough overview of the genre so far. Hanan notes three phases: an early oral tradition, Feng Menglong and Ling Mengchu's (凌濛初 1580-1644) adaptation of these for their own purposes, and the increasing levels of narrative presence and experimentation. Most *huaben* are associated with the second phase; the stories are fairly realistic and the use of a simulated storyteller serves to mediate between the stock storyteller and the author's own values.[27] This is the phase that has received the most scholarly attention. For example, Yang Shuhui argues that Feng Menglong did not merely compile and edit former stories but actively

[24] Zhao Jingshen 赵景深, *Xiaoshuo luncong 小说论丛* (Shanghai: Rixin chubanshe, 1947), 94-97.

[25] Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸, *Zhongguo wenue yanjiu 中國文學研究* (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1957), 424.

[26] Zhao Jicheng 赵继承, "Jiegou duichen yu yiyi de bu pingheng: Doupeng xianhua yishu jiegou xintan" 结构对称与意义的不平衡:《豆棚闲话》艺术结构新探," *Jinan zhiye xueyuan xuebao,* 2.47 (2005): 28-35.

[27] Hanan, *Chinese Vernacular Story*, 27.

ventriloquized his own values and ideology into them through the creative use of the storyteller and the generic conventions, such as paired stories. Both Yang and Hanan argue that the vernacular story was not truly popular literature, but a means for the elite to use a form similar to popular literature to express non-orthodox views.[28] The vernacular story, with its simulated storyteller, becomes a means by which writers could ventriloquize their own ideologies, even if this is necessarily "between the lines"—as revealed in the tensions of the narration or of the organization.

The final phase includes Langxian (浪仙), Li Yu, and Aina, though scholarship has centered mostly around Li Yu. For Ming/Qing scholars, the most significant structural comparison to *Idle Talk* is Li Yu's *The Twelve Towers* (*Shi'er lou* 十二樓). Hanan argues that *The Twelve Towers* is more structured and more personal, but still clearly in Li Yu's style.[29] This structure is obvious in the use of buildings and its use of chapter divisions to demarcate each story, a feature not present in Li Yu's other works. The weaker frame in Li Yu's text likely influenced Aina's bean arbor.[30] In terms of content, however, though *The Twelve Towers* has some semi-philosophical stories, most of them are more focused on a reversal of expectations and a playfulness with general notions of morality. The possible exception to this is the last story, which discusses Li

[28] Shuhui Yang, *Appropriation and Representation: Feng Menglong and the Chinese Vernacular Story* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1998), 19. Also see Hanan, "Language and Narrative Model" in *Chinese Vernacular Story*, 1-27.

[29] Patrick Hanan. *The Invention of Li Yu* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 76.

[30] This is especially true since they were both located in Hangzhou for some time. Li Yu was there in the 1650s when he wrote *Twelve Towers* and Patrick Hanan has asserted convincingly that Aina was a Hangzhou writer. As a result, it seems highly likely that Aina read, or at least knew of, Li Yu's work.

Yu's own escape from the Qing conquest.[31] In *Idle Talk,* however, Aina seems almost entirely focused on the philosophical and presents a much more fragmented and polyvocal discussion of the universe. Hanan suggests that "his fiction questions the very basis of belief in a morally determined universe," a much loftier, philosophical, and dark concern than the mostly profit-based concerns of Li Yu.[32] Aina also experiments with the role and authority of the narrator in a new way by providing multiple storytellers whose authority is not necessarily established or accepted. In *Idle Talk,* Aina ironically combines a high level of structural complexity with a high level of fragmentation and instability.

Tina Lu has argued that we should read *huaben* almost as a narrative form of the *chuanqi* 傳奇 drama, in which the cosmos is represented in miniature. Though *huaben* changed during the decades before and after the fall of the Ming, authors tended to emphasize perfect karmic balance. Authors experimented with more narratorial intrusion in collections after the *San yan* (三言), but the structure of the narratives stayed fundamentally the same in that authors of *huaben* were unable or unwilling to step outside of political orthodoxy and totality. To Lu, *huaben* are fundamentally politically conservative narratives, wherein even though authors may devise cleverer styles and solutions over time, the ultimate mathematics of orthodoxy and karmic retribution work out perfectly. It is a given in this genre that the community will reabsorb the individual. Thus, she argues that even when Li Yu incorporates his experience of the Qing conquest

[31] Hanan, *The Invention of Li Yu*, 109

[32] Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*. 195.

into a story, there is no political tension. As she puts it, "No one can write a revolutionary or even seditious *huaben*. Yearning for the lost dynasty has to take another form."[33]

While her statement about the impossibility of a seditious *huaben* may be correct, I argue that *Idle Talk* does not present a world where karmic math works out perfectly or where the community perfectly reabsorbs the individual. To the extent that Aina wrote a collection of *huaben*, he breaks out of these limitations by depicting a broken, unjust cosmos. Such a change is a rupture of the genre, causing *Idle Talk* to offer increasingly less coherent *huaben* narratives which struggle to give karmic resolution. By arguing that *Idle Talk* is a generic rupture, I am also arguing that *Idle Talk* is an embodiment of ideological and cosmological fragmentation.

This dissertation offers the first full-length analysis of *Idle Talk* in English. To date, very few of the stories have received detailed scholarly attention outside of translations. Yenna Wu has dissected the Boyi and Shuqi story in her 1992 article and Patrick Hanan gave a general overview of several of the stories in his *The Chinese Vernacular Story* from 1981, but both studies offer limited textual analysis. Yenna Wu's 1995 article is more concerned with structural complexities and provides even fewer close readings. I offer close readings of several of the stories to offer a foundation for future literary analysis of the texts.

The Structure of the Bean Arbor

Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor is a collection of twelve sessions, or *ze* 則, in which nine different storytellers take turns telling brief anecdotes and longer stories. Each

[33] Lu, *Accidental Incest*, 177-78.

session has one main story or lecture and a host or background narrator's introduction to the season and status of the bean arbor. Seasonal patterning decides the progression of the bean arbor and indirectly informs many of the stories. The summer heat is the impetus for the construction of the bean arbor, and the bean arbor collapses with the arrival of winter. Though the stories often have parallel titles, the parallelism of content becomes increasingly less obvious, symptomatic of a loss of order. Because earlier scholars have introduced the basic structure of *Idle Talk*, my introduction will focus on the elements of the structure that they either have not explored or that best complement my arguments and discussion.

Regional literary developments in Hangzhou, where other midcentury authors used partial frames for their works, likely inspired Aina's frame story innovation.[34] For example, Dong Yue 董說 (1620-1686) used mirrors in *The Supplement to Journey to the West* (*Xiyou bu* 西遊補). Thematic frames such as wind, flowers, snow, and moon help to frame *Guzhang jue chen* 鼓掌絕塵 (c.1631), in which there is a story of ten chapters for each of the four themes.[35] Liu Yongqiang has also argued that this unified framing may be a regional feature shared by works in the Hangzhou area during the Ming/Qing era.

---

[34] Hanan notes that Aina may be a certain Wang Mengji, (王夢吉) a writer from Hangzhou. Further, the pen name "shengshui" refers to Hangzhou, as do the long discussions of West Lake and Hangzhou that Liu Yongqiang points out as a trait of West Lake fiction. Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 191. Liu Yongqiang, "West Lake Fiction of the Late Ming: Origin, Development, Background and Literary Characteristics," Translated and edited by Roland Altenburger. *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 63.1 (2009): 135-96.

[35] See Shang Wei, *Rulin Waishi and Cultural Transformation in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center: Distributed by Harvard UP, 2003). The discussion of the progression of framed stories is given in some detail on page 184 and especially footnotes 12-15. *Guzhang jue chen* is discussed in footnote 12.

For example, the ending of the opening chapter of *Xihu Erji* 西湖二集 (c.1622-1648) mentions the Song emperor Gaozong 宋高宗 (1107-1187), who is the protagonist of the second story. The fourth story also makes clear reference to the third story.[36] Li Yu also wrote *The Twelve Towers,* while living in Hangzhou, and his collection uses the motif of buildings to loosely tie his stories together. Li Yu's work likely influenced Aina in writing *Idle Talk*. Aina borrows the concept of an architectural structure, but makes it a complete frame for the work, instead of a shared motif.

In "The Imbalance of Structure and Meaning: A New Exploration of Artistic Structure in *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*," Zhao Jicheng suggests grouping the stories into three groups of four, each of which further subdivide into two stories, the last story of each group serving to explain and unite the ideas of the first three. [37] In her view, the groups should consist of sessions one, two, seven, and eight; sessions three, four, nine, and ten; and finally sessions five, six, eleven, and twelve. Zhao argues that Aina sets up a series of truths in each set of chapters, which prepares the reader for the next. The first set of stories "set forth his views on the relationship between the cosmos, history, and people and establishes his thoughts on the way of Heaven."[38] The second group "curses the hero along with the petty person and gives vent to his own feelings of hopelessness" so that by the time we reach the highest level we are able "to tear down the highest barriers of

[36] Liu Yongqiang 劉勇強, "West Lake Fiction," 174.

[37] Zhao Jicheng, "Jiegou duichen," 28-35.

[38] Ibid., 33.

Confucian orthodoxy and find hope in the midst of despair."[39] The problem with this reading is that the text is not read in this order. It seems clear that Aina meant us to read the text in order from sessions one to twelve, which would mean that we would go through the first two of a group only to be stopped by the first story of the next group. Further, the seasonal patterning of the text and the narrative about the storytellers seems a strong indicator that Aina means us to read it cover-to-cover.

The interplay of voices within the text makes *Idle Talk* not only more interesting but also helps to set up the text as a dialogue of uncertainty and tension. The presence of nine different storytellers destabilizes any single voice as authoritative truth. These storytellers have their own diction, their own varying opinions, and their stories often contradict each other. To Wu, this allows Aina to explore issues from multiple angles, but it also leaves the reader uncertain of the moral truth.[40]

Aina's blurring of voices also contributes a high degree of ambiguity to the text. Though he gives a storyteller for each session, these storytellers are usually nameless and Aina offers little information about their background or personality. In addition, the levels of narration are often impossible to differentiate. The voice that opens most of the sessions, for example, is unclear. At times this voice seems to be the voice of the host of the bean arbor, but often the voice is omniscient, suggesting a background narrator or authorial voice. Sometimes this omniscient voice at once changes to a host. And the voices of the storytellers are no clearer. Most of the storytellers cite a secondary source—

[39] Ibid., 33-34.

[40] Yenna Wu. "The Bean Arbor Frame: Actual and Figural," 1-32.

a monk, a muleteer, etc.,— as the source of their story. Thus, it is sometimes unclear if the judgments expressed are those of the storyteller or of the person or text they are citing. Finally, the relationship of Aina and his storytellers is never explicit. Because the old storyteller leads three of the sessions and offers the concluding remarks of the text, it seems that he is the closest to the authorial voice, but Aina never makes this explicit. Aina has offered us a highly polyvocal text which is both beautiful in its complexity and frustrating in its ambiguity.

To be as clear as possible in my dissertation, I have generalized the opening voice of each session to an omniscient background narrator except in those circumstances, such as in session eleven, where it becomes clear that the voice belongs to the host of the bean arbor. This inconsistency of the text may be a simple mistake by Aina, but it adds an even higher level of fragmentation and uncertainty to the text. I refer to the bean arbor setting of the characters as the primary diegetic world and to the stories they tell as secondary diegetic worlds or embedded narratives. For the levels of readership, I refer to non-diegetic characters as external readers and to the other members of the bean arbor community as the primary diegetic audience.

Roland Altenburger has discussed the very casual and non-elite nature of *Idle Talk* as shown in the diction and the circumstances surrounding the setting.[41] The casual setting of *Idle Talk* and the intradiegetic storytellers' frequent citations of hearsay or "wild histories" (*yeshi* 野史) show Aina's rejection of a higher moral authority on which

[41] Roland Altenburger, "Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor: Aspects of Informal Non-Elite Storytelling in *Doupeng xianhua*." (Paper presented at the Chinoperl Conference, Honolulu, Hawai'i, March 31, 2011).

to rely for exegesis. There is little or no pretense of privilege on the part of most of the storytellers. The frequent use of the phrase "storytelling" (*shuoshu* 說書) reminds us that this is presented as oral and informal communication, at most nearing the level of the "professional storyteller" of city streets, and at lowest merely reflecting the common reality of people telling stories.[42] By keeping the narrative at the level of the average person—the secondhand account of a muleteer, an unofficial history, retelling a monk's story—Aina places *Idle Talk* in opposition to orthodox narrative as "the eternally living element of unofficial language and unofficial thought."[43]

Aina's delegation of narrative to unnamed storytellers with no authority also erodes certainty in cosmological unity and wholeness. Shang Wei writes about *Rulin Waishi* 儒林外史 (1750) that the lack of definite narrative authority makes the reader uncertain and unsteady:

> The diminishing of the narrator's privileged viewpoint has had a significant impact on readers' perception of the narrative world of *Rulin waishi* and of its relation to us . . . Contrary to our expectations of the orderly consolations of narrative order and transparency, we are left alone to deal with the narrative world of the novel, with no sense of certainty.[44]

Rulin waishi is troubling to Shang Wei and other readers because there is no omniscient voice of reassurance to assure us that all the happenings of the novel work together toward a unified truth and meaning or that the world makes sense. In *Rulin waishi*, the invisible narrator offers several plot points that seem to lack greater meaning. Similarly,

---

[42] This has already been observed by Altenburger, "Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor," 6-7.

[43] M. M. Bakhtin, and Michael Holquist, trans., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 20.

[44] Shang Wei, *Rulin waishi*, 200-201.

in *Idle Talk*, Aina's abundance of narrators but lack of authoritative judgment makes the stories ambiguous and disheartening to those who seek reassurance of political and moral order. The outsourced narration is like the conflicting fragments of truth in the episodic *Rulin waishi.* Aina's use of anonymous storytellers marks *Idle Talk* as a key point in the continuum between a more heavy-handed narrator used by earlier writers[45] and the almost complete invisibility of the narrator in *Rulin waishi.* The reader must discern meaning for his or her self.

Even beyond the use of anonymous storytellers, there is often a tension between the background narrator or host's introductions and the storytellers' stories that follow. The background narrator often begins with updates on the growth of the beans in conjunction with the seasons, an organic metaphor for human life and a moral cosmos. As the classic symbols for karmic retribution, beans and bearing fruit stand for an ordered and moral universe in which positive actions on earth result in natural rewards. The stories that follow, however, are inconsistent in the degree to which they parallel that metaphor. For example, in session eight, the background narrator promises us that just as offering a good environment to and proper nurturing of beans will result in a good harvest, the proper nurturing of children will result in good and successful people. Yet the story that follows relates a world where an actively angry Heaven is destroying humans en-masse and the otherwise pure protagonists are miserable most of the time. In session six, the background narrator tells us of the cool air and the children who admire the bean

[45] Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction*, 284-328.

pods blossoming into flowers, but the story that follows describes exalted monks who torture and kill older monks in a seated pose to make them appear transcendent.

At other times, the seasons match the content. As fall approaches in the second half of the text, the stories and content turn darker. By the last session, there is a noted chill in the air and frost on the ground, which coincides well with the grim message of cosmic ambivalence that the lecturer preaches before the ultimate fall of the bean arbor. If the prologues were in unison with the stories themselves, the text might be interesting just as a frame story, but the inconsistency—that some opening narratives match their stories and others contradict—marks a greater tension and uncertainty about cosmic order.

Finally, as I will explore in each close reading, many of Aina's stories are incoherent. With the darker content comes a weaker form. For example, in his mission to debunk the notion of moral heroes and romantic heroines in the second session about Fan Li 范蠡 and Xi Shi 西施, Aina has his storyteller leave out important details from the earlier versions of the story and often creates suspicion about a character without revealing why the character is suspicious. Aina either changes or removes the karmic coincidences that drive the plot of conventional *huaben*. Aina often offers no karmic retribution at all, and when he does he often resorts to explicit intervention by a deity. Even then, often the deities either waver in their decisions or are unable to resolve the conflict, as in the first story. As Hegel points out, although there are exceptions, many of the stories do not follow Feng Menglong's description of the *huaben* as being "the kind

[of writing] . . . which serves to provide entertainment . . .”[46] Aina’s stories may be entertaining, but they also question the norms of the *huaben* genre in a new and unsettling way.

Trauma and Ambivalence in the Ming Fall

Despite the political crises and social unrest that were prevalent throughout the last decades of the Ming dynasty, the downfall of Beijing in 1644 stunned Ming literati. Elman writes:

> Shock among Confucian loyalists in [the lower Yangzi] and elsewhere led to a cognitive reorganization on a scale that far exceeded the changes of the late Ming. This formative and political crisis, as it was manifested in thought, education, art, and behavior, shook Chinese society—[the lower Yangzi] especially—during this period.[47]

In this section, I will introduce the ways in which literati dealt with questions about loyalism from 1644 through the 1660s and how the fall of the Ming further raised questions about cosmological coherence.

Loyalty, Piety, and Martyrdom in the Transition

Despite the emotional upheaval of the Qing conquest, by the time the Qing was firmly established in 1662, literati were increasingly ambivalent toward the fallen Ming. Though the number of martyrs for the Ming cause had been the highest among dynastic transitions, the percentage of scholar-officials who martyred themselves was relatively

[46] Hegel, *Idle Talk*, 15-16. The line appears on the *fengmian*/cover page of *Stories Old and New* (*Gujin xiaoshuo* 古今小說) in 1621. Translation by Patrick Hanan, *Chinese Vernacular Story*, 22.

[47] Benjamin A. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1984), 50.

low.[48] In response to the Manchu conquest and the order that men adopt the queue hairstyle, some committed suicide or shaved their heads as a form of pseudo-religious detachment, but as Timothy Brook notes, most continued living their lives.[49] Their remembrance and sentiments for the fallen Ming were complicated at best. Certainly, many survivors felt some emotional connection to the Ming, but they also had bad memories of the corrupt Ming state.[50] Struve writes that:

> Moreover, the emotions and imaginations of men who matured in the conquest's wake constantly were stirred by vivid reconstructions of the Ming resistance saga—through privately circulated firsthand accounts, the reminiscences of clan elders, and tales told by aging veterans who congregated in urban or monastic centers.[51]

This is not to say that these men wanted a resurrection of the Ming. The intense factional disputes and social disorder that accompanied the final decades of the dynasty left many scholar-officials with a bad taste in their mouths, and few longed to return to that state. Indeed, many took the Manchu conquest as an ethical excuse to detach from public politics completely. Even though the younger generation of the 1660s was politically loyal to the Qing, they were empathetic to the memory and emotions of their elders and so were hesitant to actively serve the Qing.[52]

---

[48] Ho Koon-piu, "Should We Die as Martyrs to the Ming Cause? Scholar-officials' Views on Martyrdom during the Ming-Qing Transition," *Oriens Extremus* 37.2 (1994): 123.

[49] See Timothy Brook, *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 257.

[50] See Chapter VI of my dissertation for a close reading of the retelling of the fall of the Ming by one of the storytellers.

[51] Lynn Struve, "Ambivalence and Action: Some Frustrated Scholars of the K'ang-hsi Period," in *From Ming to Ch'ing: Conquest, Region, and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century China,* ed. Jonathan Spence and John E. Wills (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 329.

[52] Ibid., 327-31.

Apart from emotional loyalties, however, literati continued to debate the question of what obligated one to martyr oneself during the Ming/Qing transition through the opening decades of Qing rule. Martyrdom out of emotional loyalty to the Ming dynasty was common, but it seems that many martyred themselves for other reasons, either to avoid adopting the queue hairstyle, to be regarded as "righteous" posthumously, or out of a sense of obligation to the martyred emperor Chongzhen 崇禎 (1628-1644), who hanged himself in Beijing as rebels overtook the capital.[53] Ho Koon-piu and Ian McMorran have both noted that the primary sense of obligation to martyrdom came from having received a salary for serving as an official.[54] Receiving a salary from the emperor created a material bond of loyalty and benevolence between emperor and minister, and therefore obligated the recipient to show his loyalty by martyring himself.

Though most surviving Ming literati respected those officials who martyred themselves for the Ming, the subject of martyrdom was controversial. One interesting example is Mao Qiling 毛奇齡 (1623-1716). Mao had refused to serve the Qing from 1644 until he passed the special exam, at which point he worked on the *Ming History*. Once his work was complete he again retired.[55] Like Aina, Mao Qiling was skeptical of

[53] For information on the queue, see Brook, *Troubled Empire*, 257. Henry Miller discusses the motivation for posthumous fame as a righteous man, *State versus Gentry in Early Qing Dynasty China, 1644-1699* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 27.

[54] Ian McMorran, "A Note on Loyalty in the Ming-Qing Transition," *Etudes chinoises* 13 (1994): 55-56; Ho, "Should We Die as Martyrs," 129.

[55] Lien-chê Tu, "MAO Ch'i-ling," in *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*, ed. Authur W. Hummel (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1943), 563-64.

the cosmological tradition and also retired in Hangzhou.[56] Mao rejected a popular opinion of the time that purposeful martyrdom in the name of loyalty to a monarch was a virtuous act. Instead, as Ho writes:

> According to Mao, the concept that loyal officials should die for their monarch had not been a criterion for judging an official; no officials had been honored as loyal just because they chose to die for the monarch. Mao made a distinction between "dying as a result of a national calamity" (*xunnan* 殉难) and "dying for the sake of dying" (*xunsi* 尋死). The officials who died without a good cause were only dying for the sake of dying and their death was meaningless. Mao lamented . . . that [they] had not considered whether their death would benefit the monarch or the state.[57]

Mao advocated expediency and effectiveness over martyrdom in the name of abstract virtue, an idea that reverberates in the *Idle Talk* stories that I analyze in this dissertation. While many literati considered loyalty and martyrdom to the Ming to be positive values, there was a strong minority who felt that dying for the emperor did not serve any positive cause, a point that the Daoist deity, "The Master of Making Things Equal," (*Qiwu zhu* 齊物主) makes precisely in the seventh session of *Idle Talk*, and which I analyze in Chapter IV of my dissertation.

Scholars and officials rarely discussed or assessed political loyalty on its own. Writers often compared it either to the faithfulness that a wife should show toward her husband or the loyalty that a son owed his parents. For example, in the Song dynasty,

---

[56] John B. Henderson, "Chinese Cosmographical Thought: The High Intellectual Tradition," in *The History of Cartography, vol. 20: Cartography in Traditional East and Southeast Asian Societies,* ed. J. B. Harley and David Woodward (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 224. Mao Qiling published refutations of Zhu Xi's conception of the cosmos. See the next section for more details.

[57] Ho, "Should We Die as Martyrs?" 131-32.

Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019-1086) asserted that "A loyal minister does not serve two rulers any more than a virtuous woman marries two husbands."[58] This pronouncement became increasingly popular through the Yuan, Ming, and early Qing dynasties, resulting in government encouragement of and praise for widows who committed suicide at their husband's funeral.[59] Filial piety was also connected to political loyalty. From as early as the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing* 孝經) the state and many thinkers viewed loyalty to the state as an extension of a son's loyalty to the parents. In the wake of the Ming fall, filial piety was a prominent topic of discussion amongst those concerned with martyrdom. But while some martyred themselves out of this conception, many others argued against it. Ming loyalist Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610-1695), for example, argued against this conception by pointing out the differences in the situations. A child and father always keep the same relationship to each other; they are of the same body and spirit (*qi* 氣*).* But the relationship between minister and ruler can change based on the minister's own level of concern for the people and for himself. As such, the same standards of loyalty do not apply.[60] For yet others, filial piety was the main deterrent to martyrdom. The families of many would-be martyrs used filial obligations to change their

[58] McMorran, "A Note on Loyalty," 55-56n25.

[59] Ibid., 57.

[60] Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲, and William Theodore de Bary trans., *Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince: a study and translation of Huang Tsung-hsi's* Ming-i tai-fang lu (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 96.

minds and were often successful, though others argued that martyrdom was more filial because it saved their parents from shame.[61]

Aina well understood the conversations and controversies surrounding the interconnected webs of loyalty, and his sessions elaborate upon them. For example, in his first two sessions, Aina plays with the parallel between faithful wives and loyal ministers. He manipulates the connection of loyalty to filial piety in the second, third, and seventh sessions. These relational ethics formed an idealistic approach to social order, which itself was supposed to center the cosmos. That Aina often ties political loyalty to other relationships, then, puts him squarely within the norms. By questioning the practical value of loyalty, however, he also is consciously calling into question the practical value of general Confucian relational ethics.

Cosmological Uncertainty

By the middle of the seventeenth century in the wake of the fall of the Ming dynasty, many Ming literati began to radically question the received neo-Confucian conception of the cosmos. John Henderson and Benjamin Elman have both argued that the transition was one of the most jarring in imperial intellectual history, with Henderson noting that "probably at no time in Chinese history from the Han era, with the possible exception of the third century [CE], did leading Chinese thinkers so explicitly condemn the thought and culture of the immediately preceding era."[62] In this section, I will briefly

[61] Ho, "Should We Die as Martyrs?" 132-35.

[62] John B. Henderson, *The Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 138.

review the history of Chinese cosmology from the Han to Aina's time in order to place *Idle Talk* in an appropriate context of cosmological questioning.

From the Han dynasty (漢朝 206 BCE – 220 CE) to the Tang dynasty (唐朝 618-907 CE), thinkers like Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179-104 BCE) articulated the relationship between the earth and the heavens *Tian* with a highly correlative system of cosmology. In this system, they scrutinized, serialized, and correlated different aspects of the human body or scientific matter with patterns like seasons, colors, or the five phases. The correlations they found between these implied that the cosmos was imminently readable and changeable.[63] Humans, as the link between the earth and the heavens, could read the signs and differentiations of different correlative patterns to understand better the ordering of the cosmos, which was a macrocosm of social ordering on earth. Human action strove toward a centering of heaven and earth to produce physical and social order, which thinkers like Dong Zhongshu believed were highly coordinated. By enacting ritual, humans could "center" the cosmos and human society, creating a parallel order on earth as in the heavens. When humans converted the natural stimuli around them into patterns such as writing or music, or more significantly, through actions such as ritual and sacrifice, they created an ordered microcosm of the universe. By taking part in ritual and other such "centering" actions, the facilitator became both an active agent of "centering" and a passive diffusion of a greater number of individual elements.[64] On a personal level,

[63] Angela Zito, *Of Body and Brush: Grand Sacrifice as Text/Performance in Eighteenth-Century China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 102.

[64] Ibid., 100-101.

ritual allowed the performer to access and regulate their own emotions (*qing* 情) to moderate excess and become a more moral person, contributing to a greater social order.[65]

By the Song dynasty, predominant neo-Confucian thinkers such as Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), however, shifted their cosmological focus from the Han emphasis on exteriority, difference, and correlation to an emphasis on interiority and coherence. Instead of focusing on external differences, neo-Confucians saw all external and internal matter as manifestations of the same substance, principle, or *li* 理.[66] For Zhu Xi, all individual things and thoughts reproduced the grand patterning of the cosmos in its entirety.[67] This included moral patterning. To Zhu Xi, the human mind had the capacity to be a perfect mirror of the outer coherence.[68] However, the energetic matter that gives form to principle, or *qi* 氣, was imperfect and could often be impure, causing one to not see the reality of outer and moral coherence and therefore to act selfishly or immorally.[69] Through effort to cultivate a purer *qi*, humans could cultivate themselves to be perfect moral actors in accord with the cosmos. Like Buddhism from which it borrowed, neo-Confucianism proclaimed a method of self-cultivation (*zixiu* 自修) through which one

[65] Ibid., 109.

[66] Ibid., 105.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Maram Epstein, *Competing Discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 26.

could separate themselves from desire, which could obstruct one's moral principle. If one devoted themselves to the devout study of the classics and practiced self-cultivation techniques such as quiet-sitting (*jingzuo* 靜坐), they could achieve enlightenment and reach their full moral potential.[70] This enlightenment by individuals, would, in turn, help bring the family and society into a greater order that mirrored the outer coherence.[71]

Zhu Xi's commentary on the *Four Books* and his articulation of a strict regimen of ritual, self-cultivation, and moral development became the orthodox system of thought in the Ming. The basic premise of the mind as the concentration of the cosmos extended throughout the Ming, but the extremist implementation of Zhu Xi's ideas came under attack by certain later Ming thinkers. Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529), the leader of the main Ming contender to Zhu Xi's philosophy and the founder of the school of the mind, revised Zhu Xi's model of the relationship between principle and the individual. His revision added even more insistence on outer coherence and promoted a more metaphysical conception of the role of humans in the cosmos. Instead of seeing reality as an outside object that the individual could grasp by the mind, he saw reality as existing only in the mind of the person.[72] Wang argued that principle is, in fact, one with the mind and not separate, and therefore one could understand the cosmos from within.[73] Wang Yangming's break with Zhu Xi led to a new concept of how morality functions in the

[70] Ibid., 24-25.

[71] Ibid., 26.

[72] Ray Huang, *1587, A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 206.

[73] Wing-tsit Chan, "Wang Yang-ming: A Biography," *Philosophy East and West* 22.1 (1972): 66.

individual. Instead of stemming solely from education, moral knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知) was innate. Because this knowledge was innate, every person had the potential to be a sage and had only to realize it. He wrote that "If one clearly perceives one's own innate knowledge, then one recognizes that the signs of sagehood do not exist in the sage but in oneself."[74] As Ray Huang put it, this opened the way for one to follow one's own conscience above any other standard of morality.[75]

The trauma of the fall of the Ming shook many literati out of the metaphysical haze of neo-Confucianism. The idealism of Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming, and the later Taizhou School, and the extremes it encouraged in literature and philosophy were often the subject of critique in the early Qing, as traumatized literati asked: "What caused the fall?"[76] Indeed, the *kaozheng* 考證 school of evidential research was born out of a sense of many late Ming and early Qing scholars that the moral failings permitted by such a loose system of ethics were to blame, as well as the impractical and abstract system of cosmology that emphasized cultivation over action. It emphasized a return to the purity of Confucian classics, clarified of Buddhist and Daoist interference.

The Manchu conquest shocked surviving scholars, who then began to question not only the originality and purity of the texts used by Zhu Xi in his amalgamation of

[74] William Theodore deBary, "Individualism and Humanitarianism in Late Ming Thought," in *Self and Society in Ming Thought*, ed. W.M. deBary and the Conference on Ming Thought (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 150.

[75] Huang, *1587*, 207.

[76] Benjamin A. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1984), 50.

Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism in neo-Confucianism but also the legitimacy and use of such metaphysical cosmology. Many, such as Yan Yuan 颜元 (1635-1704) and Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613-1682), felt that the exclusive focus on self-cultivation had led to a widespread deficiency in statecraft and an ability to make practical decisions. As Elman writes, "Witnesses to the deficiencies of the Ming state and the failure of the elite to prevent the Ming collapse, seventeenth-century scholars doubted that self-cultivation alone could inspire effective statesmanship and vigorous government. Sagehood was no longer their goal."[77] In response, seventeenth-century scholars like Yen Jo-chu 閻若璩 (1636-1704) and Mao Qiling 毛奇齡 (1623-1716) published clear challenges to the cosmological models of Zhu Xi's metaphysics.[78] These challenges to cosmology often correlated with a desire by other scholars to explore the scientific phenomena behind the cosmos. For example, Wang Xishan 王錫閃 (1628-1682) and his contemporaries argued that "Astronomical phenomena should not be understood simply as manifestations of neo-Confucian principles. For there were patterns proper to the heavens that had to be investigated through empirical observation and mathematical calculation before there could be any question of developing a cosmological schema."[79] In other words, there was a clear shift from an understanding of the cosmos and the role of humans within it as metaphysical and purely internal, to an understanding of the role of human action in the

[77] Benjamin Elman, "The Unravelling of Neo-Confucianism: From Philosophy to Philology in Late Imperial China," *Tsing-hua Journal of Chinese Studies,* 11 (1983): 83.

[78] Ibid.,, 73.

[79] Henderson, *Development and Decline*, 154.

cosmos that combined a desire for textual and ritual purity with a more physical and concrete understanding of the body and the cosmos.

Yet despite the gradual changes in scholarship influenced by the *kaozheng* movement, scholars still viewed themselves as pious followers of Confucianism, not its opponent. For example, many of the early *kaozheng* scholars, especially Han loyalists focused their attention on rediscovering ritual practice.[80] I believe that this early desire to balance textual scholarship with moral practice reflects a general desire to balance textual scholarship with a consistent system of moral ordering. For example, Elman notes that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century *kaozheng* scholars such as Weng Fang-gang 翁方綱 (1733-1818) and Fang Dongshu 方東樹 (1772-1851) became quite uncomfortable with the directions in which their research led. The destructive findings of the *kaozheng* movement often created the feeling that they were destroying the "neo-Confucian orthodoxy without satisfying the need for some moral order and certainty."[81]

All the scholars I cited above believe that the *kaozheng* movement did not begin until well into the Qing dynasty, and thus after Aina's death. However, the corruption and violent fall of the Ming served as a catalyst for the movement's development. Aina was in a similar generation as critics such as Mao Qiling. Though he never published textual criticisms of Zhu Xi neo-Confucianism, I will point out the ways in which his stories work in a similar direction. By painting an increasingly clear portrait of a cosmos not attuned to moral action, Aina seems to imply the same doubts about a moral cosmology

[80] Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 18.

[81] Elman, "The Unravelling of Neo-Confucianism," 75-76.

and metaphysics as his contemporaries. And like some of the later *kaozheng* scholars, he shows a concern that if his suspicions are true, then there is no remaining moral order on which to rely.

Dissertation Arguments

I make two key arguments in my dissertation. More broadly, I argue that *Idle Talk* deserves further aesthetic and scholarly analysis in English because it is unique to the genre in the level of complexity of its structure and narrative voices, because it engages in an unusually direct way with the fall of the Ming dynasty and the cosmological crisis that followed, and because it actively pushes and questions the ability of the genre of *huaben* to encapsulate and work through trauma.

Second, I argue that through *Idle Talk,* Aina questions whether the cosmos has a moral order, that is, whether *Tian* 天 or Heaven is actively involved in rewarding positive deeds and punishing negative deeds through karmic retribution. Aina asks if there is any greater significance to virtuous acts in regards to the five cardinal Confucian relationships, especially in the context of political turmoil. Although Hanan suggests that Aina promotes an altruistic quixotic individualism, I argue that Aina is profoundly uncertain. Aina is skeptical about the presence of a moral karmic order, but he is unwilling to completely discard Confucian relational ethics, and therefore his stories hesitate and waver. The incremental loss of belief in a world overseen by a moral *Tian* is increasingly at odds with Aina's inability to discard Confucian ethical values. As this tension progresses, Aina writes stories that are increasingly incoherent and fragmented. In his earlier stories, Aina still offers a vague sense of karmic moral order, often

represented by heavenly deities, and his narratives still resemble *huaben* in their form. The second half of Aina's stories, however, deteriorate significantly in both form and content. Aina writes less coherent stories, and his narrative denouements become more ambiguous and dark. By the final session, there is no story at all; the form is a direct lecture under the bean arbor. Yet the question-and-answer session and arguments between the primary diegetic audience and the lecturer that follow still offer no clear resolution to the external reader. I argue that Aina's existential crisis between agnosticism about *Tian* and appreciation of basic ethics drives the bean arbor and the form of the *huaben* itself to its final collapse.

My main academic contribution through this dissertation is to expand the body of knowledge in English about this text, offer critical close readings to show the complexities of the stories, and point out the ways in which Aina is using a wide variety of tools to express trauma and tension in his narratives.

Project Overview

My dissertation consists of five key close readings and a concluding reading. I have only closely examined six of the twelve sessions of *Idle Talk.* For the sake of brevity and focus, I selected stories in which Aina most directly raises questions about a karmic moral order and the relative value of moral action in the wake of the Ming fall. Because these stories are at the beginning, middle, and ending of the collection, I believe that they set up a stable support for my progressive reading of the text. The stories in between are not simplistic and explore similar questions as the ones I discuss. However, a fair analysis of them would require an in-depth exploration of other tropes, historical

trends and events, and even genres that I do not here have room to fully lay out. The stories I analyze are also generally the stories that have received the most attention and therefore allow me to enter more easily into that scholarly conversation.

Counting this introduction as my first chapter, the second chapter reads the opening session of *Idle Talk*, focusing on the construction of the bean arbor and examining Aina's retelling of the loyalist legend of Jie Zhitui 介之推 (d. 636 BCE). The earliest extant version of the legend told in the *Zuozhuan* *左傳* was that Jie Zhitui served his prince Chong'er 重耳 (697-628 BCE) in exile, even serving the prince his flesh to keep him alive. When they returned to rule, however, Chong'er forgot to reward Jie Zhitui's loyalty, so Jie Zhitui served his mother in the caves of Mian without remonstrating or seeking reward. The king honored him with a memorial and established the cold food festival in his honor. Aina rewrites the story by dropping the mother and creating a wife, Shi You 石尤, as the main female protagonist. The two are in love until Jie Zhitui leaves to serve Chong'er in exile and is unable to notify his wife, who then feels abandoned. Shi You resorts to bondage and violence when her husband returns—she has grown bitter in his absence. Previous scholars have read the story as a clever twist on the shrew story, or as making fun of Jie Zhitui. I argue, however, that the story brings the idealized parallels of faithful wife and loyal minister to their logical maximum to show their weakness and even danger in times of political turmoil. Key to my discussion is the way in which Shang Di, the highest deity, is unable to resolve their conflict justly. When the story ends, Shi You is still angry and causing conflicts. The story combines

sympathy for and appreciation of loyalty and faithfulness with an implication that they are potentially dangerous qualities.

My reading in Chapter III of the second session, "Fan Li Gives Xi Shi a Watery Burial" is parallel to the first. The storyteller retells the story of Fan Li 范蠡 (517 BCE - ?) and Xi Shi 西施 to debunk the idealized romantic drama *Washing the Silk*. He emphasizes how important it is for ministers to leave court while the king still values their loyalty. In this retelling, there are no moral heroes. I argue that under the guise of a light parody is a darker concern about the ultimate ability of loyalty, fidelity, or *qing* to guarantee political order or social stability. Fan Li and Xi Shi both serve the state faithfully, but their own fear causes them to act primarily out of self-interest. Xi Shi's loyalty to both Fan Li and to the state of Yue brings about her undoing. Fan Li's simultaneous loyalty to Yue and his paranoia about the king—a palimpsest of late Ming concerns about factionalism—cause him to drown Xi Shi in the lake. My reading shows how Aina chooses to leave out details from earlier accounts of the stories to erode the characters' moral heroism. The storyteller's conflicted narrative makes clear Aina's struggle with the value of ethics such as political loyalty or sentiment (*qing*). He acknowledges the importance of survival and self-interest, yet he is quick to criticize the characters' imperfect loyalty or self-interested actions.

In my fourth chapter, I read the rewriting of the Boyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齊 (c. eleventh century BCE) legend in session seven of *Idle Talk*. In this session, Shuqi cannot bear his hunger and decides to leave the mountain and his brother and seek fame and employment by serving the Zhou. The storyteller relays the conflict that ensues when the

animals who, having converted back to carnivores from loyalists, confront the horde of dead and wounded Shang soldiers who plan to execute Shuqi for his disloyalty. The deity "The Master of Making Things Equal" descends from heaven to give a speech on timeliness. Afterwards, a Buddhist paradise emerges which convinces Shuqi that he made the right choice. Most scholars have read the story as a parody of loyalism. Through my close reading, however, I show the way in which the story refuses a clear message. Instead, Aina's creation of a reasonable but highly unlikeable protagonist who does away with traditional ethics shows his own wavering and uncertainty about loyalism and relational ethics in the light of the Ming fall.

My fifth chapter is about session eight of *Idle Talk*, in which two blind men travel to the top of a mountain in hopes of having their sight restored by a compassionate *arhat*. The setting is a dynastic transition, portrayed as a time of brutal karmic punishment for all the world, during which Heaven kills half of the world's living creatures. The two are blind because of sins in their past lives, but this blindness makes them more naïve than the others around them, which also allows for comic relief. When the two finally receive their sight, however, they cannot bear to see the world as it is and beg to be blind again. The *arhat* puts them in the wine jar of Du Kang, an allusion to drunkenness, until they can bear to watch karmic retribution unfold before starting a new society. In my reading, I assert that the storyteller expresses a form of karmic retribution that deviates from most *huaben* in its brutality, recklessness, and lack of compassion. The compassion of the *arhats* and mythological figures in the story is paradoxically both vital and resistant to a destructive moral ordering. I read the text as an invitation to vicarious mourning and

argue that the tragedy of the content outweighs the nominally hopeful ending of the story. I conclude this chapter by placing these middle sessions in the context of the collection, noting their progressively darker tone and their increasing lack of faith in deities as representatives of karmic ordering.

My sixth chapter reads the penultimate session of *Idle Talk*, in which the older storyteller of the first two sessions returns to tell the younger members his recollections of the fall of the Ming. He offers three key narratives. The first is a personal account of the fall of the Ming that is both very detached and very detailed. The storyteller offers detailed descriptions of the physical atrocities of the rebels. The second narrative is a brief anecdote about a man whom rebels decapitate amid the violence but who continues to live for four years. The final story is an explicitly fictional retelling of the transition in which a loyalist commander martyrs himself for the Ming. His bravery and loyalty scare the rebel leader Lao Huihui 老回回 (? – 1644) who then has his rebels retreat. I argue that the constant emphasis on fragmentation of the physical and political body in these narratives directly prefigures the ultimate collapse of the bean arbor as a symbol of cosmic order in the final session. This fragmentation of content parallels the fragmentation of form: the session contains a total of five different narrative fragments. These fragments of narrative mimic the fragmentation of traumatic memories. That is, in recycling the memories through these fragments, the storyteller hopes to place them into a greater narrative that would imbue the fragments with meaning, but this attempt fails. The contrast of the reality of the dynastic transition with the wish-fulfilment ending of the fictional story highlights Aina's doubts about the greater significance of virtuous human

action. The primary diegetic response is not one of moral inspiration, but of vicarious trauma shown by their nightmares.

My conclusion briefly reads the final session of the bean arbor, in which an educator lectures on an impersonal and harsh cosmos, much to the chagrin of the members of the bean arbor community. Once the man leaves, the bean arbor collapses and the text comes to an abrupt conclusion. In my reading, I make two arguments. First, that the arguments and tension that occur in the final session echo the larger tendency of Aina in his stories to waver in his view of cosmological moral order and the significance of human ethical values. When Aina had storytellers tell fictional stories, he could leave endings ambiguous and safely displace uncertainties about the nature of *Tian* into a distant secondary diegetic world. Yet when Aina finally gives up on the *huaben* form altogether and offers a lecture instead, he forces questions about whether *Tian* cares about morality or whether human ethics matter to come to a clear forefront. Unable to come to a clear conclusion, Aina instead destroys his own bean arbor without offering final answers. The dissolution of the bean arbor parallels the dissolution of the form and stands for the inability of the *huaben* genre to make sense of the political and cosmological trauma of the Qing conquest, at least in Aina's eyes. I conclude my dissertation with a brief discussion of future directions for my research on this text.

CHAPTER II

JIE ZHITUI SEALS HIS JEALOUS WIFE IN A FIERY INFERNO

Although the content of Aina Jushi's *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor* is very different from the sixteenth-century pornographic novel *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅, Aina's opening to the first session alludes to the famous twenty-seventh chapter of *Jin Ping Mei* in which Ximen Qing nearly kills Pan Jinlian while punishing her under the grape arbor. The narrator of *Jin Ping Mei* opens the scene with a poem bemoaning the unbearable summer heat. Soon after, he goes into detail about the unbearable heat of the summer, especially in the fifth and sixth month. He concludes his introduction to the scene with a description of the three classes of people who fear the heat: the farmers, the merchants, and the soldiers.[1] The narrator's discussion of the excessive summer heat foreshadows the excessive sexual energy and violence between Ximen Qing and Pan Jinlian that follows.

Though Aina presents no scenes of sexual violence in *Idle Talk*, he follows the pattern of *Jin Ping Mei*'s narrator closely. First, Aina also opens the collection with a passage complaining about the summer heat:

> The lower Yangzi River valley is low-lying. Although the weather there is generally mild, the fourth month is known as the "yellow mold season" because of the rain and the fifth and sixth months as "triple sweltering days," when the relentless sun beats down from high in the sky. People traveling along the road have sweat running down their backs, their foreheads baked dry by the sun. Even at home, people groan from the heat

[1] David Tod Roy, trans., *The Plum in the Golden Vase, or Ch'in ping mei*, v.2, *The Rivals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 129-32.

> until they have no breath left in their lungs, but there is nowhere to escape.[2]

Both storytellers mention intense heat and describe the fifth and sixth months as the height of the misery, and both use exaggerated language. Just as the narrator of *Jin Ping Mei* presents and describes the three classes of people who fear the heat, Aina describes how three classes of people cope with the summer heat, namely the rich, the "wild monks and mountain men," and the common people.

