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Savvy Women and Boundary Negotiations in Qing Fiction

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Some of the most memorable characters in Chinese fiction of the Ming and Qing are the savvy, sharp-tongued women who dominate and manipulate the men around them.¹ But such women, like *Honglou meng*'s Wang Xifeng and *Jin Ping Mei*'s Pan Jinlian, are often portrayed as dangerous to themselves and others. "Man rules without, woman rules within" went a common axiom, but shrew and virago characters try to rule a space beyond the female domain. Late imperial Chinese women's words, acts, and bodies were all expected to remain secluded within the household space, or less concretely, in a feminine sphere of action; women who overstepped these boundaries were often seen as threats to the social order. But the exceptions prove the rule. This paper examines a particular character type in Qing vernacular short stories: clever women who test the definition of feminine virtue by acting admirably outside normal gender boundaries. These female protagonists argue, meddle in men's business, divert property from the patriline, and even lose their chastity – yet each of them is presented as unquestionably virtuous. The rhetorical approaches by which their male authors present them in a positive light illuminate the strategies available to men and women for thinking creatively about gender in Qing China. The dividing line between "inner" and "outer" could be drawn in many different ways. Men who wrote about clever and capable women exploited this multiplicity by playing different definitions

¹ I would like to thank the members of the AAS 2017 panel "Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Space and Gender": Katherine Alexander, Dan Greenberg, Geng Song, and Matthew Sommer, as well as the two anonymous reviewers for *CLEAR*, for their valuable perspectives and feedback.

of womanly virtue and the feminine sphere against each other in order to present their boundary-crossing heroines as admirable.

I analyze the boundary negotiations of four capable heroines in two eighteenth-century story collections: the anonymous *Xingmeng pianyan* 醒夢駢言 (Parallel words to awaken dreamers, ca. 1766-1800, hereafter *Parallel Words*), and Du Gang's 杜綱 (fl. 1775) *Yumu xingxin bian* 娛目醒心編 (Stories to delight the eye and awaken the heart, preface dated 1792, hereafter *Stories to Delight the Eye*). The heroines' diverse actions are symbolically linked by their common drive to safeguard the biological and social reproduction of the patrilineal family, which motivates and justifies the varied ways in which they cross the inner-outer divide. Their characterization draws on elements from the classical tradition, many of which are visible in the Han dynasty *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 (Biographies of exemplary women, hereafter *Biographies*), and it differs significantly from depictions of talented women in other Qing genres, including female-authored writings. There are continuities in the developing discourse on female talent: appeals to patrilineal thinking allowed both early and late imperial authors, both men and women, to frame "inner" and "outer" in flexible ways in order to praise women's expedient, pragmatic actions. But writing about female talent branched out in different directions as it developed in different genres, and male fiction authors redefined the bounds of feminine virtue more daringly than female-authored or nonfictional writing could do.

BIOGRAPHIES: CLASSICAL PARADIGMS AND QING NEGOTIATIONS

I will begin with a discussion of Liu Xiang's 劉向 (79-8 BCE) *Biographies* and its transformation in the Ming and Qing. Highlighting elements of plot and characterization in the *Biographies* makes it easier to identify them when they recur in the more complex vernacular

stories, and analyzing the changes that late imperial editors make to the *Biographies* exposes the ways that the *liezhuan* biography and *xiaoshuo* fiction genres diverged in their depictions of female intelligence in the Qing. For the latter analysis, I will focus on a particular early Qing transformation of the *Biographies*: the anonymous *Gujin lienü zhuan yanyi* 古今列女傳演義 (*Romance of the Biographies of exemplary women, ancient and modern*; hereafter *Romance*), because it is often considered a “fictionalization” of the *Biographies*. As I will show, however, its ideological transformation of its source text aligns it more closely with other late imperial *Biographies* editions than with *xiaoshuo* fiction.² Liu Xiang’s *Biographies* put intelligent women front and center, but its late imperial editions marginalized them; the *Romance* does so more subtly than most, by erasing the spatial negotiations of Liu Xiang’s heroines.

Space and Gender in Early and Late Imperial China

In the Han Dynasty, spatial practice in the form of female seclusion constituted an important part of gender performance for elite women.³ Ideals of female seclusion applied not only to women’s

² This work is spuriously attributed to Feng Menglong, but since it includes the story of Hai Liefu, which occurred in 1667, it must postdate that year. Based on the dates during which the Changchun ge press (which printed the earliest known edition of the book) flourished and the absence of taboo character observance (which did not become widespread in the Qing until 1681) in that edition, I suggest a date between 1667 and 1681. See Huang Zhijun 皇之雋 and Zhao Hong'en 趙弘恩, *Jiangnan tongzhi* 江南通志, Qing Qianlong ed. (Hong Kong: Dizhi wenhua youxian gongsi, 2006); Wen Gehong 文革紅, *Qingdai qianqi tongsu xiaoshuo kanke kaolun* 清代前期通俗小說刊刻考論 (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 2008), 119; Chen Yuan 陳垣, *Shi hui juli* 史諱舉例 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 135.

³ A gendered division of agricultural and textile labor had resulted in a *de facto* separation of men and women during most daytime activities as early as the Shang, but it seems to have been in the Eastern Zhou period that this

physical cloistering in the home but also to the topics men and women were supposed to discuss: The *Li ji* 禮記 (*Record of ritual*), one of the Five Classics codified in the Han dynasty, enjoined: “Men do not speak of what is within; women do not speak of what is without” (*Nan bu yan nei, nü bu yan wai* 男不言內女不言外).⁴ In the biographies I will discuss, spatial separation is an important ritual norm for the protagonists to negotiate. But “within” and “without,” *nei* and *wai*, were complex and overlapping concepts. The “inner” realm of the household was a microcosm of the “outer” realm of the state, and the two resonated with mutual influence.⁵ The terms “inner” and “outer” were applied to a wide range of human activities, and Liu Xiang acknowledged considerable interpretive flexibility in women's application of gendered spatial separation.

Ideas of gender, too, were subject to competing definitions. There were two main frameworks for discussing gender in early imperial Chinese thought, which Bret Hinsch has termed “patrilineal” and “essentialist” discourse. Patrilinealism defined women according to their multiple social roles, particularly kinship roles. This kind of thinking valorized a family defined by the male line of descent, but it also provided power and strategic flexibility to individual women as well as men. Essentialist views of gender drew parallels between men and

cultural pattern was codified into a ritual norm, and elite women's movement outside the home began to be constrained. This likely affected only the uppermost social stratum in the Warring States era and the Han dynasty; however, the biographies I will discuss here are those of elite women. See Bret Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China*, 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 141-43.

⁴ Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, eds., *Li ji zhengyi* 禮記正義 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2008).

⁵ Mark Edward Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York, 2006).

women and several other abstract binary concepts: Heaven and Earth, *yang* and *yin*, and so forth. These cosmological arguments emphasized the superiority of men as men over women as women to a greater extent than patrilineal discourse. These two frameworks were well developed by the end of the Han, and they combined to frame the discourse on gender for the rest of imperial history.⁶ But patrilinealism and essentialism were not perfectly parallel, nor was essentialism always rigid. Historical narratives of Han elite women focus on their strategic negotiation of social roles, with ritual norms only one factor in their decision-making process.⁷ Early Confucian philosophers also recognized that abstract concepts like “inner” and “outer” were too complex and subtle to map onto male and female humans.⁸ Finally, in late Imperial China, cosmological analyses of gender produced gendered subjectivities only in and through the family context.⁹ In other words, patrilineal kinship should be seen as the primary framework within which essentialist and cosmological notions of gender operated in imperial China.

Using “patrilinealism” and “essentialism” as broad terms to categorize types of discourse on women, I argue that the conceptual pair of “inner” and “outer,” commonly associated with an essentialist view of gender in the formulation “man rules without, woman rules within” (*nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei* 男主外女主内), actually lends itself to a variety of interpretations. Both early

⁶ Hinsch, 174-76.

⁷ Michael Nylan, “Golden Spindles and Axes: Elite Women in the Achaemenid and Han Empires,” in *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender*, ed. Chenyang Li (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 211.

⁸ Paul Rakita Goldin, “The View of Women in Early Confucianism,” in *The Sage and the Second Sex*, 148-52.

⁹ Tani E. Barlow, “Theorizing Woman: Funü, Guojia, Jiating (Chinese Woman, Chinese State, Chinese Family),” in *Body, Subject and Power in China*, ed. Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 259.

and late imperial authors manipulate the inherently flexible concepts of inner and outer when portraying capable heroines, often drawing on patrilineal discourse to resist essentialist formulations that would strictly limit women's participation in the world beyond the home. These women act in pragmatic and expedient ways, but authors do not simply appeal to pragmatism to justify their actions; rather, they interpret normative principles in such a way as to portray them as virtuous.