In both *Jin Ping Mei* and *Idle Talk,* constructed arbors represent cool shelters from heat. For Aina specifically, the desire to escape from the fiery summer heat in this opening session correlates to the fiery anger of Jie Zhitui and his jealous wife Shi You in the story that follows. And comparable to the way that the narrator often contrasts ice with heat in *Jin Ping Mei*, in *Idle Talk* Aina associates the heroine of the following session's story, Xi Shi, with water and rain.[3] Aina juxtaposes the *yang* 陽 of the fiery heat and righteous anger in the first story with and against the *yin* 陰 of the water and moral unorthodoxy of the second to create a metaphor of cosmic ordering. Through this juxtaposition, Aina can indirectly but powerfully explore the nature of *Tian* as a moral or apathetic force and whether actions stemming from ethical relationships have any greater significance.

---

[2] Mei Chun and Lane Harris, trans., "Session 1: Jie Zhitui Sets Fire to His Jealous Wife," *in Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor, A Seventeenth-Century Chinese Story Collection*, ed. Robert E. Hegel (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 38.

[3] Andrew H. Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 84.

Diegetic Framing

After narrating the bean arbor's construction, the background narrator leads us to the bean arbor itself. To whom this voice belongs is nether consistent nor clear in the text. There is no sign whether it belongs to Aina, to an anonymous omniscient background narrator, or to the host of the bean arbor. Nevertheless, I refer to this voice as the background narrator because external readers cannot be certain if or where Aina's voice appears. Further, the voice crosses diegetic lines to explain the bean arbor to an external audience.

After giving us an overview of the construction of the bean arbor, this background narrator now leads the reader to the community under the bean arbor, where old and young, men and women, all gather to read, chat, and pass the summer heat. During this, one of the young men was

> holding a fan in his right hand and some kind of book for leisure reading in his left. When he reached a particularly exciting passage, there was a five-word quatrain. Suddenly he slapped his fan on the bench and exclaimed, "This is too much, it's just too much!"
>
> An elderly gent stood up and asked, "What was that about?" The lad handed him the book and pointed to the lines. "How can it say,
>
> 'The bite of a green bamboo viper,
>
> The stinger on the rump of a yellow bee.
>
> Neither is as poisonous,
>
> As the heart of a woman can be.'
>
> "The poet must have been bullied by a woman for no particular reason to be as savage as that," the young lad said. "Could a woman's heart really be more venomous than those two poisonous creatures?"[4]

[4] Mei and Harris, "Session 1," 39-40.

The young man has much more idealistic notions of women than the author of the text he is reading and becomes angry. In this session and the next, Aina makes the woman protagonists the focal points for deciding the efficacy of the stories. The young men's idealism and desire for reassurance that women are beautiful, virtuous, talented, and well-fated parallels their naiveté, ignorance, and innocence about the Ming/Qing transition. The young men dismiss alternative motives and bad intentions as outliers.

The elderly gent responds to the angry outburst by pointing out their naiveté:

> You young lads haven't experienced anything like it. You've never left home or traveled around, you haven't even met a lot of people or heard many stories about it. So how could you believe it? I've already started my fifth decade and would rather stay a widower than marry again. I've traveled the roads and have seen plenty, and I've heard many stories about such women too; every place seems to have their own type and each has their own brand of savagery, and everyone has her own type of venom. I won't bore you with all the details, but there was a man who knew about such things. He wrote *A Mirror of Jealousy*, which contains stories about shrews and their behavior since ancient times as well as true events that he had seen and heard more recently.[5]

The elderly gent's interruption sets the pattern for *Idle Talk*; a dialogue between younger men who are generally more idealistic and shocked by vicious behavior and the elderly men who are worldly wise and cynical about the world around them. This gentleman goes on to complain that women used the stories in *A Mirror of Jealousy* as inspiration for their own acts of jealousy until another elderly gentleman interrupts him. The second elder chimes in:

> "What this book describes are jealous acts that are in the past, what's so strange about that? There's also jealousy that lingers around thousands of years until the woman becomes a ghost or a deity—that is what is really rare." The lad saw that the two old gentlemen were speaking

[5] Ibid., 40.

> knowledgeably so he saluted them and begged them, “That’s what we want to hear about!” One of the old men said, “This is a long story. Boil some pots of first class Songluojie tea and some top-grade tender Longjing tea and bring me a few plates of tasty pastries and then I’ll tell you the tale.” The lads said in unison, “Nothing hard about that. We have it all. Now please tell us the true story and don’t tell us some old lies just to swindle us out of some tea and snacks. We’re still young and not widely read, but we want evidence from others before we will believe you!”[6]

The young men claim to want a true story, a claim that will change by the time we reach sessions seven and eight. This storyteller tells an anecdote about a jealous woman who hears her husband express his desire for a more beautiful woman. In response, the woman drowns her husband and all beautiful women. But then the storyteller is interrupted by the primary storyteller for this session, who will return for sessions two and eleven as well. This is the storyteller who will tell the main story, though his own narrative is indistinguishable from the muleteer whom he claims as his source. The storyteller mentions seeing a statue in a temple of a scary woman domineering over her cowering husband. The muleteer tells him the woman is Shi You 石尤, the wife of the famous loyalist Jie Zhitui (介之推 seventh century BCE). The primary storyteller continues to retell Jie’s story.

Aina privileges this first storyteller more than any other. An old schoolteacher who comes by the bean arbor only when he is not teaching, the storyteller is an old rustic who is happy to enjoy the treats the young men offer him but does not want to return the favor. At least this is the reason our background narrator offers for his disappearance between session two and session eleven. Aina mentions this storyteller the most

[6] Ibid., 41.

frequently but refuses to name him. He is merely called “old man” (*laozhe* 老者) or “dear uncle” (*bobo* 伯伯). Perhaps his old age helps explain his temperament. The old storyteller lived through the late Ming and survived the rebel uprising and Manchu conquest that followed. Thus, he is cynical and worldly wise. In the second session, he talks about the necessity of self-preservation in a hostile political environment. The host of the bean arbor invites him back in session eleven to teach the lads practical skills in case of political instability or war. Yet despite his cynicism, he also longs for a world in which humans act out of virtue, especially out of the cardinal Confucian relationships. Perhaps a good neo-Confucian, he wants these actions to mirror social and cosmic order, so he decries those who do not meet these standards even as he acknowledges the danger of perfect virtue in times of political turmoil.

I believe that this voice is the closest to Aina’s and therefore the most frequent voice of the collection. Yet though Aina often expresses himself through his older storyteller, the two are not the same. For example, in this story, Aina’s storyteller struggles with the implications of the story he is narrating, though even this is not consistent. Aina is the creator of both the storyteller and the story the storyteller tells. In other sessions, Aina has his storyteller contradict himself, or else uses diegetic audiences to offer a contrast to the voice of the storyteller. I discuss these other examples in relevant chapters of my dissertation.

The storyteller and his companions exchange words about female jealousy as the theme for this session under the bean arbor. But I argue that Aina uses a jealous woman for a more complex purpose. Aina’s storytellers’ connection of the jealous woman with

the political realm of Jie Zhitui points to a greater metaphor for societal ordering in both of the first two sessions. Orthodox neo-Confucianism taught that if the family is in order, greater society will be in order as well. In this first session, Aina complicates this pattern for social order by bringing Jie Zhitui's political loyalty to the state into conflict with his wife's vocal and violent demands for Jie's affections. In this session and the next, Aina uses women as a crucial element for a good story in the eyes of the men. But his female protagonists also blur political and personal boundaries as a focal point of societal order. By doing so, Aina can explore the relative value of Confucian relational ethics such as fidelity (*jie* 節) and loyalty (*zhong* 忠) or even the much-romanticized cult of sentiment (*qing* 情).

In my reading, I examine how Aina through his storyteller rewrites the original legend of the loyalist Jie Zhitui to be about a jealous shrew. I compare the early legend and the rewriting to show how Aina makes Jie Zhitui's wife, Shi You, the pivot for both the Confucian husband-wife relationship and greater political and social order. I argue that Aina is not debunking Jie Zhitui, nor is he offering a creative shrew story.[7] Instead, he combines the trope of the shrew with the idealized parallel of the faithful wife and loyal minister to question the efficacy of Confucian virtues in times of political turmoil. Shi You is not simply a shrew, she is also a faithful and affectionate wife who refuses to continue sacrificing her husband's affection for the state. Both husband and wife carry

[7] Patrick Hanan calls the story a "sardonic comment on women and marriage" and implies it is a dark story about jealous women. See Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 205. Yenna Wu reads it as a more traditional shrew story, though she acknowledges that it is problematic to modern readers. Wu, *The Lioness Roars*, 57-72.

out their loyalties sincerely, so when their commitments to virtue cause more strife than harmony, readers must decide whether to simply cast Shi You as a vicious shrew despite her fidelity, or question the greater significance of human action and virtue. Aina is also uneasy about these questions. He is unwilling to give a satisfying narrative conclusion to his *huaben* story but also refuses to completely deride these virtues as useless and insignificant.

The Legend of Jie Zhitui

In the legend's earliest recording in the *Chunqiu Zuozhuan* 春秋左傳 (c.389 BCE), Jie Zhitui returns from serving his prince Chong'er 重耳 (697 BCE - 628 BCE) loyally in exile. When Chong'er returns, however, he forgets Jie Zhitui's loyalty and does not reward him with officialdom. Frustrated but mostly unfazed, Jie Zhitui cares for his mother. Though she encourages Jie to protest to Chong'er, he refuses because such complaints would not fit his intentions. Jie Zhitui dies as a filial son caring for his mother. Later, the king realizes his mistake and memorializes him, inscribing: "For the purpose of recording my error, and honoring a good man."[8]

In the Zhuangzi 莊子 (c. third century BCE), the author retells the account very concisely but adds that Jie Zhitui burned to death from the fires a fellow minister set to smoke him out. More significantly, the author enhances Jie's loyalty by claiming that while Jie Zhitui and the prince were in exile, Jie fed his flesh to the prince. He writes:

[8] 以志吾過，且旌善人"Xi gong er shi si nian,"僖公二十四年 in *Chunqiu.zuozhuan* 春秋**左傳** *(ctext.org),* http://ctext.org/text.pl?node=18092&if=gb&show=parallel&remap=gb.

> Jie Zitui [Zhitui] was the most loyal, he cut his own flesh in order to feed the prince; the prince later betrayed him. Zitui was furious and left; he burnt to death holding a tree.[9]

By the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE), writers had merged both versions of the story and the story remains consistent from that point.[10]

In the original legend, Jie Zhitui's loyalty to his prince and his mother work in harmony. He serves his prince and then his mother faithfully. Indeed, the mother is the perfect foil of the prince. Jie Zhitui serves his prince so devotedly that he even serves his flesh to his ruler. Early readers of the story would have seen Jie Zhitui's act of flesh-cutting (*gegu* 割股) as an extreme act of political loyalty, but by Aina's time, readers would have read it as a mirror of filial piety as well, a perfect complement to Jie's care for his mother.[11] Thus Ming/Qing readers would have read filial piety to one's parents and loyalty to one's prince as parallel.

[9] 介子推至忠也，自割其股以食文公，文公後背之，子推怒而去，抱木而燔死 莊子 , "莊子 - 雜篇:盜跖 - 中國哲學書電子化計劃," Chinese Text Project, accessed December 15, 2014, http://ctext.org/zhuangzi/zh?searchu=%E4%BB%8B%E5%AD%90%E6%8E%A8.

[10] There is also a poem about the king's forgetting of Jie Zhitui, which Aina's version also includes. Most later versions of the story include the same basic elements: Jie Zhitui's serving of his flesh to his prince, the prince forgetting Jie Zhitui's loyalty, Jie Zhitui's ultimate death serving his mother in the caves of Mianshang, and the king's ultimate acknowledgement of his error and subsequent commemoration of Jie Zhitui. For a more detailed account of the development of the Jie Zhitui legend, see Olivia Milburn, "From Storytelling to Drama: The Tale of Jie Zhi Tui," *SOAS Literary Review* - Special Edition, Fall 2004, 1-15. http://www.soas.ac.uk/soaslit/issue4/milburn.pdf.

[11] The act of *gegu* was not frequently referenced until the Tang dynasty when it came in with Buddhism and became almost a purely filial act; that it shows up in this early story is significant as a manifestation of the strength of his loyalty. See Norman Kutcher, *Mourning in Late Imperial China: Filial Piety and the State* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 30.

The Old Storyteller's Retelling

In Aina's retelling, Jie Zhitui is a young official who marries a beautiful young woman of a good family named Shi You. Shi You is based on a legend of a woman who died in desolation after her husband left on business. After her death, she became a destructive wind that sinks boats.[12] Aina's rewriting of her as a famous loyalist's wife suggests a parallel disorder in both the state and the household. The two are deeply in love until Jie Zhitui, a devoted minister of Prince Chong'er, must flee with his lord and four other ministers and is unable to relay a message to his wife explaining his absence. Left alone for nineteen years, Shi You assumes that Jie Zhitui has abandoned her for another woman and grows increasingly bitter. She fashions a red whip of nine strands and beats a clay statue of Jie Zhitui, and her heart becomes stone.

Once Chong'er returns, Jie Zhitui rushes to find his wife instead of taking a position as a high official in the capital. When he finally finds her, she yells and ties him up, insisting that he is untrue and that she wants only to be home with him. Unable to convince her to move to the capital and unable to go by himself, Jie is angry and concerned when he notices that a fellow minister has set the mountain on fire in hopes of smoking him out to force him to serve. Jie Zhitui grabs a torch and sets the cave on fire. Shi You calmly curls up with him and they die together. Shi You then complains to the God-on-High (*Shang di* 上帝) and the fairies of the court, who offer the two of them the

[12] Shi You was initially used in the phrase "Shi You's Wind." In *Qingshi leilüe* 情史類略 (1629-1632), Feng Menglong includes a story in which a merchant's wife named Shi You is abandoned by her merchant husband. She dies alone and becomes a dangerous wind that threatens to capsize boats. For more, see Hegel, "Afterthoughts" in *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*, 336-43. Also see Hanan, *Chinese Vernacular Story*, 205.

sacrifices of Mian. Still angry, however, Shi You drowns any beautiful women who cross the river and changes the couple's statue in the temple so that she is domineering over Jie. The God-on-High and the king Chong'er give Jie Zhitui a greater reward—the sacrifices of Mian, a festival in his name, and remembrance as a martyr—but Shi You's angry spirit stays and causes conflict in both the earthly and heavenly realms.

Aina's rewriting is significant because unlike earlier short stories and novels, the karmic conflict—how *Tian* should reward or punish each party—stems from perfect loyalty to both Confucian relationships and *qing* sentiment and not from any ethical shortcoming.[13] In this reading, I primarily argue that Aina is not debunking Jie Zhitui as a hero, but is instead expressing a fear that human loyalties and sentiments cannot produce a desirable end in times of political turmoil. Romantic sentiment (*qing* 情), marital fidelity, and political loyalty all fail to hold relationships together or offer reward during a time of dynastic instability. Second, I argue that Aina's storyteller blames Shi You for the disorder primarily because she refuses to sacrifice her own reward and happiness for the sake of the state and her husband. As the character lowest in status she has no means of formal complaint, but can only show agency via anger and violence, which makes her an easy target for blame. In so doing he effectively avoids more difficult questions about the significance of virtuous action. Finally, I argue that Shi You is not a typical shrew. Although she displays a shrew's typical violence, her anger stems from loneliness in her

[13] For a discussion of how Chinese vernacular fiction often begins with a crack, or a breaking of the orthodox system of human relationships, see Keith McMahon, "Self-Containment and Narrative Patterning," in *Causality and Containment in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Fiction* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1988), 1-32.

faithfulness to Jie Zhitui. Further, she is less jealous of Jie's freedom than of the state's shared claim to her husband's affections.

The Cult of *Qing*: Romantic Sentiment and Orthodox Confucian Bonds

Before I begin my close reading of this story, I want to first offer a summary of the cult of *qing* that informs this session and the next. In both sessions, Aina portrays relationships that are connected by *qing* as a force that should theoretically transcend or at least strengthen normative Confucian relationships. I will conclude this section by offering more insights into Aina's use of *qing* in his stories.

The cult of *qing* 情, or of (frequently romantic) sentiment, was rooted in an offshoot of Wang Yangming's school of the mind, which emphasized a belief in innate morality (*liangzhi* 良知).[14] One of Wang Yangming's disciples, Wang Gen 王艮 (1483-1541), furthered Wang Yangming's notion that all had the potential to be sages and focused his attention on ordinary people, saying things like "The streets are full of sages" to denote their ability.[15] Other disciples, such as Wang Ji 王畿 (1498-1583), argued that especially gifted individuals could sometimes achieve sudden enlightenment without immense study. On this basis, later thinkers sometimes "saw instinctive responses to stimuli, not as being flawed due to their subjective bias, but as a basis for morality."[16]

[14] See my introduction (Chapter I) for more details about this.

[15] Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 79.

[16] Maram Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 73.

Natural and emotional responses to outside stimuli and human interaction, then, could not only be trusted but valued as a potential source of moral knowledge.

Thinkers like He Xinyin 何心隱 (1517-1579) and Li Zhi 李贄 (1527-1602) expanded the notion of a subjective response as a basis for morality by arguing that emotion and sentiment could motivate and refresh the five relationships. He Xinyin, for example, emphasized friendship as the only one of the five relationships that was not wanting in some way.[17] Most famously, Li Zhi argued that emotions were a key foundation of human nature.[18] Li Zhi emphasized the efficacy of a natural, untainted response to the world, what he called a childlike mind (*tongxin* 童心), which had a natural inclination toward good. By embracing this nature, humans could enact rituals and morality sincerely instead of in a merely performative or trained fashion.[19] In sum, these thinkers created a foundation for authors and thinkers to view *qing* as both the primary foundation of the five Confucian relationships and as a force that could potentially transcend them.

Because Confucian writers viewed women as inherently closer to their emotional nature and thus a clear source of *qing*, the feminine became "idealized as an authentic subject position untainted by the frustrations, sacrifices, and moral compromises

[17] Martin W. Huang, "Male Friendship and *Jiangxue* (Philosophical Debates) in Sixteenth-Century China," in *Male Friendship in Ming China*, ed. Martin W. Huang. (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2007), 165. The five relationships of Confucianism were ruler-minister, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, and friend-friend.

[18] Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 73.

[19] Ibid., 77-78.

demanded by participating in the bureaucratic system."[20] The feminine subject position was not limited to females, though this was common. An appreciation for a woman's sentiment for her husband was not new to the tradition. Prior to the Ming, there was already a strong Confucian practice of reading a woman's longing for her lover as a metaphor for the worthy scholar who seeks political recognition.[21] But the trope of a pure, virtuous woman who longs for her lover, seen most famously in the play *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan Ting* 牡丹亭 1598), grew much more popular in the late Ming and Qing.[22]

Men's idealization of the feminine as an idealized embodiment of morally pure *qing* and their desire for meaningful affective relationships also helped drive the popularity of companionate marriages.[23] Epstein argues that companionate marriages rooted from the early notion of the soulmate (*zhiji* 知己), or a friend that deeply understands you, and that believers already viewed this friendship as an acceptable reason to deviate from normative expectations of political or social loyalties. In the late Ming, the cult of *qing* further pushed this notion to romantic marriages, where this sentiment for each other, as a friendship of romance, surpassed the traditional obligatory Confucian bonds to each other and family.[24] In fiction, these companionate marriages

[20] Ibid., 88.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 111; Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 91.

[24] Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 91.

were often set in scholar-beauty romances, wherein the matching positive traits allowed the two to connect with each other at such a spiritual level that authors often flipped their roles so that the man was beautiful and the woman appeared as "a purer and more accomplished reflection of the male self."[25] Though both Ko and Epstein note that these companionate marriages ultimately reinforced women's domestic gender roles and were narcissistic reflections of male desire, the ideal of soulmates as lovers hinted at hopes of transcending or at least rejuvenating Confucian normative relationships.[26]

Indeed, in the most famous exposition of the power of *qing*, Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550-1616) exclaims *qing* as a force that transcends all earthly bonds. He writes:

> Love (*qing*) is of source unknown, yet it grows ever deeper. The living may die of it, by its power the dead live again. Love is not love at its fullest if one who lives is unwilling to die for it, or if it cannot restore to life one who has so died. And must the love that comes in dream necessarily be unreal? For there is no lack of dream lovers in this world. Only for those whose love must be fulfilled on the pillow and for whom affection deepens only after retirement from office is it entirely a corporeal matter.[27]

For Tang, *qing* was the "distinguishing feature of human existence"[28] and the source of all other virtue. Proponents of the cult often quoted the above preface to *The Peony Pavilion*.[29] In Tang's play, the ethereal and beautiful heroine responds to the world

---

[25] Ibid., 92.

[26] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers,* 111; Epstein, *Competing Discourses,* 91.

[27] Tang Xianzu, *The Peony Pavilion*, trans. Cyril Birch (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), ix.

[28] C.T. Hsia, "Time and the Human Condition in the Plays of T'ang Hsien-tsu," in *Self and Society in Ming Thought,* ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary, et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 250.

[29] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers,* 79.

subjectively with great passion and emotion, often in direct contrast to the expectations orthodoxy (represented by her rigid father) expect her to meet.[30] The love between her and the hero overcomes no small number of obstacles, both physical (she dies) and familial and societal (the highly rigid orthodox standards of her father). Tang finds a resolution of passion and Confucian orthodoxy for the play by having the heroine consummate her *qing* through sexual intercourse in a dream and as a ghost before she marries as a human. She does not violate her sexual chastity as a human until after her father sanctions their marriage at the end. In this way, she both keeps her chastity and fulfills her *qing.*

Expectations and social customs from both the cult of *qing* and orthodox neo-Confucian teaching on chastity as a virtue combined in the late Ming and early Qing to elevate the devotion of a married woman to a new height. Wifely devotion to her husband had long been a standard neo-Confucian expectation, part of the five key relationships, four of which were hierarchical.[31] The cult of *qing*'s emphasis on a strong emotional bond between husband and wife as companions made the bond of a wife to her husband even stronger. In fact, it often played into a widow's decision to kill herself at the death of her husband, which exceeded or even defied Confucian expectations.[32] If a chaste wife would still be loyal to her husband even after his death, a wife devoted to *qing* may well commit suicide at his death.

[30] Epstein, *Competing Discourses,* 93.

[31] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers,* 186.

[32] Ibid.

Qing was also connected to the political realm of loyalty. From early on, Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019-1086) had pointed out a parallel between a loyal wife and a loyal minister, writing that "A loyal minister does not serve two rulers any more than a virtuous woman marries two husbands."[33] However, the cult of *qing* and of wifely fidelity further exaggerated this comparison.[34] Late Ming and Qing Confucian thinkers often compared a woman's devotion to her husband, even to the point of committing suicide at his death, to a loyal minister who martyrs himself in loyalty to his ruler. Believers in the cult often asserted that both devotions, to love and to loyalism, had their root in genuine sentiment, or *qing*.[35]

In the first two sessions of *Idle Talk* and especially in this first session Aina explores the claim of *qing* as either a transcendent force or as a rejuvenating and more authentic basis of virtue and therefore of social order. By presenting *qing*-based scholar-beauty relationships in the first two sessions and directly juxtaposing them with questions of political and social order amid dynastic instability, he questions the value of *qing* both in connection with and instead of cardinal Confucian bonds as a way of supporting social harmony.

Especially in this first session, Aina explores the implications of Jie Zhitui and Shi You as a *qing*-based relationship. Their love and loyalism both stem from their *qing*.

---

[33] Ian McMorran, "A Note on Loyalty in the Ming-Qing Transition," note 25.

[34] For a deeper explanation and analysis of the cult of wifely fidelity see Weijing Lu, *True to Her Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2008).

[35] Kang-i Sun Chang, *The Late-Ming Poet Ch'en Tzu-Lung: Crises of Love and Loyalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 85-86.

This creates a parallel between the loyal minister and faithful wife, which is also problematic, however. Shi You's sentiment for her husband causes her to well represent the devoted wife but leads her to violent extremes. Similarly, Jie's devotion to his ruler leads him to abandon his wife for nineteen years. Still, Aina leads us to believe that their sentiment for each other is admirable and would lead to a happy conclusion if it were not for the instability of the state which forces their separation, and thus her bitterness. Therefore, his conclusions about *qing* in this story are ambiguous. Is it that *qing* does not help its devotees to achieve personal fulfillment and the empire to achieve social order? Is *qing* the key reason that social order fails? Or is *qing* an otherwise positive force that is merely insufficient to maintain social order in the wake of state failure? In this story and the next, I suggest that the latter is the case.

Conflicted Characterization and Jie Zhitui as a Romantic Man of Valor

In this section, I make two arguments. First, I argue Aina portrays two conflicting characterizations of Shi You to show the complexity of questions about the significance of human virtue. His storyteller despises Shi You because he sees her as vicious and jealous. Because these traits fit the archetype of the shrew, she becomes an easy target of blame for the social disorder that follows the political crisis. Yet through the storyteller's own account, Aina also offers a sympathetic rendering of Shi You's anger as the logical result of her suffering as an abandoned affectionate and faithful wife. At times, the storyteller's words imply both perspectives, adding to the complexity of authorial voices in this text. Peng Tichun 彭体春 and Fan Mingying 范明英 have also noted this tension

between conflicting voices and argue that Shi You is acting out of a compelling *qing*, though I disagree that all of Shi You's actions are affectionate.[36]

Second, I argue that Shi You and Jie Zhitui are representatives of both *qing* and orthodox parallels between faithful wives and loyal ministers. Aina uses their ability to represent both to complicate idealizations of loyalty in times of political turmoil. Jie's romantic sentiment (*qing*) toward Shi You parallels his intense loyalty to the state, and Shi You reciprocates. Similarly, Jie Zhitui shows toward his prince the expected political loyalty framed by neo-Confucianism, enhanced by his act of *gegu*. Shi You's deep faithfulness (*jie*) towards Jie well complements Jie's political loyalty. In both models, the loyalties are parallel. That is, a minister's sincere loyalty to a prince and the prince's reciprocal recognition of the minister should complement and not contradict a wife's sincere loyalty to a husband and his reciprocal care for her. Indeed, Sun Kang-i has persuasively argued that literati in the late Ming and early Qing often viewed romantic sentiment and political loyalty as rooted in the same sentiment.[37]

The storyteller's conflicted characterization begins with his depiction of Shi You after Jie Zhitui leaves. He gives a detailed description of the devolution of her emotional state:

> Mrs. Shi was at home; how could she know the sequence of events? She could only think, "We were so much in love; how could my husband abandon me without warning? He must have met someone outside and suddenly deserted me for her!" [And she shouted at heaven and raged at

[36] See Peng Tichun 彭体春 and Fan Mingying 范明英, "'Jie Zhitui fenghuo dufu' xingbie xushi de liangzhong huatiao" 《介之推火封妒妇》 性别叙事的两重语调 *Chongqing shifan daxue xuebao*. *重庆师范大学学报*. 3(2009): 82-87.

[37] Kang-i Sun Chang, *The Late-Ming Poet Ch'en Tzu-Lung*, 85-86.

> earth, and was resentful for a while, and cried bitterly for a while, and then cursed a while, and longed for him madly for a while]. She wished that she could pull Zhitui up by his hair and from mid-air, drag him before her and eat him alive—that would be the only thing that would satisfy her. Day by day, and year by year, a lump began growing in her chest that was as hard and compact as a rock, no knife could cut it out, no ax could smash it: it was called jealousy. As the common saying goes, when there is a stone attached a woman, and no skin to cover the stone, the disease has gone too far and can never be melted away.[38]

Despite the storyteller's claim that Shi You is jealous, his depiction of her psychological interiority generates reader sympathy for her. Shi You has subjectivity and a voice; she expresses her emotions, feelings, and assumptions. She becomes increasingly bitter because Jie has abandoned her, a word she uses twice in the passage above. This is not a power struggle or expression of general jealousy. Even though she is left to assume that Jie has found a new woman, she still has genuine feelings for him and longs to be near him. The detailed account of the devolution of her mental state and the progression of her grief shows that she is profoundly human and a devoted wife, a sympathetic example of wifely fidelity, even as the storyteller continuously walks a fine line between sympathy and misogyny.[39] As the storyteller implies, if Shi You does become a shrew, it is because of the constancy of her *qing* and faithfulness (*jie*) toward her husband. The storyteller acknowledges the complexity of the story he tells and struggles to come to

[38] Mei and Harris, "Session 1," 49. With some modifications in brackets to emphasize the phrasing of the original text. 石氏在家那曉得這段情節. 只說：『正在恩愛之間，如何這冤家嚄地拋閃？想是有了外遇，頓然把我丟棄！』叫天搶地，忿恨一回，痛哭一回，咒詛一回，癡想一回，恨不得從半空中將之推一把頭揪在跟前，生生的咬嚼下肚，方得快心遂意. Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua* (Taibei shi: Xinwenfeng chuban gongsi, 1982), 1.7-1.8

[39] Peng Tichun and Fan Mingying, "Jie Zhitui fenghuo dufu," 82-86. They argue that the text contains an internal tension between the storyteller's assertion of "jealousy" and a greater sympathy and concern with the husband/wife relationship.

terms with it. As he progresses through his narrative, however, the storyteller becomes increasingly hostile to Shi You. He sympathizes with her abandonment but denies her justification for any meaningful recourse.

Though he may initially seem insensitive to his wife's needs, Jie Zhitui is as much a victim of the circumstances as Shi You. The storyteller makes it a point to show that Jie Zhitui is perfectly devoted and loyal to both his wife and his prince. But despite his intentions, political instability at the empire's center makes Jie Zhitui unable to notify his wife of the circumstances. The storyteller states:

> However, because Chong'er had been suddenly hit with a great misfortune, he immediately went into exile. As a member of the heir-son's bodyguard, Zhitui's loyalty demanded that he ignore his own safety and accompany the prince. Zhitui followed Chong'er on horseback, never returning home to explain things to his wife. As he traveled, he kept looking for an acquaintance to take a message to her.
>
> "Chong'er, as the son of the Duke of Jin, had altogether five retainers: one was Wei Chou, one was Hu Yan, one was Dian Jie, one was Zhao Cui, and the last was, of course, Zhitui. All of them left in haste, worried that word would reach the ears of Concubine Li, and that she would talk Duke Xian [晉獻公 r.676-651 BCE] into sending an army after them, which would have been quite troublesome. That is why they all made superficial changes to their appearance, put on ragged clothes, stopped for only the night, and rose early the next morning, all under great duress.[40]

Just as the prior passage shows the depth of Shi You's devotion to her husband, this passage shows Jie Zhitui's sincere devotion to his wife. He wants to explain his departure to his wife, but Prince Chong'er's circumstances make that impossible. What would save one relationship would destroy the other. Jie Zhitui and Shi You's love and faithfulness toward each other are secondary to his political obligations. Still, once his

[40] Mei and Harris, "Session 1," 48.

prince can return and rule, Jie Zhitui does not forget his love for his wife. Indeed, the storyteller's praise for Jie Zhitui's *gegu* for his prince is immediately followed by his praise for Jie's devotion to his wife. The storyteller states:

> Thereafter, the four retainers who had followed this royal dragon [Chong'er] were all made high ministers and received valuable rewards. Among them, only Zhitui maintained his love for his wife as steadfastly as ever. Once he returned to his country, Zhitui went home to find out where Shi You might be . . . Suddenly, they saw each other again.[41]

Jie Zhitui is certainly a loyal minister who fulfills his obligations to his wife as her husband, but he is also an incarnation of *qing* sentiment. Jie shows extraordinary sentiment for his wife by rushing to see her out of his love for her, an act that distinguishes him from the other loyal ministers. In so doing, he is actively prioritizing his love for his wife over officialdom—a reward but also a form of political loyalty. The storyteller's tone here is positive. If Shi You is both loyal and sentimental towards Jie Zhitui, Jie Zhitui is both loyal and sentimental towards his wife.

The Deflated Reunion and Shi You's Grasp for Power

In this section, I argue that Aina provides an ironic twist on the reader's expectation for a grand reunion by having Shi You act out of anger and violence instead of making her simply happy to see her husband again. I argue that Aina intentionally has his storyteller conflate Shi You's language of violence regarding perceived marital infidelity and the language of political violence and disorder and that this is intentional. Most significantly, I argue that Shi You commits violence not as a typical shrew but as a

[41] Ibid., 49-50.

devoted and loving wife who has no power to express grievances, and I point out how the storyteller struggles with the tension between shrew and faithful wife.

Aina does offer a grand reunion of the lovers Jie Zhitui and Shi You who have actively desired each other, but he darkly subverts the reader's expectation of resolution. In fact, the two initially do not even recognize each other, and once they do the brief silence before Shi You lets out a "fake" cry points to further conflict. Although Jie Zhitui explains what happened, Shi You has grown bitter and responds accordingly:

> Ms. Shi could only scold him, "[Betrayer! You've abandoned me this many years and are therefore just using false words as decoration." It's just that she didn't believe him], but she did not hesitate to use a woman's oldest methods: she slapped him with her hand, bit him with her mouth, butted him with her head, and kicked him with her feet.[42] Beaten like a casualty defeated in battle, Zhitui hung his head in sorrow and dared not utter a word.
>
> He hoped that if he kept his mouth shut and treated her well, her anger would pass and their affections would return. He could then descend the mountain to become an official. How could he know that Ms. Shi's heart was filled with venom? Back when she was at home, she had prepared a red silk rope made of nine woven cords that she kept in her clothing case. She brought it out and tied it around Zhitui's neck so that he could never leave her side even for a moment, not even to stretch.[43]

The storyteller fills Shi You's response with the language of both sentiment and political loyalty, conflating the two realms of disorder. The word *betrayer*, for example, consists of both "fuxin" (负心) and "nizei" (逆贼). Because Shi You believes that Jie Zhitui was with another woman, *fuxin*, which refers to an unfaithful husband, makes sense. But the word *nizei*" which implies a political traitor or bandit, suggests some added

[42] Mei and Harris, "Session 1," 50. Brackets indicate my modifications from Mei and Harris's translation in order to more literally capture the original text.

[43] Ibid., 50; Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua*, 1.8-1.9.

political disloyalty. Her words blur his *qing*-based obligation to her and his lesser neo-Confucian obligation to respect her faithfulness and care for her.[44] The storyteller deliberately conflates Shi You's anger towards an unfaithful husband with a loyal minister or emperor's anger at a disloyal minister. The storyteller's metaphors consistently invoke political disorder to denote marital disorder. When Aina has Shi You compare the henpecked Jie Zhitui to a soldier fallen in battle, he suggests Jie as a casualty of war, while the mention of him wanting to leave the mountain (*chushan* 出山) alludes to wise recluses leaving to serve the state. The storyteller continues to relay parallels of marital and state disorder even as he does not offer a peaceful resolution for either.

The storyteller is sympathetic to Jie Zhitui, pointing out his remaining tender affections for his wife and mourning his fallen status as a henpecked husband. The storyteller portrays Shi You in a much more negative and critical light by showing her violence and anger and gliding over the reasons behind it. In this way, the storyteller depicts Shi You as a violent force of disorder and implies that her violence justifies blaming her for the resulting disorder.

Yet much of Shi You's violence comes not from a vicious heart but from her social inferiority. Unlike the original loving mother, Shi You is the inferior in her conjugal relationship with Jie Zhitui. Confucian obligations indicate that she should show more loyalty to him than he shows to her, and she has significantly less power to claim grievances. Aina's replacement of a mother with a wife invokes the parallel of faithful

[44] Lesser in that a man's obligation of fidelity and loyalty to his wife were seen by the state as less important than his political loyalty. It is also lesser in that women were expected to demonstrate greater fidelity to their husbands than the husbands were expected to give in return.

wife and loyal minister and causes Shi You to be expected to sacrifice more for both her immediate superior (Jie Zhitui) and the object of his loyalty (the state) than his mother would have been.

Aina's storyteller depicts Shi You's desperate frustration with this reality by grounding her violence in her allusive reversal of the dialogue between Jie Zhitui and his mother in the *Zuozhuan* account.

> His mother said: "Then why not let him (Chong'er) know?"[45]
>
> (He) responded: "Words (*yan* 言) are the decoration of the body (*shen zhi wen ye* 身之文也). Since my body is in reclusion, what need do I have for decoration? That would be seeking reward."[46]

Compare this to the words of Shi You upon hearing her husband's explanation for his nineteen-year absence:

> Betrayer! You've abandoned me this many years and are therefore just using false words (*jiayan* 假言) as decoration (*tangshi* 搪饰).[47]

The shared use of the word "yan" (言) or *words* and their use as decoration of the actual body (and the actions it commits) is intentional. In the *Zuozhuan* account, the prince's overlooking of Jie's loyalty leaves Jie Zhitui with the obvious decision to serve his mother in reclusion, which is the clear and moral choice. Jie's words and physical actions match, implying a greater narrative and cosmic order.

---

[45] Chong'er was posthumously titled Duke Wen of Jin. The mother is suggesting that Jie Zhitui remind Chong'er of his loyalty.

[46]其母曰："亦使知之，若何？" 对曰："言，身之文也。身将隐，焉用文之？是求显也。"Xi gong er shi si nian,"僖公二十四年 in *Chunqiu.zuozhuan* 春秋**左傳** *(ctext.org),* http://ctext.org/text.pl?node=18092&if=gb&show=parallel&remap=gb.

[47]负心逆贼，闪我多年，故把假言搪饰 Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua*, 1.8.

In Aina's version, Jie Zhitui offers his wife a sincere explanation but no apologies. In the eyes of the state, Jie owes her no apology due to his status as the superior in their relationship and the superior nature of the subject-lord relationship. His explanation to Shi You is valid, but to Shi You, Jie's loyalty to the state is a personal betrayal of both his *qing* toward her and his orthodox obligations to care for and help her. Jie's words are mere decoration to her because they neither acknowledge nor reward her personal sacrifice. Shi You has faithfully sacrificed for both her husband and the state. Yet unlike Jie Zhitui, who has a grand reward to claim, the state and the storyteller expect Shi You to simply forget her years of sacrifice and sacrifice again for her husband and the state. Her violent response is her only effective way of refusing to make that sacrifice. Through his cantankerous storyteller, Aina drops the possibility that even a truly faithful and loving wife would be able to wait alone for nineteen years without becoming angry and bitter.

The storyteller narrates Shi You's physical and verbal violence in a manner consistent with classic shrew behavior and therefore makes her a fair object of blame.[48] But Shi You is no ordinary shrew. Shi You becomes violent as a direct result of her exemplary faithfulness and affection for her husband that the seventeenth-century cult of wifely fidelity demanded. The storyteller himself indirectly acknowledges Shi You's faithfulness and affection. Formulaic shrews were jealous of a man's economic and social

[48] For a concise introduction to shrews see Keith McMahon, *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists: Sexuality and Male-Female Relations in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 55-81. See also Yenna Wu, *The Chinese Virago* and Maram Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 120-49.

security, his sexual freedom, or a romantic rival, whether that be a concubine, prostitute, or even another male partner.[49] Even though Shi You initially believes that Jie Zhitui has been with another woman, the main source of her jealousy is the denial of his attention or affection for the last nineteen years. The state's demand for Jie's loyalty earlier denied Shi You of this affection. Now Jie's reward for that loyalty by the state threatens to deny her of it again.

The next passage reaffirms Shi You's continued affection and faithfulness for her husband:

> I don't want gold or silks, prosperity or rank, or to wander to the ends of the earth. My one desire is to be together at home, live a simple life eating only pickles and salt, and make up for all the romantic delights I lost over those nineteen years. Let those with an exalted fate become officials.[50]

The storyteller claimed that Shi You's physical restraint of Jie proved the venom in her heart (and thus proved she was a shrew) but the words Aina puts in Shi You's mouth express a different reasoning. Shi You ties Jie up to obtain the affection and attention that her husband has denied her because of the state. Cheated of both her husband's Confucian duty to look after her and his *qing*-based sentiment for her, Shi You wants Jie Zhitui to focus on being her husband. More significantly, she is claiming that he should honor her over the state, thus revealing the state as the source of her jealousy. By refusing to continue to sacrifice her own happiness, Shi You severs the parallel between faithful wives and loyal ministers. She may be the foil of the original loving mother, but she serves a grander purpose. As a mouthpiece for the faithful wife praised by both adherents

[49] Wu, *The Chinese Virago*, 40, 43.

[50] Mei and Harris, "Session 1," 50.

of *qing* and the more orthodox Confucian five relationships, she illustrates the deep flaws in both systems.

Her assertion of agency is effective but makes her an easy target of blame for the storyteller. The storyteller implies that the ultimate disorder is not a result of unsustainable and unrealistic expectations of human loyalties amid political instability, but simply the result of a vicious woman. The violent outbursts of women were already read at the time as a physical embodiment of cosmic disorder.[51] That the storyteller maintains and consistently reasserts Jie Zhitui's political loyalty while creating an ambiguous characterization of Shi You—whether she is a violent shrew or a faithful wife—and not the reverse shows how the old storyteller uses questions of the cult of women's fidelity to displace deeper questions about the karmic value of Confucian ethics brought on by the Ming/Qing transition.

Fiery Caves and Fiery Anger: Death and Karmic Non-Resolution

In this section, I will explore the significance of the death of Jie Zhitui and Heaven's failure to fairly reward both parties or appease their anger. I argue that Aina uses the political instability of dynastic transition to question the existence or possibility of fair karmic resolution and that the result of this failure is continued disorder caused by Shi You's lasting anger.

When one of the original five ministers of the prince who followed him into exile comes to smoke Jie Zhitui out of the mountains so that he can serve as a high official, Jie

[51] See Maram Epstein, "Inscribing the Essentials: Culture and the Body in Ming-Qing Fiction," *Ming Studies* 41 (1999): 8.

Zhitui is scared and angry. Terrified that he will be found tied up by Shi You, and angry that she has denied him of his political reward, he sets the cave on fire with a torch. As the fire closes in, the storyteller reveals how the couple dies:

> Lady Shi had no road into Heaven nor a door into the Earth; she could not run on ahead nor retreat behind. As the fire closed in around her, she clutched Zhitui tightly and said, 'I will never be jealous again.' But her regret came too late. Who would have thought that when the fire moved closer, a calm came over her. She only wanted to hold Zhitui in her arms, there being no more reason for regret or remorse. And so, when the fire was at its fiercest, Jie Zhitui and his wife remained relaxed. Before long, they both became a pile of ashes.[52]

Although the storyteller strongly implies that Shi You is a shrew, Shi You longs only to cuddle with her husband as they die. There is a clear tension between the biases of the storyteller and the story he is narrating. Aina has created two voices at odds with each other: the storyteller who longs to simplify the blame for the lasting disorder by casting Shi You as a simple shrew and the story that Aina has put into his mouth which offers a more complex and empathetic portrait of a faithful wife. Nevertheless, in their last moments on earth, the couple briefly restores a loving husband-wife relationship.

This intimacy is short-lived. When Shi You petitions the God-on-High (*Shang Di* 上帝) to resolve their disagreement, Aina, through his storyteller, brings the question of Shi You as shrew or faithful wife to the forefront. The God-on-High hesitates:

> Although the Lord-on-High knew the gravity of her sin of jealousy was not light, he also knew she had remained faithful [*shouzhe* 守着] to her husband for nineteen years. Her accumulated hatred could not be dispelled quickly.[53]

[52] Mei and Harris, "Session 1," 53.

[53] Ibid.

Aina places the question of how to judge Shi You's actions before the spokesperson of karmic order. In *huaben,* karmic retribution should balance debts and offer a resolution, but Aina's scenario is too ambiguous and dark for simple decisions. The God-on-High, like the storyteller, acknowledges that because Shi You's violence stems from fidelity (*jie)* and sentiment (*qing*), and not out of mere jealousy, the proper punishment is not straightforward. Shi You may have reacted inappropriately to her husband's return but she remained faithful and took the sentiments behind the cult of fidelity to their logical maximum.

With the God-on-High unable to offer a resolution, the flower fairies of the court step in:

> It just so happened that a group of flower-scattering fairies were at the court. [54] They all pitied the helplessness of this sincerely devoted husband and wife who, during their lifetime, had not received the land of Mian promised them by Duke Wen. The Lord-on-High decided to allow them to consume the sacrificial meat offered from the land of Mian. But Shi's jealous heart was not transformed after all.[55]

Aina hesitantly forces the reader to question the significance of action under orthodox or *qing*-based notions of social order in times of political instability. The fidelity of both parties has caused more harm than good, but Aina still offers a sympathetic view of their devotion. The tragedy is that a happy resolution is impossible because the fairies cannot resolve the ultimate conflict of loyalties, or replace the nineteen years of loneliness that Shi You endured. If the political loyalties of Jie Zhitui hurt Shi You, then Shang Di's

[54] Although flower-scattering fairies are a sexual image in *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan Ting* 牡丹亭 c. 1598), I do not consider them to be a sexual image in this story.

[55] Mei and Harris, "Session 1," 55.

equal compensation seems unfair to her. This case of karmic reward is a zero-sum game. How can the God-on-High offer karmically balanced retribution when Shi You's reward would mean Jie Zhitui's political defection? How can Shi You be appeased when Jie Zhitui has only acted out of proper virtue? Jie Zhitui's loyalty has already been rewarded multiple times; he is offered a memorial, a festival, the sacrifices of Mian, and the fame of a martyr. Shi You is offered only a token and that only upon complaining to the God-on-High. Political instability and the proper sentiments of both Shi You to her husband and of Jie Zhitui to his prince have caused the disorder to this point in the story. Their perfect loyalties during imperial incompetency are admirable but reveal the flaw in the popular assumption that the husband-wife relationship and the minister-ruler relationship are parallel.

Still bitter, Shi You refuses to allow any pretty women to cross the river. Nor does she allow men to criticize her and praise Jie Zhitui. When one woman dares cross the stream without first making herself ugly and then scoffs at Shi You, Shi You transforms the statue of herself and Jie Zhitui in the temple, originally of them sitting shoulder to shoulder, into one of a small, petty Jie Zhitui cowering in fear of his wife. The storyteller dismisses Shi You's anger as bitterness and hatred from jealousy, despite its worthy cause. Never fully appeased, she lives on as a bitter deity who drowns beautiful women and in the form of a stone which emits a continuous black vapor and which causes strife wherever it goes. Aina's storyteller has shifted the perceived source of disorder from the incompetence of the state to the failure of a devoted wife to forget her own sacrifice for the sake of that state.

The statue of the two, described at the beginning of the story, physically stands for this lasting bitterness and disorder:

> In the middle of the main altar was seated an emerald-eyed, high cheek-boned, sunken purple-faced woman, of middling age, whose red mouth as big as a winnowing basket was wide open. Holding a short stick of charred wood, she crouched ferociously on the altar. By her side stood a short hunchback, who looked like he was in utter misery. He was facing a cabinet on the left, but why was this? I was about to inquire, but my driver shook his hand at me, saying, "Don't ask –let's go, let's go." I got back on my donkey and continued with my journey.[56]

When local headmen tried to rebuild the statue, it collapsed, at which point, fearing Shi You, they rebuilt it in this fashion.

This is how the narrative ends. A statue that should have shown Jie Zhitui's virtue shows only his weakness and none of his bravery. Despite the storyteller's mention of Jie Zhitui's various rewards, both the storyteller and the primary diegetic characters are more concerned with this physical memorial of Jie's service. Further, because the statue of Jie is now facing left, he is unable to receive the sacrifices of Mian, erasing one of his rewards. Shi You still refuses to give in to a political system of loyalties which ridicules her for her own anger at the incompetency of the state. The statue, where she has some symbolic agency and authority over the husband who abandoned her, negatively but powerfully illustrates Shi You's assertion of her sacrifice and voice in this system. Her victory in expressing her discontent, however, comes at the further expense of her reputation. The storyteller concludes by deriding her continued jealousy and mourning the lasting local difficulties caused by "Shi You's vicious soul."[57]

[56] Ibid., 47.
[57] Ibid., 56.

Concluding Remarks: Endings and Their Significance

In this concluding section, I offer some greater context for the issues presented in this story and argue that the ending, where Shi You continues to cause problems, is unique and significant for the trope of the shrew. In so doing, I conclude my argument that Aina is complicating idealistic notions of social order in times of political chaos. He does so by having his storyteller avoid more troubling questions about the relative significance of marital fidelity and political loyalty and instead simply blame the wife for being a jealous shrew. Aina uses this tension between Shi You as a faithful wife and Shi You as a jealous shrew to allow for his own uncertainties.

Through this story, Aina shows the tension between devotion to Confucian and *qing*-based relationships and the political turmoil that prevents social harmony. After the trauma of the fall of the Ming dynasty, Aina's retelling deconstructs not only the notion of a parallel conception of society but the entire premise of how one should behave or conceive of one's role in society. Human relationships had been on the public stage in the eyes of the state since the Han dynasty, but familial relationships such as wife and mother also became a more private place of refuge for traumatized Ming loyalists, even as the state made taking leave for the sake of family more difficult.[58] In the context of dynastic instability, Aina's Jie Zhitui sacrifices any private refuge for the sake of the state but receives little reward. The simple path followed by the Jie Zhitui of the *Zuozhuan* is not a choice here. In Aina's world of the Ming/Qing transition, Jie Zhitui must abandon one

[58] Kutcher, *Mourning in Late Imperial China*, 108-109, 124. Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 156.

relationship for the other.[59] Jie's wife and his prince both reject him despite his actions of love and loyalty to both. But though Aina through his storyteller satirizes both *qing* and orthodox Confucian systems of social order, he does not offer the reader any alternative, nor does he fully dismiss the merit of either Jie's political loyalty or Shi You's marital fidelity. I suggest we read the story not as an iconoclastic dismissal of all mainstream views of order, but as a manifestation of uncertainty and trauma in the wake of the Ming dynasty's violent fall.

The motifs of the jealous shrew and henpecked husband were an extremely popular source of entertainment in the Ming and Qing dynasties, but this ubiquity in literature also suggests that writers considered the problem real, constant, and serious. In his discussion of the motif, McMahon writes:

> The drift of this and other anecdotes about shrewish jealousy is to aver the ubiquity of the problem and, despite macabre outcomes, to record the amazement or laughter aroused in readers and spectators. But amazement or laughter trivialize what other works portray as a far-reaching problem.[60]

McMahon implies that tension between jealous wives and henpecked husbands was a source of laughter and a source of fear. Men may have enjoyed these stories as a source of laughter, but that enjoyment implies an insecurity about the increasing problem of jealous and angry wives. Jealousy was the predictable product of the economic, social, political, and sexual power differential between husband and wife. Comparable to the way Aina's rewriting alternates between sympathy and antipathy for Shi You, authors of

[59] Kutcher, *Mourning in Late Imperial China*, 74.

[60] McMahon, *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists*, 58-59.

fiction and personal writings alternated between amusement and concern about the problem of jealous women.[61]

In her discussion of the late imperial women's chastity cult, Weijing Lu notes how the discussion of women's fidelity in the face of harsh circumstances became more dramatic and more widespread around the Ming/Qing transition. Though few late Ming literati wrote more than one piece on the subject, the number of writings about women's fidelity increased sharply in the early Qing as the devotion and loyalty of a woman to her husband became symbolic of political loyalty to the Ming.[62] Lu writes that "In a continuously changing society, social practices generated new tensions that compelled the ruling elite to rethink what it meant to be 'virtuous.' The faithful maiden was the embodiment of ideological tensions and struggles confronted by the late imperial elite."[63] The discussion of faithful women, then, was often a roundabout way of discussing questions of political loyalism and choices in the context of the transition. Displacing this discussion onto the shoulders of less empowered women offered "a unique venue through

[61] Yenna Wu notes that while "some of the authors fail to sympathize with jealous women and even exaggerate their supposed evil . . . various dissenting voices began to assert themselves from the seventeenth century on." (*The Chinese Virago,* 50) For example, according to Wu, Li Yu's story "The Spirits Astonish All by Switching Wife and Concubine" in *Silent Operas* argues that female jealousy "had redeeming virtues and could add piquancy to life." It was also a common argument that a jealous wife could prevent a man from over-indulging sexually. In the following century, Yu Zhengxie's 俞正燮 (1775-1840) famous essay "Jealousy is not a Woman's Evil Trait"（妒非女人恶德论） argues that jealousy is natural and a sign of genuine affection, as does "Furong Waishi" 芙蓉外史 in his preface to the Guilü 閨律 (1644-1911). Later, Li Ruzhen 李汝珍 (1763-1830) offered a more positive depiction of shrews in *Flowers in the Mirror Jinghua yuan* 镜花缘." Wu, *The Chinese Virago*, 50, 253 n195-96.

[62] Weijing Lu, *True to Her Word*, 54.

[63] Ibid., 9.

which the traumatized Confucian elite vented their sentiment, desperation, and political resolve."[64]

Although Lu focuses her discussion of the cult of wifely fidelity on chaste widows, I argue that Aina's depiction of Shi You is also part of the fidelity cult. The chastity cult in the early Qing emphasized the parallel between the loyal minister and the faithful wife. Comparable to how the violence and instability of the Ming/Qing transition resulted in disrupted families and unrewarded loyalties, the instability of the state in Aina's narrative is the root cause of Shi You's anger and therefore the social disorder.

In Aina's story, the incompetence of the state results in the disintegration of the family and the inability to reward good deeds, very different from the moral promise of the *Great Learning* (大學) that family order will result in a greater societal order. The *Great Learning* states:

> Through the investigation of things, one can extend one's knowledge; once knowledge has been extended, the will can be made sincere; once the will has been made sincere, the mind can be rectified; once the mind has been rectified, the self can be cultivated; once the self has been cultivated, the family can be regulated; once the family has been regulated, the state can be properly ordered; once the state is properly ordered, the entire world can be kept in harmony. [65]

The *Great Learning* argues that cultivation of the self will produce a stable family, which in turn will produce a stable political order. Yet despite Jie's and Shi You's moral cultivation in regards to familial relationships, the state is unstable and actively

[64] Ibid., 8.

[65] Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 27-28. Originally from "Daxue" in Zhu Xi, *Sishu jizhu* 四書集注. (Taipei: Fa Xing Zhe Yi Wen Yin Shu Guan, 1966), 2.

destabilizes the familial and personal realm. Indeed, it may be no coincidence that the introductory anecdotes about the destructive power of jealous women are set in Shandong and Shanxi provinces, two areas especially devastated by the Ming/Qing transition.[66] In the context of violent destruction, a lowly wife becomes an easy target of blame. As Epstein writes, "The figure of the shrew, because of her power to threaten normative Confucian social structures on a number of levels, became emblematic of the breakdown of the sociopolitical order within orthodox discourse."[67] The relative harmony of the husband and wife relationship is seen as a microcosm of the harmony of the empire.

The interplay of shrews and *yinyang* 陰陽 cosmology also shows the conflicted relationship between state and household. Shi You and other shrews often seem to represent both *yin* and *yang*. That is, they are accompanied by *yin* symbols of water and wind, but also manifest *yang* yearnings for control.[68] Shi You is represented by a wind that capsizes boats with large waves, which is very *yin*, but she is also a woman with a whip of nine red cords who remains on earth after her death as a stone releasing a smoke-like black vapor, which is very *yang*. Shi You, therefore, characterizes an excess of both sides and this ambiguity makes her a strong symbol of disorder. Further, the same

[66] For a brief discussion of Shandong's issues with banditry and devastation under the Qing, see Frederic Wakeman, Jr,. "Establishing Qing Rule" in *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China*, vol 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 424-36. For more on Shanxi, see Session 11, and Jack Gladstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 390-91.

[67] See Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 121.

[68] For an example of how violent women are often marked by *yin* symbols such as water, See Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 142-49. McMahon, however, claims that a shrew represents a woman imbued with *yang* energy. *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists*, 57.

storyteller who tells us about Shi You also uses *yinyang* symbolism to depict the political and cosmic disorder of the Ming/Qing transition.[69] This sense of cosmic disorder manifested at the family unit mirrors so well the sense of cosmic disorder at the state level during dynastic crises that it is difficult to distinguish which is the cause of which, even as the storyteller continues to firmly place the blame on Shi You.

It is significant for our understanding of Shi You as a shrew that the diegetic realm of this first story stays in disorder after the storyteller has finished his narrative. Authors of shrew stories normally offered some sort of resolution. Many authors offered the jealous woman a cure for what was considered an "aberrant humor."[70] Though the man was also sometimes punished by means of karmic retribution for abusing his power, the woman—Shi You included—normally bore the majority of the blame.[71] In some stories, the jealous woman is beaten or punished in the afterworld.[72] One prominent example of this is *Marriage Destinies to Awaken the World* (*Xingshi Yinyuan Zhuan* 醒世姻緣傳), also from the Ming/Qing transition era, in which the jealous shrew Sujie collapses as her husband Di Xichen reaches karmic enlightenment and chants the *Diamond Sutra*. Karmic retribution offers narrative closure, and the male protagonist's self-cultivation further reinforces the Confucian notion of self-cultivation leading to

[69] The same storyteller offers an account of the fall of the Ming in session eleven that is full of *yin* and *yang* symbols as evidence of political and cosmic disorder.

[70] McMahon, *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists*, 59.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Wu, *The Chinese Virago*, 41.

higher levels of social order.[73] Order is restored and the male protagonist has learned important moral lessons in the process.

In Aina's shrew story, however, karmic resolution and earthly order do not resolve the situation. The story proper ends with the following statement:

> Now I ask you, isn't this a story about a woman who remained jealous even after becoming a deity? Even today, the women of that area have an extremely violent temperament, but the men are all law-abiding and never dare act in any kind of unbridled way. People arriving at the ferry crossing only see the *Yin* winds and the mists of hate casting their pall over the area, a barrier set out by Lady Shi's vicious soul.[74]

Despite what the storyteller implies, no authority figure can punish or cure the shrew in this story without invoking deeper questions about political order and loyalty. The fact that such punishment or cure never occurs may tell us something about Aina's hesitancy to completely dismiss loyalty and fidelity as worthwhile values. Still, Aina has lost much faith in the ability of Confucian ethical virtues to produce a positive social order and therefore leaves us with an incomplete *huaben* story, refusing to give the expected resolution of conflict.

As noted before, early classics such as *The Great Learning* (大学) claim that orderly society begins with the cultivation of the self, moves to the cultivation of the family, and finally to the cultivation of the empire.[75] Yet in this story, despite the proper cultivation of all parties, the instability of the state causes the devolution and destruction

[73] Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 138.

[74] Mei and Harris, "Session 1," 56.

[75] Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 27-28. Originally from "Daxue" in Zhu Xi, *Sishu jizhu* 四書集注. (Taipei: Fa Xing Zhe Yi Wen Yin Shu Guan, 1966), 2.

of a potential family and of both individuals. If rulers cannot be counted upon, or are not capable of keeping order, then no level of perfect loyalty will ensure greater reward or fulfillment, though it may cause frustration and bitterness. Aina may have set the story in the period of disorder between the Qin and the Han, but the focus seems to be the Ming/Qing transition. More specifically, Aina seems concerned about the significance or reward of human virtue in the light of the profound cosmological questioning in the early Qing dynasty. If Heaven is a force of just karmic resolution, it has failed in this case. Shi You's refusal to erase her own sacrifice and suffering from the record for the sake of Jie Zhitui's reward forces the reader to either label her as jealous and vicious or confront the unreliability of normative ideas of social order, whether that be the orthodox five relationships or the more romanticized cult of *qing*. If there is a greater message in this story, it is not that individual and familial cultivation allows for an orderly empire, but that an orderly empire allows for familial and individual self-cultivation. And if individuals must rely on the state for stability, loyalty will always carry significant risk.

CHAPTER III

FAN LI GIVES XI SHI A WATERY BURIAL

Session two of *Idle Talk* begins with the return of the older storyteller from the first session. As in his first story, his tone is despondent and sardonic, and he questions the value of loyalty in times of political instability, offering another dark ending. Though he never mentions the Ming specifically, he closely alludes to the corruption and factionalism that were rampant at the end of the Ming dynasty. Aina, through his cynical storyteller, uses the guises of generic convention and light-hearted humor to rattle and destroy traditional ideals of loyalty and faithfulness, of political and moral unity, and of martyrdom and survival. The irony of the ending of the text—a dark story followed by light laughter—leaves the reader unsure of the proper way to respond. Only the looming onset of storm clouds just as the primary diegetic audience prepares to celebrate lends credence to the story's darker undertones that they deny.

In this second session of *Idle Talk,* Aina brings back the same storyteller from session one to tell us another story of a woman who serves as the pivot between the political and familial realms. Instead of telling a story about perfect political and marital fidelity, however, Aina has his storyteller present a darker reality of human motivations. In his narrative, political instability and dynastic crises cause Xi Shi and Fan Li 范蠡 (517 BCE -?), once famous lovers and political heroes, to have more mixed motivations. Instead of acting only out of parallel sentiments of *qing* and political loyalty, both characters must also act out of a desire for self-preservation. Their desire to survive

ironically further deconstructs social order. This need for self-preservation also makes *qing* more of a necessary personal sacrifice. Indeed, Fan Li repurposes his *qing* for Xi Shi as a pretense under which to murder her. Aina uses the various characters' relationships to Xi Shi to express a declining belief in a moral, karmic *Tian* and to illustrate his own uncertainty about the value of moral action. Aina's storyteller is again inconsistent; he speaks of the necessity of self-preservation but also decries both Fan Li's and Xi Shi's lack of loyalty.

In the first century CE Zhao Ye 趙曄 (fl. 60-80) composed the *Annals of Wu and Yue* (*Wu Yue Chunqiu* 吳越春秋), a fictionalized history of the battle between Wu and Yue during the Spring and Autumn period.[1] According to Zhao, in about 494 BCE a young King Goujian 勾踐 of Yue (496-465 BCE), expecting a revenge attack from King Fuchai 夫差 of Wu (r. 495-473 BCE) for an earlier victory, pre-emptively re-attacked the state of Wu against his minister Fan Li's advice and was soundly defeated. King Goujian planned to commit suicide in response to his failure, but his ministers convinced him that doing anything to bring about peace between Yue and Wu was more valuable than killing himself in dishonor. This theme of non-violence in pursuit of peace and stability over violent loyalism reappears in the *Idle Talk* rewriting.

Instead of dying, Goujian and his minister Fan Li serve as servants to Fuchai beginning in 492 BCE. They so move the king with their gifts and humility that he

[1] David R. Knechtges and Taiping Chang, eds. *Ancient and Early Medieval Chinese Literature: A Reference Guide, Part Two*. Handbuch Der Orientalistik. Vierte Abteilung, China; v. 25/2 (Dd. Leiden: Brill 2013), 1385.

releases them. King Goujian and his ministers then spend years plotting to take over Wu and succeed, thanks partially to the gifts of beautiful women that distract Fuchai from his duties. Xi Shi emerges from the legend of the gift of beautiful women. Yet even once Yue defeats Wu, and everyone is celebrating in the Wu capital, King Goujian is not content. When one of his loyal ministers, Wen Zhong 文種 (fifth century BCE), praises the king's victory and implies that it is now time to go home and reward those who aided him, the king is visibly displeased. Fan Li notices this and makes plans to retire, urging Wen Zhong to do the same. Once they return to Yue, Fan Li offers a long memorial to the king praising his accomplishments and begging leave. Despite threatening to harm Fan Li's family in retaliation, King Goujian allows him to leave and even commissions a bronze statue in his honor. King Goujian then discusses matters of state with the statue. Fan Li disappears on a boat and is never seen again and King Goujian cares for Fan's family personally. Wen Zhong, despite Fan Li's advice that the king has become overly ambitious in his success and no longer views Wen Zhong's service as essential, refuses to acknowledge reality. When Wen Zhong refuses to support the king's continued ambition, King Goujian offers him a sword to kill himself and honors him posthumously.[2]

As Paul Cohen has argued, Zhao Ye presents King Goujian as very appreciative of his ministers and as a good recognizer and utilizer of their abilities. Still, once Goujian has what he wants, he sees no further use for his ministers. He may not actively move to

[2] My summary here is a summary of Paul Cohen's longer exposition of the story based mostly on Zhao Ye's *Wu Yue Chunqiu*, but also other sources such as the *Zuozhuan* and the *Shiji.* For a more detailed account see "The Goujian Story in Antiquity" in Paul S. Cohen, *Speaking to History: The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 1-35.

dispose of them, but he is less willing to tolerate their remonstrations. Thus, Cohen writes of Fan Li, "Fan Li also had no desire to revolt against Goujian. But he knew . . . that the unbridled ambition and envious nature of the Yue king would make life extremely dangerous for anyone in his entourage who had accumulated great merit. And so . . . Fan Li left Yue and reinvented himself in another life."[3]

This early legend is important because it was the foundational narrative for later versions of the story, including the much-romanticized Ming *chuanqi* play that the storyteller in *Idle Talk* explicitly deconstructs.[4] The legend is also important because it gives the context for characters' decisions that Aina ignores or changes in his storyteller's retelling. I will argue in this reading that the old storyteller's retelling of the legend primarily represents Aina's questioning of idealistic visions of social order as premised on either *qing* or the orthodox cardinal Confucian relationships. Further, the storyteller consciously leaves narrative gaps and omits details of the original narrative to further undermine the moral purity of his protagonists and to problematize ideals of loyalty or sentiment (*qing*). I also suggest that Aina's retelling is a palimpsest. Although Aina seems focused on the political context of the Wu-Yue conflict, his version also reflects the political turmoil of the late Ming. These features of the story turn what initially reads as a light parody of Xi Shi into a story with much darker undertones. Through his storyteller, Aina struggles to decide the roles of loyalty and sentiment in keeping social harmony. His storyteller acknowledges that self-preservation is more important than

[3] Cohen, *Speaking to History*, 30-31.

[4] Ibid., 1-2.

either, but also disapproves of his characters' disloyalties and self-interested pursuits. Through his storyteller's contradictions, Aina presents a central dilemma: loyalty and sentiment may be a flawed and unreliable means of keeping social order in times of political crisis, but if he completely diminishes their importance, what remains?

Session two opens with the same omniscient background narrator as session one, and this narrator compares the development of the story's plot to the development of the bean arbor, suggesting that both strive toward a sense of completion:

> On the other hand, what young folks find most to their liking are strange stories from all four directions and common events from daily life that they have never heard before.
>
> Even though new shoots with tender leaves are growing up the bean arbor that was set up some days ago, the bean vines have not yet entirely covered the arbor, and beams of sunlight are shining through empty places among the leaves. These rays are like story tellers who break off at some crucial spot in the middle, leaving gaps [*kongxi* 空隙] that make the audience unhappy. But we will not tell any such troublesome stories today.[5]

The immature bean vine leaves openings for the sun to shine through, leaving the group uncomfortably warm. Similarly, the background narrator implies that in his Jie Zhitui story the first storyteller left gaps (*kongxi* 空隙) in his narrative which make the end less satisfying, but he does not reveal such gaps to us. The metaphor of the burning sun as an unsatisfying ending that can leave readers uncomfortable is alluded to the next day when the young men return to the arbor. The background narrator says "Yesterday's stories so unsettled several of the young men's hearts that they tossed and turned in their sleep, just

[5] Li Fang-yu, trans., "Session 2: Fan Li Buries Xishi in West Lake," *in Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor, A Seventeenth-Century Chinese Story Collection*, ed. Robert E. Hegel (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 59.

waiting for the sun to rise so they could come back to the bean arbor for more old tales."[6] Though the shrew stories may have been entertaining, they have provoked a greater unease in the audience. This is shown in the young men's words to the storyteller:

> "Dear uncle, just as we promised yesterday, we prepared some wine and snacks so that we could hear some more of your great tales" the young men said, happily. "But please don't tell any more about jealous wives; they take the shine right off the faces of young men like us. Tell a story about a woman who is both talented and beautiful and virtuous as well, who reaped her just rewards. This is the kind of story we've got a taste for."[7]

The first story's discomfiting ending and its negative depiction of women have not sat well with the idealistic young men, who long to hear about a more positive type of woman who has talent, beauty, virtue, and receives a reward for her good deeds. There are many requests for happier stories in the text, but, as here, Aina rarely grants them. This story is one example of the interesting contradiction in *Idle Talk* between the primary diegetic characters' claim that they are there to tell light stories and the darker underbody of many of the stories.[8]

The storyteller, however, insists that such a woman has never existed and offers a long lecture on political history to show his point. He offers a chronology of all the important femme-fatales, tying their beauty and ambition to the fall of the Xia 夏 (c. 2070 BCE - c. 1600 BCE?), Shang 商 (c. 1600 BCE- 1046 BCE), and Zhou 周 (c. 1046

---

[6] Ibid., 60.

[7] Ibid., 60-61.

[8] For an example of this, see the beginning of session seven, in which the diegetic audience admonishes a harsh storyteller that the community is only there to tell light stories about Buddhism. This is noted in Chapter IV of my dissertation.

BCE –256 BCE) dynasties. He thus ties the fate of the individual woman to the fate of the state, inviting us to read this story as a companion to the first story. He says:

> There's no way to know about those who lived way back before the Three Sovereigns Era. And even if we speak of the Three Dynasties of Xia, Shang, and Zhou, when they were at their peak there may have been a few sagely and virtuous empresses, but I have never heard of one who was talented, graceful, virtuous and beautiful altogether. Instead, whenever a dynasty was in its final decline, a monstrous vixen would appear who [was] perfect in both talent and beauty.[9]

The young men are unconvinced and annoyed. Later, one of the young men who has recently seen a performance of the *chuanqi* play *Washing the Silk* 浣纱记 *Huansha ji* (Liang Chenyu, 梁辰鱼 c. 1577) disputes the narrator's claim and argues that a woman can have beauty, virtue, intelligence, and a good outcome:

> Because neither the officials at court nor the military generals were [useless 无用] in restoring the Yue Kingdom to strength, they had to rely on the woman Xishi, [who was the number one minister 功臣,] to do it for them. Later when people saw Xishi and Minister Fan leaving on a boat together they believed that the couple had become immortals. Isn't this an example of a woman having both beauty and talent, having accomplished great things, and on top of that, who enjoyed a good ending?[10]

The young man's comment conflates Xi Shi's gender and political roles as both an ideal woman and a perfect political minister (*gongchen* 功臣). She is loyal both to Fan Li as her lover and to the state as a minister. This conflation is important in the retelling, as the tensions between her loyalties and their lack of reciprocation by Fan Li and the state help to drive the plot forward. Further, the rapid collapse and instability of Yue, with its

[9] Li Fang-yu, "Session 2," 61.

[10] Ibid., 67. Modifications made to keep the translation closer to the original text. Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua* , 1.7-1.8.

"useless" officials, exaggerates Xi Shi's function in restoring order. Only the faithful lover doubling as a loyal minister allows a satisfying reinstatement of order. Yet, as Aina will argue through his storyteller, dynastic instability makes pure loyalty impractical and even dangerous. By refusing the satisfying karmic conclusion the young men desire, Aina's storyteller forces the reader to reconsider the value of loyalty, even while he is quick to condemn those who do not show it.

Despite the young men's claims, the storyteller is skeptical of the *chuanqi* version of the Xi Shi legend and suggests it is unrealistic and idealized:

> Even though the play might tell it that way, the people in real life might have had different thoughts about it. . . We see so many successful and famous literati refusing to take advantage of the opportunity to resign if the emperor should become suspicious of their loyalty. Minister [Wen Zhong] was one example, for Goujian killed him in the end [even after [Wen Zhong] had helped him restore the Yue Kingdom.][11] This is why they made up the story that he [Fan Li] became an immortal: therefore it is merely meant as a strong incentive to those who have wealth and talent to step down when they are at the top. On what basis could he really have become an immortal? What I read from an unofficial history is considerably different from what you were told.[12]

I believe that the storyteller's proclamation that the play is unrealistic and his attempt to tell a more "realistic" version of the story is the key reason this *huaben* continues the trend throughout *Idle Talk* of *huaben* becoming less coherent or satisfying. If the narrative does not fully cohere, it is not because Aina cannot write well. Instead, this and other session's narratives fail because the *huaben* form is based on the premise

[11] Traditionally Wen Zhong was the minister who was executed. I am uncertain why this translation claims it was Fan Li but I have changed it. The second set of brackets was added by the translator for historical clarification but is not present in the original *Doupeng xianhua* text.

[12] Li Fang-yu, "Session 2," 67-68.

that karmic retribution will ensure that social order is only briefly threatened by human imperfection. When Aina pushes the form to question this basic premise, he is unable to produce coherent endings that offer the reader a clear interpretation.

Chuanqi Romance and the Idealization of Fan Li and Xi Shi

Because Aina presents the play *Washing the Silk* as the *ur* text which the narrator will deconstruct, I will focus primarily on its construction of the Fan Li and Xi Shi legend in contrast to earlier versions.

Cyril Birch argues that because *Washing the Silk* introduces the romantic relationship between Fan Li and Xi Shi before it presents the crisis of the state, "this first coming together of the lovers, prior to the complications, separation, denouement, and ultimate reunion that the *chuanqi* plot demands, can thus be presented in *The Girl Washing Silk* (*Huansha ji*) as a totally lyrical, uncomplicated celebration of love before the high concerns of state take over."[13] For the *chuanqi* drama, then, the lyrical and romanticized *qing* allows for both a grand reunion of Fan Li and Xi Shi, here both perfectly loyal ministers and lovers, and for a peaceful resolution to the state conflict. Just as in the *Zuozhuan*'s account of Jie Zhitui, there is no serious of conflict of loyalties, and all good deeds are rewarded. The realms of state loyalty and the personal fidelity work together in grand harmony. The state is only able to delay, not deny, the reunion of Fan Li and Xi Shi.

[13] Cyril Birch, *Scenes for Mandarins: The Elite Theater of the Ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 68.

In the play, Fan Li, like Jie Zhitui, can show his political loyalty before any competing loyalty presents itself. As a supremely loyal minister to King Goujian, Fan Li's righteousness is clear from the beginning. Before the political crisis reaches its climax, however, Fan Li meets the unadorned Xi Shi, with whom he immediately falls in love. Soon afterwards, King Goujian and the state of Yue are in crisis. Though Fan Li must leave Yue, he first receives from Xi Shi a piece of torn silk, a symbol of her devotion to him. Wen Zhong, another loyal minister, proposes using a beautiful woman to seduce and distract King Fuchai of Wu, who is widely considered to be a lecher. Willing to sacrifice his own enjoyment of their *qing* for the state, Fan Li offers Xi Shi, thus placing her in the potentially conflicting roles of wife/fiancée and political minister.

Fan Li's decision between his love and his state at a time of political crisis reinforces his good reputation as both a loyal minister and a devoted fiancé. Yet though he is certain it is the right choice to choose the state over personal sentiment, Fan Li is uneasy. Distressed at the prospect of losing Xi Shi, he takes a moment for introspection. The distress shows the depth of his loyalties to both state and fiancée. He moans:

> The King my master has searched the country over for a beautiful woman to present to the King of Wu, and has found none fit to serve. In face of so urgent a national need, how can it be proper to begrudge one solitary woman? I therefore made bold to propose Xi Shi to my master, who has ordered me into these hills to bring her forth. Yet this is the abandonment of a virgin maid and the betrayal of our sworn bond. I am distressed at heart— what to do for the best?[14]

[14] Ibid., 70.

The author's dramatization of Fan Li's decision makes his state loyalty that much more valuable since it comes with a sacrifice. Fan Li quickly finishes his introspective moment and rushes to Xi Shi:

> My salutation to you, lady. Because of the hardships that befell my prince, who is as a father to me, I was detained in a land apart and compelled to neglect our solemn pact, and this I deeply regret (71).

Fan Li compares the prince to a father, which shows the sincerity of his loyalty and alludes to a greater moral order built on parallel Confucian relationships. Although Fan Li openly admits a conflict of loyalties, the audience already views him as a morally exemplary figure who will successfully resolve both the political crisis and his private crisis (69). The conflict of loyalties Fan Li faces shows the harmonious nature of *qing* and *zhong* as forces of social order, and not their destructive potential.

The Xi Shi of the *chuanqi* drama is also steadfast to both her fiancé Fan Li and to her state of Yue. Despite her hesitations, she prioritizes allegiance to the state over her sentimental loyalty to Fan Li:

> I learned, sir, the details of your captivity. But matters of state are of the highest importance, whilst matters of marriage are of the slightest. How could you betray the expectations of the multitudes for the sake of one insignificant woman (71)?

and later:

> Furthermore, I have suffered with grieving heart through the three years that have passed since I promised my hand to you. I beseech you, sir, to seek elsewhere in your efforts on behalf of our country, for I cannot switch allegiance from one to another as you suggest (72).

Xi Shi does serve the country, but her expression of hesitation shows her loyalty to the state and lover even more clearly. Her statements to Fan Li reaffirm his decision to serve the state over his betrothed wife. For both, matters of state loyalty take precedence

over matters of love or marriage. Recognition of the state's priority over personal desires alone would affirm her loyalty to the state but she also expresses a hesitancy to serve as the seductress of King Fuchai because it would require a shift of loyalties. Liang presents Xi Shi as an idealized representative of the virtues of the cult of women's fidelity. She is hesitant to offer her physical or emotional affection to Fuchai when she is committed to Fan Li. But because Xi Shi is also now a political figure, her chastity is connected to both the private and the public dimensions in an especially obvious form. Her concern about loyalties refers both to a temporary though feigned political allegiance to Wu and a temporary physical allegiance to Fuchai over Yue and Fan Li. Xi Shi's physical body and mind are the sites on which social and private order are negotiated

Liang Chenyu presents Xi Shi's actions not as a violation of women's chastity or a minister's loyalty, but as an act of virtue in the pursuit of both. In praising Xi Shi's ultimate success in the political realm, Liang mostly overlooks the loss of her physical chastity to King Fuchai. When Xi Shi returns, she and Fan Li leave together on a boat, and even their departure manages to be of service to both family and state. Further, because Xi Shi has been trained as a seductress and femme fatale for her mission in Wu, sending her off with her lover Fan Li effectively prevents any danger to the Yue capital. As expected for the genre, the play ends with a grand reunion and a happy conclusion, where each character's status is recognized and rewarded by the state, the lover, and the author.

In this story, Aina uses his favored old storyteller from the first session to express his own wavering between the importance of self-preservation on an earth with an

apathetic cosmos and the importance of virtue in a karmic and social order. In this session, Aina's storyteller refuses to offer virtuous heroes or unambiguous resolutions. Instead, he simultaneously acknowledges the necessity of responding to circumstances for one's own survival and condemns the characters for doing so. As a public minister and a private lover, there is no ideal way for Xi Shi to meet all expectations of loyalty. Nevertheless, the storyteller condemns her for her imperfect loyalty and calls her "filthy" and disloyal. Similarly, though the storyteller calls Fan Li a loyal minister of Yue, he complicates his circumstances, hinting that because he is loyal to Yue but born in Wu, his loyalty is not trustworthy. The storyteller depicts the realities of human nature in a politically unstable environment. There are no unambiguously good characters in this story; everyone is morally flawed and out for themselves. The storyteller is happy to condemn the protagonists for their lack of loyalty or chastity but he acknowledges from the beginning the importance of quitting while your circumstances are still favorable. In other words, Aina's storyteller believes that acting out of either *qing* or Confucian virtue can be dangerous and useless, but he is unwilling to cast either set of values out completely because he does not know with what to replace them.

Aina's Retelling of an Older Legend

In Aina's retelling of the story, Xi Shi is a country girl of average looks. Fan Li falls in love with her only because she is not overly made up and because she is surprisingly elegant and able to talk to people. When he returns three years later, Xi Shi is somehow still unmarried and very lovesick. With no parental advice to the contrary, Xi Shi naively follows Fan Li to Yue, where she learns to seduce, before being sent to King

Fuchai of Wu. King Fuchai, however, is a "Suzhou phony" who immediately falls in love with Xi Shi.[15] When Yue invades, King Fuchai flees for his own life and leaves Xi Shi on her own. Returning to Yue, Xi Shi attempts to use her beauty as a means of support, but the storyteller accuses her of trying to surpass the queen. He does not praise Xi Shi for her success but instead blames her for not negotiating peace between the two states.

The storyteller's focus then shifts briefly to Fan Li, who is originally from Wu but has served Yue loyally and can, therefore, be considered a traitor to Wu. Old by the time his plan succeeds, he is concerned about Xi Shi—both for her potential as a femme fatale and as a source of embarrassment should she reveal his secrets. Also concerned that the king will turn on him (from his own paranoia and his suspicious acquisition of wealth), he invites Xi Shi onto a boat to toast the moonlight, which she readily accepts. Right as they are about to raise their cups, however, Fan Li pushes her into the water and drowns her. He then changes his name to "Taozhu gong" 陶朱公, here punning on "escaping execution," 逃诛公 and flees. The storyteller then reinterprets the traditionally positive association of Xi Shi with West Lake, arguing that both are polluted and that both are corrupting forces. The story ends with the diegetic audience's laughter. The young men hope to have dinner with the storyteller but ominous rainclouds threaten and they disperse for a long while before the next session.

[15] The phrase "Suzhou Phony" is not explained in any detail in the story. Though here it is meant to deride the king of Wu as gullible and misguided, it is also one of a few jokes about Suzhou in *Idle Talk*. The opening of session ten also makes fun of beans in Suzhou, calling them empty and flavorless, which is also making fun of Suzhou literati. Because Aina was likely from Hangzhou, and because West Lake is a prominent feature of the text, these pokes at Suzhou can be seen as part of a regionalist literary movement of the time centered in Hangzhou. See Liu Yongqiang 劉勇強, "West Lake Fiction", 135-96.

Deconstructing and Reconstructing the Romantic Heroine Xi Shi

The storyteller begins his retelling by focusing on the implausibility of the romantic heroine. Just as in his lecture on political history, he denies the very quality that makes *Washing the Silk* so appealing: that a woman can be virtuous, beautiful, talented and have a good ending. Instead of presenting Xi Shi as beautiful, the storyteller claims that

> in fact she was merely ordinary. And when he saw her in her narrow lane, she was surrounded by many ugly women from the village. She was the only one who was not too young, not too old, who was elegant in her movements, and who knew how to speak to people. How could Minister Fan's heart not have been moved? [16]

Xi Shi is not extraordinary. She has a mild elegance and a plain appearance, but for the storyteller, these are not exemplary qualities but are instead merely nice contrasts with overly made-up girls from elite families. The storyteller even downplays her decision to follow Fan Li as a part of the political strategy against Wu. Xi Shi is no longer the heroine who considers the implications of her decision in *Washing the Silk.* Instead, the storyteller claims that Xi Shi "naively (*daidai de* 呆呆地) went along with Fan Li." Xi Shi has either no parents or bad parents and is never married off or given advice. Her decision to follow Fan Li is not particularly noble, but merely understandable. Nevertheless, though the storyteller refuses to grant Xi Shi noble intentions, he also does not give her explicitly bad intentions.

After Xi Shi leaves, she learns to dance and seduce. When she arrives in Wu, King Fuchai falls in love with her at once, and she is successful in her mission. When the

[16] Li Fang-yu, "Session 2," 68. Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua*, 2.20.

armies of Yue invade, however, the king of Wu worries only about himself and abandons her. Xi Shi must find her way back to Yue alone, and she does so successfully. The reader might, therefore, expect the storyteller to praise Xi Shi's loyalty and sacrifice. The storyteller condemns her instead:

> The King of Wu had no idea, everyone praised him till he was dizzy, but he suddenly saw her and paid careful attention, as if he had acquired a precious treasure. An old saying says: "A gentleman is ready to die for the patron who understands him, as a woman is ready to doll herself up for her lover." Since the King of Wu treated Xi [Shi] so well, she should have tried to help ease the tension between Yue and Wu. If she had, she would have supported the King of Wu in his bed to become hegemon over all the nobles, being loyal to Wu without betraying Yue. In that case, we could have said that she was a stalwart woman of the sort you'd see once in a thousand years. Why go to the trouble of promising herself to Fan Li in the first place and then let herself be presented as a gift like a goose or wine to the King of Wu! On the one hand, being the filthy bitch she was, she made the King of Yue so subservient to the King of Wu that he even tasted his excrement![17]

The storyteller never praises Xi Shi's loyalty or success but criticizes her for not supporting peace. I suggest that the violent reality of the Ming/Qing transition and the massive number of martyrs it produced underlies this hesitancy to praise Xi Shi's loyalty that started more violence.[18] Just as in the previous session, the storyteller wavers between a desire for humans to adhere to foundational Confucian ethics and a skepticism about the value of those ethics. Perhaps we can see his criticism as an example of Aina's general preference for non-violence in pursuit of peace over virtuous loyalty.[19] In the

[17] Li Fang-yu, "Session 2," 69-70.

[18] Ho Koon-piu points out that the number of martyrs for the Ming cause was higher than any other dynastic transition. See "Should We Die as Martyrs to the Ming Cause?" 123.

[19] This theme is implied in the first session, but is the explicit concern of the seventh session, which I discuss in Chapter IV.

light of the violence of the transition, political loyalty seems less meaningful. Thus, even though Xi Shi has proven her political loyalty, Aina's desire to destroy idealist visions of social order through his storyteller means that the latter must minimize her virtue. The result is a disturbingly negative portrayal of Xi Shi, who allows herself to become nothing but a pawn in a greater war.

The storyteller holds Xi Shi to impossible standards. He expects her to act in both the political and the personal realms. She should be an emblem of both the political loyalty expected of male ministers and the sexual chastity expected of faithful wives or lovers. But it is impossible for her to fulfill both roles perfectly in the context of dynastic instability. The storyteller expects Xi Shi to have sentimental and sexual fidelity to both Fan Li and King Fuchai. She should not have promised herself to Fan Li and then allowed herself to be a gift to Fuchai. But she also should not betray Fuchai who has treated her so well. For whom does Xi Shi have affection and moral obligations? The storyteller is never clear about the development or proper object of her affections, but I suggest that these are irrelevant. The point here is to imply her lack of sexual fidelity. The storyteller reaffirms this by calling her a "filthy bitch" in the next sentence.

The storyteller's expectation that Xi Shi should be faithful to both Fan Li and Fuchai also carries political implications for Xi Shi as a public minister. The old storyteller offers the same conflicted characterization that he gave of Shi You in the first session. The storyteller implies that total devotion to Fuchai would make her a traitor to Yue. Yet he also implies that Xi Shi's loyalty to Yue is a betrayal of Fuchai. By appealing to either womanly virtue or emotion, he ties Xi Shi's political loyalties either to

neo-Confucian expectations of fidelity and chastity as a wife (*jie*) or to sentimental devotion (*qing*) as a romantic partner. The storyteller first implies that she should be loyal to King Fuchai of Wu but then criticizes her for agreeing to be a gift to Fuchai. Instead of articulating a clear criticism of Xi Shi's loyalties, the storyteller moves the goalposts by expecting her to use her position to negotiate peace. Yet this was not her task from the beginning, nor is it guaranteed to not backfire. The storyteller does not promote loyalism that needs or encourages violence, but the suggestion he offers in its stead is unrealistic and problematic.

The storyteller presents Xi Shi as both a femme fatale and a helpless and naïve girl. Note how he oscillates between speaking of Xi Shi as a powerful subject and as a powerless object. She is a precious treasure but also a political negotiator. She should have been loyal to both Yue and Wu but she is also a mere gift to the wrong state. The storyteller consistently suggests that Xi Shi is ambitious and calculating, and he also expects her to be able to single-handedly negotiate peace. Yet he also makes fun of her as a naïve young girl who dumbly follows Fan Li, not fully aware of what she is doing. To the storyteller, Xi Shi is naïve to trust either Fan Li or the state to care for her. Because of her naïveté, she is a victim of the self-interested mentality that political turmoil encourages. Nevertheless, when that political turmoil causes her to act out of her own self-interest, the storyteller is quick to criticize her.

The old storyteller also criticizes Xi Shi's actions upon returning to Wu. After briefly criticizing King Wu for betraying her, the storyteller returns to his criticism of Xi Shi:

> When the enemy invaded the capital, the King of Wu saw his chance and made a run for it while Xi [Shi]—his confidante and the beauty who shared his bed and had brought him boundless joy—was thrown into the Eastern Sea.
>
> Do you know what Xi [Shi] had in mind then? She hoped to return to Yue and use her remaining beauty as a middle-aged woman to her advantage. She even thought she could win the heart of the King of Yue and rise above the Queen.[20]

The storyteller's brief sign of compassion for Xi Shi as a victim is at once interrupted by criticism of her ambition. The state's instability forces each character to focus only on their own interests. The king of Wu abandons Xi Shi because he only cares about his survival. In such a context, romantic *qing* or conjugal obligation is less important to him. The king of Wu's self-interested concern for survival is unfair to Xi Shi, but it triggers a chain reaction. Left on her own, Xi Shi must act out of her own interest even if it hurts her reputation. The storyteller wavers between his earlier admission of the necessity to ensure one's own survival more than anything else during times of political uncertainty and his desire to destroy the idealistic notion of Xi Shi as a romantic and political heroine.

Loyalty Is a One-Way Street: Ministers, the King, and Political Turbulence

Although Xi Shi is nominally the subject of the story, the storyteller's depiction of Fan Li is a more complicated example of both the desire to destroy idealistic notions of heroism and the flawed narrative that results.[21] I also suggest that Fan Li's paranoia and

[20] Li Fang-yu, "Session 2," 69-70.

[21] See Robert Hegel, "Gossip and Exaggeration: Aina and His Short Stories," in *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*, 17.

corruption seem to reflect late Ming political instability. Therefore, I will offer some brief context on the turbulence of late Ming political factionalism to bring to light the layers of authorial concern in this text.