The Biographies and the Romance

This tendency to re-interpret gender norms to praise women's expedient action is especially marked in the *Biographies of Exemplary Women*. Liu Xiang's female protagonists are clever and capable, virtuous and authoritative. Writing to admonish the emperor, Liu praised women who wisely advised rulers as well as those who maintained ritual propriety, those who acted capably in a crisis as well as those who upheld social norms. Three of Liu Xiang's six *juan* on virtuous women are devoted to the intellectual virtues: the second to "The Worthy and Enlightened" (*xianming* 賢明), the third to "The Benevolent and Wise" (*renzhi* 仁智), and the sixth to "Accomplished Rhetoricians" (*biantong* 辯通).¹⁰ The *Biographies* narrate the lives of numerous women who observe and uphold some boundaries in order to justify crossing others.¹¹ Liu Xiang praises women who cross gender boundaries provisionally while finally upholding the gendered order.

Biographies remained popular through the centuries between the Han and the Ming and Qing dynasties, but later editions drifted away from Liu Xiang's celebration of female intellect.

¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, all *Lienü zhuan* translations are from *Exemplary Women of Early China: The Lienü Zhuan of Liu Xiang*, trans. Anne Behnke Kinney (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xxix-xxx.

Biographies were added, subtracted, and reorganized; most of the new biographies focused on chaste women, and many of the new editions organized chapters by family role rather than by virtue type. Cumulatively, these changes meant that the vast majority of male-edited Ming and Qing versions of the *Biographies* emphasized chastity and family-oriented virtues while minimizing the role of the intellectual virtues.¹² Later in the Qing, however, some female editors of the *Biographies* such as Wang Zhaoyuan subtly resisted the domesticating shift by correcting omissions and misreadings in the text to highlight the importance of female intelligence.¹³ Male and female author/editors characterized intelligent female protagonists differently; so did texts in different genres (a point I will discuss at length in the next section). The early Qing *Romance*, however, follows the anti-intellectual trend of most late imperial *Biographies* editions. It retains Liu Xiang's original chapter headings and a high proportion of his biographies, and the chapter introductions even praise female intelligence. But the editor altered and commented on each biography in ways that diminish Liu Xiang's capable heroines, either restricting them within the domestic space or critiquing their movements beyond it.

Chapter prefaces in the *Romance* pay lip service to the idea that women could speak of more than the home. The preface to the third chapter, "The Sympathetic and Wise," states that women's experience and expertise should not be bounded by the walls of the women's quarters:

¹² Lisa Ann Raphals, *Sharing the Light: Representations of Women and Virtue in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

¹³ Harriet Zurndorfer, "The *Lienü Zhuan* Tradition and Wang Zhaoyuan's (1763-1851) Production of the *Lienü Zhuan Buzhu* (1812)," in *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women's Biography in Chinese History*, ed. Joan Judge and Hu Ying (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 65. For another female-edited edition, see Liang Duan 梁端, ed. *Lienü zhuan jiaozhu* 列女傳校註, Sibuyuan ed. (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1927).

I have observed that though the inner quarters are deep, nevertheless situations and affairs will certainly never cease to arrive. It may happen that times and configurations of the moment will combine [in such a way that they will impinge on the inner quarters]. If [women] are ignorant and have nothing with which to respond, soft and unable to endure, then they will harm the situation and fail in the affair, lose the configuration of the moment and fail to observe the right timing. How can one speak of this? Now, the sympathetic and wise are not thus. When affairs arrive, they handle them calmly and with aplomb....Therefore, the one who hands down training before a crisis arrives becomes a worthy mother; the one who stands out in her handling of affairs becomes a worthy wife. Beyond this, a prudent heart may speak of state government; a fragrant mouth may speak of relational norms; beautiful eyes may observe heaven and earth; weak substance may hope to attain sagely worth.

竊聞閨閣雖深而情事之來夫豈有既時勢相加或不無之使茫無以應柔不能持則傷情敗事失勢違時何可言也惟仁智則不然事至矣不動聲色而處之裕如情觸矣……故先機垂訓而為賢母當事出奇而為賢妻甚之惠心而談國政香口而論倫常俏眼而窺天地弱質而希聖賢¹⁴

Here, seclusion is not a shield against the outside world, and a lack of practical wisdom is a handicap for a woman just as it is for a man. Furthermore, capable women are competent to speak of matters beyond the household, including state government and the cosmos as a whole. In this, the anonymous editor follows Liu Xiang's lead: the *Biographies* portray women speaking with assurance on state affairs and masculine sociability.

¹⁴ *Gujin lienü zhuan yanyi*, Qing Guwu Sanduozhai ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), 3:1.

But the *Romance*'s biographies retreat from the preface's bold affirmation of women's wisdom. We can see this by comparing the *Biographies*' and *Romance*'s depictions of two women who speak of "state government" and "relational norms": Jing Jiang of the Ji lineage of Lu, and the wife of Duke Ling of Wei. The early Qing editor abridges the text of each biography to omit key incidents of spatial negotiation, and his commentary deliberately minimizes the dialectic between provisional boundary crossing and the reaffirmation of boundaries.

In the *Biographies*, Jing Jiang of the Ji lineage of Lu observes some aspects of gender separation while flouting others. Liu Xiang narrates four significant episodes that work together to showcase Jing Jiang's practical wisdom. First, she educates her son on state affairs by creating an elaborate analogy between the parts of a loom and the structures of statecraft. This discourse, which highlights her expertise and authority on politics, is rhetorically consistent with instructive arguments from male teachers to male students in early Chinese texts.¹⁵ Second, when her son asks her why she, the mother of the ruler, is weaving her own cloth, she lectures him on the importance of hard work for both men and women at all levels of society. Third, she upbraids her son for offending a guest at a state banquet by serving him an unusually small turtle. Fourth, Jing Jiang visits her nephew at his home, but refuses to speak to him in the public area of his residence where he is holding court. When he comes to the inner quarters to speak to her, she declares: "Now, the outer court is where you attend to the affairs of our ruler, and the inner court is where you manage the affairs of the Ji lineage. I would not dare to speak about either of them"

¹⁵ Lisa Raphals, "Arguments by Women in Early Chinese Texts," *Nan Nü* 3, no. 2 (2001): 170-76.

夫外朝子將業君之官職焉內朝子將庀季氏之政焉皆非吾所敢言也。¹⁶ Since Ji Jiang's biography has already narrated her physically leaving her own home and entering her nephew's, and earlier, speaking in detail and with authority about the affairs of the ruler, this disavowal cannot be taken at face value. Rather, it is a verbal performance that reconfirms her commitment to the spatial division of men and women, and their separate spheres of action, in order to justify the provisional boundary crossings of her movements and words. Selective observance of the notion of separate spheres increases Jing Jiang's agency and capacity for action.

The *Romance's* version of this biography removes the dialectic between boundary crossing and boundary maintenance. It omits the first and fourth incidents completely: Jing Jiang never draws an analogy between government and the loom, and she never leaves her home to visit her nephew. What remains are two trite discourses on hard work and courtesy to guests.¹⁷ The *Romance* deletes both Jing Jiang's intimate knowledge of statecraft and her disclaimers about the bounds of her sphere of activity, erasing her negotiation of the contradictions in gendered spatial practice.

Another *Biographies* protagonist who manipulates the spatial boundaries governing women's bodies and discourse is the Wife of Duke Ling of Wei.¹⁸ In Liu Xiang's biography, Duke Ling and his wife, together in their home, hear the sound of a carriage passing by. The carriage stops, then resumes. The wife immediately identifies the occupant as Qu Boyu, a worthy

¹⁶ *Biographies* 1.9, Wang Zhaoyuan 王照圓, *Lienü zhuan buzhu* 列女傳補注, Guoxue jiben congshu sibai zhong (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1968), 10-12. *Exemplary Women of Early China: The Lienü Zhuan of Liu Xiang*, 14-16.

¹⁷ *Gujin lienü zhuan yanyi*, 1:17-19.

¹⁸ *Biographies* 3:7, Wang Zhaoyuan, 47.

minister, who must have stopped outside the gate of the ruler to bow as prescribed by ritual. The duke sends someone to investigate and discovers that his wife was correct, but in order to trick her, he tells her that she was wrong. His wife congratulates him: “At first, I thought Wei had only one Qu Boyu. But now I see that we have yet another who is his equal, so that you have two worthy ministers. A state with many worthy officers is a fortunate state!” 始妾獨以衛為有蘧伯玉爾今衛有與之齊者是君有二[賢]臣也國多賢臣國之福也.¹⁹ Liu Xiang’s commentary adds: “The wife of Wei was well versed in the art of knowing people. So great was her wisdom that she could be tricked but not deceived” 君子謂衛夫人明於知人道夫可欺而不可罔者其明智乎.²⁰ The wife of Wei demonstrates that her wisdom is not bounded by the walls of the women’s quarters. By using only the information available to a woman observing strict physical segregation – the sound of a carriage outside as heard from within the house – the wife of Wei makes the same instantly correct evaluation of a worthy minister that normally characterized effective rulers. Her person is gendered; her intelligence is not. In fact, her seclusion in the women’s quarters, which requires her to extrapolate from a minimum of data, makes her power as a judge of character all the more striking. Her observance of physical gender boundaries empowers and reinforces her intellectual boundary crossing.