Intense factional disputes for power and increasingly harsh consequences for those who found themselves out of power characterized the late Ming (roughly from Wanli 萬曆 [r. 1587-1620] to 1644). Although factional disputes are a common theme in Chinese imperial history, the brutality of the late Ming struggles, the way that the factionalism crippled any administrative effectiveness, and the corporal punishments for political losers make it unique in Chinese history.[22]

Starting with the already brutal first emperor Ming Taizu 明太祖 (1368–1398), Ming emperors began to use corporal punishment of officials in increasingly violent ways. Except for Ming Taizu, early emperors usually used corporal punishment more to embarrass officials than to physically hurt them, but later emperors used it more extensively and gravely. For example, William de Bary notes that on one occasion about a century into the Ming, the emperor had 35 ministers beaten so severely that they needed months of recovery. In the sixteenth century, some officials were flogged naked, while others, who dared to criticize the emperor for his pleasure excursions, were beaten so severely that many died. William de Bary argues that "under such circumstances even the ablest of ministers could not be expected to act effectively in the peoples' interest."[23]

[22] See Andrew Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, 9-11.

[23] W.T. de Bary, "Chinese Despotism and the Confucian Ideal: A Seventeenth-Century View," in *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, John K. Fairbank ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 174-75.

One famous early example of officials' discontent was Fang Xiaoru 方孝孺 (1357–1402), whose family was executed to ten generations after he refused to serve the Yongle emperor 永樂 (r. 1402-1424). Emperor Yongle had violently taken over and murdered the Jianwen emperor 建文 (r. 1398-1402), to whom Fang had been personally loyal. When the emperor asked Fang to compare him to the duke of Zhou, Fang responded "Then where is King Cheng?" sealing his fate.[24] In one legend of the duke of Zhou's virtue and loyalty, his brother King Cheng publicly questions the duke's intentions and spreads rumors that the duke wants to be king himself. By implying that the Yongle emperor is more like King Cheng than the uke of Zhou, Fang is asserting that the emperor is a villain who does not recognize true virtue. Fang's violent punishment of being forced to watch his brother's death and then being executed himself by being severed at the waist continued to upset literati throughout the dynasty.[25]

After a protracted fight with his officials over the succession, the Wanli emperor mostly withdrew from the affairs of ruling the country, leaving a political vacuum. Angry that his ministers insisted on naming his first son as heir instead of his favored third son, the emperor refused either to act as emperor or to abdicate. The Wanli emperor refused to fill official positions or to approve requests to resign (because they offered a chance for remonstration). With frustrated officials discouraged and often just leaving without

[24] Peter Ditmanson, "Fang Xiaoru: Moralistic Politics in the Early Ming," in *The Human Tradition in Premodern China*, ed. Kenneth J. Hammond (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 128.

[25] Peter Ditmanson, "Death in Fidelity: Mid- and Late Ming Reconstructions of Fang Xiaoru," *Ming Studies* 1 (2001), 114. Julia Ching also implies this in *To Acquire Wisdom: The Way of Wang Yang-Ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), xxi.

approval, competent administration became impossible.[26] Many officials felt they were ineffective or unable to perform their obligations either because of the excess power of the grand secretary Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525–1582) or the inaction of the emperor. This alienation of officials resulted in the creation of factions as an attempt to either influence those with power or gain power themselves.[27]

The Wanli emperor's death did not result in a more competent administration but instead caused even more partisan factionalism.[28] When he died in 1620, and his first successor died, the Tianqi emperor 天啓 (r. 1620–1627) took the throne at the young age of fifteen. More interested in carpentry than ruling, he allowed the eunuch Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢 (1568–1627) to rule in his stead. The much-hated eunuch was not afraid to act against his critics. Charles Hucker points out that those officials who dared to oppose Wei were "expelled from office by the hundreds, stripped of their status and traditional privileges, arrested, imprisoned, and in not a few instances tortured to death."[29] This spectacle of proud, educated, moral men being humiliated brought government morale to a never-before-seen low, and made any service out of loyalty to the state explicitly dangerous.

Here it is worth returning briefly to the storyteller's earlier comment:

---

[26] Ray Huang, *1587, A Year of No Significance*, 76.

[27] See Timothy Brook, *The Troubled Empire*, 102.

[28] Ray Huang, *1587*, 79.

[29] See Charles O. Hucker, "The Tung-Lin Movement of the Late Ming Period," in *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, ed. John K. Fairbank, 134-35.

> We see so many successful and famous literati refusing to take advantage of the opportunity to resign if the emperor should become suspicious of their loyalty . . . This is why they made up the story that he [Fan Li] became an immortal: therefore it is merely meant as a strong incentive to those who have wealth and talent to step down when they are at the top.[30]

The storyteller emphasizes the importance of officials leaving court before kings question their loyalty. He seems to reference this in the present tense but mentions the Fan Li story as an example. This suggests that Aina is using the old storyteller to comment on late Ming and early Qing political realities. I believe that the turbulent court politics of the late Ming were also unstable enough to encourage comparisons to the fate of the loyal Wen Zhong. That is, even the most moral official could meet a sad fate if he happened to be on the wrong side of whoever was in power. This, combined with the immense pressure to become a martyr during the Ming/Qing transition, makes the storyteller's implications understandable. Loyalty is an admirable but potentially dangerous quality.

Timothy Brook writes:

> Most everyone understood the loyalty clause in autocracy's deal between ruler and minister: only the minister can be at fault. Whether the ruler acts well or badly is of no account, because he is essential to the system, the foundation of the nation, and the only sure guarantee of the survival of his dynasty. Loyalty produced a situation that was a predicament both for the ruler who wished to override the real constraints on his power but could not figure out how to do so, and for the official who believed that there were constitutional principles higher than the obligation to serve the emperor, but who could not hold to the one without suffering for breaching the other.[31]

[30] Li Fang-yu, "Session 2," 67-68.

[31] Brook, *Troubled Empire*, 103.

Brook describes the impossible quandary that late Ming officials faced. Even devout officials could become victims of factionalist politics in which political enemies magnified the smallest technicality to a question of good versus evil.[32] Officials had to question whether their loyalty was to the Confucian system of ethics, which could put them at odds with the emperor, or to the emperor himself, who could be incompetent, bitter, or blatantly uninterested. Because the factionalism of the late Ming discouraged good officials and rewarded corrupt officials, literati began to view the once alluring prospect of court service as a dangerous undertaking. Ray Huang captures the spirit of both the late Ming and of the ministers in this *Idle Talk* session in his comment that "only when thousands of hidden motives and private interests had been restrained and neutralized by the teaching of the *Four Books* could the empire be held together. The moment that bureaucrats started to quote the text of the canon to wage a verbal civil war . . . the empire became ungovernable."[33]

Fan Li: Paranoid Loyalist or Heartless Villain?

The storyteller does not tell Fan Li's story in chronological order. He focuses first on Xi Shi's character and history and only then switches to Fan Li. Further, he contributes to the narrative disorder in this session by jumping around in his narrative and making assertions that lack clarification until later, almost as afterthoughts. For example, the storyteller mentions that Fan Li fears that Xi Shi will reveal his secrets before he reveals what those secrets are. By alluding to Fan Li's "obscure plots" without offering

[32] Ray Huang, *1587*, 79.

[33] Ibid.

any details, the storyteller destroys the reader's empathy for Fan Li without really telling why.

The only secret about Fan Li that the storyteller does reveal to us is about his place of birth:

> Moreover, Fan Li was born in the family of Sanhu at Chu, which nowadays is in Wujiang County originally under the jurisdiction of Suzhou. Thus, as a commoner of Wu who had become a loyal minister in Yue and who in turn plotted against Wu, although loyal to Yue, Fan could be considered as a traitor to Wu.[34]

The storyteller's information is straightforward, but the phrasing is stilted and awkward. He shifts back and forth between multiple reminders of Fan Li's sincere loyalty to Yue and his potential status as a traitor to Wu. His statement is difficult to read and seems forced. As he does with Xi Shi, the storyteller implies that Fan Li's lack of loyalty to Wu somehow undermines his loyalty to Yue.

With the one explicit source of Fan Li's embarrassment clarified, we can return now to the beginning of the storyteller's discussion of Fan Li. He starts:

> On the day that the state of Wu fell, Minister Fan was quite old. On the one hand, he was worried that if Xi [Shi] returned to Yue, she might use her old tricks to tear down the Yue kingdom as she did Wu. On the other hand, he was afraid that if the King of Yue revived the hegemony, Xi [Shi's] presence would remind him of his shameful past, which might cause people to laugh at him.[35]

It is important that Fan Li worries about Xi Shi's ability to hurt the kingdom of Yue because it shows that Fan Li is legitimately loyal to the state. Yet, just as before, the storyteller speaks out of both sides of his mouth. Fan Li may be loyal to Yue but he is

[34] Li Fang-yu, "Session 2," 71.

[35] Ibid., 70-71.

untrustworthy, or at least has some unsavory past that the reader does not fully understand. The storyteller clarifies some of that unsavory past, but even his explanation is limited in its helpfulness. Comparable to the way he describes Xi Shi, the storyteller rarely praises or even acknowledges Fan Li's loyalty. Instead, he works steadily to turn reader empathy against Fan and thereby destroys hopes for the social order built on *qing* and *zhong* idealized by Liang Chenyu in his earlier *chuanqi* version of the events.

Fan Li's anxiety about Xi Shi as a potential femme fatale is also significant. The storyteller seems to share the same fear. The idea that Xi Shi could be both a loyal minister and a femme fatale is related to the fact that she is shouldering both roles of public minister and domestic wife/partner. But it also relates to the political instability of the time. For example, the storyteller mentions in his introduction that the Yue king Goujian later killed Wen Zhong. In Aina's retelling of the story, nobody trusts anybody. A fear of Xi Shi as a femme fatale was also in the *chuanqi* drama. In that version, however, her romantic reunion with Fan Li was both a greater reward for the loyalties of both parties and a subtle way of removing Xi Shi from the Yue capital. The *qing* between Fan Li and Xi Shi doubles as an act of loyalty (*zhong*) that ensures the state's political stability. Here, however, the reader is left to question what romantic sentiments (*qing*) Fan Li still has for Xi Shi. He expresses no happiness that she is still alive and expresses no desire to see her. Fan Li's loyalty to the state of Yue causes him to be suspicious of Xi Shi. Unlike Liang Chenyu's *chuanqi* version, *qing* and *zhong* conflict with each other, and this conflict further destabilizes the political order.

If the first half of this passage emphasizes Fan Li's concerns about Xi Shi stemming from his political loyalty to Yue, the second half emphasizes his more self-interested concerns about Xi Shi. Xi Shi's return to Yue is a direct threat to Fan Li. Xi Shi's return threatens Fan Li's reputation for reasons that are unclear but pressing. Thus, there is no room for sentiment, but only for his own survival. Fan Li's prior *qing* for Xi Shi means that Xi Shi knows his intimate secrets. Instead of that shared knowledge making her his closest friend (*zhiji* 知己) and ultimate companion, it makes her a threat of which he must dispose. When Fan Li's self-interest is at stake, *qing* is no longer relevant.

But why is Fan Li so concerned? The storyteller's refusal to reveal Fan Li's real motivations makes the story difficult to follow, but he does offer some vague context for Fan Li's paranoia. The storyteller alludes back to his earlier concern about unstable kings by elaborating upon the political instability:

> Every one of the ministers who had helped him [King Goujian of Yue] regain the throne had harbored their own secret plots: What if they were serving a ruler who did not trust them? What if they might offend the king unknowingly, and out of the blue the king decided to press charges? They would bring harm to themselves as well as their families! Thus Fan Li suddenly came up with an idea. He found a boat and left saying that he had enough of the material world and wished to spend time drifting around the Five Lakes region.[36]

Again, the storyteller mentions secret plots without informing the reader of their content. In context, the plots seem to be their actions in service to Yue. Otherwise, the plots may refer to plans to preserve the minsters' own security. More interesting, however, is the

[36] Ibid., 71.

remarkable paranoia of the loyal ministers. The storyteller himself, a diegetic puppet of Aina, engages in indirect free discourse with the ministers and his eagerness to relay these concerns appears to cross diegetic lines. The external reader easily forgets who is speaking. The concern about an unstable king may be valid for the ministers in the story's diegetic world, but the storyteller relays it with such exuberance that it seems to connect with Aina's own experience or knowledge. Aina's vicarious discourse about the anxieties of the ministers is also remarkable because immediately prior to this description the storyteller assures us that the king of Yue had no major concern about his ministers. Instead for him, "after he returned to Yue and revived his ambition to become hegemon over the various states, beyond having strong armies and sufficient grain reserves, nothing else was of much concern."[37]

This storyteller purposefully omits the original details of King Goujian's execution of his loyal minister Wen Zhong to make the ministers seem morally dubious and to make the king seem highly unpredictable. According to the *Wu Yue chunqiu*, King Goujian executed Wen Zhong not because of a sudden unpredictable change of affection, but because of a slowly growing arrogance in his ability to lead without ministers who remonstrate. Ironically, including that information would further the storyteller's own point that ministers should quit before their loyalty is in question, but it would also weaken the storyteller's attempt to dispose of moral heroes in this story. Further, the omission of these details makes the minister's predicament seem very much like the predicament of late Ming officials facing an unstable head of state. Aina, through his

[37] Ibid., 71.

storyteller, has changed the story from earlier forms into one that both more closely aligns with his own experiences and eliminates any space for moral bravado.

Aina's storyteller shows his discomfort with violent actions of loyalty by expressing the ministers' concern that the king of Yue will retaliate against them for being willing to plot against other states. Aina also tacitly acknowledges the importance of acting out of self-interest and survival. If Aina believes that the ministers are rightly afraid that the king might distrust them because of their willingness to hatch violent plots, then he leaves the reader wondering how the ministers should behave. Should they have abandoned the King of Yue? The anxiety of the ministers due to the political turmoil forces them to create alternative plans that further tarnish their appearance of loyalty and virtue. Their initial plan may have been "cheap and despicable" but it both proved their loyalty and put them in danger.[38] Loyalty in this story offers little reward, even while disloyalty is condemned.

Before the reunion of Fan Li and Xi Shi, the storyteller tells us that Fan Li had acquired significant wealth while serving as an official. The storyteller finds this suspicious, implying again that it is part of a malicious plot, but he never tells us the details of the plot. Indeed, the storyteller actively changes the plot development to make Fan Li seem corrupt. In the *Wuyue chunqiu*, Fan Li recognizes the ambitions of the king, makes excuses to retire, and is never seen again. King Goujian even honors him. Fan Li harbors no malicious plots, he merely fears for his own safety. In the *Records of the*

[38] "Moreover, the plot was so highly secretive that so much could not be told to others; it was cheap and despicable, involving many situations that people could not bear to see." Li Fang-yu, "Session 2," 70.

Grand Historian, Fan Li does become wealthy, but only as a merchant in the state of Qi after he leaves his loyal service of Yue. Sima Qian also does not question his loyalty.[39] Liang Chenyu's *Washing the Silk* only praises Fan Li's loyalty and romantic exit. But Aina's storyteller is determined to portray Fan Li as morally dubious. To do this, he changes the ending of the legend and leaves out the details of the king of Yue's change of heart. Without the details of Fan Li's intentions, the audience is uncertain why Fan Li is so paranoid or loathsome. As he did with Xi Shi, the storyteller has made a hero seem like a villain. Fan Li's act of loyalty to the king of Yue puts him in danger. The political climate and the violent actions needed to demonstrate his loyalty work against Fan Li. The storyteller is, therefore, able to strip away Fan Li's moral bravado until he becomes yet another morally questionable self-interested character in the story. Having converted both Fan Li and Xi Shi from the romantic heroes of *Washing the Silk* to self-interested individuals involved in personal and political scheming, Aina presents a postlapsarian world where there seems to be little room for belief in successful moral heroes. The ironic "grand reunion" (*datuanyuan* 大团圆) further confirms this.

The Ironic "Grand Reunion" and the Pollution of West Lake

Aina has his storyteller borrow the "grand reunion" ending of *Washing the Silk* but darkly subverts it. Fan Li invites Xi Shi into a boat for a romantic exit from the world. Fan Li has already falsely declared himself a hermit. Xi Shi is also actively looking out for her interests, trying to find some status and stability back in Yue after the king of Wu

[39] See "Wu Zixu Zhuan" (伍子胥传), Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*. (史记) *The Grand Scribe's Records*, trans. William H. Nienhauser, vol. 7 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 58.

betrayed her. The storyteller builds up the suspicion until the very end by switching back and forth between Fan Li's and Xi Shi's perspectives.

> Only Xi [Shi] understood Fan Li's obscure plots. Xi [Shi]'s only strength was to make herself up as she had done when she was Lady of the state of Wu in an effort to trap him. Yet Minister Fan's feelings for her were not the same as they had been long before. Word that they were together would get around, and the King of Yue would probably come after her.[40] Better that Fan resort to a stratagem he had used as a conniving court official: he invited Xi [Shi] to watch the moon on a lake. When Xi Shi appeared that evening fully made up, she was ready to lift a wine cup to the moon and to lament lost time. She did not expect that Minister Fan had figured all this out in advance and at a deserted spot, totally unexpectedly, he pushed Xi [Shi] overboard. With a splash she went straight off to the Crystal Palace.[41]

Aina has completely de-romanticized the idealistic version of this story. By the time we reach the subverted grand reunion, Aina's storyteller has denied any praise or virtue to either of the protagonists. Quite the opposite, their pursuit of survival and self-interest results not in a romantic reunion, but in their fear and distrust of each other. Xi Shi needs Fan Li for status and stability. She thinks that he still loves her. His affection and her knowledge of his secrets should provide the leverage to promise her security and status. Fan Li, however, needs Xi Shi to die in order to be able to protect himself from the feared paranoia of the king. As the only one who knows his real intentions, Xi Shi could ruin Fan Li's reputation and even endanger his life. Murder is the only solution. Aina's storyteller shatters the young men's hopes for satisfying narrative closure by refusing to

[40] It is unclear if the storyteller is stating that the king of Yue would come after him or her. Either way, however, Fan Li would be in danger, if either one of them could be located.

[41] Li Fang-yu, "Session 2," 72.

depict Xi Shi as both a perfect lover and minister or Fan Li as a man of both *qing* and *zhong.*

The rest of the storyteller's banter concerns the historical connection between Xi Shi and West Lake (*Xihu* 西湖). One of the young men, frustrated with such a negative depiction of Xi Shi and Fan Li, suggests that the storyteller has no proof. The storyteller uses as evidence the names of several made-up unofficial histories and points out the several associations of the name of Xi Shi with water. He also informs us that after Fan Li murdered Xi Shi, he changed his name to "Chi yi" 鴟夷 because he killed Xi Shi (also named "Yiguang" 夷光). The storyteller explains: "If she were not buried in the water, why would Minister Fan change his name to Master Chi Yi? 'Chi' means 'owl' and 'Yi' means 'to harm' or 'to kill.' Since Xishi was also named 'Yiguang,' certainly Fan named himself Chi Yi because he 'killed' Xishi."[42] He then disappears, changing his name again to "Taozhu gong" 陶朱公, which the storyteller claims is a pun on *taozhu gong* 逃诛公 *or* "fleeing execution."[43]

Xi Shi's association with water and Fan Li's name-change should be enough evidence of the veracity of his claims, but the audience is still angry. One man posits Su Shi's famous poem on Xi Shi to prove that Xi Shi has historically been positively compared with the West Lake.

> "What you just said was absurd!" one man said. "Since ancient times, there has only been praise for Xi [Shi], comparing her beauty with the

[42] The character for "owl" *xiao* 枭 can also mean criminal or trafficker. I have followed the published translation but Aina likely means to imply both. Li Fang-yu, "Session 2," 73.

[43] Ibid., 73.

> most magnificent lake in the world—West Lake in Hangzhou. One of Su Shi's poems goes:
>
> The shimmering ripples delight the eye on sunny days;
>
> The dimming hills present a rare view in rainy haze.
>
> West Lake may be compared to Beauty Xi [Shi];
>
> Lightly adorned or thickly made up, lovely both ways."[44]

In response, the storyteller ludicrously suggests that the corruption and filthiness of Xi Shi are a perfect parallel to West Lake. The beauty of West Lake attracts pleasure boats, young idlers, gamblers, and prostitutes, and drains resources from the people in the city who most need them. Just as West Lake "brings no benefit to the city of Hangzhou. Is this not similar to how Xi [Shi] brought down the State of Wu by using her state-toppling beauty?"[45] The similarity of the destructive beauty of the West Lake (*Xi hu)* and the destructive beauty of Xi Shi (*Xi zi)* is certainly parodic, but it also suggests a purposeful attempt by Aina to deconstruct any remaining belief in a romantic heroine who embodies all positive qualities. The focus on Xi Shi's filthiness here does not stem from misogyny, but from Aina's sense that human actions have little connection to greater order. Xi Shi may not be a villain but she is certainly no victim. Rather, despite her loyalty to Yue, political turmoil forces her to pursue her own interests and survival. Loyalty to Yue has hurt her reputation and even proven dangerous to her survival. She would have been better off as an innocent country girl.

[44] Ibid., 73-74.

[45] Ibid., 75.

Xi Shi and Fan Li are both loyal to the state and self-interested. If the political order were stable and the emperor virtuous, these may not be in conflict. But in the context of the late Ming and early Qing, when loyalty could mean death, loyalty and self-preservation became competing values, even as moralists were happy to condemn them. Indeed, the question of loyalty itself was complicated. Is Fan Li obligated to be loyal to the state or to the ruler? And what happens when loyalty to one means disloyalty to the other? The earlier narratives offer a greater significance to the sentiment behind human actions. Fan Li's motivations in both the early accounts and in *Washing the Silk* are pure and recognized. In the latter, Xi Shi is just as the young men desire: a romantic heroine who *Tian* rewards for her beauty and virtue. Both Fan Li and Xi Shi make significant personal sacrifices in the name of loyalty to the state, which needs such sacrifice to survive. In this narrative, however, the storyteller refuses such simplistic harmonies of sentiment. *Qing* and loyalty may be genuine motivations for both characters, but the realities of dynastic and imperial instability mean that they must also consider self-interest, and that blurs motivations and destroys trust.

Just as in the first session, a story that otherwise appears to be a light parody has a much darker undertone. The diegetic audience's response to this story is laughter. Yet, just as they are about to dine together in celebration, storm clouds force them to cancel. The storm clouds threatening the celebration parallel the deeper questions about loyalty threatening the light parody. This story is doing more than giving a humorous account of Xi Shi; it is asking questions that will reverberate profoundly in later sessions. Questions such as: How does one define loyalty and to what is that loyalty owed? To the king? To

the dynasty? Does loyalty define one's virtue? What obligations does a subject have to a ruler in times of dynastic turmoil? Do human actions in the realm of Confucian ethical relationships have any greater significance? and What is the source of moral order, or does such an order really exist?

Through his first storyteller, Aina offers no definitive answers to these questions in his story, but he does make some key implications that I have tried to point out. He implies that loyalty is a complex and potentially dangerous virtue, but he seems hesitant to dispose of it completely—a problem that will appear again in the seventh session. He questions the power of *qing*, either in its romantic or political forms, to bring about social order, but he is just as skeptical about the core Confucian relationships. Most significantly, he is skeptical about the way the genre itself can depict a greater cosmic and moral order that no longer makes sense in the wake of the Ming fall. Dynastic transition or crisis is only in the background in these two stories, but in the next set of stories it will begin to take center stage.

CHAPTER IV

THE GOOD SIDE OF BAD KARMA: AINA'S REWRITING OF SHUQI

In session seven, "On Shouyang Mountain, Shuqi Turns His Coat," (*Shouyang shan Shuqi bianjie* 首陽山叔齐變節) Aina rewrites the legend of Boyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齊 (c. eleventh century BCE), two paradigms of Confucian loyalty whose account was most famously recorded by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (c. 145 or 135–86 BCE). Aina rewrites this legend to continue to question the relevance of Confucian relational ethics such as filial piety and loyalty in the context of the Ming/Qing transition. Like Sima Qian's earlier account, Aina's is especially ambiguous about the ultimate value of virtue. The predominant and simpler reading of this story is that it is making fun of loyalism. But I argue that the storyteller's manipulation of reader empathy, the ironic use of Buddhist symbols and ideas of "enlightenment," and an ambiguous ending leave the reader with no clear didactic message. As in the Fan Li and Xi Shi story, there are no moral heroes. Boyi is both loyal and self-interested but it is Shuqi's explicit disregard for loyalty that makes the story painful, ambiguous, and innovative.[1] By having the cosmos reward Shuqi's self-interest over virtue, Aina questions how or if cosmic moral order functions.

Fictionalizing Sima Qian's Account

To understand the ambiguity and questions of loyalty and fame in Aina's retelling, I look first at Sima Qian's account, which is also ambiguous. Sima's narrative

[1] Patrick Hanan claims that Aina is the first to "debunk" the brothers. Patrick Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 241 n.18.

of Boyi and Shuqi in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記) is straightforward.[2] Boyi and his younger brother Shuqi are the sons of the lord of Guzhu, a vassal state of the Shang. Because he is the eldest, Boyi should inherit the throne once his father passes away, but his father wants to pass the throne to Shuqi. Not wanting to violate ideals of filial piety or rob his brother of his place, Shuqi defers to his brother Boyi, who then refuses the throne because their father wanted Shuqi to rule. They yield to each other several times before they agree to flee. They flee to the Zhou because it is more virtuous than the Shang and because King Wen of the Zhou takes good care of the talented and virtuous Shang elders. King Wen dies, but his son King Wu takes over. King Wu does not properly mourn his father's death. Instead, he carries King Wen's spirit tablet with him into battle with the Shang. He also kills the last Shang king. King Wu's actions outrage the brothers, who view them as both regicide and a lack of filial respect. In their anger, they block the king's path and criticize him. Sima Qian presents their anachronistic protest:

> Can this be considered filial piety, taking up arms even before your father's funeral rites have been completed? And can a subject murdering his ruler be considered feeling for one's fellow man?[3]

[2] For more details on the early history of the story see Sarah Allan, "Legend Set 5: The Foundation of the Zhou Dynasty," in *The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Early China* (San Francisco, CA: Chinese Materials Center, 1981), 108-17. For the story in the context of Aina's rewriting, see Yenna Wu, "The Debunking of Historical Heroes," 1-27.

[3] Translation by Stephen Owen with minor changes. For his complete translation of the biography, see Stephen Owen, trans., "The Biography of Bo Yi and Shu Qi" in *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911,* ed. and trans. Stephen Owen. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 143. Original: "父死不葬，爰及干戈，可谓孝乎？以臣弒君，可谓仁乎？"

The brothers have Confucian ideals before the birth of Confucius, but their protest makes King Wu want to execute them. He spares them only because of the pleas of Taigong (Jiang Ziya 姜子牙 fl. eleventh century BCE), a wise and faithful advisor to kings Wen and Wu of Zhou. In protest, the two brothers refuse to serve the Zhou and seclude themselves on Shouyang Mountain, picking ferns (*caiwei* 采薇) as their only source of food. They later starve to death and become emblems of Confucian virtue and righteousness. Sima Qian briefly doubts their goodness, but he is more concerned about the value of virtue in a greater cosmic order. To him, the brothers only became famous because Confucius heard about them. Yet even more virtuous people have died unknown. Sima questions the value of these virtues, even as he refuses to discard them. He quotes a traditional ideal: "The Way of Heaven shows no personal favorites and always provides for good men." Yet he also mourns: "To have such a history of kindness to one's fellow men and to be so pure in actions, yet to die from hunger!"[4] Sima questions if their death was meaningful and why Heaven allows good men to meet such tragic ends. As he notes, Yan Hui, the favored disciple of Confucius, also died in dire poverty. Why then, did Heaven allow Zhi the Outlaw, an evil man who "killed innocent men every day and fed on their flesh," to die in his bed?[5]

Sima Qian's concern prefigures Aina Jushi's doubts about the existence of moral order. Sima departs even further from his nominal account of Boyi and Shuqi to cry out:

> And if we come down to more recent times, conduct beyond the rules of morality and willful transgressions have brought lifetimes of carefree

[4] Owen, "The Biography of Bo Yi and Shu Qi," 143-44.

[5] Ibid., 144.

> pleasures and great wealth passed on for endless generations. Others take care where they tread, speak up only when it is timely, take no dark byways and are stirred only for justice and the common good; yet the number of such people who have met with disaster is beyond reckoning. I cannot understand this at all. Is this what is meant by the "Way of Heaven?"[6]

Sima has moved from narrating the story of Boyi and Shuqi to questioning whether a greater moral cosmic order exists or cares about humans. How can anyone speak of the "Way of Heaven" in the light of such injustice? Is the "Way of Heaven" arbitrary and unattached to human action? Does virtuous action have any greater significance? Stephen Durrant also notes that

> the "Traditions of Bo Yi," located near the center of Sima Qian's vast work and that the beginning of its literarily most important section, is a radical questioning . . . of the moral world in which the endeavor is embedded. It is, in a sense . . . a defense of inadequacy that points to the deficiencies of Confucius' record and to the even more glaring injustices of Heaven itself.[7]

Durrant points out the historian's increasing lack of structure and explanation in the biography. He argues that this lack of structure makes Sima unable to offer a coherent explanation of moral order or a hermeneutic of history. Sima's structure continues to fall apart as the questions increase. Sima cites Confucius as saying "Men who follow different ways cannot make judgments for one another"[8] but still, Sima pleads, "when all the world is foul and corrupt, the pure man appears most clearly."

---

[6] Ibid.

[7] Stephen W. Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian.* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 26.

[8] Owen, "The Biography of Bo Yi and Shu Qi," 144.

In the final passage, Sima discusses the desire to leave behind a name. He cites Confucius saying that "The man of virtue is pained by the thought of dying without his name being known."[9] but he also cites Jia Yi's concern that a desire for power and glory is often associated with "brash warriors" and "the man overweening." While he concludes that Boyi, Shuqi, and Yan Hui were all virtuous, he questions why they were remembered but not others. Must one be connected to an arbiter of influence to be remembered? What mixed motivations does the desire for a name create?

This narrative certainly inspired Aina's fictionalized retelling of Boyi and Shuqi. Aina asks the same questions. Are acts of virtue significant? Is martyrdom a worthwhile cause? Is the cosmic order moral or is it apathetic to human action? How does the desire for a name affect the sincerity or performativity of virtuous deeds? Is this relevant for our moral judgments of their decisions?

Your Stories Are Too Tart: Brothers, Beans, and Smokescreens

This session begins with the return of the storyteller from the sixth session. In that session, a young man took advantage of the cool breeze to offer a story about cruel and corrupt monks. Aina tells us little about this storyteller. He only tells us that he is young and that while he appreciates early Buddhism's emphasis on karmic retribution, he resents notions of heaven and hell which he claims were added to cheat people. This young man is a milder version of the lecturer we will meet in session twelve in that he believes in a purer Confucian doctrine. Still, in this midpoint of *Idle Talk*, the storyteller

[9] Ibid.

still believes in karmic retribution.[10] After his harsh criticism of institutionalized Buddhism and its corrupt monks, the primary intradiegetic audience pleads with the young man to lighten up. One of the audience members says:

> There are too many exalted monks, and loathsome they can be, my dear friend, but your mouth is too sharp, your tongue is too bitter, and your stories are too tart. We are vegetarians and read sutras all day, we invite others to Buddhist ceremonies and urge them to give alms. We now find it difficult to even mention such matters anymore. Even if we make it sound like flowers are falling from Heaven, no one will believe us.[11] Rather than tell us another tale about the ways of the world, we have a test for you. Yesterday, our host boiled some beans as your reward for telling those stories. Today, why not tell us a little tale about boiling beans; you can show us the depth of your talents without repeating idle talk and gossip about the ways of the world.[12]

The darkness of the prior story makes the primary diegetic audience cry for something less harsh. The members of the audience do not directly ask for a happy story, but they do want something less heavy, as seen in their challenge to tell a story about beans. Yet, as before, Aina meets the pleas for a lighter story with another dark one. First, however, Aina's storyteller gives two anecdotes that lead into his final story about Boyi and Shuqi. The storyteller uses the two anecdotes to carry out two purposes. First, he deceives the audience into believing that he is talking about brotherhood. He does this by ending each anecdote with a comment about brotherhood. Second, the storyteller foreshadows some of the key concerns of the story proper.

---

[10] See Session 6 大和尚假意超昇, or see Zhang Jing, trans., "Session 6: Exalted Monks Pretend Transcendence in Meditation," in *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor, A Seventeenth-Century Chinese Story Collection*, ed. Robert E. Hegel (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 152-53.

[11] This is an ironic touch since at the conclusion of this story flower petals literally do fall from Heaven.

[12] Chun Mei and Lane Harris, trans., "Session 7: On Shouyang Mountain, Shuqi Becomes a Turncoat," in *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor, A Seventeenth-Century Chinese Story Collection*, ed. Robert E. Hegel (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 174.

The theme of boiling beans reminds the storyteller of the "seven steps poem" (*qi bu shi* 七步詩*):*

> Boiling beans, burning their stalks,
> The beans in the pot cry out.
> 'Born we are of the selfsame root,
> Why do you boil us so hard?'[13]

This poem, traditionally attributed to Cao Zhi 曹植 (192–232), was already well-known. Yet the poem, which the storyteller claims "fully explored the theme of brotherly jealousy and sibling rivalry," is dark because it reads as one brother pleading to another for mercy and trust. Accordingly, the storyteller says that Cao Zhi's older brother, Cao Pi 曹丕 (187-226), was jealous of Cao Zhi's talents and asked him to write a poem about beans in the time it took to walk seven steps. Cao Zhi offers the above poem, and Cao Pi does not murder him. The storyteller says that Cao Pi's jealousy was unnecessary and petty. Still, he admits, Cao Pi inherited the empire while Cao Zhi died young, showing that "talent and blessings . . . are all predetermined."[14] The storyteller ends by saying, "Finding ourselves under a bean arbor about ready to boil some beans, I have told a tale about beans and brothers. Now that I think about it, far fewer brothers have harmonious relationships than are estranged from each other (176)." The anecdote thus ends with a vague generalization about brothers.

[13] Mei and Harris, "Session 7," 175.

[14] Ibid., 175-76.

The storyteller seems more concerned with brotherhood to this point, but his next anecdote concerns the duke of Zhou 周公 (? -1032 BCE). The duke tried sincerely to help his young nephew King Cheng 周成王 (r. 1116-1079 BCE) rule the Zhou empire after the death of the duke's elder brother King Wu 周武王 (r. c1046-1043 BCE) who had established the dynasty. The storyteller states that this occurred "shortly after the end of the Shang dynasty when every corner of the world was in chaos. East of the capital arose an army, a righteous army in the estimation of the Shang, but a band of diehards to the Zhou (176-77)." The circumstances—a ruler trying to establish a dynasty amidst the chaos of a loyalist rebellion—seem especially relevant to the Ming/Qing transition, as Mei and Harris note (176). Despite the duke of Zhou's honorable intentions, his elder bother Guan Shu 管叔鮮 spreads rumors that the duke is scheming to take over the throne for himself. The storyteller continues to tell how the duke was unwilling to serve at court because of the rumors. Only later did King Cheng's ministers find the duke's bamboo tablet inside of King Wu's casket. The tablet contained the duke's prayer that Heaven would take him as a substitute for the king. When the duke of Zhou then returned to the capital, the previously uprooted trees [in protest of the duke's mistreatment] uprighted themselves, proof that "Heaven, earth, spirits, and deities were all moved by his integrity. . . As you can see, even a sage can be implicated without proof by his evil brothers. Let me tell you another story about two brothers in the Zhou.(177)."

Though the storyteller has discussed beans and brotherhood, he has also raised the key questions of the session. Both anecdotes concern the role of Heaven in human action.

In the first, Heaven is apathetic and ruthless, "talent and blessings are predetermined," and Cao Pi's jealousy was rewarded with an empire while Cao Zhi died young. Yet in the second, despite the jealousy and viciousness of the elder brother, Heaven visibly recognizes the duke of Zhou's integrity and loyalty. The contradicting conclusions in the anecdotes contribute to the ambiguity of the session and the text.

While both anecdotes imply that loyalty and integrity in times of dynastic turmoil can be dangerous, the storyteller presents the loyal and filial actions of Cao Zhi and the duke of Zhou as the proper course of action despite the circumstances. This hermeneutical precedent makes it more difficult to read the proceeding as a satire of loyalty. The storyteller has moved from a witty story about beans to direct questions about human action in times of political turmoil. Still claiming to simply discuss brotherhood, he moves on to the story proper.[15]

Plot Overview

In Aina's rewriting, the two brothers yield the fiefdom of Guzhu to each other as the Shang collapses. As the Zhou invades, they both flee to take advantage of King Wen's 周文王 (1152-1056 BCE) care for the elderly. But King Wen dies before they arrive and the brothers rethink their decision. They want to call for a righteous rebellion to restore the Shang dynasty from the Zhou invaders, but the people have already accepted the Zhou as having the mandate of Heaven. Disappointed, the brothers remonstrate with King Wen's son King Wu for not showing filial respect and for

[15] "Two brothers, born of the same parents but of different minds, started off by coming together but ended by separating. . . . They were born of the same mother and, initially, quite congenial; they were unsurpassed in their friendship and mutual respect." Mei and Harris, "Session 7," 178.

committing regicide by killing the Shang king. They then seclude themselves on Shouyang Mountain. Though the mountain has only ferns and a few streams, they are enough for two people. Further, ferocious animals who have decided to stop hunting to protest the Zhou surround the mountain.

The brothers' earlier remonstration with King Wu has attracted the attention of many onlookers who have mixed motivations. These onlookers parade in a long line to the mountain and rapidly consume most of the ferns. Loyalty now demands rapid starvation. While Boyi stays devoted but aloof, Shuqi is unable to ignore his empty belly and convinces himself to leave the mountain. Born with a smooth tongue, he convinces the animals to revert to their carnal natures because virtue was not intended for them.

When a supernatural horde of wounded and dead Shang soldiers captures Shuqi, however, Shuqi is unable to talk his way past them. When they question him about his identity and intent, he gets nervous and a letter of defection to the Zhou falls out of his sleeve. Angry at his lack of loyalty and filial piety, the horde intends to execute him in the marketplace, but the animals who defend Shuqi confront them. The two parties are unable to resolve their dispute until "The Master of Making Things Equal" (*Qiwu zhu* 齐物主) descends from the Heavens and lectures on the importance of timeliness more than anything else.[16]

Shuqi feels he has been right all along. The darkness fades into light, the animals and the horde disappear, and Shuqi realizes it was all a dream. He looks around as a

[16] Though this deity is made up by Aina Jushi, it seems to originate from the chapter of the Zhuangzi called "Qiwu lun" or the treatise on making all things equal.

countless number of blue lilies, symbolic of the eyes of the Buddha, bloom around him. Shuqi then resolves to go make a name for himself with the Zhou. He decides to return later to collect his brother's bones and the story ends.

The consensus is that this story is a parody of political loyalty.[17] For example, Yenna Wu and Patrick Hanan have both argued that Aina intends Shuqi to be the reasonable character of the story.[18] But Hanan and Wu make Shuqi seem more honest and straightforward than he is. Hanan argues, for example, that Shuqi "has clearly chosen the reasonable path" and that Aina's depiction of Shuqi as an amoral protagonist shows "the irrelevance of morality to cosmic causation."[19] His reading informs my own, but he oversimplifies the story. He takes as foregone conclusions that the cosmos is apathetic to human action and that political loyalty is meaningless. On the other side, Zhao Jingshen suggests that the story is a satire of Shuqi as a political traitor.[20]

I argue that the story is far more ambiguous than prior readers have suggested. While Aina does question the value of loyalty in times of political turmoil, he wavers and hesitates in this assessment. In this reading, I complicate the prior readings of this story. I argue that though Aina is skeptical about the value of loyalty, he is not comfortable completely dismissing it as a virtue. Nor is he comfortable criticizing or belittling those

---

[17] See Yenna Wu, "The Debunking of Historical Heroes in *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*, 1-27. Hanan, "Aina," in *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, and Wai-yee Li "Early Qing to 1723," in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature Volume 2: From 1375,* ed. Kang-I Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 201-203.

[18] Wu, "The Debunking of Historical Heroes," 18. Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story,* 203.

[19] Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 203.

[20] Zhao Jingshen, *Xiaoshuo luncong*, 94-97.

who stay loyal to a fallen dynasty.[21] Aina channels through his anonymous storyteller a high level of ambiguity, complex characterization, manipulation of reader empathy, and illusion. In so doing, Aina makes the story a far more complex discussion of the relative values of loyalty and self-preservation. His exploration of the value of loyalty also begs greater questions of the relationship of Heaven and humans and whether human action has any significance.

Aina and his storyteller have nominally different purposes in this session. The storyteller views himself as telling an interesting story that may have moral implications. He has some concerns about morality in his introduction, but he does not give easy moral judgments. Though his tone toward Shuqi is increasingly negative, he stays distant from the content he narrates. Indeed, he merely claims to retell a ". . . story [that] cannot be found in the classics or histories, but only glimpsed in the jottings and unofficial histories that escaped the fires of the First Emperor of Qin."[22] I argue that Aina's relationship with the storyteller has two key facets. First, though the storyteller wants to entertain, Aina is still putting the words in his mouth. The young storyteller's general disinterest lets the external reader see Aina's own cognitive dissonance through the ambiguity of the storyteller's narration. Second, there is not here, nor anywhere in the text, a pure separation of voices. The voices of Aina and his storyteller converge more as the session

[21] For more on ambivalence about loyalty amongst Kangxi-era literati, see Lynn Struve, "Ambivalence and Action: Some Frustrated Scholars of the K'ang-hsi Period," in *From Ming to Ch'ing: Conquest, Region, and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century China*, 277-320.

[22] Mei and Harris, "Session 7," 178.

progresses and Aina brings his own questions of karmic order to the surface. The ambiguity of both content and voice show the complexity and instability of Aina's views.

Boyi, Early Characterization, and Problems with Loyalty

In this section, I argue that Aina's storyteller presents Boyi and Shuqi as morally ambiguous from the beginning. As in much of *Idle Talk*, the protagonists are neither moral heroes nor morally reprehensible. Instead, they are a complex amalgamation of empathetic and non-empathetic traits. This ambiguity makes it difficult for the reader to extract any clear moral message from the story.

The storyteller's early indirect description of the brothers' personalities foreshadows their later ambiguity. As the brothers' father nears death, he needs to name a successor. Normally Boyi, as the eldest son, would rule, but the father thinks that Boyi is anti-social and unable to empathize with people. The storyteller describes Shuqi, however, as more worldly wise and more proficient in human sentiment.[23] Shuqi's shrewdness and charisma are neither wholly good nor wholly bad. They make him initially likeable to the reader, but they also foreshadow his ability to manipulate with smooth talk, an ability which traditional Confucian writers never fully trusted. This gift of eloquent persuasion is emblematic of Shuqi's journey to seek a name and complicates his character.

The storyteller also problematizes political loyalty as a value from early in the story. Shuqi begins as a filial son and a mostly loyal subject. When the father tries to pass

[23] *anlian minqing* 諳練民情. Translation is my own.

the throne to him, he acknowledges that Boyi should be the proper heir to the throne, and the storyteller tells us:

> The two brothers politely deferred to each other for a while, but, in the end, decided to run away. Well, these two brothers had abandoned the throne of a ruler just like throwing away an old pair of worn-out sandals; they wanted to abide by the [ancient cardinal bonds of human relationships].[24]

Both brothers are concerned about ruling the Shang in a time of dynastic transition. Shuqi would be justified in taking the position and establishing a name for himself, but he chooses to defer because he recognizes the authority of his older brother and because he cares about the five relationships. Similarly, Boyi declines because he respects his father's wishes and because he does not want to be associated with the Shang during the Zhou invasion. Though both brothers care about loyalty and filial piety, the satiric tone shows that they also care about survival. The passage both pays homage to and parodies yielding narratives as exemplars of loyalty and filial piety.[25] In the context of dynastic transition, the brothers' dedication to human relationships is pleasant but insignificant. Their desire to avoid taking the throne in the face of the imminent demise of the Shang dynasty should take priority over personal relationships. Political turmoil pits otherwise noble or reasonable aims against each other.

Aina's storyteller also suggests that loyalty is problematic because it never exists in a vacuum. Loyalty is very rarely the sole motivation for an action. For example, even Boyi has mixed motivations for secluding himself on Shouyang Mountain. He originally

[24] With modifications for emphasis. Mei and Harris, "Session 7," 179. Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua,* 7.81.

[25] Allen, *The Heir and The Sage*, 108-17.

wants to take advantage of King Wen's care and does not become a loyalist until King Wen dies. The storyteller never clearly reveals Boyi's true intent. On one hand, Boyi and Shuqi both "realized that both the Mandate of Heaven and the people's hearts had already abandoned the Shang."[26] Their decision to remonstrate against King Wu is quite contrived.[27] On the other hand, the storyteller repeatedly calls them righteous, presents King Wu as guilty of their accusations, and has multiple other characters attest to the brothers' integrity. The two brothers are loyal to a corrupt regime that no longer deserves loyalty, and their actions against it are ineffectual and dangerous—their remonstration against King Wu almost gets them executed. But though the storyteller parodies their self-justification for staying loyal, he stops short of criticizing them.[28]

The news of the brothers' move to Shouyang spreads quickly. Hearing of their remonstration, phony loyalists and moralists also begin to move to the mountain. They had initially been afraid of the violence of the transition, but having seen others come out and serve the Zhou, they are emboldened. They only fear that the new dynasty might come after them because of their past associations, so they

> Flowed towards the mountain like a spring tide, like a fish on a string, like pilgrims with the incense in the second month of spring.[29]

---

[26] Mei and Harris, "Session 7," 179.