The *Romance* keeps the biography’s plot intact but adds gratuitous criticism:

With Nanzi’s wisdom, there is nothing she did not know. If she had been established at court, she would naturally have been a worthy minister. Since she was the wife of a lord, she was also an inner helpmeet. Why then did Wei encounter defeat, the Duke of Wei

¹⁹ *Exemplary Women*, 52.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

encounter confusion, and she herself fall into error, in the following days? Could this be because she lacked knowledge of something? It was not because she lacked knowledge. Dissolute longings; although she clearly knew them yet she did not bother to attend to them. Thus we realize that in respect to wives and daughters, one does not prize having talent but prizes having virtue.

以南子之明智無所不知使之立朝自是一賢臣即為君夫人亦是一內助奈何使衛國日就於敗靈公日就於昏自身日就於匪若有不知者何也非不知也荒淫念切雖明知之而不暇顧惜矣因悟婦人女子不貴有才而貴有德²¹

In this case, the *Romance* keeps the biography's incidents unchanged, but the commentary deliberately weakens the story's original force by adding information not present in the original biography about Wei's defeat and claiming that this was due to the wife's "dissolute longings." By inserting a new doubt about her virtue, and by introducing a new contradiction between talent and virtue, it explicitly minimizes the importance of women's intelligence.

The heroines of Liu Xiang's *Biographies* treat the division between inner and outer as negotiable.²² Some die to uphold the tiniest details of gender segregation, while others conspicuously observe some rules in order to break others. The *Biographies* inaugurated the *liezhuan* tradition of female biography by praising women who act expediently for the benefit of the patriline. This is particularly evident in the three sections that focus on the intellectual virtues; heroines frequently display a combination of verbal force and expertise in matters beyond the inner quarters. The seventeenth-century *Romance*, however, tries to mute this

²¹ *Gujin lienü zhuan yanyi*, 3:12.

²² E.g. *Biographies* 4.6 and 4.10

interfering streak in its heroines. Like other late imperial editions of the *Biographies*, it downplays women's pragmatic wisdom. One might be forgiven for wondering whether the early Qing public simply could not handle the accomplished rhetoricians and sharp-tongued advisors that Liu Xiang celebrated in the Han dynasty. But Liu Xiang's explicit praise of argumentative women was hardly unanimous in the Han. Indeed, the best known Han woman writer, Ban Zhao, wrote that an admirable woman was characterized by quiet restraint and attentiveness to household duties, not remarkable talent or skilled disputation.²³ But in light of Ban Zhao's actions as a political advisor, this statement itself – like Jing Jiang's disclaimers – should be read as a strategic performance of gender norms that enabled Ban's own political action, or equally strategic advice to younger women about how to survive court and household intrigues as a vulnerable new bride, or both.²⁴ There was more than one way to write as, or about, a clever woman.

And the clever, outspoken woman did not disappear from the page when the late imperial *liezhuan* tradition began to squeeze her out. She simply took on different forms and moved to other genres. The *xianyuan* biographical tradition celebrated women of literary talent, as did women's poetry collections and their prefaces, while the able and argumentative heroine flourished in the narrative fictional genres of *tanci* and *xiaoshuo*. Heroines of late imperial fiction combine pragmatic action with virtue performance in the same nuanced ways as the protagonists of the *Biographies*; though *xiaoshuo* fiction pushes the boundaries of feminine virtue further than other genres, it does so by drawing on the resources of the classical tradition.

²³ In Ban Zhao's biography from the *History of the Latter Han*, *juan* 84. Fan Ye 范曄, *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 10:2789.

²⁴ Yu-shih Chen, "The Historical Template of Pan Chao's 'Nü Chieh'," *T'oung Pao* 82, no. 4/5 (1996), 229-57.

EXPEDIENCY AND ETHICS IN QING FICTION

Smart women abound in late imperial fiction, but their archetypes are often two-edged. There is the persuasive, but greedy and dishonest, madam or matchmaker. There is the virago, marked by jealousy, courage, and violence, who can nevertheless appear as a capable manager benefiting her family and even her hapless husband.²⁵ Finally, there is the shrew, described by Keith McMahon as a woman who defies the inner-outer division by “scattering” and “splashing” her words and her energies, “trying to control the man’s outer actions and replace him as tyrant.”²⁶ But McMahon also sees a connection between shrews and talented poets: the beauties of the chaste scholar-beauty romance “take the shrew’s skill at haranguing and turn it into supreme aptitude in poetry and other literary arts.”²⁷ Verbal skill unites positive and negative depictions of female intelligence.

The characters I analyze below stand between poets and shrews. They are merchant and farmer wives, haranguers rather than poets, but they benefit their families tremendously. They verbally dominate their male relatives and neighbors, manage their marital clan’s property, inherit their natal family’s property, and leave their husbands for other men – for their own good. Like the accomplished rhetoricians of the *Biographies*, they understand the complexity of the

²⁵ Yenna Wu, *The Chinese Virago: A Literary Theme* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 190; Maram Epstein, “Turning the Authorial Table: Women Writing Wanton Women, Shame, and Jealousy in Two Qing Tanci,” in *Wanton Women in Late-Imperial Chinese Literature: Models, Genres, Subversions and Traditions*, ed. Mark Stevenson and Wu Cuncun (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

²⁶ Keith McMahon, *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists: Sexuality and Male-Female Relations in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 57.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

discourse around women's place and use it strategically, crossing some boundaries while upholding others. In these two vernacular story collections, the patriline's survival outweighs women's performance of the feminine virtues of meekness and chastity and justifies their takeover of clan governance and property management. But the potential dangers posed by their clever female protagonists remain visible: usurpation of male authority, loss of clan property, failure of chastity. Each story controls these dangers by exploiting the symbolic tensions and resonances between the linked conceptual areas of women's speech, women's chastity and property rights – in each of which women were expected to remain in the “inner” realm – to present their heroines as admirable and recognizably feminine, even as they appropriate aspects of masculine authority.

Moving from *liezhuan* biography to *xiaoshuo* fiction entails both changes and continuities of form and content. Biography is linked to fiction by the genres' common origins in historiography, and the boundaries between the two could be blurry. Historical biography required authors to expand on the historical record to fill in motivations and dialogue.²⁸ Biography and fiction informed one another: many *chuanqi* 傳奇 tales of the strange took the form of “biographical accounts” (*zhuan* 傳) of a particular individual, and these accounts influenced subsequent biographies of women.²⁹ And short story collections drew on historical and quasi-historical accounts for some of their materials. Thus, while biography's status as a genre was higher than that of *xiaoshuo* fiction, the two genres overlapped.

²⁸ Susan Mann, “Scene-Setting: Writing Biography in Chinese History,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (2009); Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, *From Historicity to Fictionality: The Chinese Poetics of Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

²⁹ Beverly Bossler, “Fantasies of Fidelity: Loyal Courtesans to Faithful Wives,” in *Beyond Exemplar Tales*.

The surprising negotiability of clan governance, property management, chastity, and meekness in the vernacular story collections *Parallel Words* and *Stories to Delight the Eye* is ritually analogous to (though more extreme than) the sanctioned negotiations of the inner-outer divide as depicted in the *Biographies*. Both draw on the classical discourse of patrilinealism, in which women could win praise by “filling in” for absent or incapable men in the family, to redefine essentialist notions of separate spheres. Unlike the *Biographies*, however, male-authored vernacular stories deploy this patrilineal rhetoric in the socially modest setting of merchants and farmer families, and they do so with the freedom of self-conscious fictionality. These factors allow them to push the boundaries of feminine virtue further than other late imperial genres such as biography and *tanci*, which praise women’s talent but still emphasize their meekness and sexual purity and remain silent on their economic activities.

Stories to Delight the Eye and *Parallel Words* bring a distinctively eighteenth-century didactic imagination to the established short story genre whose heyday was already past. Du Gang’s *Stories to Delight the Eye* was first printed in 1792 and enjoyed a steady popularity thereafter; it was reprinted eight times in woodblock during the 19th century and once in lithograph in 1905.³⁰ *Parallel Words* dates from the second half of the eighteenth century and was reprinted at least once.³¹ This reprinting history suggests a fairly wide distribution,

³⁰ Wang Qingyuan 王清原, *Xiaoshuo shufang lu* 小說書房錄 (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan, 2002).

³¹ *Xingmeng pianyan* is undated and its author remains unidentified. Comparison of *Xingmeng pianyan* with the print edition and extant manuscript editions of *Liaozhai* shows that where print and manuscript differ, *Xingmeng pianyan* follows the print edition. It therefore postdates 1766. There are two extant woodblock print editions of *Xingmeng pianyan*; one with no printer given, and one printed by Jiashixuan press, a reprint of the other edition with a recarved and altered title page. The Jiashixuan press appears to have flourished in the Qianlong and Jiaqing reign

especially for *Stories to Delight the Eye*. Both collections draw extensively on earlier classical and vernacular fiction, and both focus on the everyday world of the household and village. *Stories to Delight the Eye*'s sixteen chapters mingle stories of generosity, filiality, and chastity rewarded with tales of fraud uncovered and unjust convictions overturned. Du Gang composed some of its stories and drew others from earlier published works such as Feng Menglong's *San yan* (三言, Three words) and *Shi dian tou* (石點頭, Rocks nod their heads), as well as lesser-known *biji* 筆記 (note-form literature) collections.³² All sixteen chapters have strong moralizing overtones.

Parallel Words is a collection of twelve stories, each of which is a vernacular expansion of a classical tale from Pu Songling's *Liaozhai zhi yi* (聊齋志異, Liaozhai's records of the strange). But *Parallel Words* is far more domestically focused than *Liaozhai*, both in the stories it selects and in the ways it transforms them. Eleven of its twelve stories center on marriage and family life, with 494 stories on widely varied subject matter in the *Liaozhai* collection to draw

periods (1735-1820). Given that the vernacular story maintained its vitality primarily up to the end of the eighteenth century, and that the Jiashixuan edition is a reprint of an earlier printing, a date for *Xingmeng pianyan* in the second half of the eighteenth century is most plausible. On the dating of *Xingmeng pianyan* and its relationship to the different *Liaozhai zhiyi* editions, see Gu Qing 顾青, "Xingmeng pianyan erkao 醒夢篇言二考," *Wenxue yichan*, no. 6 (1997). On Liaozhai's textual history, see Allan Barr, "The Textual Transmission of *Liaozhai Zhiyi*," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 44, no. 2 (1984). On Jiashixuan press, see entry "*Jiashixuan* 稼史軒" in Wang Qingyuan.

³² Ouyang Jian 歐陽健 et al, ed. *Zhongguo tongsu xiaoshuo zongmu tiyao* 中國通俗小說總目提要 (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chuban gongsi, 1990); Gu Qing.

from.³³ Its stories trace the inception and resolution of conflicts between brothers and step-brothers, wives and concubines, and in-laws. And within each story, the anonymous author greatly expands the plot elements that relate to family life and interpersonal dynamics while giving proportionately less space to distant travel and supernatural encounters.³⁴ *Parallel Words*' characters do engage in some legal and ritual impossibilities such as co-wife marriage.³⁵ But the collection's underlying moral imagination is conventional: filiality, thrift, and harmony are its central values, and the patriline's prosperity is its highest imagined good. *Stories to Delight the Eye* and *Parallel Words* share a thematic focus on the household and a strong didactic dimension. Both are rich in vividly depicted female characters who are clearly coded as admirable or not-admirable. They provide several examples of heroines who push the commonly understood boundaries of female behavior while remaining recognizably both virtuous and feminine.

Verbal Dominance and Clan Governance

One benevolent fictional virago manipulates her male kinsmen with her expertise in the masculine domain of inheritance law; her story illustrates the patrilineal imperative that drives the more radical transgressions of late imperial gender norms in the stories that follow. This is Cheng shi, heroine of a story from Du Gang's *Stories* that I will refer to as "A Reputation for

³³ The remaining story is about a clever woman's use of magical arts. There are some interesting family dynamics, but the protagonist's magical skill is relatively more important.

³⁴ Jessica Dvorak Moyer, "Gender and Genre in the High Qing: Depictions of Feminine Sociability and Household Dynamics across Late Imperial Genres" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2015).

³⁵ Marriage to two main wives was legally impossible but common in fiction, where it often appears as a limited form of polygyny that symbolically united passion and potency with self-contained moderation. McMahon, 99-125.

Greed.”³⁶ She is the childless widow of the oldest of six Wu brothers. The second brother, Wu Youyuan, is a wealthy merchant who has divided the household, leaving his orphaned nephews and nieces in abject poverty. Cheng shi adopts Youyuan’s son and business manager Ruquan and makes inordinate demands of silver and food of her “son,” which he dutifully pays. At the end of the story, it turns out that she was acting the role of a greedy woman in order to make up for Youyuan’s greed by redistributing his wealth more equitably through the clan, feeding the children of all five brothers and arranging their marriages. Cheng shi exceeds the normal boundaries on women’s action throughout the story by managing her nephew’s business and manipulating his lineage.

Cheng shi exerts authority when she manages Ruquan’s business, and her expertise stretches beyond the women’s quarters. She advises him on investments, but her hiring insights are especially remarkable:

When it came to hiring employees, as soon as they passed before her eyes, if she said they would do, then indeed [Ruquan] would gain from their ability; if she said they would not do, and they went elsewhere, then indeed they would cause problems.

即生意裏邊他道那件可做做來必有數倍之利稍違其言便至虧本用的夥計一經他目說道用得果然得他氣力他說用不得的到了別家果然壞事³⁷

Cheng shi’s business acumen is not unique in late imperial fiction; the late Ming *Rocks Nod Their Heads* story “Siege of Yangzhou” shows a capable wife traveling with her hapless

³⁶ Originally *Mao tan ming yin xing hou de* 冒貪名陰行厚德: “Risking a name for greed, secretly enacting great virtue.” Story 13.2 in 杜綱 Du Gang, *Yumu xingxin bian* (1792).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 13:13.

merchant husband and managing their capital.³⁸ But Cheng shi remains at home, extending her authority from the stable center of the women's quarters, and her ability to evaluate shop employees instantly and correctly recalls the Wife of Duke Ling of Wei's ability to evaluate ministers. Like Duke Ling's wife, her unerring perception of the world outside the home is all the more striking because she herself remains secluded in the home.

Cheng shi also takes charge of lineage affairs, which were a primarily masculine concern. Furthermore, the rhetoric she uses to dominate the Wu clan elders relies on a pretense of legal expertise. She thus speaks with authority on both "state affairs" and masculine "relational norms." It begins with a sneaky, even illicit transaction: Cheng shi uses her adoptive relationship with Ruquan to siphon money from Youyuan's household into her own. From the standpoint of the *jia* household, an economic unit that shares a roof and a food supply,³⁹ Youyuan and his five brothers "divided the household" long ago; in legal terms, they are financially independent, and Cheng shi's diversion of resources from one to the other is little better than theft. But Du Gang justifies his heroine by criticizing Youyuan's greed and emphasizing lineage morality in Cheng shi's final speech:

Older and younger brother, uncle and nephew, are all the descendants of one ancestral lineage. When one is in need, another must act to relieve the emergency. When your birth father was alive, his household was wealthy alone, and all the other branches were poor.

³⁸ For a detailed analysis of the story's gender politics, see Xian Wang, "Langxian's Dilemma over the Cult of Martyrdom and Filial Piety: A World of Emptiness in 'The Siege of Yangzhou,'" *Ming Studies* 2015, no. 72 (2015).

³⁹ Derk Bodde and Clarence Morris, *Law in Imperial China: Exemplified by 190 Ch'ing Dynasty Cases* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 193.

But he saw members of the same stock like strangers on the street and didn't lift a finger to help them.

人家弟兄叔姪都是祖宗生下來的需要緩急相通你本生父在日家業獨富各房些貧視一本若路人全無一毫周濟⁴⁰

Each phrase emphasizes the centrality of lineage ties and the kinship obligations that should bind wealthy households to support their poorer relatives in other households. Late imperial readers would have been familiar with this kind of rhetoric: morality books frequently exhorted wealthy men to care for poorer households of their lineage, and Wu Youyuan clearly failed in this duty.

But though patrilineal logic makes Cheng shi a heroine, her actions still transgress gender boundaries. Women did frequently manage household finances in the Qing dynasty and gained oblique praise for doing so effectively,⁴¹ but the ancestral lineage was an overwhelmingly masculine concern.⁴² Women were central members of the *jia*, but they were peripheral, even suspect, in the male-dominated *zu*. Thus, there are two ways to read this story, and either reading

⁴⁰ Du Gang, 13:14.