[27] "Boyi and Shuqi discussed it between themselves, . . . Let's castigate him with this moral argument and see whether he can deny it!" Mei and Harris, "Session 7," 179-80.

[28] The concern about whether loyalism is appropriate for a dynasty that had lost its mandate had long been a concern of Confucian literati, and this story was often used for such discussion. See Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story,* 201 and 241n18.

[29] Mei and Harris, "Session 7," 181-82. The phrase about pilgrims alludes to a passage in the *Rites of Zhou Zhou li*, "In the second month of spring, men and women can meet, and they are not prohibited from eloping." Mei and Harris, "Session 7," 182n34.

These men, called "half-baked literati and phony moralists,"[30]act primarily for their own survival and out of a desire to be known as a hermit or to be offered a position with the Zhou. Though some are loyalists, the majority have at least some self-interest at stake. Yet Boyi still does not acknowledge reality:

> their numbers [were] increasing every day. But Boyi was determined, as solid as a rock. He wandered day in and day out whistling freely and proudly. Leaning on his walking stick, he would pick some ferns to eat and never talked about hunger. Eventually, such hordes of people came that they bumped elbows on Shouyang Mountain. Rather than an empty peak it started to look like a crowded market. Boyi observed, 'They are many in the world who value righteousness; this is a great focal point for the power of the Shang.'[31]

Shouyang Mountain is no longer a sanctuary for genuine loyalty. The storyteller's comparison of the monumental mountain to a marketplace defiles the sanctity of the mountain. Boyi may be a mostly sympathetic loyalist, but he is too naïve to see the reality of the intentions around him. His rapid starvation serves no greater purpose. The mixed narration of Boyi here shows a compassionate empathy for the survivors of the Ming/Qing transition. The storyteller acknowledges Boyi's virtue, noting that for him loyalty is far more important than his physical hunger. But the main tone of the passage is parody. His virtue is like a stone; a respected symbol of loyalty but also stubborn and unchanging.

The onset of hunger reaffirms Boyi's loyalty, but causes Shuqi to have second thoughts:

[30] "或是半尷不尬的假斯文、偽道學，言清行濁" Mei and Harris, "Session 7," 181.

[31] Ibid., 183.

> Shuqi, however, was irritated by what he saw and frustrated by the emptiness of his rumbling belly. One day, a realization suddenly came to him.[32]

In the context of the false motivations of the phony loyalists and the pitying but satiric depiction of Boyi, Shuqi's choice seems rational. Unlike his brother, Shuqi understands the hypocrisy of those eating the ferns, and this drives him to change his mind.

Shuqi now thinks aloud in a rare soliloquy, almost a dramatic aside to the extradiegetic reader:

> What a mistake it was to come up here! My elder brother, Bo Yi, ought to have succeeded my father as ruler of the feudatory state. It was his duty, both by age-old ethical principle and also by the ancestral precepts of the Shang . . . But I am only the second son of the Lord of Guzhu, after all, and in a very different position from my brother. I could have taken a great deal less upon myself. Running up against the Zhou army, without thinking what I was doing, I joined my brother in hurling wild accusations at them, an act that almost cost us our lives. . . But the army passed on, and it is now quite obvious that the Shang house cannot eke out an existence.
>
> I was in a confused and volatile state of mind when I came up here. I assumed there would be just the two of us on the mountain and that our actions would put us in the top rank for all time. But recently we have been joined by many who are merely looking for an excuse to indulge their pride, as well as by a good number who are pretending to be recluses in the hope that they will one day be summoned to court. As for the supply of ferns on the mountain—they need no cultivation and are free of taxes—these people rise early in the morning to get the first choice and pick the shoots clean. . . now our bellies are slack and empty and we simply cannot go on.
>
> It suddenly occurs to me that there are really only two things men seek in this world—fame and money. Some people consider my brother sage-like, virtuous, pure, benevolent and austere, thus giving him his due as a great man. But if anyone were to couple my name with his, it would be only as a casual compliment. If I were to continue under his auspices, even if I made a name for myself, I would still be just a hungry ghost injecting himself into someone else's affairs. . . Now as I look back, my one

[32] Ibid.

> consolation is that it is still not too late to act. As the ancients said, "Better a glass of warm wine while you're still alive than empty fame after you're dead." At present my brother's resolve is as hard as iron, unshakable. If I were to explain to him my desire to leave, he would never accept it. Better by far to seize this opportunity while elder brother is in the back of the mountain picking ferns . . . If there is any chance, I shall leave.[33]

Shuqi acknowledges the false claims of loyalty of those around him, claiming they only really care about fame and money. He makes the reasonable deduction that their insistence on showing loyalty to the ill-fated and corrupt Shang has nearly cost them their lives to no greater purpose, and their current starvation will change nothing. Instead, he reasons to himself, it is better to leave and be productive on his own, and not blindly follow his brother.

But before we declare that Aina is simply making fun of political loyalty, we should examine the speech more closely. Although Shuqi makes reasonable claims, no higher Confucian virtue or purpose drives him. His primary motivations are for food and fame and, as Hanan notes, his speech is "palpably self-serving."[34] Shuqi does not worry that following his brother would make his own intentions less sincere, he worries because he will not be as famous or respected as his brother. This desire for a name had been problematic even in Sima Qian's discussion of the brothers, where he simultaneously acknowledged that the desire for a name drives both the virtuous and the "man overweening."[35] Most telling, however, is that Shuqi decides to leave at the precise moment his brother is picking ferns because he is too scared to tell him directly.

---

[33] Hanan, *Chinese Vernacular Story*, 201-202. Aina Jushi, 艾衲居士, *Doupeng xianhua*, 7.84-7.85.

[34] Hanan, *Chinese Vernacular Story*, 202.

[35] Owen, "The Biography of Bo Yi and Shu Qi," 144.

Cowardice aside, Aina's storyteller directly contrasts the emblematic and revered symbol of loyalty, picking ferns, with Shuqi's desire for food and fame. This detail portrays Shuqi in a clearly negative light.[36]

The storyteller uses the recurring themes of physical hunger ["the emptiness of his rumbling belly"] and sudden enlightenments ["a sudden realization came to him"][37] to create Shuqi as an immensely ambiguous character. Aina has his storyteller constantly reference an empty stomach. This could be literal hunger since Shuqi is starving, but it could also be another allusion to Buddhism. In the Buddhist context, hunger could stand for a desire for carnal pleasures or for fame. By maintaining a language of ambiguity, Aina's storyteller makes it impossible for external readers to decide with certainty whether Shuqi is a crude opportunist or a reasonable self-preservationist. Aina's ambiguity shows a tension between his own internal conflicts. He has empathy for those who chose not to become martyrs for the corrupt Ming but is reluctant to completely steer reader sentiment away from traditional Confucian ethics like loyalty

Sympathy for the Devil? Shuqi's Smooth Talking and Reader Empathy

In this section, I look at the narrative of Shuqi's actions after he decides to leave Shouyang Mountain. I argue that the storyteller gradually manipulates reader empathy against Shuqi. Shuqi's earlier quality of being "proficient in human sentiment" becomes an ability to use smooth talk to get away with amoral actions. Until now, the storyteller

[36] Zhao Jingshen argues that this contributes to a general satire of Shuqi as a traitor. *Xiaoshuo luncong*, 94-97.

[37] These sudden realizations often use the character for "enlightenment," 悟 wu, which alludes to Buddhism.

has depicted Shuqi in a balanced, neutral way. From this point, the storyteller's tone strives to be both entertaining and satirical. The storyteller expounds Shuqi's self-serving justification for his departure to make him less likeable to the reader. By having his storyteller do so, Aina complicates his skepticism of loyalty as a worthwhile virtue in times of dynastic transition. Aina does not portray Shuqi as an explicit villain but instead deflates Shuqi as a moral hero. If the reader does want to read Shuqi as making the reasonable choice, he or she must stomach a lot of negative actions. Shuqi stands for Aina's conundrum: self-preservation is the logical choice, but Aina is still empathetic to loyalists.

Shuqi's deceptive acts after he leaves the mountain further diminish readers' ability to view him as a virtuous or likeable protagonist. He disguises himself as a filial son despite abandoning his brother and refusing his father's request. When other people question his odd appearance or his motivations, he claims that he is "extending filial piety to [state] loyalty," (*yixiao zuo zhong* 移孝作忠) a Confucian virtue but also an explicit lie.[38] This lie is unnecessary if depicting a reasonable protagonist whom the reader should admire or respect. The statement is also strategically ambiguous; the reader can interpret the object of loyalty as either the Shang or the Zhou. The storyteller's disinterested description of Shuqi's artifice is entertaining. But the same artifice suggests Aina's

[38] To convert filial piety into state loyalty (in order to serve the imperial court) See Chapter 14 of the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing* 孝經). For a good translation see Henry Rosemont Jr and Roger T. Ames, trans., *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence: A Philosophical Translation of the Xiaojing* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

hesitance to cast off Confucian relational ethics in the name of survival. It does not make Shuqi a villain, but it does make him a less likeable anti-hero.

To escape the mountain Shuqi must pass the animals, who have also vowed to stop hunting (and thus eating) to guard the loyalists. Like Shuqi, the animals also struggle with the practical implications of their loyalty:

> Let's set aside the story of Shuqi going down the mountain and return to the jackals and wolves, tigers and panthers who followed Boyi and Shuqi up the mountain. The beasts faithfully guarded the mountain single-mindedly with no other intentions. Now among the beasts was a certain kind of fox. He was good at flattery, inclined to suspicion, and awfully hungry. He suddenly [became enlightened to reality (*xingwu* 省悟)], 'Who knew that when the Shang was replaced by the Zhou there would be so many people charging up the mountain to profess their loyalty. But who among them will not have second thoughts about it? My only fear is that they're trying to ride two horses at the same time or having a foot on two boats at once, waiting for their chance to make trouble.'[39]

Starving but skilled at flattery, the fox is Shuqi's foil. Both experience a sudden inclination or enlightenment (here *wu* 悟) to move away from idealistic virtues and focus instead on their carnality. As in the storyteller's narration of Shuqi's change of heart, the language here is ambiguous. The animals' desire to eat and survive seems reasonable, but the use of the Buddhist language of enlightenment to describe their realization has a more carnal and selfish connotation. Similarly, the fox does not carry a purely positive cultural connotation. Like Shuqi, he is cunning, sneaky, and good at talking, and like Shuqi, he is both a voice of reason and an object of suspicion.

The hungry animals decide to eat those who betray their loyalty to the Shang, and so confront Shuqi. Fearing for his life, Shuqi claims that his filial obligations as the

[39] See Mei and Harris, "Session 7," 186. Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua*, 7.85-7.86.

second son are different. He also claims he never intended to stay longer than a few days to help his brother settle in, which had also been a mistake. This second claim is an explicit lie. The lie is understandable, but it means that we read his statements more out of a desire to survive than from a sincere belief in what he is doing. Further, he does not only ask the animals to spare him, but encourages them to stop protecting, and by implication, to eat the loyalists on the mountain, including his own brother. The storyteller implies that survival is not Shuqi's sole motivation. Shuqi argues:

> You and the descendants of the king of the mountain are not like humans, you are not bound with ethical principles. Heaven bestowed life on you, allowing you to be cruel and vicious, to drink blood and eat flesh. You were originally man-eaters. During this dynastic change, there are many past wrongs and long-standing sins in the human world. The time is right to use the power of your strong claws and sharp teeth to gulp and bite, to let loose your Heaven-and-earth shattering force. This is called "Rising when your destiny allows and acting when the time is right." Why follow the humans of today, with their fake dispositions, who speak like sages and saints, but who act like Bandit Zhi? Half awake and half asleep, as if dreaming or drunk you have to put up with empty bellies and relish this simple life. This is dead wrong. Hurry away to the king of the mountain and explain my ideas to him and he will see the light. (*huangran da wu* 恍然大悟).[40]

Overcome by their own hunger, the animals are willing to accept a cosmic justification for ending their loyalism. The animals are happy to accept Shuqi's speech, while the reader may see it as desperate self-justification. Aina through his storyteller again refuses to endorse either view. It may be valid for the animals to reject higher virtues in honor of their physical needs, but does this mean that it is okay for humans? Xu Heya has noted

[40] See Mei and Harris, "Session 7," 187. Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua*, 7.87.

the significant contrast of humans and animals in this story.[41] Confucius asserted that reverence to parents is what distinguishes humans from animals.[42] Confucius did not expect animals to operate out of sincere virtue, but he did expect humans to hold themselves to a higher standard. If this is the case, then Shuqi's arguments about animals do not apply to himself and he betrays his own lack of virtue. Through his storyteller, Aina details the parallel development of human and animal realizations, and this makes loyalty and other Confucian relational ethics difficult to reject. Shuqi may be a voice of reason but Aina refuses to completely reject these virtues.

Shuqi's speech also alludes to questions of greater cosmic order. His mention of Zhi the Outlaw alludes to Sima Qian's discomfort about the murderer's peaceful death in his own bed. Shuqi describes a violent, distant, and mostly apathetic cosmic order and, like *Qiwu zhu* will later, invokes timeliness as justification for opportunism. He criticizes hypocrisy even while he denounces the effort to concern oneself with virtue. The general degradation of human virtue becomes an excuse for animal violence. Shuqi's articulation of karmic order is quite different from conventional *huaben* stories, where karmic order is intricately involved in discrete human actions. The rant both decries humans for not adhering to Confucian virtues and implies that such virtue carries little significance.

Nevertheless, Shuqi's speech saves his life. Relieved, Shuqi

[41] Xu Heya 许和亚 "Xiaojie yu chonggou de zhangli: dui "shouyang shan Shuqi bianjie" de lishi jiedu." 消解与重构的张力——对《首阳山叔齐变节》的历史解读. *名作欣赏* 24 (2014): 129.

[42] *Analects* 2:7 Zi Lu asked about the meaning of filial piety. Confucius said, "Nowadays filial piety means being able to feed your parents. But everyone does this even for horses and dogs. Without respect, what's the difference?"

> looked all around and thought, 'How fortunate am I. Without my [glib] tongue and flowery words, these dried-up bones (*kugu* 枯骨) of mine would have been chomped up and swallowed down and they'd be complaining about the smell of my shriveled-up lice.' I would be nothing but a bunch of dried-up bones in their mouths![43]

Shuqi may be making the reasonable choice in choosing survival over martyrdom, but Aina's storyteller does not make him an easy hero with which to identify. In the wake of dynastic transition, there is no straightforward moral path or simple answers. Indeed, Shuqi's tone is unlikely to garner empathy from most readers, even if they laughed at Shuqi's excessive arrogance. Unlike many early Qing literati who also decided not to martyr themselves, or even decided to serve the Qing, Shuqi shows no qualms at all. His use of self-congratulatory phrases like "glib" and "flowery words" which denote beautiful but empty words show the lightness and arrogance of his sentiment. His use of the phrase "dried-up bones" (*kugu* 枯骨) is also poignant because the phrase reappears at the end of the story:

> He . . . would wait until he had fame [*gongming* 功名] in his grasp, and then go [back] to West Mountain to collect the dried-up bones (*kugu* 枯骨) of his elder brother, and it would not be too late.[44]

In other words, Aina's storyteller does not present Shuqi's relief that the animals did not eat him as a purely innocent happiness to be alive. Instead, Aina's storyteller tinges it with a small reminder of the brother whom Shuqi is betraying.

---

[43] Mei and Harris, "Session 7," 188.

[44] 待有功名到手，再往西山收拾家兄枯骨，未为晚也. Translation my own in order to emphasize original text. Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua*, 7.92.

Capture, Confrontation, and Climax

Shuqi's wit and smooth tongue have gotten him out of every confrontation to this point. In fact, through these confrontations he decides not only to leave the mountain but to serve the Zhou dynasty. When Shuqi travels to the Zhou capital, dark storm clouds and a horde of dead and wounded ghostly Shang soldiers confront him. Assuming he is a traitor, they bind him and take him back to their camp. Shuqi mistakes them for Zhou militia and assures them he is defecting to the other side. The horde assumes he means the Shang and loosens his bond until his strange attire helps them recognize him as Shuqi. Ironically, the clothes that helped him escape the mountain now expose him and it is again up to Shuqi's ability to speak. The storyteller states:

> Someone seated in the middle said, "Nowadays people's hearts are cunning and crafty; who knows what they are hiding inside. Don't let him use that glib tongue as a way to escape."[45]

It is this explicit mention of his glib tongue that leads to the climax of the story. For it is while Shuqi was "trying to find the words to get himself out of this mess"[46] that his arms and legs begin to dance uncontrollably. The direct result—a letter of defection to the Zhou falling out of his sleeve—causes the horde to berate him as unfilial and disloyal and they take him to the marketplace to behead him.[47]

The active and violent imposition of loyalist ethics by the Shang horde is different from Boyi's loyalism, which results in a slow death that will change nothing. The horde

[45] Mei and Harris, "Session 7," 191.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Keith McMahon argues that wild gesticulation by characters in Ming/Qing stories indicates an approaching plot climax—in this case, a decision about Shuqi's betrayal of political and familial loyalty. See Keith McMahon, *Causality and Containment in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Fiction*, 22.

actively fights for their cause and errs on the side of too much violence, seen in their desire to force Shuqi into martyrdom. All the forms of loyalism that the storyteller introduces in this story, however, show the immense pressure to become a martyr in the wake of the Ming fall. Boyi and the Shang horde are concerned not only with loyalty but with the ultimate significance of human actions in the context of Confucian relational ethics. The horde is certainly not worthy of our admiration, but they passionately and sincerely raise key questions about the place of loyalty and filial piety, the relationship of human action and cosmic order, and the problematic nature of Shuqi as a protagonist in a *huaben* story.

The subsequent confrontation between the animals (an imperfect parallel of Shuqi) and the Shang horde is a conflict between self-interested survival and fame and fanatical dedication to loyalty and martyrdom. The leaders of both sides meet but are unable to resolve the dispute. There are really three parties here, the animals, whom nobody expects to value virtue over carnal desire, Shuqi, who as a human should have higher standards but views his own self-interest as more important than loyalty, and the horde, who are violent but believe in the lasting importance of loyalty and filial piety. I suggest the gravity of the questions at stake is one reason that Aina through his storyteller invokes a higher deity to resolve the conflict. The storyteller states:

> In the midst of this battle between the sharpened tongues, auspicious clouds started rising from the southeast blowing gusts of fragrant wind and bringing a symphony of celestial music. Rare birds and animals flew and ran along in front of the clouds while jeweled canopies and beautiful pennants fluttered in the sky. Deities and celestial generals clustered around dragon carts and phoenix carriages. An order rang out, 'Wild beasts and hungry ghosts, step back!' The diehards and wild beasts understood that the deity who had just arrived was the most senior of the

Jade Emperor's court, the Master of Making Things Equal, also known as the Buddha Who Confirms the Age. He specialized in the rise and fall of dynasties, the fortune and wealth of living people, and squaring unsettled injustices and debts among humans. Now, in this time of transition between two dynasties, it was time to settle old grudges. When they saw him, the diehards, wild beasts, and Shuqi all knelt down and each repeated their arguments.

The Master of Making Things Equal carefully weighed the speeches of both sides and said, 'All see the difference between Shang and Zhou as between old and new. As I perceive it, a rise and fall is like having a son in a human family. What is the difference? When the flowers of spring and summer wither, those of fall and winter bloom. As long as they accord with the seasons, they do not oppose Heavenly principles. The diehards say the world has belonged to Shang from its very beginning. If after Shang there ought not to be a Zhou, then before Shang there ought not to have been a Xia. Without understanding celestial time, you have come up with preposterous ideas. Rebelling here and raising armies there, does this benefit the Shang king? It only harms life and consciousness! You have done things both filthy and petty, but nothing from a sincere desire to carry out the Way on behalf of Heaven. In the end, what good does it do? Focusing only on your misbehavior, however, will also erase the age-old loyalty between sovereign and subject, which is not right. Should you be unwilling to relinquish your lingering resentment, I shall cultivate your strengths. When the world is at peace again, you shall be its founding ministers.'

The diehards responded, 'Though our mission has not been successful, we did get to air out some of the grievances of the Shang royal family. It is still despicable that Shuqi betrayed his benefactor and chooses to serve the enemy. How can we tolerate such a disloyal and unfilial person?' The Master of Making Things Equal said, 'When the Way is in the ascendant, it ascends; when the Way is muddled, it is muddled. Throughout the ages, are not the new ministers of dynasties always descendants of the preceding one? The time has come for him to descend from the mountains and, with the wild beasts, to create and destroy with wind and rain, lightning and thunder. They all answer to Heaven and follow human designs, never losing track of ''leaving the dark to seek clarity.'' The diehards responded, 'But the world is in utter misery. [Is it not the case that Heaven is fond of killing?]' The Master of Making Things Equal said, 'Creation and destruction are of the same principle. In creation lies the force for destruction, in destruction lies the force for

> creation. You are living in it and have not understood!' Upon hearing this, the diehards all nodded their heads.[48]

The Master of Making Things Equal (*Qiwu zhu*) articulates a distant and apathetic view of cosmic and moral order. As the second-highest deity, his voice should be authoritative, but his articulation of cosmic order is difficult to accept. For Qiwu zhu, Heaven is void of moral vision and unconcerned with human action, per his Daoist name.[49] Dynasties, like seasons, rise and fall; the only constants are the passing of time and the changing of circumstances. The view seems neutral but it implies that the passing of time justifies amoral and self-interested actions. If opportunity and context dictate the relative importance of virtues, then what greater significance do those virtues hold? In other words, self-interested actions are neither good nor bad, reasonable nor immoral, but are merely the products of context. Shuqi's actions are justified, not because of a stronger moral order, but because a new dynasty was fated to arise eventually, and someone must serve it. Why not Shuqi? Qiwu zhu hints at a future virtuous state, but the heart of his speech about opportunism downplays its significance.

Despite Qiwu zhu's focus on timeliness above loyalty, he is also hesitant to completely discount loyalty.[50] While he claims that loyalty in this context is useless, he also proclaims:

---

[48] See Mei and Harris, "Session 7," 193-95. Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua,* 7.90-7.92.

[49] The inclusion of a Daoist-inspired deity also hearkens to Sima Qian's wavering between Daoist and Confucian ideals of government service in his account of Boyi and Shuqi discussed earlier, a dichotomy that Aina is certainly playing on here. For more on this see Wai-yee Li, "*Shiji* as Higher Narrative: The Idea of Authorship," in *Epic and Other Higher Narratives: Essays in Intercultural Studies*, ed. Steven Shankman and Amiya Dev (Delhi: Pearson, 2011), 159-97, esp 189-90.

[50] Xu Heya makes a similar point in his article. "Xiaojie yu chonggou de zhangli," 129.

> Focusing only on your misbehavior, however, will also erase the age-old loyalty between sovereign and subject, which is not right. Should you be unwilling to relinquish your lingering resentment, I shall cultivate your strengths. When the world is at peace again, you shall be its founding ministers.[51]

The actions of the Shang horde are excessively violent and serve no greater end, and executing Shuqi for acting in his own self-interest will not save the Shang dynasty. Nevertheless, Qiwu zhu briefly acknowledges the validity of their concerns about virtue. His speech shows a tension between the conventional *huaben*'s focus on karmic retribution and the importance of human actions and virtues therein and an apathetic cosmos in which Confucian virtues are either only relevant in times of peace or else not relevant at all. Political loyalty to a corrupt regime, either the Shang or the Ming, may be pointless and potentially even destructive, but no one, not even Qiwu zhu, is completely willing to discount it as a sentiment or virtue.

Qiwu zhu's comment above also invokes more empathy for the Shang horde who concern themselves directly with filial piety and loyalty. Indeed, the horde's remarkably direct question to the deity is certainly heart-wrenching:

> These days the total suffering of humans under Heaven is extreme, is it not the case that Heaven enjoys killing [people]?[52]

The straightforward question is remarkable for the genre and it further reveals the ambiguity of Aina's characters. The horde's plea is so full of emotion and misery that it is difficult for the reader to remain unmoved. Just as Shuqi is reasonable but not very likeable, the horde is violent but at least slightly sympathetic. Their question is at the

[51] Mei and Harris, "Session 7," 193-95.

[52] Translation my own 今天下涂炭极矣，难道上天亦好杀耶' Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua*, 7.91.

heart of *Idle Talk.* What is the relationship between human action and cosmic moral order, and does such an order exist? In this sense, this story is not only about political loyalty.[53] Nor is it only about a detached or dualistic cosmos.[54] Instead, Aina's ventriloquistic hesitations and manipulations of reader empathy point to an internal conflict of belief about cosmology and Confucian ethics. A belief in an intricately involved moral cosmos and a focus on values such as loyalty, filial piety, and chastity may be flawed, but with what should we replace them?

Qiwu zhu offers few answers; he merely claims that birth and killing are one principle. The deity whose job it is to oversee karmic justice shows little interest in enforcing it. And his message to readers is still unclear. The deity lives up to the origin of his name, which is the chapter in *Zhuangzi* entitled "On making all things equal" (*Qiwu lun* 齊物論), In this chapter, Zhuangzi argues that it is useless to select a winner of a dispute.[55]

The Ambiguity of Illusion: Moral and Hermeneutic Uncertainty

In this final section, I explore the conclusion of the story and the primary diegetic audience's response before offering some final conclusions. I argue that the story's ending not only destabilizes the reader's understanding of the plot but that it also leaves the reader with no basic moral interpretation. The conclusion can be read as sincere or as

[53] Readings that argue for an almost pure focus on political loyalty include Yenna Wu, "The Debunking of Historical Heroes," and Wai-yee Li, "Early Qing to 1723," 201-20.

[54] Hanan suggests that this is Aina's perception in *The Chinese Vernacular Story,* 203-205.

[55] This has been noted by Mei and Harris in "Session 7," 194. Also see Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 36-49.

satire. The lack of a clear hermeneutics for this story further complicates the question of loyalty and differentiates the story from more conventional *huaben.*

After Qiwu zhu's speech, Aina's storyteller ends the story:

> "Suddenly, the tigers and leopards scattered, and a great 'boom' erupted from the camp of the holdouts as if the sky had burst and the earth had cracked. The black clouds and fog turned yellow and drifted away in all directions. Thousands of green lotuses, that seemed to appear from midair, littered the ground. Standing up, Shuqi realized it had all been a 'Southern Bough' dream [南柯一夢 *nanke yimeng*].[56] He thought about the argument of the side taken by the Master of Making Things Equal and was confident in his decision to come down the mountain. 'When I acquire position and fame, I'll return to the Western Mountains and bury my brother's dried-up bones, which will be just fine.'" [57]

Aina's ending to this story is unique and discomfiting in its ambiguity. The storyteller claims that as the animals and the horde disappear, Shuqi realizes it was all a dream. What parts were a dream and what parts were real? And in what sense could it have been a "pleasing illusion"? The only pleasing part of the dream is that it justifies Shuqi's own desires. We reach the end of the story only to realize that we do not actually know the story at all. Aina's manipulation of point of view makes it even more difficult to interpret the story his storyteller has just presented.

Even at the end of the tale, Aina and his storyteller refuse us a simple reading. Should readers take the conclusion at face value, as an endorsement of the pursuit of pure self-interest at the expense of Confucian relational ethics? Or should we read it as a satirical ending, as a convenient dream (thus the "pleasant illusion") that rationalizes and

---

[56] An illusion to the Tang *chuanqi* story "The Governor of the Southern Branch"南柯太守传 in which a man dreams of rising high in the political ranks but awakes just as the king becomes suspicious.

[57] Mei and Harris, "Session 7," 144.

justifies his self-interested decision? Depending on how the reader approaches the story, it is either a treatise on the reasonableness of survival and self-interest when a dynasty has lost its mandate to rule or a satire of those who abandon basic virtues for their own self-interest. There is no clear judgment against those on either side of the loyalty question. Aina may be skeptical of the value of loyalty to a corrupt regime, but at least in this story, he reserves his judgment for those who are either completely corrupt or commit excessive violence.

The primary diegetic audience offers the reader no interpretive aid. It only claims to now understand why in the *Four Books* only Boyi is mentioned as a "remnant subject," (*yimin* 逸民) but does not resolve the ultimate ambiguity of Shuqi's character, nor does it offer insight into the intended message and reception of the story. The lack of response was likely disconcerting to contemporary readers, who would have replaced "Shang" and "Zhou" with "Ming" and "Qing" in their own heads as they read the story. Perhaps we can read the lack of response as a sign of the profound heaviness and darkness of this story in comparison to the ones before. This is the first story of the collection to deal relatively directly with dynastic transition and the concerns that go with it. It is uncomfortably clear that this story is a direct reflection of the Ming/Qing transition and the difficult decisions that literati had to confront during it. The content hits too close to home, on topics too pertinent to individuals to be fully processed at this point in either the frame story or external reality. This story marks the beginning of the darker second half of the text, and the content is becoming too heavy for the form.

To Aina, it seems that in times of political instability all human action stems from a complex combination of virtuous and selfish motivations. Unlike the short fiction of the 1640s, which often featured a moral hero, Aina's storyteller refuses us a moral protagonist.[58] There are no positive acts of morality. The ambiguous confirmation of Shuqi's decision to leave the mountain discredits both notions of greater moral order and altruistic quixotic individualism. Shuqi is clearly neither likeable nor worthy of emulation, yet there are few other options. Qiwu zhu, the one possible greater source of inspiration and compassion, preaches the uselessness of loyalty while still proclaiming its value. Ideals of ritual order and greater significance may function in times of stability, but the violence of the Ming/Qing transition has called that order into question.

The intradiegetic storyteller's refusal to grant any greater moral significance to human action destabilizes the form of the story and differentiates it from more conventional *huaben* stories such as "Jiang Xingge Re-encounters His Pearl-Sewn Shirt," or Li Yu's "Nativity Room," which show how karma as the embodiment of cosmic order works intricately on the earthly level to coordinate reward and punishment for individual action.[59] In those stories, moral order is resolved by a series of karmic coincidences. But in this text we see none of those coincidences, nor is a clear moral paradigm established. The questions raised by Shuqi's abandonment of his brother, the animals' decision to eat all humans, and the Shang army horde's desire to execute Shuqi for being unfilial and

[58] Patrick Hanan, "The Fiction of Moral Duty: The Vernacular Story in the 1640s," in *Expressions of Self in Chinese Literature*, ed. R. Hegel and R. Hessney (New York, Columbia University Press, 1985), 189-213.

[59] For the most thorough discussion of karmic retribution in *huaben* See Tina Lu, *Accidental Incest*.

disloyal cannot be resolved on their own and instead require a higher deity. Moral order is no longer clear, it requires explicit intervention and confirmation, and that explicit intervention, at least as far as it involves direct interaction with representatives of Karma, can only be offered in fiction.

CHAPTER V

THE EYES OF THE BLIND: TRAUMA AND SUBVERTED TRANSCENDENCE

Session eight's story proper is titled "With the Empty Blue Stone, Master Wei Opens the Eyes of the Blind" (*Kongqing shi Weizi kaimang* 空青石蔚子开盲). Whereas session seven's storyteller shows little explicit interest in the idea of karmic punishment, even as he presents a deity who has that very task, session eight's storyteller seems obsessed with it. Karmic punishment is everywhere, and in a variety of forms, all of which seem especially harsh or even cruel. Indeed, the death of half the world's creatures in this story echoes the question at the heart of session seven, "Does Heaven enjoy killing?"[1]

If session seven ended abruptly with an ironic but uncomfortable endorsement of profane self-interest in which the cosmos seemed to endorse opportunism over loyalty, session eight offers readers a chance to vicariously mourn how horrible the world is or was, at least in the context of the Ming/Qing transition. In this story, Aina examines what it means to be "enlightened" to the illusion of a beautiful world. Instead of a self-interested protagonist seeking a name and fame, two blind men seek to have their eyes opened. They want to see what they think is a world of light, despite several warnings that the world is flawed and corrupt. Their own optimism and misleading experiences lead them to believe that the world is worth seeing and even, as Boyi would have it, full of people acting out of a sincere concern for cardinal Confucian relationships. Their eyes

[1] '今天下涂炭极矣，难道上天亦好杀耶？'Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua,* 7.91.

are indeed opened, a symbol of enlightenment, but such enlightenment proves to be even more unbearable than the blindness. Aina subverts the otherwise positive notion of enlightenment for darker causes.

In this session, Aina further deconstructs narrative and moral certainty by outsourcing moral certainty to so many deities and mythologies that none of them carry meaning. I will not try to interpret all the allusions and allegories within the text, which are too many and complicated to explain concisely. Rather, I show how Aina's conflicting narrative of karma further destabilizes *huaben* as a narrative of moral karmic order. In earlier sessions, Aina's storytellers at least faintly recognized that moral action was connected to karmic order. Here, however, Aina has his storyteller present a cosmos that is either completely materialistic or completely incomprehensible. Through his storyteller, Aina explores the possibility that *Tian* is not merely flawed but brutal, reckless, and incapable of compassion. Within such karmic destruction, compassion becomes both vital and an act of defiance to a destructive cosmos. Aina invites external readers to vicariously mourn the violence of the Ming/Qing transition and to question the existence of *Tian* by building reader empathy with two blind men who are ironically the purest as a direct result of their karmic punishment. Some vague karmic force has made the protagonists blind to punish them for their prior sins, but nobody tells the protagonists what those sins are. When the two blind men finally have their eyes opened, a symbolic enlightenment, they can only despair of the condition of the world.

Through this story, Aina even more directly expresses a conflict between his wavering belief in the importance of moral action and his increasing disbelief in an

attentive moral cosmos. The storyteller and the characters in his story consistently describe a society where people have given up on virtuous action and are acting purely out of self-preservation. This is the world which the blind protagonists initially cannot fully acknowledge and over which they later weep. Yet, Aina does not use this dystopia simply to remind us of the importance of moral action. The reason for this inhospitable world is at least partially the arbitrary karmic forces that so eagerly and brutally administer punishment. And the faint reward that Aina does provide for virtuous action seems like an afterthought. The storyteller mentions it only a few times and neither the primary diegetic audience nor the external commentator acknowledge it. In earlier sessions, Aina also often refused clear endings to stories, but this story expresses such despair that it is not the ambiguity of the ending that haunts the external reader, but rather the despair and grief that precedes the nominally restorative ending.

The Bean Arbor Background

Session eight opens with the background narrator discussing Fan Chi 樊遲, a disciple of Confucius, who asked his master to teach him to garden.[2] Why, asks the background narrator on our behalf, ask about such menial labor? Because, as he answers, while Confucius was wandering back and forth hopelessly trying to find someone to

[2] As noted before, the narrative voices in *Idle Talk* are often impossible to untangle. Here, however, because the first narrator seems to be omniscient and mentions the host in the third person, I am following my earlier precedent and calling him the "background narrator." For more on the narrative voices see Yenna Wu, "The Bean Arbor Frame: Actual and Figural," 1-32.

listen to his teaching, Fan Chi thought it more useful to grow some food and have a reward for his labor.[3]

In the brief introductory passage that follows, the background narrator relates the growth of beans to the growth of humans. If beans planted in fertile soil are gently and properly cared for, they are sure to succeed, assuming they are not trampled underfoot. Similarly, humans who are fortunate enough to have good parents and all they need in this world are sure to be successful. The question the background narrator asks is what happens to those less fortunate? For them "Though they be born with all the gifts of nature, they will be neither clothed nor well-fed; their parents will not make them feel comforted or secure;, and they will not enjoy good health. How can they be successful thus?"[4]

This generic introduction offers some insight into the story. The opening discussion of Fan Chi asserts a concern over practicality and survival over lofty values, even as the story proper that later follows complicates that idea. The following discussion of the necessity for proper care of children and beans raises the importance of both nurture and luck for the development of humans. Some humans will suffer for reasons beyond their control. Similarly, the bean arbor as a dedicated community allows for the growth not only of the beans, but at least, in principle, for the people underneath. There

[3] The narrator is referencing the *Analects* 3:4 in which Fan Chi asks Confucius how to garden. Confucius replies that he is not experienced at gardening, but once Fan Chi leaves, Confucius calls him an inferior man.

[4] Alexander C. Wille, trans., "Session 8: With a Transparent Stone Master Wei Opens Blind Eyes," in *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor, A Seventeenth-Century Chinese Story Collection*, ed. Robert E. Hegel (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 198-99.

seems to be a faint assumption that the stories of the bean arbor community are meant to edify and cultivate the moral and practical qualities of its members. What moral and practical edification the bean arbor is actually offering its members is a more complicated question.

The same rustic storytellers who have tried to give that edification, after being treated to snacks in earlier sessions, now fear that they will be expected to return the favor and flee. With only a few "people of taste and refinement" remaining, nobody is certain who should tell a story. Fortunately, the host finds a young man who looks "semi-literate" and the community encourages him to take a turn. The young man is straightforward that he is illiterate and refuses to take their berating if they do not like his tale, which he heard from a monk.[5] His belief that he has a worthy story to offer despite his lack of education foreshadows the theme of the blind having true insight.

Unlike the privileged old storyteller of sessions one, two, and eleven, or Rector Chen of session twelve, this storyteller has no defining characteristics, political opinions, or personality. His only unique characteristic is his cynical attitude toward the other members of the bean arbor. Because this is one of the most anonymous storytellers of the collection, and because he brings so little of his own opinions to the story, I believe that Aina uses him as a puppet—one that is effectively distanced in a separate diegetic realm—to explore another articulation of *Tian.*

[5] Storytellers claiming to be telling stories secondhand is a common technique in *Idle Talk.* While it is fascinating in the way it creates yet another level of narrative distance between Aina and the content, for the sake of the analyses, I have simply associated each storyteller with the story they tell.

As Aina begins the last third of the text, he develops the tensions in *Idle Talk* by having the storyteller increasingly express his own uncertainties about the relative value of moral action. In sessions one and two, Aina made morality a primary motivation for the old storyteller. In session six, Aina made the questions of brotherly harmony and political loyalty at least the nominally driving concerns for the storyteller. In session eight, Aina uses the dialogue between the primary diegetic audience and the new storyteller to offer a slightly different purpose to the act of storytelling. The primary diegetic audience says:

> As long as your story is lively and good to listen to, it matters not from what dynasty it comes nor whether it is true or false.[6]

And

> So long as your story has twists and turns and keeps things interesting it will be fine.[7]

At the beginning of session seven the primary diegetic audience members criticize the speaker because his "mouth is too sharp, your tongue is too bitter, and your stories are too tart."[8] They imply, as in the beginning of session two, that they want a story that is lighter, that is not about "the ways of the world" which they have found depressing. Aina had his primary diegetic audience express interest in new and unheard stories in prior sessions as well. The difference is that in those sessions the conversations between the storyteller and the diegetic audience also pivoted on protagonists that adhered to virtue. In this session at least, Aina has his storyteller drop that premise.

---

[6] Wille, "Session 8," 199.

[7] Ibid., 200.

[8] Mei and Harris, "Session 7," 174.

Plot Overview

The story is set during a dynastic transition, likely the Ming/Qing transition. *Arhats* secretly guide the affairs of each dynasty's ruler, so the ancient Buddha of the Burning Lamp (*Dīpaṃkara* or *randengfo* 燃灯佛) must select the next *arhat*.[9] He offers the position to whichever of two candidates gets an iron tree to flower first. The first *arhat*, named "Honored Lightning" (*dianguang* 电光), is recommended by the demonic *rakshas* to forge it in flames. This results in flowers which last only a split second before they vanish. The other *arhat*, named "Honored Free and Easy" (*zizai* 自在), with his calm demeanor, plants his tree near a mountain and waits for it to bloom naturally.[10] Because Lightning is first, he descends to the mortal world first.

Lightning has a fiery and angry personality and immediately uses thunder and lightning violently. People make the vivid complaint that they feel like they are being boiled alive, but the storyteller shows no compassion. He simply claims it was fated to be. The calm and composed "Free-and-easy" is meanwhile born in the east as "Sky Blue" (*wei lan* 蔚蓝) and cultivates himself during Lightning's violent reign. Sky Blue is unaware that the people of earth had complained to the God-on-High (*Shangdi* 上帝), who had then become angry and sent all the fire spirits to destroy most of the world. The

[9] *Randengfo* 燃灯佛, also called "randeng gufo" 燃灯古佛, is the Chinese for *Dīpaṃkara*, who is the Buddha of the epoch before *Sakyamuni*. He is the Buddha of the past, in contrast to the Buddha of the present (*Sakyamuni*) and the Buddha of the Future (*Maitreya*). Oddly, the diegetic time of the story skips directly from the Buddha of the past to the Buddha of the Future. His association with "light" may be an intentional conflation of the ideas of vision and light/dark contrasts of the story.

[10] "Free and Easy," *zizai* 自在 is a direct reference to the Zhuangzi.

God-on-High splits Kunlun in twain and reduces half of all people and creatures on earth to dust.

Sky Blue flees, scared of this destructive chaos that he does not understand, and finds a round stone infused with a green light that emits "clear liquid" (*qingshui* 清水) which can cure the blind. The stone, called the "empty green stone" (*kongqing shi* 空青石), was from Nüwa's mending of heaven.[11] Sky Blue holds the stone tightly to his chest, "vowing to cure the world of its blindness and return it to the light for the stone to fulfill its destiny."[12] He wants to save humanity from the dark hell it is currently experiencing.[13]

When massive numbers of blind people appear to Sky Blue seeking their vision, an armor-clad deity emerges to scold the *arhat*, claiming that this is the punishment period of the 500-year cycle of retribution and that all the blind deserve their punishment. By having compassion on the blind, Sky Blue is preventing karma from functioning correctly.[14] Sky Blue puts the stone away and visits the immortal Chen Tuan 陳摶 (871-

[11] The name of this stone seems to be a pun on 空情 or "free of emotions" (Wille, "Session 8," 203.) Nüwa is said to have mended Heaven when it became damaged, using smelted stones. The use of a stone as a starting point is common in Ming/Qing fiction. See *Journey to the West* and *Dream of the Red Chamber* for prominent examples.

[12] Wille, "Session 8," 203.

[13] "With just one drop of the liquid within, he hoped, all could be made clear and he would be able to offer humanity salvation from the dark hell in which it was imprisoned." Wille, "Session 8," 204.

[14] This idea of a 500-year cycle may refer to the Buddhist conception of *kalpas*, or blocks of time where the world, human age, and values are established over 40 *kalpas*, before entering into the *kalpa* of destruction, where all is destroyed and left void due to the evil that accumulates in that period. Then comes the "great *kalpa*" where moral rule is restored through wise leaders. See Joseph Edkins, *Chinese Buddhism: A Volume of Sketches, Historical, Descriptive and Critical* (London: Routledge, 2013), 221. And Hubert Michael Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 372-73.

989), who has recently emerged from a thousand-year sleep and who knows everything about everyone.

The primary diegetic storyteller then switches his focus to two blind men. The first is named "Late-but-First" (*chi xian* 迟先) because even though he is ill-fated and slow, he is wiser than most. Hoping to regain his eyesight, he needs a companion to help him reach Sky Blue, so he trips another blind man. This man is named "Brighter-than-Confucius" (*kong ming*" 孔明) because instead of studying all the classics and scheming to get ahead, he "simply follows [his] human heart."[15] He is looking for Chen Tuan, so the two swear brotherhood and travel together. While they are praying, however, they both reach for the other's belongings and argue loudly.

Their argument provokes the attention of two troublemakers, who pretend to be a magistrate and *yamen* runner so that they can prank them. The scoundrels force them to calculate their horoscopes and chant the story "Li the Dashing Takes the Capital"[16] before leaving them alone. Clueless about the reality of what happened, the blind men praise the "magistrate" for being just and merciful. They finally make it to Mount Hua, where they weep loudly in anticipation of meeting Chen Tuan. After being cleansed of their emotions and hunger, they meet Chen Tuan, who tells them that they have too many sins, but respects their sincerity. He warns them that the world is full of schemers and bad

[15] The characters in their names "Chi" 遲 and "Kong" 孔 allude back to the opening discussion of Fan Chi 樊遲 and Confucius 孔子.

[16] This is a story about Li Zicheng 李自成 (1605-1645) whose rebel forces overtook Beijing in 1644, resulting in the suicide of the Ming Chongzhen emperor.

people, but tells them that if they repent and perfect themselves they will regain their sight in the next life. The two again wail loudly and plan to leap off a cliff until Chen Tuan suggests they simply find Sky Blue and have him restore their vision.