⁴¹ For one study of talented gentry women playing a key economic role in the household, see Susan Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁴² See the studies in Patricia Buckley Ebrey and James Watson, eds., *Kinship Organization in Late Imperial China, 1000-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Those who acted on behalf of a lineage were almost always men. Exceptions, such as the widows Yang and Zhou's involvement in the Qian lineage and Yuan Jingrong's leadership of the Wu lineage, and the way men write about these interventions by women, only underscore the rarity of this occurrence. See Jerry Dennerline, "Marriage, Adoption, and Charity in the Development of Lineages in Wu-Hsi from Sung to Ch'ing," in Patricia Buckley Ebrey, ed., *Kinship Organization in Late Imperial China 1000-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 190-94; Binbin Yang, *Heroines of the Qing: Exemplary Women Tell Their Stories* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 88-93.

shows Cheng shi verging on impropriety. If we read her speech as genuine, then she has taken control of the lineage and deceived her clan elders, overstepping her authority. Or, if her speech is more strategic than heartfelt, she has constructed a facade of lineage discourse to justify her actions on behalf of her own impoverished household. In either reading, she has skillfully blended masculine and feminine rhetorics of authority.

The speeches by which Cheng shi dominates the Wu clan elders join masculine expertise with feminine tears. Her combination of masculine and feminine rhetorical tactics is especially visible during her fight to name Ruquan, rather than one of her impoverished nephews, as her husband's heir. Nobody wants the role, which brings only a ritual obligation to his spirit and the financial burden of supporting his widow. So the clan elders meet to choose an heir, and Wu Youyuan suggests she choose one of the poor nephews currently sharing her household. But Cheng shi, who wants to adopt Youyuan's son and take his money, responds:

May I ask, respected elders, in the statutes set down by the court, in the statute on adopted heirs, I think there must be a clear written guideline recorded in the law; when the oldest branch of a family is without heir, which branch's nephew should inherit? I only want to act according to proper precedent and let that be the end of it. Why would I need to choose for myself?

但有一句話請問諸位高親朝廷設立條例立嗣這條想亦有明文載在律上長房無後應該那一房的姪子承繼只要照例而行就是了何用自行揀選⁴³

⁴³ Du Gang, 13:10.

Youyuan gets the message, but resists – he says he depends on his oldest son to run his business and offers his younger son instead – whereupon Cheng shi browbeats Youyuan into submission with a shrewish harangue:

“I don’t care whether he’s young or old. Whatever the laws and statutes say about what to do when the senior branch of a lineage has no heir, whether one should establish the older or younger son of the second branch as heir – I’m a woman, what do I know? – just do what the law says, with no mistakes. Rather than violate the law, let the dead be a ghost with no ancestral sacrifices – let his younger brother not acknowledge him as older brother, let my brother-in-law not acknowledge me as sister-in-law. Just let it be as though the Wu clan never had this branch of the family.” When she was done, she wept loudly and freely and went into her quarters. The assembled elders looked at each other helplessly with tongues sticking out. Youyuan was reluctant to give up his oldest son, but he was helpless before his sister-in-law’s reasonable and convincing speech.

我也不管年大年小這律例上長房無後還是應該次房長子承繼還是應該次房幼子承繼我婦道家那裏曉得什麼還是要照着律上萬無一失若背律另議寧使死者為無祀之鬼弟不認他為兄叔不認我為嫂算吳氏門中沒有這一房便了說罷放聲大哭竟走進去了眾親族你看我我看你都把舌頭來伸伸有源心中大兒子本割舍不得爭奈長嫂所話又極名正言順⁴⁴

Cheng shi’s appeal to the law of which she claims ignorance is disingenuous – and effective. In fact, the Qing code did not specify which branch should inherit, much less which son of that

⁴⁴ Ibid., 13:11.

branch.⁴⁵ As paternal grandsons of the dead man's father, all the nephews are equally eligible. But Cheng shi demands that the clan follow a strict hierarchy of seniority by selecting the oldest son of the next oldest brother as her husband's heir.

This logic goes beyond either law or custom: although many texts distinguish the oldest son as head of the patriline from his younger brothers,⁴⁶ they do not make distinctions of seniority between younger brothers and their descendants. But Youyuan and the clan elders accept her implied logic of a strict chain of succession between the branches of a lineage. Would a middle-aged widow really have known the relevant statutes of the Qing code? Du Gang does not tell us, and narratively, it hardly matters whether Cheng shi is lying about what she does know or inventing where she is ignorant. She has, and instills in her listeners, a plausible sense of what lineage law *might* require. Since the clan elders themselves are evidently not certain of the

⁴⁵ It specified only that the adopted heir to a childless man must be from the same generation as his son would have been, and that nearer relations must be chosen in preference to more distant ones. See section 78 on adopted heirs. *Da Qing lüli* 大清律例 (Beijing: Falü chubanshe, 1998), 179. An English translation can be found in David Wakefield, *Fenjia: Household Division and Inheritance in Qing and Republican China* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 215. See also Philip C. C. Huang, *Civil Justice in China: Representation and Practice in the Qing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 97-98. The Ming code is the same.

⁴⁶ The revival of the *zong* system (in which the oldest son of the oldest son would always be head of the patriline) sparked lively discussions in the Song dynasty; Zhu Xi incorporated the "small *zong*" system into his *Family Rituals*, which became extremely popular in the Ming and Qing dynasties, but was not enshrined in law. Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Confucianism and Family Rituals in Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). For studies of lineage organization in late imperial China, see Michael Szonyi, *Practicing Kinship: Lineage and Descent in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Zhenman Zheng, *Family Lineage Organization and Social Change in Ming and Qing Fujian* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).

code's contents, they are vulnerable to manipulation by a quick-witted woman who seems to know something that they don't.

Finally, Cheng shi follows her speech with a tearful exit to the women's quarters where the clan elders would be unlikely to follow. Her tears, which silence her opposition, recall the maternal tears that inspired many late imperial Chinese sons to moral and scholarly effort.⁴⁷ Her speech weaves together a façade of legal expertise, a *pro forma* protest of womanly ignorance, and a feminine emotional outburst. In the same way, she calculates her movements between the outer area of the house and the inner women's quarters for maximum effect. Her movement through space manipulates gender boundaries in the same way her verbal tactics do.

The commentary to "A Reputation for Greed" by Du Gang's contemporary Xu Baoshan 許寶善 praises Cheng shi precisely for exceeding feminine norms. "For a woman to understand the greater good, this is already difficult to obtain. Mother Cheng did even more: she fulfilled the greater good. When she was real, she did so well; when she was false, she did so well" 女子而能曉大義已是難得程母更有一番作用以全大義真也真得好假也假得好.⁴⁸ Xu Baoshan sees Cheng shi's lineage concern as unusual for a woman but nevertheless praiseworthy. He praises her apparent greed for its underlying goodness, showing his awareness of the performative nature of virtue. Cheng shi's sphere of concern is broader than a woman's was expected to be, which justifies her trespass on the masculine territory of lineage finance as well as her false rhetoric of dubious knowledge and pretended ignorance. But she does it all to fill in for the dead or morally

⁴⁷ On the power of maternal tears, see Hsiung Ping-Chen, "Constructed Emotions: The Bond between Mothers and Sons in Late Imperial China," *Late Imperial China* 15, no. 1 (1994).

⁴⁸ Du Gang, 13:15.

bankrupt men of the lineage, to benefit the clan as a whole. The same patrilineal logic also drives the far more radical revaluations of feminine virtue in the stories that follow.

A Filial Daughter and Female Inheritance

Cheng shi's financial shenanigans helped safeguard her marital clan's wealth. But in the story of You Yinggu, another capable virago of eighteenth-century fiction, a woman's masculine boldness on behalf of her natal family gains her a son's inheritance of her father's land – a profound upheaval of gender norms and property law. Her story is *Parallel Words*' "The Capable Stepsister."⁴⁹ In the story, the You family consists of a father, his deceased first wife's daughter, Yinggu, his second wife Cao shi, and her two sons, Shangxin and Cixin. At the beginning of the story, Yinggu has been married and widowed and lives in another province, and she has quarreled violently with her father because he is not willing to help her impoverished marital family. Early in the story, the father is exiled, and an old enemy of the family sees an opportunity to destroy them. He befriends the older son Shangxin, turns him into a gambler, and gets him to sell all the family property and even his wife Jiang shi to pay his gambling debts. Shangxin is exiled as punishment. Cao shi and the teenage Cixin are left desolate at home. The enemy writes to Yinggu, expecting that she will come to gloat and her shrewish presence will add to the family's misery. Instead, she saves the day. She goes to both the county and prefectural yamen to bring accusations against the gamblers, pleading her case so effectively that

⁴⁹ Original title "Bestowing kindness on a treacherous person, giving rise to danger on every side; relying on benevolent spirits, turning disaster into good fortune" (施鬼蜮隨地生波 仗神靈轉災為福). The story is a transformation of *Liaozhai* 10:18, "Qiu Daniang" 仇大娘. *Parallel Words*' adaptation follows its source closely; it spends more time detailing human interactions and less on the workings of karmic retribution than the *Liaozhai* tale, but the depiction of all major characters is essentially the same in both texts.

the courts order the gamblers beaten and return the money to the family. She manages the You household business so effectively that they become wealthy. Eventually, the father and both brothers are reunited, and Yinggu reconciles the older stepbrother to the wife he sold. The father divides his estate evenly between Yinggu and her two stepbrothers, and Yinggu's sons inherit her portion.

Yinggu's actions transgress the normal boundaries of a woman's sphere of action and possession in several ways. First, she travels to both the county and prefecture yamens, where she pleads her case publicly and successfully: "She knelt beneath the dais and told the whole story... clause by clause, term by term (條條款款), weeping and accusing."⁵⁰ This is her most obvious meddling in the outside world. Like Cheng shi in "A Reputation for Greed," Yinggu combines logical and legal force – the adverbial phrase *tiaotiao kuankuan* suggests legal language and implies clear organization of events in her narration – with emotive outbursts that evoke both the "scattering" and "splashing" of the shrew and the tearful exhortations of a wronged mother figure. Her fourteen-*sui* old son accompanies her; technically, he serves as the male guarantor for her written plaint,⁵¹ but Yinggu does all the talking. The fact that she has only a teenager as chaperone lets the full force of her personality emerge.

Yinggu also spends years of her life away from her marital family, managing her natal family's affairs, and is then rewarded with an equal portion of her father's property. Both plot

⁵⁰ Juqi zhuren 菊畦主人, *Xingmeng pianyan*, Reprint of Qing Qianlong ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 8:8.

⁵¹ Women had to be represented legally by proxy in written plaints; see Matthew Sommer, *Polyandry and Wife-Selling in Qing Dynasty China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 225; Huang, 112. This did not prevent women from being the primary litigants and defendants in historical lawsuits; for one example of a woman suing another woman, see Huang, *ibid.*, 132-33.

elements transgress late imperial norms. The inappropriate expenditure of a married woman's time and energy on her natal family are balanced by the inappropriate transfer of the clan's resources to another patriline. Here, "outside" and "inside" take on multiple meanings. On one hand, they relate to the tension between natal and marital family loyalty in expectations for married women: warnings against allowing married women to spend too much time visiting their natal families and too much money on presents to them can be found in numerous morality books and household codes.⁵² On the other, they indicate the male head of household's imperative to keep the resources of the clan within the clan through the standard pattern of partible male inheritance, which is violated when Yinggu receives a full portion and passes it on to her sons, members of her husband's lineage.

But the You paterfamilias is in exile throughout most of this story, which brings us to Yinggu's third major contravention of gender norms: her total domination of her stepmother, her two stepbrothers, and her stepsisters-in-law. Ignoring distinctions of both generation and gender, she steps into the role of head of the family. Yinggu's violations of a daughter's normal role are clearly recognized as such by the story's author and supporting characters and would have been clear to readers. For instance, Yinggu has difficulty arranging the marriage of her younger stepbrother Cixin, because their enemy tells everyone: "The You family's property is all under Yinggu's control – it will never return to the You brothers!" 尤家的田產盡是英姑掌管將來沒

⁵²E.g. Chen Hongmou 陳弘謀, ed. *Wuzhong yigui* 五種遺規, Sibubeiyao ed. (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1936),

11:15; Shi Chengjin 石成金, *Chuanjia bao* 傳家寶, Reprint of Qianlong 4 ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2009), 2:4:23.

得歸還兄弟的了。⁵³ The family's nemesis starts the rumor, but it gains currency because Yinggu does in fact control the You family property in a way that would have been unheard-of for a married daughter.

Parallel Words' author uses several strategies to distance himself from the bystander characters' perceptions of Yinggu and present her as a heroic benefactor. First, Yinggu conspicuously observes some gender, family, and property boundaries. She brings her son with her on her trips to the *yamen*. Yinggu's father is exiled and her husband dead, so her son is not only her legal guarantor, but also the proper male authority figure in her life according to the "Three Followings" principle.⁵⁴ His presence serves a conspicuous moral function as well as a legal one. Yinggu also keeps strict account books; when the family is reunited, she brings them out to prove that she has diverted none of the You family property to her own husband's family.⁵⁵ Her father's decision to give her a son's inheritance is spontaneous – Yinggu is financially incorruptible. Like Cheng shi in "A Reputation for Greed," she avoids shrewishness (despite her initial quarrel with her father) because she does not splatter her fierce energies indiscriminately, but contains and directs them. Both her partial observance of gender boundaries and her strict financial accounting serve to balance her misdemeanors in the story's moral ledger. "Inner" and "outer" conceptualize both lineage property and spatial practice, and the author combines Yinggu's partial observance of boundaries in each area to present her as a person of strict moral and financial propriety, someone who keeps things and people where they belong.

⁵³ Juqi zhuren, 8:9.

⁵⁴ In which a woman follows her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son after widowhood.

⁵⁵ Juqi zhuren, 8:17.

Finally, although Yinggu's status as a widowed daughter introduces the danger of property loss from her father's to her husband's family, it also makes her less threatening in other ways. Unlike most of the shrew figures discussed by Wu and McMahon, Yinggu shows neither sexual desire nor jealousy. Her family role is stepdaughter and stepsister rather than wife. This makes her a partial outsider, so the You family is less responsible for controlling her behavior.⁵⁶ In fact, Yinggu's unorthodox actions allow her stepmother Cao shi and her stepbrother's wife to act as conventional models of feminine virtue, chaste widow and faithful wronged wife. The You family wives do not have to leave the house to go to the *yamen*: Yinggu does it for them. Cao shi does not have to persuade her daughter-in-law to return to her worthless husband: Yinggu does that, too. She enables the virtuous seclusion and harmonious mother- and daughter-in-law relationship of the You wives.

The story displaces the necessary transgressions in the You family's path back to prosperity onto a woman who is enough of an insider to have a legitimate concern, but enough of an outsider to have freedom to act. Like Liu Xiang, the author of *Parallel Words* manipulates the complexity of the concepts of inner and outer to make Yinggu simultaneously unorthodox and exemplary. In late imperial China, women belonged *in* the marital household, and property belonged *in* the patriline. Yinggu leaves her marital household, acts in public, and inherits property – but she keeps the property together, keeps her mother-in-law alive, and brings back her sister-in-law. Her father's permanent alienation of clan property to Yinggu and her sons is

⁵⁶ On lineage leaders' legal liability for controlling the younger men and wives of their clans, see Janet Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 65-81.

balanced by her years of service to them instead of her marital family in a careful calculation of boundary maintenance.

The Ethics of Sex and Property

A final story pair from *Stories to Delight the Eye* develops the connection between feminine virtue and patrilineal property even further. Du Gang uses the symbolic linkages between chastity and property to make sex and money into semi-interchangeable ethical bargaining chips in his contrasting depictions of two clever women. *Stories to Delight the Eye* has a strong paired format in which each chapter consists of two thematically related stories, which work in concert to illuminate a shared question: in this chapter, how to evaluate a capable young woman who saves her entire marital family by either really or apparently violating her chastity.

The heroine of the first story, “A Bandit’s Concubine,” is Feng shi.⁵⁷ Her character recalls Li Yu’s heroine, Geng Erniang (Secunda Geng), who beguiles a bandit chief without ever quite having penetrative sex with him and then returns to her husband.⁵⁸ The story takes Li Yu’s thought experiment a step farther: what if a woman really did have sex with her captor but remained loyal to her husband? When Feng shi’s city is attacked, she bargains with the bandit

⁵⁷ *Stories to Delight the Eye* 4.1, *Huo quanjia yuangan jiang ru* 活全家原甘降辱 (Keeping a whole family alive, willingly submitting to humiliation), is a vernacular expansion of an anecdote found in Wu Chenyan 吳陳琰’s early Qing *biji* anthology, *Kuangyuan zazhi*. Changying Shao and Wenyu Lin, “*Yumu xingxin bian*” *yanjiu* 娛目醒心編研究 (Taipei: Hua Mulan wenhua gongzuofang, 2008), 21; Chenyan Wu, *Kuangyuan zazhi* 曠園雜誌 (Shanghai: Shanghai shu dian, 1994).