At this point, Sky Blue realizes that it is time to "emerge from the mountain" (*chushan* 出山) and restore the world by filling it with good people (i.e. people who follow the five relationships). But before he can do so, the two blind men arrive weeping and pleading. Sky Blue is filled with compassion and opens their eyes, but not without reminding them that they are unworthy and must leave the mountain. But once the two see the world as it is they weep yet again and beg to have their blindness restored. Sky Blue is no longer moved. Though he has an empty cloth bag from Maitreya, the two are not worthy to be placed inside.[17] Instead, he places them in the wine jar of Du Kang 杜康, a thin metaphor for drunkenness.[18] Inside, the two find a utopia where everyone gets along with each other perfectly with no need for government. Once thoroughly drunk, the two sit on top of Mount Kunlun and watch Honored Lightning destroy the world before emerging with Sky Blue into a comfortable and peaceful life on Earth.

The Sight of the Blind: Seeing the World as It Really Is

Although the two blind protagonists who journey in the hope of having their eyes opened claim to know the reality of the world, Aina consistently shows them to be naïve. In this section, I will argue that Aina uses the protagonists to question the ethics behind

[17] Maitreya (弥勒佛**)** is the Buddha of the future and is associated with a future moral, idealistic rule.

[18] Du Kang is the legendary inventor of wine.

the karmic retribution occurring on earth and that the protagonists' sincerity clashes with the self-interested humans around them. The storyteller builds audience empathy for these humorous protagonists by showing their sincerity and naiveté. This empathy makes the tragicomic ending of the story more emotionally moving and gives the story a decidedly dark undertone.

The characters' names are both creative and telling. Both names imply that the characters are more insightful than those around them, even as they clearly are not.[19] The explanation of their names is simultaneously critical of human nature and optimistic about it; other people work out of greed and care little for others, but the blind men, reduced to their basic senses and unable to partake in stale book learning and literacy, are less corrupt. They, therefore, operate on a higher and cleverer realm than others. Yet the characters' explanation of their names and their reality do not fully match. Their names imply that they are aware of the realities of human nature and the corruption that the storyteller criticizes and that they know people use the guise of proper Confucian relationships for selfish ends. But this characterization is ironic, because though they claim to know what people are really like, they quickly trust all they meet and are profoundly disappointed when they finally see the world as it is. Although the two protagonists' journey is often humorous and even slapstick, the humor is a light covering for a more profound sadness, a common mechanism in *Idle Talk.*

[19] Guo Wei suggests that their names are just part of an overall attempt to satirize the late Ming and human nature, and he reads their encounters as simple evidence of Aina's negative views of the situation. I am not convinced that this story is merely satire, however. See Guo Wei 郭玮 "Lun "Doupeng xianhua: kongqing shi weilan kaimang" de huangdan yiwei" 论《豆棚闲话·空青石蔚子开盲》的荒诞意味, *江西教育学院学报* 6 (2012): 95-97.

Late-but-First and Brighter-than-Confucius are also interesting characters because they suggest a paradox of karmic resonance. The armor-clad deity and Chen Tuan both proclaim that their blindness is a punishment for past sins which they have no hope of resolving in this life. Yet, aside from the immortal Sky Blue, the characters themselves are the purest characters in the story. They are pure ironically because the weight of their prior sins has resulted in their physical blindness, and that physical blindness corresponds to ignorance and naiveté. The two display a high level of sincerity which Chen Tuan acknowledges, telling them, "a bright ray of honesty shines forth from your natural disposition and consciousness (*xingling* 性靈)."[20] This sincerity jives with their names, moves Sky Blue to compassion for them, and most importantly builds significant reader empathy for the two protagonists in their journey. It almost seems that Aina himself feels deeply for the protagonists, also wishing he were blind to the chaos around him. When the protagonists are fooled, external readers laugh; when they cry, external readers may still laugh at the excessive weeping, but when they beg for their blindness to be restored, it is hard not to weep with them.

The first sign of the blind men's naiveté about others around them comes soon after they decide to swear brotherhood. In preparation for the ceremony, Brighter-than-Confucius buys bean curd and a candle. Late-but-First buys rice wine and incense. But once the ceremony begins:

> each prayed, swearing an oath, and bowing four times. [Brighter-than-Confucius] quietly stuck out his hand, feeling for the wine bottle to take a furtive swig just as [Late-but-First] reached for the bean curd. Each felt the hand of the other, and immediately an anxious chorus of voices rose up

[20] Wille, "Session 8," 213.

> from them. One said, 'You stole a bite,' and the other said, 'You drank first.' How absurd that these sworn brothers should turn on each other in a moment, yelling and about ready to start pummeling each other.[21]

The humorous irony here is that while each character is selfish and reaches for the other's belongings, they are both shocked and angry that the other is doing the same. The two blind men almost immediately trusted each other and swore brotherhood before they even really knew each other. Though the two are fully aware of their own desires, they seem completely unaware that others may also be self-interested.

This paradoxical self-awareness continues in the following scene. The racket of the two yelling at each other catches the attention of two scoundrels, Hua Liyou 滑里油 and You Lihua 油里滑.[22] Looking to have some fun at the blind men's expense, the two pretend to be a magistrate and a *yamen* runner and threaten to beat and fine the blind men unless they perform for them. So, Late-but-First spends a long time figuring out their horoscope. Brighter-than-Confucius, interestingly, "spent half a day chanting the text of the popular story he had compiled, 'Li the Dashing Takes the Capital,'" a story about how the rebels overthrew Beijing in 1644. When the "officials" finally leave, Late-but-First displays no anger or embarrassment at all, but rather proclaims:

> How is it that this place has such a fine magistrate? Had we gone through a different *yamen*, who knows when this case would have ended? They didn't torture or interrogate us but just took care of us without delay. That's just not something you see often. If this were a big county in a big

[21] Ibid., 209-10.

[22] These characters are not made up by Aina Jushi, but are rather another intertextual reference to a popular joke about people who are too slippery (the literal meaning of their names) and have no grounding. Pretending to be what they want to be to manipulate others, they have no grounding or basis in themselves.

> prefecture such an honest and upright official would surely have inspired a shrine in his honor.[23]

The humor of this scene further drives the point about the characters' relative innocence and ignorance. After being the clear victim of abuse and manipulation by some local scoundrels, Late-but-First praises them as virtuous officials! The proclamation also shows the corruption around them. He seems aware that there is in fact corruption, but when he runs into it directly he is unable to diagnose it, merely assuming that the men have excellent morals and pure intentions. In fact, the incident inspires the two men to become even more moral:

> [Brighter-than-Confucius] said, 'You and I should be good to one another as before. Brothers have run-ins with the law all the time. If it weren't for this dispute, we wouldn't have seen each other's true colors. From now on we can cleanse our hearts of ill intentions then all will be well.' From then on the two regarded one another with respect and love and, one stage of their journey after another, relied on their skills to provide them with food.[24]

Despite having seen each other act in their own self-interest and despite being the victim of a swindle, the two are completely unscathed. Their purity and honesty lead them to simply become better people and to take care of each other as two blind men, even while corruption and violence surround them. Their actions and stupidity are humorous, but behind the humor, their sincerity is touching.

In fact, this sincerity is the driving force of their interactions with, first, Chen Tuan and, later, with Sky Blue. After a long journey, they reach the Daoist realm at the

[23] Wille, "Session 8," 211.

[24] Ibid.

top of Mount Hua, where other seekers are asking for blessings. Here the storyteller briefly departs from his generally objective storytelling method:

> Although those seeking immortals to ask for blessings were many, all were calm and expectant. These seekers patiently waited until Chen Tuan gave a sermon and would only then go ask questions of him. [Late-but-First] and [Brighter-than-Confucius], who had recently traveled so far, hoping to return with an answer immediately— how could they wait? — broke into loud weeping.[25]

This storyteller, as I will point out below, shows no sympathy for those whom the *arhat* Honored Lightning destroys, yet he is sympathetic toward the blind protagonists. This storyteller actively manipulates reader empathy, making the story of karmic retribution seem especially harsh. The blind protagonists are sympathetic characters even though they are the same sinners that the deities are actively destroying. Because the blindness as punishment ironically makes the two more pure, their punishment and the violence around them seem even harsher. In earlier stories, such as "Jiang Xingge Re-encounters His Pearl Shirt," the reader may empathize with imperfect characters like Sanqiao who commits adultery, but the punishment and resolution otherwise seem proper. Here, however, our empathy for the two blind men makes us despair of their karmic punishment and even makes us question whether this karmic punishment is not actually arbitrary.

Indeed, the sincerity that creates reader empathy for the two men is also what moves Chen Tuan to speak to them. He first orders them to eat a few small white stones that purify their thoughts and feelings and a jujube to end their physical hunger. More

[25] Ibid., 211-12.

importantly, he tries to convince the blind men that the real world around them is unworthy of their despair or vision. Although he admits that it is beautiful, this is only because of the corruption of humanity:

> It is only because the people of the world are so cutthroat that, from the very moment they emerge from their mothers' wombs, if they're smart they want to read all the poems and books in the world and if they're strong they seek to overwhelm the good men of the world. When riches come into their hands they want to be high officials and when high positions come into their hands they want to be emperors. Say one word against them and they will suddenly shoot you in the dark. If you have a little power, they're willing to sell out their own wives and children to flatter you. Hence, prestige always stands on a foundation of riches, frightful words are just so much hot air, and behind every noble enterprise is a pack of schemers.[26]

Chen Tuan compellingly admonishes them that if they are good people they will be able to see again in the next life, even while implying that the world may not be worth seeing. But the two are unable to take this to heart. Their response is not to work to improve themselves for their next life, or to ask about the immense corruption of the world, but rather to "[wail] loudly, thinking they would never see the world of light in this lifetime. They decided to discard their bodies by finding a steep cliff and leaping off."[27] All these two men seek is their eyesight, to be able to see the "world of light" which does not exist as they imagine it. This innocence and desire are so deep that they nearly kill themselves to attain it. It is only this last act of desperation that moves Chen Tuan to refer them to Sky Blue to have their sight restored, and this is where the story reaches its climax, discussed in more detail below.

---

[26] Ibid., 213-14.

[27] Ibid., 214.

The contrast between Chen Tuan's description of the world and the sincerity of the two protagonists who are unable to believe him show the extent of Aina's wavering. Chen Tuan is describing a world where virtuous action is less valued than self-interest. The storytellers in earlier sessions implied that prioritizing self-interest over virtue was either necessary or at least understandable. Aina has here carried this implication to its logical extreme, and the result is a dark world that the lovable protagonists cannot imagine. A blind faith in virtue and goodness of people, symbolized by the blind protagonists, is in direct conflict with self-interest. Self-preservation has not created a better social order—it has made the world less ordered.

Karma, Compassion, and an Angry Cosmos

If *huaben* typically work out formulas of karmic retribution, this one is no different. The main difference with this story is that instead of karma working to punish or reward individual actors, here *Tian* is judging all humanity as part of a 500-year cycle of punishment. Aina has his storyteller jump around in his narration to different parts of the empire as if to emphasize that this is a narrative of the entire world (*tianxia* 天下). Further, Aina has Heaven enforce karmic punishment to a much more exaggerated and severe extent than other *huaben* authors. The various deities in this story who are the agents of cosmic interaction with the earth use ruthless violent destruction and compassionless anger as their means of carrying out karmic retribution. In context, blindness almost comes off as a light punishment.

Yet the contradictions in the method of karmic retribution in the story suggest that Aina is also confused about the relationship of human actions and *Tian.* For example, the

deity that scolds Sky Blue for his compassion proclaims that the destruction is part of a five-hundred-year cycle but also that blindness is a current punishment for sins in past lives. Yet the attention to individuals, making them blind as punishment, seems individualized and therefore a redundant measure of karmic retribution. Further, though *Tian* is judging the entirety of earth's population for their degradation, the reader is still assured that Sky Blue is reviewing a roster of moral persons to rule the next world. Is karmic order focused on punishing and rewarding individuals for their actions, or is the punishment purely cyclical and unrelated to current human action?

A more significant flaw, and one that suggests a more arbitrary cosmic ordering, is the way in which the Buddha of the Burning Lamp selects the *arhat* who will descend to rule the following dynasty. Sky Blue refers to the world moving from "darkness" to "light" in its punishment for sin to a time of moral predominance, but the way the deities rule earth does not necessarily correspond to Sky Blue's hope for the future. The current world is at the mercy of uncompassionate cosmic deities. The Burning Lamp Buddha selects the next *arhat* ruler not by the proper timing of moral cycles or retribution, but by a random flower-growing competition.

He states:

> Descending to the mortal realm is inevitable—it is only a question of whether you do it sooner or later. Still, I have no better way of choosing between you: each of you will take one of the iron trees before me and plant it on the east or west face of this mountain. Whoever has the first tree to flower will go.[28]

[28] Ibid., 201.

If karmic retribution is tied to the moral or immoral actions of humans on earth, why does the Buddha of the Burning Lamp "have no better way of choosing"? No thought or premeditation goes into the selection of the *arhat* and either could have won. If Sky Blue had won the competition and descended to rule on earth, karmic violence as punishment would not have occurred until Honored Lightning's reign. In such a scenario, it would be impossible to argue that general human sin is the object of punishment. From this perspective, Aina seems to imply that patterns of peace and destruction are completely arbitrary.

Aina has moved from representative deities that show at least marginal concern with human action in earlier sessions to what seems like complete bafflement in this session. He cannot let go of the concept that moral karmic order exists—that it punishes bad deeds and rewards good deeds, even if this is in a cyclical and therefore harsher pattern. Yet Aina also implies that humans' fate is completely arbitrary and unrelated to moral action. Unable to decide between the two, Aina presents a story that goes back and forth between a vision of hopeful karmic reward for those who deserve it and a sense that if a karmic moral does exist it is beyond human comprehension. Thus, his restorative ending seems empty.

Honored Lightning's victory in the competition dictates that violent punishment will occur. The *arhat* descends to earth with his fiery and angry nature. He at once scorches a large part of the earth with thunder and lightning and the storyteller states:

> With his fiery disposition he took to his corner of the world with thunder and lightning, creating a vast conflagration that stretched from east to west. For the common folk, this was like being boiled alive in a crucible

> and before long they were all suffering greatly. The cataclysm was fated to be so and I will say no more on the matter.[29]

The storyteller introduces the first act of destruction with significant narrative distance. He shows no real concern or compassion for the suffering of the people during the transition. Aina uses this storyteller to explore harsh possibilities of the nature of *Tian.* By making his storyteller so detached, at least in the beginning, Aina increases the extent to which the reader finds the violence of the cosmos arbitrary.

In this story, the highest levels of *Tian* do not seem to have any ability to sympathize with the plight of humans. When humans complain to the God-on-High, he offers neither compassion nor an explanation, but with further anger. In his anger:

> A great blast sounded from within the void and immediately mountains collapsed and the earth split open, wrenching trees from the ground and sending sand flying. Even the "Pillar of Heaven," Mount Kunlun was cleft in twain. The intense shaking blew half of all the people and beasts into the air, where they were reduced to dust, disappearing without a trace.[30]

This is extraordinary for a late imperial short story, or for any late imperial genre. The storyteller narrates the death of half of the world's population within two sentences but gives not a hint of empathy. Truly this is a dark and striking reminder of the immense violence of the dynastic transition. Even if violence is proper as part of a larger cycle of karma, it means that *Tian* is only a rough force of destructive punishment. If the violence is not warranted then there is no greater explanation for human tragedy, and therefore little hope of preventing it.

---

[29] Ibid., 202.

[30] Ibid., 202-203.

The compassion of Sky Blue and Chen Tuan brings them to reward the sincere and the virtuous, but this compassion is always in opposition to the mostly arbitrary decisions made by the multiple voices of *Tian*. For example, Sky Blue, himself terrified by the violence, comes across the empty green stone while he is fleeing and, in his compassion, wants to heal the world:

> With just one drop of the liquid within, he hoped, all could be made clear and he would be able to offer humanity salvation from the dark hell in which it was imprisoned. Within two days great numbers of the blind had come from every corner of the earth to get a drop of that mysterious liquid when, without warning, a golden armor-clad deity emerged from a place high in the clouds.[31]

Sky Blue's compassion is at once reprimanded and restrained by an armed deity who proclaims that the world is in a "five-hundred-year cycle of divine retribution" and that all creatures are subject to the violence. By curing the blind, the deity proclaims, Sky Blue is actively working against the forces of karmic retribution. Though Sky Blue is also an immortal, his authority and power to help the world are severely limited. The reprimanding of Sky Blue is significant because it suggests that the destruction of humans by the cosmos, whether it be arbitrary or as punishment, is more important than a greater concern for human welfare or salvation. Aina seems to suspect that *Tian* is an arbitrary force, but he never allows himself to completely accept that premise.

The interaction of Chen Tuan and the protagonists also shows the subordination of compassion to karmic violence. When the two blind men reach Chen Tuan, they initially receive very little compassion. Chen Tuan mostly offers harsh words about past sins and about the depraved nature of human society. Seeing their sincerity, he has them

[31] Ibid., 204.

purify their bodies of emotions and physical hunger, but this purification of their bodies does nothing for the plot or for their benefit. When they reach Sky Blue in the next scene, for example, he still considers them unworthy. Furthermore, despite being freshly cleansed both spiritually and physically, they promptly weep upon hearing that they will not receive their vision. Though Chen Tuan recognizes their honesty, he cannot or will not act against what seems to be an overly harsh disbursement of karmic punishment. It is only when the two blind men are ready to jump off a cliff in their misery that Chen Tuan's compassion overcomes his devotion to karmic retribution. He relents and sends them to Sky Blue for healing, explicitly reversing his earlier statement that only good deeds would reverse their blindness for a future life.

A Drunken Utopia: Compassion and Coping with a World in Transition

The conclusion to the story simultaneously problematizes compassion in a violent cosmos and presents the opportunity for the deepest emotional empathy with the protagonists. When Aina juxtaposes deep reader empathy with an unempathetic cosmos, the result is an ambiguous and tragicomic ending. Although Aina's storyteller does offer a restorative ending, he does so only at a high cost.

The final act of compassion, Sky Blue's restoration of the sight of the two blind men, has an unexpected and painful close. Once again weeping in desperation for their sight,

> They arrived before him and, just as before, [Late-but-First] and [Brighter-than-Confucius] broke into loud sobs. [Sky Blue] looked at them and in his heart felt a burst of compassion… He then went to the place where he slept and retrieved the stone, opened the seal, and placed a drop of the spirit on the pupils of the two men. Their four eyes cleared and they

> immediately kowtowed and then bowed to [Sky Blue]. [Sky Blue] said, 'To return [to light from the darkness] is the purview of Heaven—it is there that you should direct your thanks.'[32]

For the two protagonists to achieve "enlightenment" or to receive their vision, which the audience also wants them to receive, Sky Blue must defy the orders of the armor-clad deity. Sky Blue had claimed it was time to descend the mountain, but the karmic destruction continues after he opens the blind men's' eyes, and both *arhats* and deities consistently repeat the blind men's unworthiness. In other words, the only way for the story to end on a positive note for the protagonists is for karmic retribution to be secretly suspended or defied. The armor-clad deity and Chen Tuan have already said that the protagonists fully deserve their blindness, but nobody ever tells the protagonists what sins they have committed. If *Tian* is the driving force of the violence, it is incomprehensible and unbearable. Compassionate or even attentive response to human sincerity and intent requires bypassing *Tian*'s will, which means that *Tian* does not respond in accordance with human action, but against it.

Now, as readers celebrate the restoration of the protagonists' sight and see hope for compassion in a cosmos run by angry and impersonal deities, we reach the conclusion of the story. With their eyes open,

> [Late-but-First] and [Brighter-than-Confucius] merely stood on that summit gazing down from the void. They took in this human world of red dust and found it utterly drab and ordinary, with myriad paths and thousands of streams unfolding before their eyes. Again they wept, saying, 'Until now our eyes have been closed and we foolishly thought there were countless uses for them in the world. Now we've seen with open eyes and have awoken to the fact that all is flowers of ignorance and flames of illusion. There's nothing to hold on to. Now we can see we're suffering

[32] Ibid., 215.

> through seas of degradation and mountains of injustice, seeking calamity in the midst of calamity, where the prick of each new disaster troubles our eyes. It was better when our eyes were closed but we were living free and easy. Your disciples were happy to ascend this mountain with our eyes shut but we dare not go down again with them open.[33]

Aina's storyteller darkly subverts what the reader expects to be a satisfying conclusion. The compassion of Sky Blue has not ended but added to the protagonists' misery. When Sky Blue grants them their vision and metaphorical enlightenment, the two blind men see the world as it really is and weep. This enlightenment allows the two to finally realize that everything is an illusion, the basic premise of Buddhist thought. But it is also a worse punishment than the blindness they had before. When they were blind, they could imagine a more beautiful and worthwhile world and go ahead with some sense of hope. Now, with their eyes open they can only mourn at the corruption, injustice, and violence around them. Enlightenment is not a positive experience worth coveting.

Yet, as the reader is the most heartbroken on behalf of the two blind protagonists, Sky Blue for the first time has no compassion. Instead, he becomes a vocal judge of their sins, repeatedly mentioning that they are not worthy to stay on the mountain with him. When the two beg Sky Blue to restore their blindness, Sky Blue mentions the empty bag of Maitreya (the Buddha of the future), only to repeat that the two men are not morally worthy. Instead, Sky places them inside Du Kang's wine jar, the interior of which is a Daoist utopia—a thin metaphor for a drunken stupor. Only once the two protagonists are completely drunk can they bear to watch the world and the destruction of it without tears.

[33] Ibid., 216.

Even though Sky Blue eventually allows the two to descend the mountain into a moral and carefree world, this future still is beyond the limits of the diegetic narrative.

By ending the story in this way, Aina shows that the violence and chaos of the Ming/Qing transition are unbearable for normal humans. Enlightenment to the illusory and immoral nature of the world only gives more reason to despair. The hopeful conclusion of the story seems to be a small bandage over a huge wound. Heaven has killed half or more of the world's population, a number that must have seemed like the death toll of the transition, and there is no way to come to terms peacefully with the devastation. Transcendence from the "illusion" of the world can only come by being fortunate enough to survive the devastation and waiting for something better and drinking yourself into an emotionless stupor in the meantime. The two main characters must get drunk and retreat to a false utopia to bear the weight of their own enlightenment. Buddhist enlightenment ceases to be a means of transcendence and strength and becomes another emotional burden.

Through his storyteller, Aina tries to make greater sense of the tragedy by offering countless cosmic deities and beings who can notice and react to human action and suffering but choose not to. Aina promises that Sky Blue will usher in a new era of virtue and moral order, but covers it in a prolonged narrative of human suffering. Like the story before it, a restoration of order requires divine utopias and the intervention of supernatural beings.

Aina's confused combination of both a completely arbitrary *Tian* and a *Tian* excessively concerned with the punishment of sin is significant for the development of

Idle Talk and the genre. Karmic retribution is no longer an invisible force in the background working seamlessly to reward or punish individual human actions. Instead, it is either brutal and cyclical or else completely disengaged and even non-existent. Aina's narrative of the significance of human virtue in the context of an unknowable but violent cosmos foreshadows the final session in which Rector Chen preaches a cosmos that works as a means of population control. Through this story, Aina tries to come to terms with the violence through a genre typically devoted to the workings of karmic order. Aina's increasingly dark perception of the relationship between humans and the cosmos makes it more difficult for him to write a coherent and conventional *huaben.* Aina wants to offer a moral logic to his narrative, but seems unable to make it work with a cosmos that can incite such harsh violence. Unwilling to completely accept an arbitrary cosmos, he is left with an awkward and somewhat incoherent *huaben.*

Finally, the various characters' references to a "world of light" and of transition from "darkness to light" adds a layer of ambiguity to the text. On one hand, the mentions of "light" seem to allude to the Ming dynasty, the name of which means "bright." This is especially suggested by the blind men's' refusal to acknowledge the corruption of the "world of light" they so desperately want to see. In this reading, *Tian* is punishing the corruption of the Ming, and the "Qing," on which the "green" (*qing*) stone and its "clear" (*qing*) liquid both pun, is the means of compassion and restoration. Though the reader may not want to admit the corruption of the Ming, and though one may still mourn its fall, there is still hope for a true vision of how society should run, a vision given by the clear "qing" liquid to better equip individuals for the moral society to come.

This is a tempting reading that does set up the context and subject as the Ming/Qing transition. However, the intent of the allusions is not consistent. Sky Blue's references to light are positive. When he first finds the stone, the liquid is the antidote to the darkness of the hell of the violence, not the corruption of the Ming. In fact, Sky Blue uses multiple words for brightness to show the positive result of his compassion for people. The clear liquid restores a world of brightness for those who are blind. The Qing being the antidote to the Qing conquest does not make sense. Further, once he restores the sight of the blind men, he proclaims that "To return to light from the darkness (*qu'an huanming* 去暗还明) is the purview of Heaven." Here the use of the character "ming" is positive, making a political reading difficult. Aina's storyteller offers a high figural density of references to "Ming" and "Qing," but like many of Aina's other stories, the tales are too ambiguous for simple formulaic interpretations.

Diegetic Responses and Conclusions

Because of this ambiguity, it is worthwhile to briefly examine the primary diegetic and paratextual responses. Part of the uniqueness of *Idle Talk* is that it offers two levels of response, from both the primary diegetic characters under the bean arbor and from the external commentator. These responses gauge the effectiveness and coherence of this story. After some humble remarks from the storyteller, the group proclaims:

> Listening to your lofty tale, unconsciously it swept over us like a cooling breeze. What do you say to each of us riding it home to a happy evening of ease and comfort tonight in the world inside Du Kang's jar?[34]

[34] Ibid., 218.

The audience acknowledges the story's concern with a form of enlightenment but makes light of the heaviest part of the story—the drunkenness needed to cope. The "cool breeze" that unconsciously comes over them is a light reference to enlightenment, but the reference to Du Kang's wine jar is a more light-hearted plea to go drinking in response to the darkness of the story. Either way, the community offers little meaningful commentary on the story. The audience's response contrasts with the commentator who directly reflects upon the gravity of the text.

Although the commentator's remarks are often unremarkable, in this case, they offer greater insight into the problematic form of this story. After the story, the commentator, "Purple-Bearded Crazy Stranger" (紫髯狂客) proclaims:

> This chapter uses blind eyes to expound Buddhist teachings, and it is really extraordinary (*qiyi* 奇異). And the use of wine to end it, this is beyond fathoming. When all things under Heaven get to the point where nothing can be done about them, only intoxication can melt them away. Thus Liu Ling always had a shovel and wine ready, and Ruan Ji was drunk for sixty days straight. This is how the lofty people have viewed it; it is not just being drunk for the sake of it. Does not Old Man Aina's writing also put 10,000 words into this?[35]

The commentator often reassures readers that Aina's stories promote standard Confucian values such as filial piety and loyalty. Here, however, he completely ignores the promise that a moral society will return. Instead, like Aina's storyteller, he is far more concerned with realities of a world that seems to be violently falling apart. Even if there

[35] Translation based on Wille's translation with significant modification."Liu Ling 劉伶 (c. 221-300) was one of the so-called *Zhulin qixian* ("Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove," a group of eccentric literati). He would drink to excess and carried about a spade, instructing his followers to simply bury him if he should die. Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210-263), was another of the Seven. He would frequently drink to avoid dealing with matters he deemed unpleasant, as when he stayed drunk for sixty days to keep from discussing the possibility of his daughter marrying the emperor." Wille, "Session 8," 218.

is hope for a future moral society, that hope is not the predominant focus of the story. The commentator, like Aina, focuses on how one can cope with the trauma of excessive violence and death of the Ming/Qing transition. Heaven, or *Tian*, in this story and others, exceeds human comprehension or agency. When any sense of greater karmic order is actively working against human agency, moral action or sincerity seems of little value. In such times, when cosmic order is both violent and impossible to comprehend, Aina and his commentator seem to suggest that there are no valid means to cope other than heavy drinking. The commentator makes no mention of Sky Blue's hopeful ending of the story; he cares only about the heavy weight of the karmic destruction that Aina equates with the Ming/Qing transition.

Coda: Hopeful Endings and Hard Questions

It is important to note that sessions seven and eight do offer a future hope. In session seven, Qiwu zhu implies that virtuous ministers will again rule the empire. In this session, the storyteller claims Sky Blue will descend from the mountain with filial sons, chaste wives, and righteous men in the next age. But despite these promises of a return to moral order, both storytellers focus on how to cope with the devastation that occurs before that future hope. Dynasties and human life may go in natural cycles, just like the seasons that affect the bean arbor, but the devastation and broken relationships that occur in between raise questions about the actual significance of human action. Adherence to Confucian relational ethics such as loyalty, chastity, and filial piety are desired and glorified in times of peace, but become at best worthless, or at worst devastating and dangerous in times of turmoil. And if destruction and peace are cyclical, do human

actions make any greater difference? Or should we simply pursue our own interest and hope that all ends well? Virtuous men taking over the world after the destruction is wonderful, but can we stomach the rewarding of protagonists who disregard values of filial piety and loyalty in times of crisis? And how do we cope with a cosmos that so recklessly destroys humans and creatures alike in the meantime? The Shang horde in session seven asks this directly, "Does Heaven enjoy killing?" In session eight, the necessity for massive drinking displaces such direct questions, but the suggestion that Heaven is an apathetic force of destruction is there nonetheless.

In sessions one and two, Aina's privileged old storyteller presented two stories that were relatively light in their tone. Although both stories contained dynastic transition or disruption in the background, on their surface the stories looked like entertaining narratives. If a reader wanted to read them as mere parodies of the famous characters they discuss, they could, though not without at least twinges of discomfort. The God-on-High in session one, for example, was an incompetent executor of karmic distribution, but this also made the story of Shi You as a shrew more entertaining. Aina has taken the two main stories in sessions seven and eight in a notably darker direction. In session seven Aina offers entertainment value in Shuqi's excessive ego, but the direct questioning of Heaven's intent is difficult to stomach. And in session eight Aina seems to directly mourn the Ming/Qing transition and the uncaring cosmos. If in session seven there was still some nominal arbiter of karmic retribution in the figure of Qiwu zhu, by session eight there is no reliable arbiter to whom we should listen, nor would anyone be at ease with what the deities do say. *Idle Talk* is rapidly becoming darker and more unstable.

CHAPTER VI

BROKEN BODIES AND BROKEN NARRATIVES IN THE PENULTIMATE CHAPTER OF *IDLE TALK*

The return of the storyteller from the first two sessions for this penultimate session of *Idle Talk* is significant. He is the eldest of the group and the only one invited to tell so many stories. Though his earlier stories about Jie Zhitui and Xi Shi hinted at the fall of the Ming, in this session it is his direct concern in all three of his narratives. Further, as in the other two sessions, he seems to praise traditional Confucian ethics, even as the stories he tells question the value of those ethics. In session eleven he returns not as an anonymous young storyteller like the other members of the community but as an old schoolteacher who lived through the fall of the Ming. The host asks him to give his personal account, but he never fully obliges. Instead, he gives three narratives, each more distant from personal experience and each more explicitly fictional than the last. As is proper to his role as a schoolteacher, the old storyteller continues to long for a world where humans act virtuously and where *Tian* rewards them for doing so. Yet, as in his earlier stories, the old storyteller struggles to unify the reality of the Ming fall with his own idealistic visions of society.

The relationship between Aina and this old storyteller is not stable in *Idle Talk*, but I argue that Aina often uses this storyteller to express internal tension about whether human virtues are more valuable than self-preservation. In the first session, the older storyteller was harsh and moralizing. He condemned Shi You for causing the violence

and disorder, even as the story that Aina puts in his mouth allowed for a very different interpretation. In the second session, the old storyteller expressed both viewpoints: he condemned Fan Li and Xi Shi for their lack of loyalty and/or chastity but expressed sympathy and agreement for their decision to prioritize self-preservation. Though I am uncomfortable equating the two voices, I believe that in this eleventh session Aina merges his own voice more directly with the old storyteller, especially as the old storyteller offers details of the Ming collapse and articulates or circumnavigates his own trauma. Aina expresses his increasing doubts about the value of virtue in both the emptiness of the narratives in session eleven and the confused lecture of the foil character of Rector Chen in the final session.

In this chapter, I will make three key arguments. First, that Aina's primary diegetic storyteller repeatedly emphasizes a broken body politic as macrocosmic of a broken corporeal body and that this directly prefigures the collapse of the bean arbor and cosmic order in the final session. Second, that the storyteller recycles the same thematic content through several narrative fragments, each of which offers greater narrative distance from the event, from a personal account to an explicitly fictional account. Finally, that the storyteller's multiple fragments of narrative parallel the fragments of memory. That is, in recycling his memories through these fragments, the storyteller (and indirectly, Aina) hopes to place them into a greater narrative that would imbue the fragments with meaning, but this attempt fails. Though the storyteller is one of many voices in *Idle Talk*, I suggest that the fragmentation of voices and especially of the

storyteller's narratives are representative of Aina's own views, since he is the most privileged storyteller in the collection.

Unlike most *huaben* stories, which introduce the main story with one or two brief anecdotes, this session of the bean arbor has five significant parts. First, the host of the bean arbor offers a discussion of the seasonal transition and the relationship of nature to greater political stability. He then introduces the storyteller as the same storyteller of the first two sessions. He explains that they have invited back this storyteller to tell the younger men about the reality of the violence of the fall of the Ming. After this introduction, the storyteller gives three narratives. The first should be a personal account of the fall of the Ming dynasty to the rebels, but it is highly detached. The second narrative is a brief anecdote about a man who survives decapitation during the Ming/Qing transition. The final narrative is a full-length fictional story about two local militia commanders who fight the rebels. When one commander defects to the side of the rebels, the other martyrs himself to save the Ming dynasty from defeat. The last part of the session is the storyteller's personal comments about the narratives he has provided, followed by the intradiegetic audience's response.

Part 1: Autumn Harvest and Political Stability

The host opens by discussing the arrival of autumn and the celebration of the autumn harvest. He suggests that this celebration is justified not only because of the work of the farmers, but because any natural or political disaster could have destroyed the food supply. Seeds may naturally grow into crops, but nature can also destroy the harvest. By

pointing this out, the host indirectly introduces a theme of disintegration and destruction. He says:

> When all the farmers celebrate the year, they always say, "Let there be autumn."[1] Why focus on this one word "autumn"? During the spring when they plow and plant vegetables and wheat, what benefit can they get? By the fourth or fifth month, when it is time for summer weeding, if there are daily rains there will be rot in the fields and the major rivers will inundate the land, or if the heavens are clear and there is a severe drought, and the sprouts and seeds dry up, then you may only get half a crop. But if you take advantage of the late summer to plant another crop of sprouts or rice seedlings you can still hope that when autumn arrives, you will have a crop. If by autumn the waters are high and do not recede, or if the drought lingers and there is no rain, then the crops will break off at the roots and die, and there is no hope. . . Now at this time, with the weather of early autumn, the rains have evened out, and you only have to look at the flourishing flowers on the bean arbor to know that this will be a year of rich harvests. Thus we can see that the appearance of this bean arbor is directly relevant to the harvest season.[2]

The host's opening metaphor recognizes the threat of violence even as it celebrates the prosperity that persists despite it. For the host, a genuine celebration of harvest means the celebration that natural forces did not destroy it. Similarly, a celebration of human growth and prosperity depends upon a lack of political violence that could easily eliminate both human leisure and humans' enjoyment of nature. The host continues:

> Now everyone is sitting at leisure [*an xian zi zai* 安閑自在] under the bean arbor, and your minds are all at ease. If the world were in turmoil [*luanli* 荒亂] and if the fields were nothing but random weeds and wild grasses, how could there possibly be a bean arbor? For the last several days all of the stories told under this bean arbor have been idle talk of peace and contentment [*taiping wushi de xianhua* 太平無事的閑話], so we can see that the world has enjoyed peace for a while now. These naive youths know nothing of the pain of the homelessness and the flames of

[1] The phrase "To have autumn" leaves off its obvious complement, *huo* "harvest."

[2] Lindsey Waldrop, trans., "Session 11: In Death, Commander Dang Beheads his Enemy," in *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor*, 279.

> war [*luanli binghuo zhi ku* 亂離兵火之苦]. So today let us invite back the old gent who told stories on other days and have him recount from the beginning his experience of those days of separation and distress in order to allow the youth to practice some skills at hand and to cultivate some wisdom in their minds. That way, should a bad year turn into a time of chaos, they will still have something to rely upon, something to support them.[3]

The bean arbor exists as a place of safety and leisure only because the external political and natural realm are not destructive. The members should celebrate their ability to tell stories under the bean arbor with an awareness that political instability could have prevented it. *Xian* 閑, or leisure, is not only how humans express their basic morality, but it also inspires human gratitude for the political stability that allows it. The host contrasts the content of stories that reflect a time of peace and leisure (*taiping wushi de xianhua* 太平無事的閑話*)* with the historical possibility of chaos (*luan* 亂) and disorder which threaten it. The host's repetition of the word *chaos* and the invocation of the homelessness that it causes reflects upon the chaos of violence by connoting a sense of the wandering and instability that it causes. The host posits the importance of an awareness of the violence of war as the reason for inviting back the old schoolteacher to serve as a storyteller.

Part 2: Broken Microcosmic Bodies

Overview and the Microcosmic Body in Chinese Tradition

In this section, I will read the storyteller's narrative of the fall of the Ming. The host asks the storyteller for his personal account of the fall, but the storyteller gives a

[3] Waldrop, "Session 11," 280.

very detached narrative, which I suggest represents an emotional distancing from the violent events of the transition. The storyteller's narrative begins with a discussion of what happened under each of the final four emperors of the Ming dynasty (Wanli, Taichang, Tianqi, Chongzhen) and how corruption, incompetence, and natural disaster resulted in social instability. The storyteller continues to relate how officials and then cities had to confront the increasingly strong force of rebels. He also discusses how the rebels would take cities and how they decided who to kill and who to spare. He ends his narrative by focusing on the rebels' specific ways of torturing and killing innocent people. I am particularly interested in the storyteller's abrupt shift from a highly emotional song lyric to an emotionless list of rebel names and nicknames. Interestingly, the storyteller only alludes to the death of Chongzhen and never mentions the Manchu invasion.[4]

I believe we should read the old storyteller's narrative of the Ming as more than mere historical background for the narratives that follow. Contemporary readers would need no such background information. Instead, the storyteller uses the first narrative to show the deterioration of both the political body and the physical body. He begins his first narrative with the failing at the head of the body politic and continues to the metaphorical organs and limbs, before reaching a final focus on the broken physical body. Both broken bodies, the body politic and the corporeal body, mirror a greater sense of fragmentation of belief in a united cosmos in the final session.

[4] Censorship seems an unlikely reason for this, since the next session alludes to the Manchus through only a very thin veil.

In Chinese literary and cosmological traditions, writers and scholars viewed the corporeal body in two ways. First, they viewed it as in constant interaction with the cosmos and society through the boundaries of the senses and the skin. Second, they saw it as a living microcosm of greater societal and cosmic order. Jonathan Hay, for example, discusses the body of Pan Jinlian in the novel *Jin Ping Mei* as a point of departure for exploring medical and sociological texts about the body. He argues that the body existed not as a disparate unit, but as a symbol of greater political and societal organization. The lungs, for example, correspond to the prime minister, and the heart/mind to the emperor. The systematic nature of the body, with its intricate organization, was an ideal representation of the body politic. Both were "hierarchical and highly centralized, but with a highly effective system of power distributed and connected."[5] The physical body's constant interaction with the cosmos through the skin supported the notion that "the self might be seen as evolving in the relations between the organic microcosm of the body and the social macrocosm of humanity. The cyclical feedback continued in the relation between the social microcosm and the universal macrocosm."[6]

The explicit duality of the material and physical body in late imperial Chinese fiction strengthens the conception of the physical body as a microcosm of the political and cosmic bodies. Andrew Plaks has argued that many of the masterpieces of Ming

[5] John Hay, "The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?" in *Body, Subject, & Power in China,* ed. Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 64-65.

[6] Hay, "The Body Invisible?," 65.

fiction are based on the opening lines of *The Great Learning*, which pinpoint the individual as the centering point of the cosmos:[7]

> Through the investigation of things, one can extend one's knowledge; once knowledge has been extended, the will can be made sincere; once the will has been made sincere, the mind can be rectified; once the mind has been rectified, the self can be cultivated; once the self has been cultivated, the family can be regulated; once the family has been regulated, the state can be properly ordered; once the state is properly ordered, the entire world can be kept in harmony. From the Son of Heaven to the common people, all must regard self-cultivation as the foundation. There is never a case where the foundation is in disorder and yet the branches are in order.[8]

As the vessel of the heart/mind, the individual body becomes the site for the centering of the cosmos. The regulation and cultivation of the body is the foundation and microcosm for the regulation and cultivation of the political body. Maram Epstein also notes that writers used the physical body as a metaphor to express their anxiety about potential cosmic disorder.[9] The physical body was used as a metaphor for social order, which in turn mirrored political and cosmic order. In Aina's story, the schoolteacher expresses this concern in a traumatic and violent way. For him, the body wears and manifests trauma and even the disorder of the political body.

Finally, though Hay only discusses Pan Jinlian's body, the author of *Jin Ping Mei* also includes a memorial to the emperor that directly relates the material body to the body politic. The memorial begins with an example of a man ravaged by disease. Because

[7] Andrew Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*, 156-57.

[8] Zhu Xi, *Sishu jizhu* 四書集注. (Taipei: Fa Xing Zhe Yi Wen Yin Shu Guan, 1966), 2.

[9] Maram Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 31. For more on the corporeal aspect see Epstein, "Inscribing the Essentials: Culture and the Body in Ming-Qing Fiction," *Ming Studies* 41 (1999): 6-36.

illness has already weakened him, he becomes more vulnerable to outside forces. The author continues:

> The present situation of the empire is just like that of an invalid in the final stages of debilitation. The ruler resembles his head; the chief ministers resemble his vital organs; and the lesser officials resemble his four limbs. If Your Majesty sits in state upon the throne above, and your officials fulfill their responsibilities below, the natural vitality of the body politic will be replenished within; its defenses will be strong without; and the menace of barbarian invasion will be eliminated.[10]

The author of the memorial admonishes corrupt officials who serve themselves instead of the empire. For him, societal order and peace are like physical health in that both depend on different parts working together in a logical fashion. The security of the empire depends on the ability of the state to effectively communicate with its outposts. If this communication breaks down, the body politic becomes vulnerable to invasion, just as a corporeal body in disarray is vulnerable to infection.

The memorial is similar to the old storyteller's proceeding narrative of the Ming fall. In both narratives, the metaphorical illness spreads from the head to the vital organs, and finally to the limbs.[11] Though the old storyteller does not explicitly discuss illness, he follows the memorial's comparison of the corporeal body and the political body in his account of the fall of the Ming. The storyteller of session eleven begins with the ruler and proceeds to the key officials and outer officials in that order.

---

[10] David T. Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase or, Chin P'ing Mei* , vol. 1, *The Gathering* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 1: 343-44

[11] It is perhaps not surprising to see such a parallel between *Jin Ping Mei* and the storyteller's conception of the fall of the Ming. The opening to the collection as a whole parallels part of Chapter twenty-seven in *Jin Ping Mei* in its discussion of escaping the summer heat. At one point the commentator also parallels a play or text called *Ximen Zhuan*, based, it seems, on *Jin Ping Mei.*

The Storyteller's Detached Narrative

Despite the promise that the storyteller will relay his own experience of the fall of the Ming, the storyteller begins his narrative at the highest level of narrative history: the emperor as head of the body politic. His account wavers between a personal narrative of a traumatic event and an objective historical narrative. Despite his distanced narration, ruptures in the narrative and the storyteller's later personal comments show a personal connection and struggle with the memories of the violence.

The storyteller begins:

> I remember that in the 48th year of the Wanli reign, Liaodong changed command.[12] The Taichang emperor died within a month, and it turned to the Tianqi emperor to take the throne, but he was still young and foolish (*chichi daidai* 痴痴呆呆), and really knew nothing about the affairs of the world. He relied on the eunuch Wei Zhongxian to handle matters of recruiting soldiers and securing provisions for them, but Wei whittled the state treasury down to nothing (*kongkongxuxu* 空空虛虛).[13] At that time the disruptions were still outside of the Shanhai pass, and the lands within were still calm and tranquil. Unexpectedly, the throne passed to the Chongzhen emperor, but his fate was worse than that of Tianqi. As time passed if it were not a multi-year drought, then it was floods; if it was not epidemics, then it was locusts covering the ground.[14]

The storyteller conflates natural and political disorder as he explains the disintegration at the head of the empire. The rapid progression of emperors already

[12] In 1620, the year the Wanli emperor passed away, the commander of defense of the Liaodong area, Xiong Tingbi (1569-1625), resigned his commission after his colleagues brought multiple impeachment charges against him. His replacement, Yuan Yingtai, was defeated by the Manchu armies the following year and he committed suicide as a result.

[13] The eunuch Wei Zhongxian (1568-1627) and the emperor's wet nurse, Madame Ke, held significant power once the teenage Zhu Youjiao 朱由校（Tianqi）became emperor. Because he was more interested in other projects, the Tianqi emperor left most of the state and palace matters to Wei, who manipulated power as he saw fit.