⁵⁸ Li Yu 李漁, *Li Yu quan ji* (Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1974), 12:5341. The story has been translated by Patrick Hanan in *Silent Operas* (Hong Kong: Research Centre for Translation, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2000). The story’s negotiation of chastity norms is discussed in Theiss, 161-64.

chief who invades her home, agreeing to become his concubine if he will guarantee the safety of her husband and the rest of his family. She ingratiate herself with the bandit and his main wife and learns to ride and shoot. When the bandit chief leaves on his next expedition, Feng shi convinces his wife that her family has a hidden cache of jewels; the wife urges her to ride in male disguise to claim them. Feng shi does so, only to escape back to her original husband. During their emotional reunion, she reveals that her saddlebags are full of treasure from the bandit chief's hoard. The entire family lives happily ever after without reproaching Feng shi for her extramarital liaison. Du Gang concludes: "Though her body is defiled, her heart can face the sun of heaven!" 身雖受污此心可對天日. He leads the reader into the next story by asking, if there were a woman who could preserve both her family and her chastity simultaneously, "wouldn't that be a marvel beyond marvels, an even greater difficulty among difficulties?" 非更是一樁奇外出奇難中更難之事.⁵⁹

The next chapter, "A Wife for a Field," tells how Cui shi, a daughter-in-law of the Wang family, saves her entire marital household from starvation during a famine by volunteering to be resold in marriage at a handsome price.⁶⁰ Her father-in-law and husband have already sold all their household valuables and have tried to sell their unfruitful land too, but nobody wants to buy it. Cui shi boldly negotiates her own sale price of 120 taels with the matchmaker, then demands that her father-in-law make out a deed of land sale for 120 taels to her in repayment for her dowry, which she has spent to buy food during the famine. Cui shi takes the deed of sale with her

⁵⁹ Du Gang, 4:9.

⁶⁰ *Stories to Delight the Eye* 4.2 or *Xun dajie shi xian qingzhen* 狗大節始顯清貞 (Sacrificing great chastity to show spotless purity) has no known source other than Du Gang's invention. Shao and Lin, 22.

in her sedan chair in the wedding procession and strangles herself during the journey. When the horrified groom's family, the Rens, discover her corpse, they also find the land deed, on which Cui shi has written "The field returns to the Rens; the body returns to the Wangs." 田歸任姓屍歸王氏.⁶¹ Even though the original wife sale was illegal, the local magistrate praises Cui shi and rules that the Wangs should keep the money and the Rens keep the property. In effect, Cui shi has done a bait-and-switch to force a land sale when land prices are low and wife prices are high.

Cui shi's gender transgressions are subtler than Feng shi's. Feng shi yields herself to the bandit with every appearance of enthusiasm. Her loss of chastity is mirrored in her abandonment of physical seclusion, as she becomes an expert in vigorous outdoor activities like horseback riding and archery. Both the sex and the horseback riding prove to be part of her strategy to rejoin her original husband with the money to restore the family's fortunes. Her loyalty to her first husband and his family justify her actions, and the reader is not expected to feel any sympathy for the bandit chief. Cui shi, on the other hand, remains behind the walls of the marital household until she enters the bridal sedan chair that becomes her coffin. Her second marriage is never consummated. Her stepping out of the feminine sphere consists rather in her willingness to appear unchaste by volunteering to remarry during her first husband's lifetime,⁶² in her self-positioning as her father-in-law's equal and her husband's superior, and in her uncharacteristic verbal boldness. She earns praise not only for saving her husband's family but for engineering marriage and property transactions so cleverly as to rescue the impoverished Wangs without robbing the respectable Rens.

⁶¹ Du Gang, 4:19.

⁶² Since an unwanted flirtation by a man was enough to drive some women to suicide, the importance of a reputation for chastity should not be underestimated; see Theiss.

Cui shi's main conversation partner throughout "A Wife for a Field" is her father-in-law, Wang Zhiji, not her husband. This signals that the focus of the story as a whole is not the marital relationship, but the entire Wang household. When Wang Zhiji suggests to all three of his daughters-in-law that they marry other men to survive, Cui shi calmly points out that if they are going to remarry, they might as well do so for a price that will enable everyone to survive. And she dominates her husband. When he starts crying, she rebukes him sharply:

You're a scholar; how can you not understand principle?...If you greedily love your wife and can't bear to sever that love, so that you're willing to sit by and watch your father die without helping, how can you call yourself a person? How can you call yourself a son?
你是個讀書人如何不曉道理……你若貪戀妻子不忍割愛是坐視父死而不知救何以為人何以為子⁶³

This speech silences her husband. Cui shi then refuses to let Wang Zhiji ask her natal family for their permission to sell her in marriage – thus rejecting their vestigial authority over her as well.

Cui shi boldly negotiates her own remarriage, which marks a change from her usual womanly reserve. Wang Zhiji finds her sharp bargaining with the matchmaker a startling departure from her usual behavior, thinking: "She's usually so reserved of speech and slow to laugh, and when she sees strangers she's always shy and timid. But today her speech is so confident and assured!' He found it very odd." 他平日寡言寡笑見面生人都是羞怯的今日語言侃侃若此暗暗稱異。⁶⁴ The fact that Cui shi changes her persona so quickly to meet this crisis shows that her previous reserve was not ingrained, but that shyness and boldness are tools she

⁶³ Du Gang, 4:13.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 4:14-15.

uses at will in different situations. Like Jing Jiang in the *Biographies*, Cui shi displays a combination of “womanly” and “unwomanly” behavior. The ease with which both women switch between orthodox and unorthodox conduct shows that even if they spend the majority of their lives acting the role of the quiet, secluded woman, this role does not define them in their authors’ eyes. In both Jing Jiang’s biography and Cui shi’s story, Liu Xiang and Du Gang highlight the women’s performance of gender norms at some times in order to set up a baseline of virtue that allows their nonstandard behavior at other times to emerge as praiseworthy. Virtue itself is a strategic performance in both texts.

Cui shi does her gender-bending in order to carry out some extremely shady property transactions. But like Cheng shi, who embezzles from her wealthy nephew to provide for her poor ones, and Yinggu, who takes over her natal family’s affairs with such terrifying gusto, Cui shi’s financial irregularities serve a higher patrilineal good. Her goal is to get the Rens to buy the Wangs’ land so that the Wangs can survive. Her method is to offer herself for sale and then substitute the land: she is the more desirable asset, young and pretty, while the land does not produce well even in a good year. By using her death to force the land sale posthumously, Cui shi has ensured that the Rens end up with something more than a corpse in exchange for their betrothal silver. But the land is neither what they agreed to buy nor something they would have chosen to buy. On the other hand, land sale was legal in the Qing, while direct wife sale was not; Cui shi’s fraudulent maneuver does keep her, the Wangs, and the Rens from actually breaking the law. It leaves room for the magistrate to ratify her solution to the problem, though the law did not require him to do so—indeed, the interlinear commentary praises the magistrate for not taking the opportunity to confiscate the land in question.

On a symbolic level, the sleight of hand, swapping wife for land, works within the story because of the underlying similarity between land and women in the Qing cultural imaginary. There are numerous parallels between (legal) land sales and (illegal) wife sales in both sale contracts and folk proverbs of the Qing dynasty.⁶⁵ Cui shi's last decree, "The field returns to the Rens; the body returns to the Wangs," creates a verbal parallel by using the same verb, *gui*, to return, for both field and body – the same word that is used to describe a bride entering her marital household. Even though Cui shi is more attractive than this particular field, her childless state mirrors the field's infertility, and the land sale effectively returns her bride price to the Wangs.⁶⁶ The symbolic resonance between the woman and the field is powerful enough, and Cui shi's verbal manipulation of that resonance is skillful enough, to convince the Wangs, the Rens, the magistrate, and the reader that her solution is right and fitting.

Cui shi remains chaste while Feng shi does not; Cui shi dies and sacrifices her marital family's property while Feng shi lives and enriches her husband with the bandit's wealth. But *Stories to Delight the Eye* treats them as equivalent. By pairing these stories and commenting on them as a unit, Du Gang and Xu Baoshan suggest that the values of chastity, life, and wealth, which are swapped around so differently within each story, are not themselves the point. Each woman has made a tremendous sacrifice, one of life and one of chastity. By praising both, Du and Xu emphasize, not what each woman has lost, but how wisely each has leveraged her sacrifice.

MEN WRITING WOMEN

⁶⁵ Sommer, 193-96.

⁶⁶ I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for this observation.