[14] Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua,* 11:140; Waldrop, "Session 11," 281-82.

suggests instability, but incompetence and natural disasters make it worse. The Taichang emperor dies quickly and the Tianqi emperor is too young to rule wisely, resulting in the rise of the corrupt eunuch Wei Zhongxian. The repetition of syllables in *chichi daidai* ("foolish") and *kongkongxuxu* ("whittled down to nothing") further emphasizes the dysfunction. At first, the violence is only in the outer regions, ("outside of the Shanhai pass") but the instability at the center correlates with the increasing threat to the entire state. The storyteller associates the Chongzhen emperor's rule with multiple natural disasters as both the natural and political realms disintegrate further. Further, although the storyteller does not mention the Chongzhen emperor's body hanging from Coal Hill in Beijing's Jingshan Park, the mention of his "fate" implies it.[15] His damaged body (by the breaking of the neck, nonetheless) is the counterpart of the broken crops, institutions, cities, and bodies that follow in the storyteller's account.

The storyteller then continues from the center of the empire to the high officials and then to the local officials, correlating them with the vital organs and limbs. He says:

> He [the Chongzhen Emperor 崇禎 (1628-1644)] was also stingy by nature, and the inexperienced officials in charge of the Six Ministries at the provincial level cared nothing for governing but wanted only to ingratiate themselves with their superiors. They presented an edict cutting funds for all the courier stations in the country.[16] This cut off the loafers and hoodlums' source of clothing and they then formed gangs and turned to banditry.[17]

[15] The legend is that when the rebels entered Beijing, the Chongzhen emperor committed suicide by hanging himself from Coal Hill in a nearby park.

[16] In 1629 an economic measure cut one-third of the postal attendants; see Frederick Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise*, vol 2, 796. For a succinct overview of those years of natural disasters and the resulting famine and banditry that led to the fall of the Ming, see Timothy Brook, *The Troubled Empire*, 238-59.

[17] Waldrop, "Session 11," 282.

The high officials care only about pleasing the emperor for their own careers and have no real knowledge of how to govern the country. Their incompetency sets off a chain reaction that continues further from the center. The storyteller mentions the 1629 edict, which laid off one-third of the postal attendants, many of whom were already disgruntled. This policy was a key cause of the revolts. When those runners, now with no income for food, resort to banditry, the storyteller does not blame them, but instead bemoans the moral failings of the high officials:

> At that time if there had been a commander daring and clever enough to offer them amnesty, and if there had not been officials in court demanding that bribes be passed up through the chain of command and hamstringing his leadership, then it would still have been easy to eliminate them.[18]

The center's instability and corruption spread to the officials in charge of caring for the people. They are more concerned about their own power. The metaphorical illness has spread to the organs. The resulting ineffective communication from the heart/mind to the body results in larger groups of bandits. When another officer, Yuan Chonghuan 袁崇煥 (1584-1630), arrogantly kills another Liaodong general, those who had worked with that general turn against Yuan, who has also indirectly cut off their food source.[19] This is the fatal blow; the bandits now move to the heartlands of the empire, mostly because of widespread hunger. The storyteller says the rebels cut through areas "with the force of a splitting bamboo stick," a powerful metaphor for the way the bandits take over the political body with little resistance.

---

[18] Ibid.

[19] Yuan Chonghuan was a Chinese general assigned to defend Liaodong against the Manchus. He was later executed under trumped-up charges of treason, crippling Ming resistance in the region.

From here, the storyteller continues to the "loss of cities and towns." Despite the state's last effort to stabilize the country by sending secret police to execute all criminals, social order continues to deteriorate. Now local officials, unable to keep order in their regions, give up and join the rebels as well. With all communication and cooperation between the state and the outskirts, or between the heart/mind and the limbs cut off, the metaphorical illness of the body politic reaches a critical threshold.

Narrative Convulsions

As the empire falls apart, the storyteller offers a rare personal glimpse of his own feelings and of how ordinary people responded. He recalls:

> At that time, I happened to be walking down the road, when I heard someone singing a borderland tune.[20] Then it was clear that all of the people under heaven were crying out in anguish, as if they were being burned by fire. I hated that the heavens and the earth could not be overturned at once to fulfill their heartfelt hopes. His song went:
>
> Old man Heaven,
> You are getting old;
> Your ears are deaf and your eyes are blurry;
> You can't see people
> Nor hear their worries.
> Those who kill and burn enjoy splendor and glory,
> While those who read sutras just starve to death.
> Old man Heaven,
> If you can't be Heaven, then just cave in!
> If you can't be Heaven, then just cave in![21]

[20] "Borderland" means the Shanxi-Shaanxi border region.

[21] Waldrop, "Session 11," 284. This folk song originated from the Late-Ming period, apparently describing social injustice and poverty. A version of it is quoted by Frederic E. Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise*, 16. The poem is also mentioned by Mi Chu Wiens, "Masters and Bondservants: Peasant Rage in the Seventeenth Century." *Ming Studies* 1 (1979): 63. Aina is repurposing it, tellingly, to describe the violence of the transition instead.

This emotional indulgence is brief but significant. By placing himself among the people, the storyteller takes the role of the minor historical official (*baiguan* 稗官) who would collect folk songs as a gauge of the empire's effectiveness in caring for the people. With all communication between the state and the people severed, now only a rustic schoolteacher can serve the *baiguan*'s function. Yet the storyteller's recording of the song is more a vicarious expression of his own emotion than a means to improve the country. And as the lyrics suggest, more than just the state has broken down. Heaven and the cosmos are also incompetent. Instead of a moral cosmos rewarding moral actions and punishing immoral actions, the people feel that there is an apathetic or even violent cosmos.

Yet the storyteller does not elaborate on this sentiment at all. Instead, he offers no further commentary on this song and quickly switches to an impersonal narrative. His next words are:

> Strongmen arose everywhere, and although I cannot recall all of the factions, I can still remember their names and nicknames:[22]

He continues to list the names and nicknames of 37 rebels. There is a stilting shift of narrative style. The storyteller's sudden change of narrative from emotional lyricism to a listing of historical names suggests a personal discomfort on the part of the storyteller, as if he had briefly lost control of his emotions or his narration. The storyteller has moved from emotion to the most distant and detached narrative possible. Unlike historical prose, which can reveal personal subjectivities and biases, lists such as this one offer little room

[22] Waldrop, "Session 11," 284.

for personal expression. The storyteller's first task was to give a personal account. To this point, his voice and narrative have been mostly objective, but still in a free and relaxed narrative form. Here, after his brief emotional expression, he switches to a purely historical role, the recording of names. Alone, such a list may merely remind us of the role of a historian in assigning praise or blame, but here it seems more representative of the storyteller's need to detach himself from his own outpouring of emotion.

After his list of names, the storyteller gives us more insight into the nature of the rebels as they conquer cities and towns. The storyteller offers a surprising amount of details on how the rebels conquer the cities. For example, he says that the rebels immediately killed people under twelve or thirteen *sui* and those over 40 *sui*, fearing that their attachment to home and family would be too strong and could, therefore, be a liability. The rebels spared and conscripted only the young adults, believing that their naivete and overconfidence would be an asset. The storyteller's narrative of the destruction of the family and the city shows how human nature and human institutions fall apart because of the center's disintegration.

The storyteller concludes the narrative with a detached but detailed description of how the rebels mutilated the corporeal body:

> There were also the heartless ones, who, in order to amuse themselves, took [a pregnant woman] and gambled on whether there was a boy or girl in her belly, and then cut her open to see who was right. Some cut out peoples' heart and lungs, strung them together, and smoke-dried them to eat with wine as snacks. There were also cruel forms of execution, like skinning people alive, gouging out the eyeballs, cutting off the nose, chopping off hands, and cutting off feet, even melting people—who knows how many ways they had! One need only mention such scenes and

> it causes people in times of great peace to remember the separation and the misery, and to recall and regret all those events.[23]

The damage to physical limbs and organs mirrors the dysfunction at various levels of administration, whether at the center, the organs, or the limbs. The narrative ends here—there is no resolution. There is no greater narrative in which the storyteller frames his account of violence to provide it with greater meaning. Dynastic fall inscribes the political body's deterioration onto the corporeal body.

Fictional Perspectives and Continuities

In his proceeding two narratives, the primary diegetic storyteller moves from a historical account under the premise of a personal account to an anecdote and a full story that are both explicitly fiction. His recycling of the same content from a more objective account, to an anecdote which occupies a space between fiction and history, to an explicitly fictional *huaben* story is significant because it shows that the old storyteller is trying to place the traumatic memories of violence associated with the Ming/Qing transition into a grander narrative that imbues each piece with meaning. Though the storyteller is innovative in his use of violence to drive the plot instead of lust or coincidence, I argue that this attempt is unsuccessful.

Further, the old storyteller in the proceeding narratives uses more markers of cosmological instability, such as *yin/yang* symbolism and characters that are neither dead nor alive. This is important for two reasons. First, the presence of both marks the narratives as an explicit work of fiction based on the storyteller's own memories and

[23] Ibid., 287.

therefore more distanced than the first account. Second, each feature suggests a cosmic instability in which the memories of violence appear. The presence of ghosts implies an unstable reality symbolized by violence and "strange affairs," as the storyteller states. The use of *yin/yang* symbolism positions the storyteller himself as the narrator of the cosmos, in the sense that he uses individual characters and their bodies to imply a greater battle of *yang* as a force of moral rectitude and *yin* as a force of lust and evil.

I suggest that the spiritual beings in the anecdote and the full-length story—the spirit officials, the headless man thought to be a ghost, the resurrected body of Commander Dang, and then his manifested spirit—are a means by which the storyteller can mourn and attempt to make sense of the traumatic past. Judith Zeitlin argues that the historical ghost story was a means by which current writers could start to come to terms with the past. She writes that "this set of narratives [the historical ghost story] about the recent past participates in the work of mourning, enabling the threatening memory of the old dynasty to be tamed and rehabilitated and finally put to rest and purged."[24] The narratives, then, are a means of therapy whereby the storyteller tries to put the traumatic events in a narrative that makes sense of them. She continues to argue that in the historical ghost story

> the past is always represented in some form as a loss to be mourned and lamented. Especially in tales that reflect upon violent events of the recent past, the course of history becomes the trauma that produces the ghost(s).[25]

[24] Judith T. Zeitlin, *The Phantom Heroine: Ghosts and Gender in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Literature* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 88.

[25] Ibid.

I suggest that in session eleven of *Idle Talk,* the spirits and liminal beings and the manifested spirit of Commander Dang at the end of the final narrative in these stories serve a similar purpose to the ghosts in Zeitlin's historical ghost story. That is, even if they are not "ghosts" in the official sense, they are lingering reminders of traumatic violence. The damaged bodies that defy death or that straddle the gap between life and death in the following two narratives imply a disconnect between actions and significance. In early Qing fiction, ghosts tended to stand for the traumatic past coming back to the surface, in need of re-incorporation into a grander narrative. Only in this way can the sufferer put them away.

As an example of her point, Zeitlin references "A Record of Ten Days in Yangzhou" [扬州十日记 1645], a personal account of the violence of the Qing massacre of Yangzhou by a man named Wang Xiuchu 王秀楚.[26] Though little is known about Wang other than that he considered himself a scholar, his record is remarkably descriptive. Zeitlin writes of his account that

> [it] seems to take place in the present. Such an eyewitness account attempts to depict the direct experience of traumatic events. This historical ghost story, on the other hand, is a new or secondary narrative that represents an attempt to come to terms with the recurrent *memory* of such trauma.[27]

Zeitlin here points out the fundamental difference between first-hand accounts that record an event as it happens or soon after and the historical ghost story. The historical ghost

[26] The massacre of Yangzhou was sanctioned by the Manchu Generalissimo Dodo as punishment for resisting Qing rule. He permitted Qing soldiers to spend five days killing and raping the inhabitants of the city. See Lynn Struve, "'Horrid Beyond Description': The Massacre of Yangzhou," in *Voices from the Ming-Qing Cataclysm: China in Tigers' Jaws.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 28-30.

[27] Zeitlin, *The Phantom Heroine*, 99.

story, because it is set several years after the traumatic event has occurred, represents an attempt to make sense of the trauma and to cope with it, rather than simply to record it. "A Record of Ten Days in Yangzhou" is like the storyteller's first narrative in that it purports to be a direct representation of the narrator's experience of the fall of the Ming. Unlike this session's storyteller, however, Wang Xiuchu gives a truly personal account of the experience. The remarkable narrative distance of Aina's storyteller suggests his or Aina's own inability to directly confront the reality of the trauma.

Yet this session of *Idle Talk* is unique because as the storyteller recycles the same material through different fictional genres, the narratives more closely approach the historical ghost story. Though they are not directly focalized through a character in the present tense as Zeitlin argues of ghost stories, they are "secondary" narratives in which ghosts and liminal beings stand for traumatic memories, and they reflect the passing of time that has allowed for reflection. The old storyteller's second two narratives in session eleven are like Zeitlin's narratives in that they move from a direct and personal confrontation of traumatic memory in the diegetic realm of the storyteller to a secondary diegetic realm. They are also more explicitly fictional, giving the storyteller creative control to try to give the recurring traumatic memories greater significance. That the old storyteller delivers this narrative in the "present" time of the primary diegetic world, which is at least a few decades after the Ming fall, and the fact that the storyteller portrays a greater narrative distance from the events he is narrating (he does not offer any memories or associated emotions) also lend credence to my reading of these narratives as closer to historical ghost stories than other historical fiction of the time.

Aina furthers his disconnect between narrative form and moral certainty by using a diseased and unwell body as a microcosm of a dysfunctional and anarchic cosmos. He does this by having his primary diegetic storyteller use *yin* symbols traditionally associated with both cosmic and earthly disorder. In her discussion of the continued influence of Han ideas of moral cosmology into the Ming and Qing, Maram Epstein cites Liu Ji 劉基 (1311-75). Writing about the political instability of his own time, Liu employs the same symbols authors employed in "the core of the orthodox rhetoric deployed in Ming-Qing fiction."[28] Liu Ji writes:

> Although Heaven's principle is such that it has a mind to love the good and hate the evil, and while it has an original bias in favor of ordered conditions, its natural substance *qi* ceaselessly oscillates between the positive and negative extremes of *yin* and *yang.* As *qi* moves toward the *yin* extreme, it loses balance, its circulation becomes blocked, it throws the seasons out of sequence and the stars out of position, it gasps and retches, and thunder, lightning, disease, flood, drought and rebellions appear on the earth. Inescapably infected with this cosmic sickness, men crazily rebel against what is normal, they become deranged and stagger about because they have contracted the diseased *qi* of Heaven and do not know what they are doing.[29]

In this view of a sick cosmos, the prevalence of *yin* at the expense of a generally morally positive *yang* is associated with a wide range of earthly and bodily symbols. Though the storyteller mentions some of these, such as flood, drought, and rebellion, in his historical account of the fall of the Ming, he more strongly emphasizes their presence in the anecdote and the fictional story. I will argue that their presence in both the anecdote and

[28] Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 35.

[29] Liu Ji, *Chengyibo wenji* in Guoxue jiben congshu series (Taibei, 1967), 175; cited in John W. Dardess, trans., *Confucianism and Autocracy: Professional Elites in the Founding of the Ming Dynasty* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 134-35.

the fictional story is important for two reasons. First, their presence marks the story as explicit fiction, thereby creating a more distanced narrative where the storyteller can change the ending and detach from or manipulate his personal memories. Second, the storyteller's use of *yin/yang* symbolism suggests that the political and physical disorder in the stories is a microcosm of greater cosmic disorder.

Part 3: A Dark and Stormy Narrative: The Headless Man Anecdote

The old storyteller tells a brief anecdote between his historical account and his proceeding fictional narrative. This anecdote has two key parts. First, he tells us a narrative fragment about a random traveler:

> One day there was a traveling merchant returning to the Huguang area along the road from Shaanxi and Henan. The travelers that he passed often had chopped off noses or ears, or had both hands cut off, and seeing them made his blood run cold. Later he saw even more—they were not rare. If there were someone who was even more badly injured, nobody would even believe him. For most people, if their ears, eyes, mouths, noses, hands, feet, or all four limbs had been cut off, their wounds were not fatal. It was only if the head had been chopped off that death would be instant, leaving no way to recover.[30]

The presence of this narrative fragment exemplifies the significant narrative fragmentation of this session. It also reintroduces and elaborates the theme of the broken physical body, again with no resolution. The enumeration of body parts, many of which correspond to the relationship of the material body to the political or cosmic body, shows the extent of the violence as the individual wears it. The focus on beheading, both in this fragment, and the following anecdote and story, is not merely a means of death, but a symbol of the collapse of moral and political order. One can repair bad limbs, but the loss

[30] Waldrop, "Session 11," 287-88.

of the head, physically or metaphorically, is fatal. As the Chongzhen emperor's body hangs in Beijing, the decapitated individual becomes a symbol of a decapitated state.

The old storyteller now begins the anecdote proper, about a man who begs shelter from a nearby older man while trying to escape the rebels in a rainstorm. The older man is reluctant but eventually gives in, making the traveler promise not to be afraid. The traveler scoffs, but when the older man shows him the headless man in the spare room, the man collapses in fear, after crying "Oh no! Oh no! A ghost!" Annoyed, the older man explains that the headless man is his brother, who was beheaded by rebels near home. The spirit officials originally thought him dead, but the heavenly register only had him listed as wounded, with four more years to live. The headless man can continue living by weaving mats. The traveler, however, has a sleepless night.

I want to focus on a few key traits of this anecdote. First, the strong presence of *yin/yang* symbolism suggests that the disorder within the narrative is microcosmic of cosmic disorder. While the storyteller mentions flood and drought as part of the reasons for the Chongzhen emperor's "fate" in the personal narrative, *yin* symbols are especially prominent in this short narrative. These symbols are dominant even in the first passage in the narrative:

> In a small deserted village in the area of Luoyang County in Henan, a man happened to be riding into town when he suddenly encountered a violent storm. (*jifeng baoyu* 疾风暴雨) There was no place to take shelter so he had to borrow the space under the eaves of a house to escape the rain for a while. But unexpectedly, the heavy rain came down in torrents (*dayu pangtuo* 大雨滂沱) and still had not stopped when evening came, so he was forced to beg boarding for the night in the person's home.[31]

[31] Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua,* 11:144; Waldrop, "Session 11," 288.

The old storyteller invokes the overwhelming *yin* that Liu Ji speaks of in his discussion of cosmological illness by mentioning the "violent storm" and the "rain [that] came down in torrents." The rain and wind are two prominent *yin* symbols that set the anecdote's plot into motion. The overwhelming *yin* is parallel to the infestation of violent rebels, and the two work in tandem to force the man to change his travel plans and beg for boarding, and later cause him to meet a ghost.

As the older man is recounting his reunion with his headless younger brother, he mentions more markers of excessive *yin*. The older man states:

> That night I was still hiding out in the village, and I heard someone knocking on the door, and it was my brother's voice. Since there were also no lights in our deserted village, I could only help him into the room by his dark shadow. He then told me the whole story about how he had been injured in the other village. It was only in the daylight that I saw that he had no head.[32]

The old man heavily emphasizes darkness. He notes the lack of lamps as a light source, the dark shadow which follows his brother, and finally the prolonged darkness of night before he realized his brother was headless. The darkness sets a foreboding tone but also shows an overwhelming excess of *yin* energy, which works in tandem with the theme of beheading to show an unstable physical, political, and cosmic order.

Second, by retelling this anecdote, the old storyteller introduces the liminal spaces between discrete states of life and death as evidence of a fragmented political and cosmic order. Liminal beings such as spirit officials and the headless man thought to be a ghost

[32] Waldrop, "Session 11," 290.

appear. More significantly the storyteller later explicitly claims to be telling stories that blur the boundaries between life and death:

> I started out by telling of a living person being dead; this story was about a dead man being alive. We can see that in a chaotic and desolate world, strange events [*yishi* 异事] are especially plentiful.[33]

The secondary diegetic narrator's (the brother of the headless man) mention of these ghosts and spirits and the explicit reassertion by the primary diegetic storyteller of the blurred boundaries between life and death undermine any confidence in a greater cosmic or moral order. Indeed, the storyteller here marks the people and events that occupy this space as symbols of chaotic times. These apparitions stand for an incomplete state between life and death, between disorder and order, and even between the Ming dynasty and the Qing dynasty.

The headless man is a clear example of how liminal beings represent traumatic and fragmented memories. In the opening fragment, the old storyteller assured us that decapitation is always fatal. Yet in the following anecdote, the storyteller, through the voice of the old man, complicates his prior statement. When the older man's brother runs home to escape the rebels, the rebels "kill" (*sha* 殺) him by chopping off his head. There should be no doubt, then, that the brother is dead. Yet the spirit officials clarify his fate and return him fully to the realm of the living as "wounded." Their intervention itself is a symbol of traumatic violence. The simultaneous states of being dead and alive drive the anecdote. If the young man had died, the story would not be worth telling. The headless

[33] Aina Jushi, *Doupeng xianhua,* 11:152; Waldrop, "Session 11," 302.

man, like Zeitlin's ghost, appears in a time of extreme violence and dynastic transition as a physical but fictionalized representation of violent memories. Headless, and neither fully dead nor fully alive, he embodies incompletion and fragmentation.

Part 4: "In Death, Commander Dang Beheads His Enemy"

Plot Overview

The storyteller's final story is the full-length fictional account of two militia commanders, Dang Yiyuan and Nan Zhengzhong. Both are elected to lead local militias against the rebels. Nan Zhengzhong, prone to lust, begins to lust after Dang Yiyuan's married sister, known only as "Mrs. Dang." He and his servant, Li San, convince her drunkard husband Zhu Bofu to move in as an honored guest and sworn brother, and Nan continues to wine and dine Zhu. Initially hesitant, Mrs. Dang eventually agrees to move in but she soon learns that Nan has bad intentions. She tells her husband, but he just accuses her of causing problems and refuses to move out. Desperate, Mrs. Dang writes to her elder brother, Commander Dang, for help.

Furious, Commander Dang gets into a yelling match with Nan at the new governor's reception. He sends his men to Commander Nan's home and seizes his sister. Commander Nan discovers this at the reception and leaves at once for Commander Dang's residence. When Nan's cronies seize Mrs. Dang back, Mrs. Dang realizes her fate and begins rapidly jerking her body back and forth, resulting in her fall and death. Commander Dang complains to the governor-general who sends troops to seize Nan. Commander Nan realizes he has no way out and decides to rebel; he then kills the local magistrate, burns the city tower, and conscripts or kills all in his wake. Commander

Dang, now promoted, defeats Nan's mostly refugee soldiers and forces them into a retreat into the deep woods. While Commander Nan is starving in retreat, however, Li San has already joined the barracks of Lao Huihui, the only historically real character in the story.[34] Li San convinces Lao Huihui to send reinforcements and Nan and his men join the rebels. Commander Dang puts on his armor to fight them again, following them deep into the woods but Lao Huihui's men surround and capture him. After an emotional speech, Commander Dang bites his own tongue to pieces and martyrs himself at Commander Nan's "skin-flaying pavilion" before Commander Nan can torture him. Just as Commander Nan is celebrating, however, Commander Dang and his horse both come back to life and kill Nan and Li San before dying again. The storyteller concludes by saying that Dang's resurrection scares Lao Huihui into retreat and restores peace. In celebration, the locals build a temple to Commander Dang, whose spirit appears repeatedly.

Yin/Yang Symbolism and Cosmological Implications

Although they are not a defining feature of the story, Aina's indirect invocation of *yin* and *yang* symbolism in this story represents narrative patterning as microcosmic of cosmic patterning. Aina's characterization of Dang Yiyuan and Nan Zhengzhong is a clear example of his use of *yin* and *yang* symbols and typologies. The storyteller constantly presents Dang Yiyuan in terms of his masculine qualities and physical

[34] Lao Huihui 老回回, the nickname for Ma Shouying 馬守應 (? -1644), is the only historical figure in this story. One of the most prominent and fierce rebel leaders in the fall of the Ming, he nearly killed the loyalist commander Shi Kefa, on whom Commander Dang may be loosely based. For more, see Morris Rosabi, "Muslims and Central Asian Revolts" in *From Ming to Ch'ing: Conquest, Region and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century China*, 189.

prowess, as well as his virtue. These qualities correlate with *yang*, generally favored as more morally positive. For example, at the beginning, the storyteller says that "He had been upright and outspoken all his life, and in physical strength he surpassed other people." (*shengping xingzi gangzhi, bili guoren* 生平性子刚直，膂力过人) Later, the storyteller uses the word *fiery* to describe his nature, the character for which includes the fire radical (*lie* 烈). The old storyteller shows Dang's *yang* energy by expressing his anger, using symbols like fire, and associating him with highly masculine physical qualities.

The old storyteller also links Nan Zhengzhong with *yin* energy. Though the storyteller does not describe his physical body, he does tell us that he relies on deals with local strongmen to achieve order, implying a lack of his own physical strength. Further, the storyteller says that "by nature he was lustful" (*xinxing haoyin* 心性好淫). The *yin* of lust often correlated with the *yin* of *yin* and *yang* energy, and his physical lust for another woman which drives the plot of the story reinforces this.[35] Finally, his home county is *Qingjian* 清涧 meaning "clear mountain streams." The use of a place name associated with clear water alludes to the passage in Xunzi which associates clear water with virtuous rulership.[36] Ironically, however, in Ming/Qing fiction, such locations often devolved to become a place of excess *yin* and general disorder. For example, Maram

[35] Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 142.

[36] "The ruler is the source of order. The officials maintain the regulations; the ruler nurtures the source. If the water of the source if clear, the lower reaches of the stream will be clear. If the water of the source is muddy, the lower reaches of the source will be muddy." Translated by David T. Roy in *The Plum in the Golden Vase or, Chin P'ing Mei*, xxxvi.

Epstein notes that the first meeting between Pan Jinlian and Ximen Qing in that novel occurs in a place named *Qinghe* 清河, or "clear river." Further, in the nearly contemporary novel *Marriage Destinies to Awaken the World* (*Xingshi yinyuan zhuan* 醒世姻緣傳), the opening flood associated with excess *yin* energy occurs in the town of *Mingshuizhen* 明水镇, or "town of bright water," where the characters met for the first time.[37] Though there are no floods in the old storyteller's story, I believe that Aina intends the allusion to Xunzi to be either ironic or a further sign of the Ming dynasty's gradual moral decline. It is certainly allusive of earlier city names that reference clear water.

By creating opposing characters that seem representative of *yang* and *yin*, the storyteller purports to narrate the battle of *yin* and *yang* forces themselves. The word for writing, *wen* 文, meant patterning, and from early on scholars and writers had seen writing as a symbolic act of ordering the cosmos. The storyteller here is performing a similar act. Tina Lu has argued that *huaben* represent the cosmos in miniature.[38] Here, the stakes of that miniaturization are at their maximum. When Commander Dang and Commander Nan battle for the fate of the dynasty, restoration of order depends on Commander Dang's decisive victory.

[37] For more on this phenomenon, see Epstein, *Competing Discourses*, 142-43.

[38] Tina Lu, *Accidental Incest*, 177-78.

Violence and Narrative Closure

The premise of the Dang Yiyuan and Nan Zhengzhong story is the need to discuss the physical violence relayed in both the historical account and the anecdote. Aina has his storyteller attempt to do this by changing the conventions of *huaben* in a unique way. Instead of driving the plot of the *huaben* story with a series of lustful encounters, exchanges of money and bartering, and remarkable coincidences, Aina's favored storyteller drives the plot of this story with a series of violent actions. In this section, I will argue that Aina has the old storyteller use excessive violence to mirror political, cosmic, and narrative fragmentation. In so doing the old storyteller is trying give the acts of violence a greater redemptive or restorative function that would grant them meaning. As I will show later, however, there is little evidence that he is successful.

Although corporeal bodies in the earlier narratives stood for a loss of social or political order, in this last story, the storyteller grants greater cosmic significance to the individual body. Commander Dang and Commander Nan's bodies both correlate with their moral intent, so that Dang as the moral character prevails over Nan as the immoral character, though only with the help of the spirit realm. The storyteller, the rebel leader, and the secondary diegetic audience (the audience within the embedded story about the commander) all praise Commander Dang's martyrdom, and his death offers narrative closure by scaring away the rebels. However, Commander Dang is not the only positive martyr in the text. The first martyr is his sister, known only by the name "Mrs. Dang" 党氏, who dies defending her chastity, another moral virtue, after Commander Nan captures her.

This first act of martyrdom would normally suggest that she is a major character, but the storyteller offers only minimal characterization. He only tells us that she had suspicions early on that Commander Nan had nefarious intentions and initially refused to move in with him. Otherwise, the storyteller treats her more as the object of Commander Nan's lust than as a subject in herself. Her peak in the narrative comes after Commander Nan has successfully captured her. The storyteller describes Mrs. Dang's reaction:

> The woman saw that she had fallen back into the hands of a bandit, so she let her hair down and acted crazy, cursing and scolding without end. As they turned toward a dangerous and precipitous mountain slope, she violently jerked her body this way and that, and the horse suddenly reared. Commander Nan loosened his grip a bit, and the woman fell over the tall cliff. How lamentable to see a woman as delicate as a flower and as refined as precious jade all smashed and broken! Commander Nan regretted it deeply.
>
> Commander Dang knew that his sister had died protecting her chastity, and on the appointed day for the Governor General's office to review lawsuits, he wrote up a complaint and filed it jointly with Zhu Bofu. The Governor saw the details of the case and slapped the table in fury[39]

The storyteller frames the woman's martyrdom as a virtuous act that should be significant. He notes her virtue and mourns her broken body. The woman martyrs herself for chastity before her brother martyrs himself for the Ming. Aina's storyteller is presenting the common parallel of a woman martyring herself for chastity and a man martyring himself out of loyalty. During the Ming/Qing transition, many literati saw female chastity as a direct parallel to male political loyalty because they felt that both

[39] Waldrop, "Session 11," 297-98.

actions came from the same source, namely their *qing* 情.[40] By framing her death in this way, the storyteller builds reader expectation that her death will have value, or at least be remembered.

Yet despite the storyteller's implication, the significance of the self-inflicted violence is at best ambiguous and at worst devoid of meaning. The secondary diegetic characters and the storyteller himself all later forget her sacrifice entirely. Even her brother, who here shows at least some reaction, does not mention her death in his later passionate cursing of the rebels. Her death serves only to escalate the plot from a conflict at the level of the family to a conflict at the level of the state. Her death escalates the battle between the two commanders and causes Nan to defect to Lao Huihui but does little else. The woman and her broken body become an isolated fragment of historical memory and a representation of a broken body politic.

The storyteller relies upon the broken bodies of both good and evil characters reappearing throughout the text to drive the plot and give closure for the story. The violence of the rebels in the Shaanxi province at the end of the Ming is the impetus for the election of both Commander Dang and Commander Nan. Commander Nan can lust after Commander Dang's sister only because of this violence. Although lust is a factor, it is widespread violence that drives the plot. Nan's lust drives him to violently seize her,

[40] For more on this see Chapter II where I give a basic introduction. For a more detailed discussion see Kang-i Sun Chang. *The Late Ming Poet Ch'en Tzu-Lung*, 17. Wai-yee Li has also discussed the broken female body in relation to national trauma. See Wai-yee Li, "Women as Emblems of Dynastic Fall in Qing Literature," in *Dynastic Crises and Cultural Innovation from the Late Ming to the Late Qing and Beyond.* ed. David Der-wei Wang and Shang Wei (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), 93-150. and "Victimhood and Agency," in *Women and National Trauma in Late Imperial Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014).

Dang to react violently, and finally for her to martyr herself. Her martyrdom in turn sparks direct physical conflict between Commander Dang and Commander Nan who are now fighting each other instead of fighting the outside rebels, showing the dysfunction of the body politic. Commander Dang's physical strength and his ability to fight off most of Commander Nan's soldiers causes Commander Nan's defection to Lao Huihui and the rebel forces. This defection increases Commander Dang's righteous anger and further escalates the violence.

As the violence escalates and a family conflict transforms into a fight for the Ming dynasty, the actions of the physical body become even more significant. In the rest of this section, I argue that the storyteller focuses on Commander Dang's corporeal body as representative of a greater polity of moral values and human action. I therefore focus on how the storyteller offers a detailed narrative of Commander Dang's physical body.

Commander Nan's decision to join the rebels gives him significantly greater power. He is then able to lure Commander Dang into a trap deep in the woods, capture him, and take him to Lao Huihui. Before telling us about Commander Dang's encounter with Lao Huihui, however, the storyteller lingers for a moment on Dang's brave resistance:

> Relying on his manly might, [Commander] Dang dashed left and broke through on the right, resisted on the east and held off on the west. But even though he killed many men, having fought from mid-morning until early evening, in the end even his strength had limits. Unexpectedly, while they were fighting in close quarters in a cleft of the mountains, his horse's hoof slipped and he fell off a cliff.[41]

[41] Waldrop, "Session 11," 299-300.

The storyteller's narrative of Dang's capture again relays his physical might as an outward manifestation of inner moral virtue. When Lao Huihui confronts him, the storyteller continues to conflate the two:

> Now Commander Dang was naturally loyal and violent. With fury in his eyes he bared his teeth and cursed him loudly saying, "Rebel! Traitor! What did the Dynasty ever do against you, that you should rebel like this? Worse yet, why give protection to this lecherous thief, and, for no reason at all, wreak havoc all around? The great army will exterminate you in a matter of days—you do not even realize your death awaits!" And he clenched his fists ready to fight, but was pinned down by runners who came forward from both sides. [Commander] Dang gave a twist and knocked down several of them with his elbow.[42]

Commander Dang is internally loyal and externally violent. He speaks harsh moral truth and presents harsh physical assaults. He directs his anger solely at the rebels as the enemy of the Ming and not as the enemy of his sister, whom he does not even mention. He predicts the rebels' deaths even as he seems aware that his own death is imminent. The fiery eyes and exposed teeth, and elsewhere raised hair and vertical eyebrows, are somaticized instantiations of Commander Dang's sentiment and virtue. Commander Dang's material body becomes a representation of political and cosmic order.

Commander Dang's acts of violence cause Lao Huihui to send him to Commander Nan at the "skin-flaying pavilion." The storyteller continues to focus on Commander Dang's body as he struggles and resists against the strongmen of Lao Huihui.

> [Commander Nan] changed into a red robe and ordered his servants to put his camp chair in place. Two groups of jailors . . . wanted him to kneel, but [Commander] Dang straightened his back and cursed them continuously. Commander Nan deliberately swaggered in, looking

[42] Ibid., 300.

> completely pleased with himself, and came forward to scold him. Commissioner Dang bit off his own tongue, chewed it into pieces, and spat them at his face.
>
> Commander Nan covered his face, and went back to sit down on his seat, cursing him saying, "You are so fierce in nature, but today even if you had wings you could not escape, so you'll just have to accept my grinding and breaking!" But before he finished speaking, Commissioner Dang's last breath caught in his throat, his anger not yet relieved.[43]

Commander Nan's boasting leads Commander Dang to chew up his own tongue into several pieces and spits them at Commander Nan in disgust. The dismembering of his own tongue is a smaller representation of the ultimate sacrifice of his physical body for the Ming dynasty. Commander Nan responds with threats of more violence, of "grinding and breaking," reiterating the theme of the story, but his threats prove empty; the anticipation of torture has already caused Commander Dang to end his own life.

The storyteller labels Dang's anger incomplete after his death. This incompletion is significant because it results in his resurrection as a spirit or ghost still in his physical body. By bringing Dang briefly back to life, the storyteller again creates a character who occupies a liminal space between life and death. He emphasizes how Commander Dang's "eyebrows stood straight up, and with one hand he grasped the sword and pulled it out of his bosom."[44] Before Nan has time to figure out what is happening, Dang cuts off his head with his own sword. With everyone in shock and his mission accomplished, Dang falls prostrate, dead, on the ground.

The act of beheading, a theme already set up in the anecdote (and implied in the historical narrative) is here repurposed. Instead of being a means to decapitate innocent

[43] Ibid., 300-301.

[44] Commander Nan had placed a knife in his chest after his initial death.

people, the storyteller uses it to defeat one of the villains of the story. This repurposing lends credence and symmetry to his attempt to restore order. The symmetry of decapitation, and the authorial insistence that Commander Dang die should reinforce the value of his loyalty as a foundational ethical value, but this also means that Aina, through his storyteller must then bring him back to life to fully complete the story (by killing the main villain.) Aina's old storyteller tries to make violence and death redemptive, or even cathartic, by making them the currency for the restoration of peace and social order.

The appearance of Commander Dang's spirit brings the story to what seems to be a satisfying narrative closure:

> Everyone exclaimed, "The spirit of a loyal subject and a righteous minister does not change even in death. We said he was dead, but he still could take revenge on his enemy as a heroic spirit. This man was much more determined than those who die and just turn into malicious ghosts to kill rebels."[45]

The secondary diegetic audience has a very different reaction from the primary diegetic audience. The secondary diegetic audience has an ideal response to the death and resurrection of Commander Dang. Moral inspiration characterizes their response, as "good readers" of the events they have seen. For them, the hero's actions are not traumatic or scary. Instead, the hero's actions reassure them that moral values such as loyalty have significance and power to restore order. The secondary diegetic audience still views Dang's resurrection as a spirit as a fragment of unresolved violence, but it views it more favorably than "malicious ghosts." As we will see, however, the primary diegetic audience has a much less positive response. The storyteller's creation of an

[45] Waldrop, "Session 11," 302.

artificial positive response is telling of his desire for a conventional *huaben*, where virtuous actions have positive significance. In the storyteller's ideal *huaben,* violence and injury caused by dynastic transition still carry redemptive value.

In a parallel to the secondary diegetic audience's positive response, the storyteller finishes his story with Lao Huihui's response:

> When [Lao Huihui] saw that [Dang's] heroic spirit was so fierce, he immediately withdrew his soldiers and left. [Afterwards the world was] at peace and tranquil, his spirit has manifested itself over and over again, so that to this day the burning of incense in his shrine never ceases.[46]

The storyteller offers an idealized ending, in which the spirit of Dang's damaged body leads directly to the healing of the political body shown by the retreat of the rebels. In itself, the external reader may read this as an odd, violent *huaben* story. Yet though the storyteller ignores it, both the primary diegetic audience and the external readers are painfully aware that this ending is merely wish-fulfillment. By connecting Dang's physical body to a greater polity that never occurred, the storyteller offers a nominal narrative closure that seems to also prove that virtuous action has greater significance. Under the surface, however, the narrative appears empty. Such admirable political loyalty was not actually enough to end the rebellions, nor did it save the Ming dynasty. Aina asks again in this story if there is an attentive cosmos that rewards virtue, and again he wavers. His primary storyteller wants to believe so but the reality suggests that human virtue is only meaningful at the personal level.

[46] Ibid., 302.

Part 5: Final Words and the Response of the Bean Arbor Members

As mentioned above, Aina's especially complex framing of this story means that there are two levels of intradiegetic audiences: the secondary diegetic audience inside the secondary narrative and primary diegetic audience in the same diegetic world as the storyteller. Having finished his story, the storyteller offers his final comments:

> "I started out by telling of a living person being dead; this story was about a dead man being alive. We can see that in a chaotic and desolate world, strange events are especially plentiful. By now those who witnessed that chaotic world have all been killed, and those still alive have never seen it. So it has been buried, and no one speaks of it. Only I, with just a few breaths left in me, can still talk idly about it here under the bean arbor. This is not just by chance. Gentlemen, take advantage of these tranquil times, and hasten to cultivate your virtues!" As everyone finished listening, they sighed fearfully and dispersed.[47]

The storyteller's repeated mentions of the chaotic world contrast starkly with the "idle" stories of the bean arbor. And he juxtaposes the misery of death and war with the current time of peace and prosperity. The storyteller's expression that the purpose of his last remaining breath is to tell his story for the sake of a greater appreciation of peaceful times suggests a desire to give meaning to his memories. Just as characters fill the liminal space between life and death, Aina's privileged storyteller is still unsettled by the trauma. Aina uses this sense of unresolved trauma to lead the reader to the final session and ultimately away from the bean arbor ruins.

The unusual response of the diegetic audience contributes to the hollowness of the story's violence in the name of a satisfying narrative closure. This is a rare example of the members of the bean arbor community offering no feedback to the storyteller. This is

[47]Ibid., 302.

the only story to end in fear. Though session eleven ends here, the host opens session twelve with more details about the community's response. The host states:

> Yesterday the old gent told of a headless man who could still weave mats and a dead man who was able to kill another fellow, stories that all the listeners felt were as weird as they could be. After we went home to bed we still saw in our dreams many who were dead or wounded in battle, or bared fangs and slashing claws, or cudgels and spears, with no place to hide from them. When we woke up, our hearts pounding with alarm, the idea that we should listen to the storytellers again was even stronger than in days past. This is how most of the people under the bean arbor felt today.[48]

Contrary to its assumed didactic purpose, the storyteller's narratives have evoked a traumatic response in the bean arbor community members. No primary diegetic characters mention the moral worthiness of Commander Dang in either session eleven or session twelve. Instead, the young men of the bean arbor experience traumatic, violent nightmares, becoming vicarious victims and witnesses to the violence themselves. Despite the secondary diegetic audience's praise of the martyr, there is little greater meaning and reassurance in this final narrative.

Coda

The headless man of the anecdote who defies death, the dismembered but resurrected body of Commander Dang, and the manifestations of Commander Dang's spirit after his death all represent fragments of traumatic memory coming to the surface. Indeed, their presence in these stories is like the fragmented memories that come to the surface in the continual process of forgetting and remembering that form the experience

[48] Robert Hegel, trans., "Session 12: Rector Chen Discourses on Heaven and Lectures about Earth," in *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor, A Seventeenth-Century Chinese Story Collection,* ed. Robert E. Hegel (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 304-305.

of trauma.[49] In this way, the necessity of physical violence and liminal beings to complete these stories shows the fragmentation of narrative and memory and the violence that drives it. Before I conclude this chapter, I want to briefly explore Maozi's "Record of Life beyond My Due" (*Yusheng lu* 餘生錄) as a comparable personal account of the transition. Like the old storyteller in session eleven, Maozi records many violent and haunting memories of which he tries to make sense.

Lynn Struve prefaces her discussion of this account by noting the importance of a grand narrative in recovering from trauma.[50] She writes:

> Therapists agree that recovery from or amelioration of distress requires the incorporation of constituted, semantic memories of the traumatic events into a personal (and perhaps wider) narrative that is compatible with the sufferer's existing mental schemata and can be sustained within his or her system of values.[51]

Struve offers as a case study the memoir of a young man named Maozi who witnessed the suicide-martyrdoms of most of his family in the violence of 1652, survived many near-death ordeals himself, and was later haunted by intense survivor's guilt, as well as nightmares and flashbacks to the events themselves. The title "Record of Life beyond My Due" also suggests survivor's guilt. Struve argues, however, that in the end Maozi makes sense of the trauma he experienced by casting it as "an account of how the cosmic forces of loyalty and filiality have quasi-supernaturally guaranteed the perpetuation of the family line and the transmission of the sterling example of [his much-admired

---

[49] Zeitlin, *Phantom Heroine,* 99.

[50] See: Lynn Struve, "Confucian PTSD: Reading Trauma in a Chinese Youngster's Memoir of 1652," *History and Memory* 16.2 (2004): 14-31. Also see Struve, *Voices from the Ming-Qing Cataclysm*.

[51] Struve, "Confucian PTSD," 17.

grandfather who martyred himself] Zhang Kentang, whose name opens and whose death-poem closes the *Yusheng lu*."[52] Maozi, after several months of what Struve considers Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, finally makes sense of his story by placing it into a narrative of Confucian virtue and karmic resonance. Maozi offers several instances in which he believes he "should have died" before proclaiming:

> Could it be that the Emperor of Heaven and the Empress of Earth have been moved by the bitter resolve of my forebears and have specially preserved this unfilial, weak body of mine to fulfill their plan to return Grandfather home? Or that, in this decadent age when upright ways have withered away, they have made use of this refugee's hardships to make glowingly manifest [the example left to us by] humane and noble persons?[53]

And further:

> Although such [noble] persons seek only to amass virtue, not to make their voices heard afar, how could I not but broadcast [the virtue of my grandfather], as well as that of the five wives, to the four quarters! For this reason, in grief and distress I cry out laments as I kowtow [in respect to the deceased] and present this narrative.][54]

By reasoning that his own survival is part of a greater karmic narrative of Confucian virtues such as state loyalty and filial piety, Maozi can give meaning to his countless near-death experiences and unlikely escapes and reincorporate them as smaller parts of a larger story.

I suggest that we read the strands of narrative in session eleven as the old storyteller's (and by extension, Aina's) similar attempt to work through violent fragments of memory. Even though the host asks for a personal account, the storyteller abruptly

---

[52] Ibid., 25.

[53] Struve, "Confucian PTSD," 23. From *Yusheng lu* 9b-10b. Brackets are from Struve's translation.

[54] Ibid., 24. From *Yusheng lu* 10a. Brackets are from Struve's translation.

discards the little sentiment he offers in favor of more objective description. In the anecdote, the old storyteller again recycles his memories of dismembered bodies, but this narrative also lacks a clear resolution. The anecdote ends with the specter of a man who is neither alive nor dead. In the final story, the storyteller attempts an even greater narrative, more similar to Maozi's *Yusheng lu* in that he recycles his own memories of the violence of the Ming/Qing transition into a story about Confucian virtues of state loyalty and chastity. Yet though the artifice of fiction allows the storyteller to offer a satisfying karmic reward for virtue, unlike the *Yusheng lu,* the reader is unlikely to leave the text with renewed belief in a karmic moral order that would give meaning to the deaths.

Aina is increasingly more explicit in his refusal or unable to reproduce the easy karmic-based moral and narrative logic of the conventional *huaben*. Those who hear it do not respond with satisfaction, humor, or edification. Instead, they have violent nightmares, their own symptom of vicarious trauma. Aina introduced dark content in earlier sessions as well, but this is the first time that the primary diegetic audience has not been able to either make light of it or simply ignore it. The darkness of the content leaves the bean arbor along with both the primary diegetic audience and the external readers. As Aina loses faith in a morally attuned cosmos, he writes *huaben* that are increasingly fragmented, unfamiliar, didactically empty, and traumatic. By the time we reach the last session, Aina will disregard the form of *huaben* completely in his attempt to make sense of the cosmos.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION: READING THE FALL

In session eleven, the old storyteller used an emphasis on broken bodies to articulate how the rebels brought about the downfall of the dynasty. Yet despite his detailed narratives, he completely omits the Manchu invasion. The old storyteller correlates the broken body with a broken body politic, but he only implies that these are both smaller representations of a broken cosmos. In the final session, the last speaker continues where the old storyteller left off. Aina now completely drops the *huaben* form and has his speaker address the primary diegetic audience directly in the form of a lecture, bringing questions to the forefront that previous storytellers had only implied. The primary diegetic audience asks why Heaven allowed the Manchus to conquer the Ming, what the role of the cosmos is in the dynastic transition, and what is the ultimate significance or lack thereof of adherence to traditional virtues such as loyalty. These questions are at the heart of Confucian and neo-Confucian beliefs about the role of humans and the ordering of the cosmos, and Aina's direct confrontation of them makes *Idle Talk* a significant text. By presenting this confrontation, Aina also reveals his lack of faith in the *huaben* genre to make sense of the cosmos.

In this conclusion, I will make two key arguments. First, I will continue to argue that through his storytellers Aina expresses less and less faith in a morally attuned cosmos that cares about human action and human virtue, but that he is highly hesitant to deny that human virtue has greater significance. In this last session, Aina's own

disillusionment reaches a peak and he completely rejects the *huaben* form as a means of articulating cosmic or moral order. Still, he never allows his main storytellers to acknowledge the insignificance of human action. Instead, he has them simply walk away discouraged. There is no greater resolution or reassurance.

More specifically for this session, I will argue that although Aina offers multiple reasons for the fall of the bean arbor, they all complement the philosophical cause: namely, that when Aina shifts questions about cosmic order or human significance from safe displacement in secondary diegetic narratives to direct discussion in the primary diegetic world, neither the bean arbor nor the primary diegetic audience can bear the result. To Aina, the collapse of the bean arbor is symbolic both of the collapse of the form of *huaben* and the collapse of a clear belief in an involved moral *Tian* that rewards human virtue. I end my conclusion and my dissertation with a brief discussion of future directions for my research on this text.

Context, Parody, and Satire as Backdrop for Session Twelve

The background narrator opens the final session by telling us how the number of people under the bean arbor has grown dramatically over time. News of the bean arbor reaches a man from a large city named Rector Chen, who mistakenly believes it is a friend (*peng*) named "Dou" (thus "*doupeng*" 窦朋, a pun on "bean arbor"). Having searched everywhere, he finally finds the bean arbor, convinced that there is a concrete purpose to the meetings. The old storyteller greets him and tries to tell him about the casual nature of their stories, but Rector Chen is so persistent that the old storyteller reluctantly invites him to give a talk. From the beginning, Aina satirizes the visitor as

arrogant and self-centered. Rector Chen sees himself as an educator, not only of schoolchildren, but of the misguided public and he does not offer a story at all, but instead lectures on the origins and nature of the universe, replete with visual aids.

In many ways, Rector Chen is the foil of the older storyteller of sessions one, two, and eleven. Both are educators of ethics and Confucian doctrine and both take a leadership role. Both teachers come in to explain the reasons behind the violence and tragedy of the Ming fall, and though the old storyteller is far more likeable, I argue that Rector Chen merely clarifies and makes explicit what the old storyteller only implies despite himself: that *Tian* may be mostly apathetic to human action. Unlike the older storyteller's hauntingly empty narrative, however, Rector Chen speaks relatively directly.

Chen provides both a lecture and a question-and-answer session about the nature of the cosmos, which he mostly proclaims as indifferent to human action. He begins his lecture with a discussion of how the heavens and earth began, as per the request of the audience, and continues to rant about how Laozi and the Buddha have confused and exploited the people despite being poor examples of morality themselves. The main concern in these early passages, however, is the existence of representatives of moral order such as the Jade Emperor and Yama the King of Hell. The Rector harshly denies the existence of either, claiming instead that Heaven is made of *qi* 氣. Rector Chen claims Heaven is light and pure. The group responds by asking how the Jade Emperor and Yama could exist in such light air. Rector Chen responds:

> "The body of Heaven is light and pure, but it moves from hour to hour: how could it admit any thing?" the Rector said. "If things are not admitted, how could it admit the gods to abide there? When morning is on the top,

> night must gradually revolve around to the bottom in accordance with the sequence of the hours; when night is at the bottom, morning must gradually revolve around to the top in accordance with the sequence of hours. If in fact there were the Jade Emperor and other gods in Heaven, they too would have to revolve around in accordance with the sequence of time—how could the gods do otherwise? Even though the body of the Earth is very thick, below its surface are water and mud and dirt and rocks, layer upon layer, all piled up on top of each other. If there were a King Yanluo and a Prison for Ghosts, they too would have to be there in the midst of the water, the mud, the dirt, and the rocks—how could they be elsewhere?"[1]

Rector Chen's discourse on a materialistic and distant cosmos involves partially denying the existence of sentient deities.[2] Rector Chen eliminates a source of moral order and weakens the case that human action in relation to others on earth has greater significance by arguing that it is not logical to believe in deities. If heaven is a dispersed and mostly indifferent force, then individual actions of merit or demerit have little greater meaning, and the ultimate corruptibility of human and ethical obligations to others becomes clear.

Rector Chen's dismantling of belief in supernatural agents of karmic order is merely a harsher and more direct statement of what Aina has already alluded to in his collection. Aina has introduced in earlier sessions various gods as agents of limited moral judgments but gradually denied their clarity or effectiveness. In the first session, for example, the God-on-High appears as an arbiter of karmic reward and punishment for Jie Zhitui and Shi You. Though somewhat ineffective, he at least is a capable and discerning figure of moral actions and notes the complexity of the case. The Buddha appears in

[1] Robert E. Hegel, trans., "Session 12", 307.

[2] I say partially here because he later concedes that there is a God-on-High (Shang di). His predominant stance, however, seems to mostly be against the acknowledgment or concern with higher deities as an arbiter of moral reward or punishment of individual human actions.

session five as an ever-present source of reward and punishment for humans on earth but seems a bit harsh in his punishment. By sessions seven and eight, representatives of karmic order are more ambiguous and less effective. The Master of Making Things Equal, *Qiwu zhu,* is the manager of karmic punishment but only vaguely acknowledges the importance of virtue. The various deities of session eight are too many to be significant and their actions are so brutally destructive that there is no longer any meaningful sign of a *Tian* that concerns itself with human action.

Rector Chen's denial of the existence or significance of supernatural deities denies the validity of the storytellers' earlier narratives as reassurance of karmic order, as well as their claimed motivation of encouraging people to be moral Buddhists. These words lead some members of the bean arbor community to later bemoan the lecture, claiming it to be inflexible and to have nullified their efforts to tell leisurely stories and teach people to be Buddhists.[3] Though the members' claims of telling only leisurely stories are questionable, their discontent and anger at Rector Chen indicate that his words have been directly offensive and discomfiting.

Though his lecture is too detailed for me to fully explicate here, his list of ten key points of discontent with the corrupting influence of Daoism and Buddhism includes several points about the issues with karmic retribution and the cycles of reincarnation associated with Buddhism. In doing so, Rector Chen is espousing a very different

[3] "Too bad that old pedant had to hold forth with such nonsensical theories and sweep clean away all the tales of the Buddha and Laozi and the ghosts and gods in the world," the people in the crowd said. "We put up this bean arbor for idle talk to encourage people to fast and recite the name of the Buddha—but now we've lost our interest in all that." Hegel, "Session 12," 331.

conception of cosmic order, though it has its own flaws and contradictions. Indeed, though Rector Chen does not explicitly proclaim the complete absence of moral ordering, he certainly attacks the beliefs of the bean arbor audience in the moral ordering of Buddhist karmic retribution.

For example, his fourth point criticizes the idea of pre-destination and prior lives involved in the cycles of reincarnation. He complains:

> Item: Because people of this world are fascinated by the theory of retribution, bandits and ruffians can seize people's wealth and property by force, saying, "In your previous life you owed me a debt, and now I have come to collect!" Either they force people to have sex with them or they cajole them with clever words to participate in illicit sex, saying, "We were fated to spend the night together, and that is why you met me in this life." Other such evil "debts" can also be explained away as being conditioned by a previous life. . . . The great delusion of claiming aid for adultery and theft from the beyond—this is the fourth hateful thing.[4]

These points are significant in two ways. First, it suggests that the Buddhist karmic system of moral order is corruptible and highly prone to manipulation. In earlier sessions, Aina had his storytellers struggle with the reality that virtuous motives do not always accompany human action. Here, Rector Chen points out what other storytellers have implied all along: that even moral systems designed with virtuous intents can be manipulated and used for selfish ambition. The storytellers often claim explicit Buddhist beliefs and missions. Rector Chen's highlighting of the ability of people to manipulate this system for selfish means implies that the system at best does not function as an incentive to morality, and at worst further enables people to commit bad deeds.

[4] Ibid., 316.

His next point discusses this karmic system directly by noting the problem of disincentives. He writes:

> Item: People of the world are misled by the Buddhist scriptures into believing that they should repent for their crimes and misdeeds. Thus, in broad daylight believers in the Buddha go around committing all kinds of evil acts, leaving no place untouched; then at night they burn incense and recite scriptures, praying to be forgiven for their crimes and to obtain blessings. Day after day they commit evil acts; night after night they repent. At its worst, there was a thief who went into the Meridian Gate tower of the Imperial Palace where he was apprehended by the eunuchs. When they stripped off his clothing to search him, his whole body was covered with Buddhist scriptures. Because he so fervently believed that Buddhist scriptures could help him avoid calamity and achieve transcendence, he wore them on his body in order to be a thief. This grand delusion, which causes the destruction of normal human affairs—this is the fifth hateful thing.[5]

This point expresses a logical concern with the idea of sin and repentance in the Buddhist tradition. For Rector Chen, the problem with the popular moral ordering given by Buddhism is that it theoretically allows people to commit any sin with the assurance that they can simply repent and start anew. He gives a singular example of a thief who simply covers himself in scripture to cancel out the negative retribution of the crime he is about to commit. In this way, the idea of moral order ceases to function appropriately because the weight of the actions committed is of no relevance when simple repentance erases all negative effects of the sin. The result is that the system in place is no better than if there were no system at all, and in fact may be worse, as it reduces the incentive to behave properly.

[5] Ibid., 316.

As the argument between the Rector and the primary diegetic audience about the existence and moral value of supernatural deities persists, the Rector begins to flounder in his argument. In doing so, however, he makes a significant claim about the relationship of *Tian* and humans. The Rector claims that ghosts of martyrs and wronged persons may exist, but only to finish their purpose. But when the audience presses him about the existence of sorcerers, citing a famous case of the Ming dynasty, the rector begins to flounder. He argues:

> "Conjurors are in the category of gods and immortals," the rector said. "They steal some of the craft of creation from Heaven and Earth to make their magic, and then they hide in the mountains. When the fate of the world is about to change, the people will experience disasters; when this task is given to conjurors they aid in creating chaos. At such times countless people are slain, starve to death, or die wrongfully. Even though this is brought about by the destiny of Heaven and Earth, myriad living beings must experience it. Even though it was caused by gods and immortals, the crime of rebelling against Heaven would be unforgiveable. Belief in the gods is not only of no value to the world; in fact, it harms the world."[6]

His statement is significant not only because it concedes the presence of ghosts or sorcerers, but also because it suggests an especially harsh and destructive cosmic order. Rector Chen also struggles with his claim of an apathetic cosmos. Heaven is less interested in punishing or rewarding moral action, but actively puts sorcerers on earth to aid in its destruction. Yet, he also claims that those figures will face retribution for their violence. Unsure of how to resolve the contradiction he has created, he retreats to generalities and returns to his claim that humans should just refrain from believing in supernatural entities.

[6] Ibid., 328.

The Question at the Heart of the Matter

All the questions the audience ask follow a logical trend toward the most important question, still haunting the text to this point, namely, why were the Manchus allowed to conquer China? The audience asks this directly:

> One among the crowd said, "When the Jin ruler crossed the Yangzi, the water did not come up to his horse's belly. The crown prince of the Yuan fled north, and when he got to the Great River there was no boat—but a golden bridge appeared in mid-air on which he crossed over. Weren't these miraculous events?"[7]

By asking why Heaven allowed these invasions to succeed, the audience is assuming a direct connection between the means of cosmic and moral order and the traumatic and dramatic events of the change of dynasty. The Jin mentioned here are obviously not really the subject of their inquiries, but are instead thinly veiled allusions to the Manchus, who claimed to be descendants of the Jin (Jurchens).[8] This is the question and the problem at the heart of the cosmological crisis of the mid-seventeenth century and the question that is behind the examples and anecdotes of this lecture and questioning. Why would a cosmic and morally just heaven allow such violence and destruction? The question harkens back to the Shang horde's question in session seven, in which they ask the mouthpiece of the heavens, The Master of Making Things Equal (*Qiwu Zhu*), directly if Heaven enjoys killing. Here, however, it is much more direct, barely veiled at all in historical allusions and with no pretense of fictionality.

[7] Ibid., 329.

[8] Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 197.

Rector Chen confidently claims to answer the question of dynastic change presented by the members of the bean arbor, and in so doing, he articulates a vision of a cosmos like the one described by The Master of Making Things Equal in the seventh session. He says:

> "The creative energies of Heaven and Earth," the rector said, "supplement that which is insufficient and reduce that which has surplus. During the Xia and the Shang, human beings were very few in number, and so Heavenly destiny produced numerous sages and worthies in order to give life and nourishment to humanity. After eight hundred years of peace under the Zhou house, humanity had become extremely numerous and the wicked and violent were also numerous, the good and virtuous being extremely few. The Way of Heaven despises having wicked people be so numerous and consequently produced men who were good at killing to make war on them. For example, it gave birth to Bai Qi who buried 400,000 soldiers from Zhao; it allowed Bandit Zhi to 'rampage back and forth across the empire' and yet die at home of old age. Heaven helped the Jin ruler to cross the River in order to strike chaos into the Central Plain, and presented a golden bridge to the Yuan crown prince in order to preserve his progeny. It is not as if the Way of Heaven acts blindly; these events occurred because Heaven was depleting that which was excessive. Since Heaven intended to restore the Han enterprise, miraculously ice formed and Guangwu was able to cross. When the Way of Heaven is exhausted, then there will be a major change in the succession. Weird and uncanny affairs may occur from time to time but one may not discuss them from exclusively one perspective."[9]

Rector Chen presents a contradictory vision of a Heaven that somehow strives for moral balance but focuses on population control. When the population was small and struggling, Heaven allowed for success and for sages to nurture the people to help them grow in number. The moral cultivation taught by the sages does not allow humans to center or mediate heaven and earth in a greater cosmological patterning. Instead, Rector Chen presents *Tian* as mechanistic and mostly rejects the Confucian promise and the

[9] Ibid., 329.

premise of *huaben*: that the cosmos responds to human action. He claims a moral balance, that Heaven uses those with a passion for killing to eliminate excess evil. But his examples of Robber Zhi and Bai Qi weaken his claim, because both were known for killing innocent people, not those who were guilty of a crime. And if Prince Jin is a veiled allusion to the Manchus, then Rector Chen implies that all those killed were evil. Heaven, in his conception, is at best a vaguely moral force that actively creates and tolerates evil for its own purposes. Yet he also very strongly implies that "Yes, Heaven is sometimes fond of killing." If Rector Chen does believe in a morally involved cosmos, it is at best a rough and approximate force unconcerned with accuracy. Aina uses Rector Chen to present the harshest view of karmic order yet, but once again he is uncomfortable going to the extreme of a completely uninvolved cosmos.

The Rector's inability to completely disregard a moral cosmos is most clear in the following discussion about the presence of Sages. The primary diegetic audience asks the Rector to explain the presence of Sages. If Sages are part of the triad of Heaven and Earth, how could they simply pass away?

> "The Sage stands together with Heaven and Earth to make a Triad," the crowd said. "If Heaven and Earth exist, then the Sage must continually exist as well. But how could such sages as Emperor Fuxi, Yao, Shun, and Confucius all pass away with the passage of time?"
>
> "Before the Sage had been born, this Principle and this Energy existed in Heaven and Earth," the rector said. "Once the Sage has been born, this Principle and this Energy exist in the Sage. Even though a Sage may grow old and die, that morality, those teachings are passed on for ten thousand generations to come, enduring as long as Heaven and Earth themselves. Thus even though the body of the Sage may pass away, that Principle and

> that Dao are returned to Heaven and Earth as before. Heaven and Earth endure forever; so too does the Sage."[10]

In Chen's discussion of Sages, he concedes that Heaven nourishes humans with moral teachings that endure metaphysically long after the human dies. Yet he later proclaims that Heaven only uses Sages and moral teachings to rebuild human populations after mass acts of destruction. Rector Chen mostly rejects the notion of a morally attuned *Tian* that rewards or punishes individual human action, yet when pushed even he starts to concede a little. His own inconsistencies in his explication of cosmic order further diminish his authority to lecture, even while the overwhelming negativity of his message is disconcerting to the primary diegetic audience and the external audience. His inconsistency raises the question: Is Aina unable to articulate a *Tian* that is purely apathetic? Or, as I have suggested, does he simply not want to?

How should we read Rector Chen? The community's response is to kick him out with words of warning about the unpopularity of his message and then bemoan the harshness of his words and the inflexible arrogance of his teaching. But the community's response is often notably different from how the reader is likely to respond. Is Rector Chen a figure of arrogance worthy of our disgust? Or is he the bearer of a truer message that we just yearn to disregard?

Rector Chen is clearly a highly satirized figure. When he arrives at the bean arbor, one man under the arbor whispers to another:

> This old fellow is a Confucian rector who lives in the city. His name is Chen Gang [Unbending Chen], his informal name is Wuyu ["No Desires"], and his nickname is Chen Wugui ["No Ghosts Chen"]. He has a

[10] Ibid., 307-308.

> rigid and square disposition and he's biased and obstinate in everything he says. He's already over fifty, and he's read every book in existence. I've heard him lecture back and forth about all the principles of Heaven and Earth, his mouth flowing like a waterfall, with no letting up.[11]

By giving him names that mean "no desires" and "no ghosts," Aina satirizes his Rector as a harsh neo-Confucian. He is rigid, arrogant, and so caught up in book learning that he seems to have no connection to fellow people or to the world around him. He is intelligent, but he is also thoroughly unlikeable. That Aina makes him well-read and intelligent but impersonal and arrogant reveals his own mixed feelings about the message the Rector sends and makes it more difficult for the reader to know how to read the Rector as a character.

Hanan also expresses concern about how the external reader should understand the role of Rector Chen. Hanan writes:

> But Chen, as we have seen, is a satirized figure, and the book ends with a condemnation of him and all he stands for. Surely his opinions are not to be accepted at face value? In this case, as in others, Aina is presenting a problem from several sides. There is apparently no clear and simple cause for a complex historical problem, and it would be a mistake to suppose that Chen Gang [Rector Chen] can be ignored. His ideas of historical cycles, of impersonal forces in control of things, of creation and destruction as two sides of a single principle, are all notions with which Aina toys in other chapters.[12]

Hanan notes an interesting ambiguity of the session. The members of the bean arbor wholeheartedly condemn Chen's teaching and even claim it to be the reason the Ming fell, but Aina has implied Chen's ideas in many other sessions. However, I suggest

[11] Ibid., 301-302.

[12] Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 198.

that rather than reading the chapter as an example of Aina "presenting a problem from several sides," we read it as Aina's gradual build-up of cognitive dissonance and uncertainty. If the text were simply offering a wide range of viewpoints about complex questions, we might expect the same harsh response to earlier narratives that imply similar questions. The speech of Qiwu zhu in session seven is not satire, and yet it receives no such criticism by the community under the bean arbor. The issue here is not that Aina satirizes Rector Chen. Whether Rector Chen is correct or wrong is immaterial to the meaning of the text itself. Aina uses the exaggerated character of Rector Chen to bring his own uncertainty about cosmological and moral order directly to the primary diegetic world of the bean arbor. Rector Chen is the highly educated bearer of uncertainty and cognitive dissonance.

Indeed, the ambiguity of Rector Chen's character merely adds to the ambiguity of the text. Rector Chen is the butt of many jokes but he still manages to offer content that causes both the intradiegetic and extradiegetic audience to stop and reflect on the nature of *Tian.* Aina has done more than merely explore a variety of viewpoints; he has used a wide variety of stories to make his readers question both the relationship between humans and *Tian* and the significance of human action.

Reading the Fall: Confronting Trauma and Walking away from the Ruins

Rector Chen's unstable articulation of the cosmos causes frustration under the bean arbor as the cognitive dissonance of the primary diegetic audience rises. This fragmentation of certainty in a morally attuned *Tian* both drives the bean arbor to its conclusion and, I suggest, hints at the reasons for the decline of the genre. In this final

section, I will explore the several reasons presented for the collapse of the bean arbor. I argue that although these reasons are complementary, the predominant reason is that Aina's increasingly pessimistic view of cosmic moral order becomes unsuited to the genre of *huaben.* When Rector Chen preaches Aina's own cognitive dissonance about the lack of a morally attuned cosmic order at the primary diegetic level, the bean arbor simply collapses and the primary diegetic audience walks away. Neither Aina, the primary diegetic audience, nor the form of *huaben* can bear the thought that human action is insignificant.

After the members of the bean arbor usher out Rector Chen, Aina uses the old storyteller—his privileged voice in the collection—to remind us of seasonal change. The old storyteller proclaims:

> It was I who worked up a fad for this idle talk. Now people in all four directions have heard of this, and our crowd increases every day. Nowadays the government's prohibitions are so strict, and, worse yet, the mind of man is unfathomable. Even if we all agreed with what Rector Chen advocates, if somebody outside who didn't know better just says that I have been flapping my lips and banging my tongue here, advocating some heresy to delude people's minds, then this bean arbor might well become a meeting place for brewing up disaster. Now autumn is coming to an end; first frost is close upon us, and the beans stems are drying out.[13]

Aina's storyteller offers two reasons for closing the bean arbor. First, the success of the bean arbor talks has ironically led to its demise due to the threat of government censorship. The political realities of the early Qing make discussion of matters like cosmic order and especially dynastic transition dangerous. The threat of political

[13] Hegel, "Session 12," 330.

censorship is a tangible reminder of the Ming fall and of the questions about *Tian* that the storytellers have indirectly discussed.

Second, through the old storyteller, Aina suggests that the bean arbor has reached the end of a cycle. The bean arbor made sense in the heat of the late spring and summer, but with the arrival of winter the organic life of the bean arbor ends. Indeed, no sooner does the old storyteller proclaim the frosty death of the bean stems than a member of the bean arbor community leans against one of the pillars of the arbor. The bamboo pillars have grown brittle from frost and the arbor collapses. The members of the bean arbor laugh and most of them leave. But before Aina ends the text proper, he offers a brief closing dialogue. Some of the members of the bean arbor community complain:

> "Too bad that old pedant had to hold forth with such nonsensical theories and sweep clean away all the tales of the Buddha and Laozi and the ghosts and gods in the world," the people in the crowd said. "We put up this bean arbor for idle talk to encourage people to fast and recite the name of the Buddha—but now we've lost our interest in all that."[14]

The primary diegetic audience's response confirms that they want to believe in a *Tian* that cares about humans, that rewards human virtue, and that punishes human sin. They want to believe that moral human action is significant and meaningful. Rector Chen refuses to confirm this, and he is merely the most direct figure to do so. The progression of the narratives to this point has increasingly implied that *Tian* is impervious and apathetic to human actions. When the Rector says so explicitly, the primary diegetic audience decides to simply give up its purpose. The audience cannot make the *huaben* story form work with such a harsh conception of cosmic order.

[14] Ibid., 331.

In response to their complaints, the old storyteller offers a simultaneously ambiguous and clear reason for the fall of the bean arbor. In the last line of the text proper, he says:

> Far more things in this world have been destroyed by such pedantic nonsense than just this bean arbor![15]

Aina offers no explanation of this comment. Instead, he abruptly ends the text and the commentator takes over. Hanan notes that earlier authors would not have tolerated such an ambiguous ending to the text.[16] Yet the ambiguity does not actually seem that ambiguous. The old storyteller implies that the kind of pedantry offered by Rector Chen and the ensuing conflict caused the fall of the Ming dynasty as well. But what does that mean? And even more important, Aina has offered three reasons for the fall of the bean arbor. Which one is true? Is it the arrival of the end of fall and beginning of winter that causes its natural destruction with no relationship to the content of the stories? Is it the pedantry of Rector Chen? Is it the threat of censorship?

Though these three reasons are mutually symbiotic, I have argued that the reason for the collapse is that Rector Chen forces the primary diegetic audience to directly confront questions about human significance and cosmic moral order after the Ming fall. The collapse of the bean arbor effectively cancels out any expectation by the reader for reassurance of greater moral order, and it leaves far too many questions unanswered. What is the ultimate relationship of human action and the cosmos? Does well-intentioned

---

[15] Translation based on Hegel's translation ("Session 12," 331.) 老者道：『天下事被此老迂僻之论败坏者多矣，不独此一豆棚也。』

[16] Hanan, *Chinese Vernacular Story*, 194.

action in the realm of the five relationships, shown by values such as loyalty and chastity, have any greater significance and reward? Are there contexts in which purely self-interested action can have better results for societal order than blind allegiance to these imposed relationships? The assurance of earlier *huaben*, either of greater cosmic order or the possibility and beauty of moral heroism that restores a moral balance is here absent. Indeed, while earlier *huaben* authors meant to convince people that *Tian* would reward or punish individual actions, Aina has questioned the very premise of the genre.

This confrontation is too much for those under the bean arbor who want to believe and teach a universe perfectly ordered and attended to by karmic retribution. When the bean arbor collapses, it collapses in large part because of the fragmentation of cosmological certainty and cognitive dissonance. The constant disagreements between the audience and Rector Chen pay homage to this reality. The cold weather (symbolic of death), the threat of censorship (a tangible reminder of the Ming fall), and the pedantry of Rector Chen (who expresses an unpopular view), are all mere complements to this cognitive dissonance and help to bring about the demise of the bean arbor.

The Evolution of the Bean Arbor

In the first two sessions of *Idle Talk*, there is a notably lighter tone than in the rest of the collection. This is not to say that there are not deeper issues lingering under the surface, but simply that Aina suppresses the darker issues of human virtue and karmic significance under the guise of entertaining stories. In terms of karmic ordering, in at least the first session there is still a representative of karmic retribution in the figure of the God-on-High, but he is indecisive. In other words, Aina still expresses some belief in

a morally ordered cosmos, but this force seems incapable of dealing with dynastic or social instability on a large scale.

In the second session, Aina's storyteller makes no explicit mention of karmic ordering but shows a conflicted attitude toward the purpose of virtuous action. His conflicted narrative, in which he sympathizes with self-interest but condemns political and sentimental disloyalty, shows his own uncertainty about the relative value or significance of moral actions. Nevertheless, the storyteller oscillates between a harsh and a lighter tone of parody and he ends his story with humor. In both of the two opening sessions, Aina pushes direct questions of the nature of Heaven, the value of moral action, and implications for human action in times of political turmoil to the background.

In the seventh and eighth sessions, however, Aina shifts both the tone and message of his stories. First, Aina concerns himself much more directly with contemporary issues. Instead of hinting at dynastic transition, Aina very clearly alludes to it. In session seven, Aina is clearly addressing survivors of the fall of the Ming in his use of Boyi and Shuqi to discuss the value of martyrdom and loyalty to a fallen dynasty. And in session eight, he makes direct reference to the Ming/Qing transition while also constantly punning on the names of the two dynasties. Though in both stories Aina still displaces the questions into a separate secondary diegetic world, he much more clearly focuses on the Ming/Qing transition and the questions that result, whether those be if loyalty is meaningful or if the destruction of the transition was coincidence or Heaven's intention.

These sessions also offer greater insight into Aina's views of the cosmos. In session seven, a direct representative of karmic retribution, "The Master of Making Things Equal" descends but offers no meaningful karmic resolution. Aina ends that story not only with the loyalist's direct questioning of the justness of *Tian*, "Is it the case that Heaven enjoys killing?" but a remarkably ambiguous ending. Is Shuqi's utopia a decisive statement that he made the right decision or a satiric representation of his own self-delusion? Session eight only gets darker. Still unable or unwilling to portray *Tian* in a uniform way, Aina offers so many different explanations and representatives of *Tian* that none of them seem to hold any authority. He alternates between the cosmos as a tremendously violent force of harsh punishment to a completely arbitrary cosmos that has only nominal connections to human action. Session eight does offer a hopeful ending, but the tragedy that comes before it dramatically outweighs it.

In the final two sessions, the fall of the Ming is the clear focus as the narrative form continues to deteriorate. In session eleven, the storyteller is unable to produce a personal account of the fall of the Ming and recycles the same material through increasingly fictional and detached narratives. This results in a highly fragmented session. The storyteller ultimately relies on a larger-than-life story to make sense of the violence. This story is unique because only violence, death, and an obsession with the materiality of the corporeal body can drive the story to a peaceful resolution. The traditional means of lust or coincidence to drive the plot are no longer available as feasible choices. And yet, despite his attempt to place his own trauma into a grand *huaben* narrative that would give it greater significance, the storyteller is unsuccessful.

The ending of his narrative is in direct contradiction to historical reality and the nightmares of the audience that might undermine any effort at moral didacticism.

By this final session, Aina has completely given up on the *huaben* genre. There is no longer any pretense of displacing difficult questions into secondary diegetic narratives. Aina instead has a lecturer present a mostly harsh, uncaring cosmos directly to the primary diegetic audience. Aina is unable or unwilling to use the genre of *huaben* to articulate his own profound doubts about the presence of a morally attuned *Tian.* When the implications of those doubts become unbearable, the bean arbor collapses. Aina has offered us no ultimate didactic message or sense of certainty. The bean arbor collapses with no definitive answers about the significance of moral action or of the nature of the cosmos.

Final Thoughts and Future Directions

Since I began this project in 2014, scholars have already shown greater interest in *Idle Talk*. Robert Hegel at Washington University in Saint Louis began a collaborative translation of the entire text and commentary, to which I contributed a translation of session eleven. By the time I file this dissertation, the entire text of *Idle Talk* will be available in translation with scholarly notes for an English-speaking audience. In this last section, I want to outline my future hopes for the study of *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor,* either for myself or for future scholars who are as inspired and awe-struck by this text as I am.

First, I would like to put this text into two greater literary contexts. The most primary literary context would be literature about the dynastic transition, especially in

other genres. For example, the authors of the plays *The Palace of Everlasting Life* (*Changsheng dian* 长生殿) and *The Peach Blossom Fan* (*Taohua shan* 桃花扇) both raise questions about how humans should process and cope with the fall of the Ming. Because *chuanqi* plays are comparable to the *huaben* genre in their aims of producing the cosmos in miniature, the comparison would be especially relevant. Similarly, other *huaben* writers wrote darker stories around and after 1644 that seem to anticipate dynastic collapse. Placed in juxtaposition with *Idle Talk,* I think the works would lend context and insight into one another.

I would also like to put *Idle Talk* into the context of literary structural developments. As I briefly note in my introduction, authors were playing with frames before the publication of *Idle Talk,* and I am optimistic that a deeper comparison of their use of frames would lend insight into whether authors meant frames to be merely a creative new literary device, or if they used frames to add complexity to the reading of the content. A key example of this is *Xiyou bu*, translated into English as *The Tower of Myriad Mirrors,* also written near the time of the dynastic transition. I would also include Li Yu's *The Twelve Towers* in this comparison.

In a future work, I would like to offer a close reading and exploration of other stories in the collection. In this dissertation, I have only been able to look at the most prominent and well-known stories of the collection, but the other stories also have much to say and are certainly not ordinary. They contribute information about societal norms and situations and thus offer a historical context and use. Through them, Aina offers not only a greater discussion of themes like loyalty (in sessions three and four) but also of

social justice and corruption under the corrupt bureaucracies of both Confucianism and Buddhism (in sessions five and nine).

Finally, I would like to go further with the basic themes I have begun discussing here. The text is so polyvocal and dialogic that it defies simple readings that claim a simple meaning. In future research, I would like to look more closely at how the text views loyalism, for example, by including a discussion of sessions three and four. Further, because Aina often pairs values in the sessions instead of focusing on one over the other, I would like to look more closely at how these themes relate to one another. Aina seems to have a much more comprehensive and broad view of social values and ethical relationships than many short-story writers of the Ming/Qing era, and I want to better understand the greater web of interrelationships that Aina moderates and questions with contemporary political and social realities in *Idle Talk.*

REFERENCES CITED

Aina Jushi 艾衲居士. *Doupeng xianhua* 豆棚閒話. Taibei: Xinwenfeng chuban gongsi, 1982.

Allan, Sarah. *The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Early China*. San Francisco, CA: Chinese Materials Center, 1981.

Altenburger, Roland. "Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor: Aspects of Informal Non-elite Storytelling in *Doupeng xianhua*." Paper presented at the Chinoperl Conference, Honolulu, Hawai'i, March 31, 2011.

Bakhtin, M. M., and Michael Holquist. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Birch, Cyril. *Scenes for Mandarins: The Elite Theater of the Ming.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

Brook, Timothy. *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Chan, Wing-tsit. "Wang Yang-ming: A Biography." *Philosophy East and West* 22, no.1 (1972): 63-74.

Chang, Kang-i Sun. *The Late-Ming Poet Ch'en Tzu-Lung: Crises of Love and Loyalism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991.

Ching, Julia. *To Acquire Wisdom: The Way of Wang Yang-Ming.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1976.

Chow, Kai-wing. *The Rise of Confucian Ritualism in Late Imperial China: Ethics, Classics, and Lineage Discourse.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994.

Cohen, Paul S. *Speaking to History: The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth-Century China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

Dardess, John W. *Confucianism and Autocracy: Professional Elites in the Founding of the Ming Dynasty.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

de Bary, W. T. “Chinese Despotism and the Confucian Ideal: A Seventeenth-Century View.” In *Chinese Thought and Institutions,* edited by John K. Fairbank, 163-203. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957.

——. “Individualism and Humanitarianism in Late Ming Thought.” In *Self and Society in Ming Thought,* edited by W. T. de Bary, 144-247. New York: Columbia University Press, 1970.

Ditmanson, Peter. “Death in Fidelity: Mid- and Late Ming Reconstructions of Fang Xiaoru,” *Ming Studies* 1 (2001): 114-43.

——. “Fang Xiaoru: Moralistic Politics in the Early Ming.” In *The Human Tradition in Premodern China,* edited by Kenneth J. Hammond, 127-42. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002.

Durrant, Stephen W. *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995.

Edkins, Joseph. *Chinese Buddhism: A Volume of Sketches, Historical, Descriptive and Critical.* London: Routledge, 2013.

Elman, Benjamin A. *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China.* Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1984.

——. “The Unravelling of Neo-Confucianism: From Philosophy to Philology in Late Imperial China,” *Tsing-hua Journal of Chinese Studies* 11 (1983): 66-88.

Epstein, Maram. *Competing Discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity, and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001.

——. “Inscribing the Essentials: Culture and the Body in Ming-Qing Fiction.” *Ming Studies* 41 (1999): 6-36.

Gladstone, Jack. *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Guo Wei 郭玮. “Lun ‘Doupeng xianhua: knogqing shi weilan kaimang’ de huangdan yiwei” 论《豆棚闲话·空青石蔚子开盲》的荒誕意味. *江西教育学院学报* 6 (2012): 95-97.

Hanan, Patrick. *The Chinese Vernacular Story*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.

——. “The Fiction of Moral Duty: The Vernacular Story in the 1640s,” In *Expressions of Self in Chinese Literature,* edited by Robert Hegel and Richard Hessney, 189-213. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

——. *The Invention of Li Yu* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

Hay, John. “The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?” In *Body, Subject & Power in China,* edited by Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow, 42-77. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Hegel, Robert E, ed. *Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor, A Seventeenth-Century Chinese Story Collection.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017.

——. *Reading Illustrated Fiction in the Late Imperial China.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Henderson, John B. “Chinese Cosmographical Thought: The High Intellectual Tradition,” In *The History of Cartography, vol. 20: Cartography in Traditional East and Southeast Asian Societies,* edited by J. B. Harley and David Woodward, 203-227. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

——. *The Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology*. Neo-Confucian Studies. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

Ho Koon-piu. “Should We Die as Martyrs to the Ming Cause? Scholar-officials’ Views on Martyrdom during the Ming-Qing Transition,” *Oriens Extremus* 37, no. 2 (1994): 123-51.

Hsia, C.T. “Time and the Human Condition in the Plays of T’ang Hsien-tsu.” In *Self and Society in Ming Thought,* edited by W. T. de Bary, et al., 249-90. New York: Columbia University Press, 1970.

Huang, Martin W. “Male Friendship and *Jiangxue* (Philosophical Debates) in Sixteenth-Century China.” In *Male Friendship in Ming China,* edited by Martin W. Huang, 146-78. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007.

Huang, Ray. *1587, A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981.

Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲, and W. T. de Bary. *Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince: a study and translation of Huang Tsung-hsi's Ming-i tai-fang lu.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

Knechtges, David R., and Taiping Chang, eds. *Ancient and Early Medieval Chinese Literature: A Reference Guide, Part Two.* Handbuch Der Orientalistik. Vierte Abteilung, China; vol. 25, no. 2 Dd. Leiden: Brill, 2013.

Ko, Dorothy. *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995.

Kutcher, Norman. *Mourning in Late Imperial China: Filial Piety and the State.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Li, Wai-yee. "Early Qing to 1723." In *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature Volume 2: From 1375,* edited by Kang-I Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, 201-203. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

——. "*Shiji* as Higher Narrative: The Idea of Authorship." In *Epic and Other Higher Narratives: Essays in Intercultural Studies,* edited by Steven Shankman and Amiya Dev, 159-97. Delhi: Pearson, 2011.

——. "Victimhood and Agency." In *Women and National Trauma in Late Imperial Chinese Literature.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014.

——. "Women as Emblems of Dynastic Fall in Qing Literature." in *Dynastic Crises and Cultural Innovation from the Late Ming to the Late Qing and Beyond,* edited by David Der-wei Wang and Shang Wei, 93-150. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006.

Liu Yongqiang 劉勇強. 'West Lake Fiction of the Late Ming: Origin, Development, Background and Literary Characteristics.' Translated and edited by Roland Altenburger. *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 63, no. 1 (2009): 135-96.

Lu, Tina. *Accidental Incest, Filial Cannibalism, and Other Peculiar Encounters in Late Imperial Chinese Literature.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008.

Lu, Weijing. *True to Her Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008.

McMahon, Keith. *Causality and Containment in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Fiction.* New York: E.J. Brill, 1988.

——. *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists: Sexuality and Male-Female Relations in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Fiction.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995.

McMorran, Ian. “A Note on Loyalty in the Ming-Qing Transition.” *Etudes chinoises* 13 (1994): 47-64.

Milburn, Olivia. “From Storytelling to Drama: The Tale of Jie Zhi Tui.” *SOAS Literary Review.* Special Edition, Fall (2004): 1-15. http://www.soas.ac.uk/soaslit/issue4/milburn.pdf.

Miller, Henry. *State versus Gentry in Early Qing Dynasty China, 1644-1699,* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Owen, Stephen. “The Biography of Bo Yi and Shu Qi.” In *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911,* edited and translated by Stephen Owen, 142-144. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996.

Peng Tichun 彭体春 and Fan Mingying 范明英. “’Jie Zhitui fenghuo dufu’ xingbie xushi de liangzhong huatiao” 《介之推火封妒妇》 性别叙事的两重语调. *Chongqing shifan daxue xuebao 重庆师范大学学报* 3(2009): 82-87.

Peterson, Willard J. “Changing Literati Attitudes toward New Learning in Astronomy and Mathematics in Early Qing.” In *Guoshi fuhai kaixin lu: Yu Yingshi jiaoshou rongtui lunwen ji* 國史浮海開新錄: 余英時教授榮退論文集 edited by Zhou Zhiping and Willard J. Peterson, 390-392. Taibei shi: Lianjing chubanshe shiye youxiangongsi, 2002.

Plaks, Andrew. *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Rolston, David L. *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary: Reading and Writing between the Lines.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.

Rosemont, Jr, Henry, and Roger T. Ames, trans. *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence: A Philosophical Translation of the Xiaojing.* Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008.

Roy, David T., trans. *The Plum in the Golden Vase or, Chin P’ing Mei.* Vol. 1, *The Gathering.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

——., trans., *The Plum in the Golden Vase, or Ch’in P’ing Mei*. Vol. 2, *The Rivals.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Seiwert, Hubert Michael. *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History*. Leiden: Brill, 2003.

Shang, Wei. *Rulin Waishi and Cultural Transformation in Late Imperial China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003.

Sima, Qian. *The Grand Scribe's Records*. Vol. 7. Translated by William H. Nienhauser. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Spence, Jonathan D. and John E. Wills, Jr,. eds. *From Ming to Ch'ing: Conquest, Region, and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century China.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979.

Struve, Lynn A. "Ambivalence and Action: Some Frustrated Scholars of the K'ang-his Period." In *From Ming to Ch'ing: Conquest, Region, and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century China*, edited by Jonathan Spence and John E. Wills, Jr., 321-67. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979.

———. "Confucian PTSD: Reading Trauma in a Chinese Youngster's Memoir of 1652." *History and Memory* 16, no. 2 (2004): 14-31.

———. *The Southern Ming, 1644-1662.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984.

———. *Voices from the Ming-Qing Cataclysm: China in Tigers' Jaws.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998.

Tang Xianzu. *The Peony Pavilion*. Translated by Cyril Birch. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980.

Tu, Lien-chê. "MAO Ch'i-ling." In *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*, edited by Authur W. Hummel, 563-64. Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1943.

Wakeman, Frederic Jr. *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China. Vols 1 and 2.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

Watson, Burton, trans. *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

Wiens, Mi Chu. "Masters and Bondservants: Peasant Rage in the Seventeenth Century." *Ming Studies* 1 (1979): 57-64.

Wu, Yenna. "The Bean Arbor Frame: Actual and Figural." *Journal of Chinese Language Teachers Association* 30, no. 2 (1995): 1-32.

———.*The Chinese Virago: A Literary Theme*. Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1995.

———. "The Debunking of Historical Heroes in 'Idle Talk under the Bean Arbor.'" *Selected Papers in Asian Studies* (Western Conference of the Association for Asian Studies) 43 (1992): 1-27.

———.*The Lioness Roars: Shrew Stories from Late Imperial China.* Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1995.

Xu Heya 许和亚. "Xiaojie yu chonggou de zhangli: dui 'shouyang shan Shuqi bianjie' de lishi jiedu" 消解与重构的张力——对《首阳山叔齐变节》的历史解读. *Mingzuo xinshang 名作欣赏* 24 (2014).

Yang Shuhui. *Appropriation and Representation: Feng Menglong and the Chinese Vernacular Story*. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1998.

Zeitlin, Judith. *The Phantom Heroine: Ghosts and Gender in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Literature.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007.

Zhao Jicheng 赵继承, "Jiegou duichen yu yiyi de bu pingheng: Doupeng xianhua yishu jiegou xintan." 结构对称与意义的不平衡: 《豆棚闲话》艺术结构新探. *Jinan zhiye xueyuan xuebao* 2, no. 47 (2005): 28-35.

Zhao Jingshen 赵景深, *Xiaoshuo luncong 小说论丛.* Shanghai: Rixin chubanshe, 1947.

Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸, *Zhongguo wenue yanjiu 中國文學研究.* Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1957.

Zhu Xi 朱熹. "Daxue." 大學 In *Sishu jizhu* 四书集注. Taibei: Fa Xing Zhe Yi Wen Yin Shu Guan, 1966.

Zito, Angela. *Of Body and Brush: Grand Sacrifice as Text/Performance in Eighteenth-Century China.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.