To understand the significance of *Parallel Words*' and *Stories to Delight the Eye*'s savvy heroines, we must consider them in the context of writing about intelligent women in other genres, including works written by talented women. In late imperial China, women of literary talent most commonly expressed that talent in poetry; male and female editors of poetry collections praised talented women in prefaces, and biographers (often male) celebrated talented women in the *xianyuan* biography genre.⁶⁷ Biography, like *xiaoshuo* fiction, was normally written by men before the nineteenth century. But early Qing women did write fictional narratives in the form of literary *tanci* ("plucking rhymes" or very long verse narratives), and their talented and capable heroines contrast with male-authored fictional portrayals of clever women.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the rise in women's education in the late imperial period, women's literary talent remained controversial. Both women who wrote, and men who wrote about writing women, had to justify its writing and publication. So how did women write about talented women in poetry, prefaces, and *tanci*, and how is their writing different from men's writing on talented women? Qing female authors used both direct argument and strategic performance of womanly virtue to frame their own verbal intelligence, as well as that of their poetic acquaintances and the female characters they created. Female poets, for example, directly critiqued ideas of women's work that limited their participation in writing and publishing.⁶⁸ But

⁶⁷ This genre differed from *liezhuan* biography in focusing on talent instead of virtue. Nanxiu Qian, "Lienü Versus Xianyuan: The Two Biographical Traditions in Chinese Women's History," in *Beyond Exemplar Tales*.

⁶⁸ Kang-i Sun Chang, "Ming-Qing Women Poets and the Notions of 'Talent' and 'Morality'," in Theodore Hutner, R. Bin Wong, and Pauline Yu, eds., *Culture and State in Chinese History: Conventions, Accommodations, and Critiques* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997): 252-53.

they also frequently assured their readers in their titles and prefaces that they wrote only in their spare time, after finishing their household tasks: Hu Wenkai lists over 170 titles of female-authored poetry collections along the lines of “Poems composed after working” (or “weaving” or “embroidery”).⁶⁹ *Tanci* authors portrayed capable, cross-dressing, examination-taking women – but they still emphasized the meekness and sexual purity of most of their talented heroines.⁷⁰ Though scholars have identified empowering, quasi-feminist messages in *tanci*, these messages are often subtle, “appropriating” the discourse of chastity or “recuperating” expressions of female jealousy.⁷¹ Nor do virtuous *tanci* heroines explicitly dominate men. Here is how Ellen Widmer characterizes the rhetoric of female author Hou Zhi’s 侯芝 (1764-1829) *tanci Zai zaotian* 再造天, a story that centers on three capable women: “What it really has in mind is both practical and rhetorical: competent women have much to contribute, yet when a competent

⁶⁹ Hu Wenkai 胡文楷 and Zhang Hongsheng 张宏生, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* 歷代婦女著作考 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2008), 1012-13, 17, 21-23.

⁷⁰ Ellen Widmer, “The Trouble with Talent: Hou Zhi (1764-1829) and Her *Tanci Zai Zaotian* 再造天 of 1828,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 21 (1999) 131-50; *The Beauty and the Book: Women and Fiction in Nineteenth-Century China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), 14.

⁷¹ Chen Yinke and Bao Zhenpei both argue that *tanci* authors’ depictions of outstanding female characters reveal their anger at unjust gender norms, see Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, “Lun Zaishengyuan” 論再生緣, in *Hanliu tang ji* 寒柳堂集 (Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhi sanlian shudian, 2015), 63-66; Bao Zhenpei 鮑震培, *Qingdai nü zuojia tanci xiaoshuo lungao* 清代女作家彈詞小說論稿 (Tianjin: Tianjin shehui kexue chubanshe, 2002), 126-34. See also Siao-chen Hu, “Literary *Tanci*: A Woman’s Tradition of Narrative in Verse” (Ph.D dissertation, Harvard University, 1994), 22. On *tanci* appropriating discourses of chastity and filial piety, see Li Guo, “Tales of Self Empowerment: Reconnoitering Women’s *Tanci* in Late Imperial and Early Twentieth-Century China” (Ph.D dissertation, University of Iowa, 2010), 100-13. On female jealousy as a positive force in *tanci*, see Epstein, 177-79.

woman rules the roost, she must learn to hide the fact that she is actually in charge.”⁷² The explicit rhetoric of women’s writing is often conservative about the legitimate uses of women’s intelligence. But like Ban Zhao’s admonitions to meekness and verbal restraint, or Jing Jiang’s disclaimers of knowledge about statecraft in the *Biographies*, these statements should be taken with a grain of salt. For female authors, the act of writing automatically placed them in the category of talented women; it was a performative statement that they saw literary intelligence as compatible with feminine virtue, so every written message had a doubled meaning.

Male-authored vernacular stories differ significantly from biographies, poetry, and *tanci* by and about talented women. First, they frequently depict women of non-gentry families, whose verbal intelligence manifests itself in property disputes rather than poetry. Such women rarely feature in poetry collections or *xianyuan* biography.⁷³ This is important because vernacular stories foreground women’s economic contributions to the family in a way that biographies of and poetry by gentry-class women do not.⁷⁴ And as we have seen, fictional portrayals of women’s economic activities highlight the ways feminine virtue might have to fragment in the face of famine or violent crisis. The patrilineal ideal was for a woman’s productive and reproductive abilities to be equally strictly dedicated to her husband’s family. But in extreme

⁷² Widmer, “The Trouble with Talent,” 148.

⁷³ Female authors were almost always from gentry families, as only such families would spare the resources to educate their daughters; their writing about themselves and the other women in their social networks represents primarily the uppermost layer of society.

⁷⁴ Talented gentry women did sustain their households economically, and their male relatives did recognize their contributions, but like most male literati involvement in the economic sphere, this activity was discreetly masked in their writing. See Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family*, 169-74; 198.

circumstances, the fictional imagination allowed for some flexibility in the expedient strategies of capable women, a calculus in which chastity was only one aspect of devotion.

Thus, fiction's economic frankness contributes to a second key difference between male and female writing about clever but virtuous women: male authors push harder on the boundaries of virtue than female authors, or biographies of women, tend to do. Men writing fiction about women did not need to consider their own self-presentation, as writing women did, or the feelings of a real woman's family.⁷⁵ These vernacular story collections stand out for the extent to which they treat meekness, chastity, and the patrilineal inheritance system as negotiable virtues. Their heroines can be bossy, dominating, shrill and argumentative. They can dispose of clan property and even lose their chastity. Du Gang and the anonymous author of *Parallel Words* play different ideals of feminine virtue against each other, treating verbal restraint, sexual purity, and financial management as semi-interchangeable. This works because women's words, clan property, and women's bodies were all normatively things to be kept "in" the family, which was the fundamental unit of both economic production and sexual and social reproduction. "Inside" and "outside" could be spatially and ritually defined, in line with an essentialist understanding of gender, but they could also be defined relative to the male lineage. Drawing on the framework of patrilineal discourse, fiction authors reconfigured the meaning of the inner/outer conceptual pair.

⁷⁵ Authorial self-consciousness and explicit self-presentation were also generic norms in *tanci*, which conventionally include descriptions of the writing process and author's mood. Such passages are minimal or nonexistent in predominantly male-authored *xiaoshuo* fiction. Bao, 106.

Although the boundaries of the feminine domain shifted over the course of Chinese history, the notion of separate spheres for men and women persisted.⁷⁶ But inner and outer have multiple, overlapping meanings in both Han classics and Qing fiction. They conceptualize different areas within the home, the home relative to the public space, different areas of expertise, and the property lines between families. These narratives show that the spatially imagined divisions of the human world encompassed so many conceptual areas that they could be strategically framed according to the goals of a particular moment, text, or genre.

Thus, the shift away from the intellectual virtues and toward chastity performance in late imperial *Biographies* editions should be seen as a change that occurred within a genre, not within the culture at large. Late imperial transformations of the *Biographies* in the *liezhuan* (linked biographies) and *yanyi* (expanded history) genres emphasize chastity over intellect, *xianyuan* biographies praise the literary talent of their female subjects, and vernacular stories present savvy, bossy women as both dangerous and praiseworthy. None of these facts exists in a vacuum. Genre profoundly influences what can be said in a given kind of text, and the fact that different genres portray different types of heroine suggests that we need to read multiple genres together to understand the complexity of discourse on women in the Qing dynasty. Scrappy farmer's widows and merchant's mothers are rarely mentioned in the same breath or the same book as talented poetesses and the *guixiu* who kept their official husbands' households afloat, yet it is necessary to consider them to understand the full range of culturally recognized models for female intelligence in late imperial China.

⁷⁶ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 179.

In the eighteenth century, male fiction authors redefined feminine virtue in more shocking ways than female authors or biographers of women did. But upholding the doctrine of separate spheres verbally while performing it selectively was a versatile tactic that was also used by historical women of varied social classes and occupations. This rhetorical strategy, embodied in the *Biographies* and sanctioned by that work's canonical status, persisted in a variety of discourse genres in Qing China. It empowered late imperial women to write and act in public and to justify their potentially controversial actions as virtuous. Historical women wrote and published poetry while gesturing toward keeping it private or even burning it.⁷⁷ They performed womanly work like embroidery and circulated it publicly with conspicuous excellence.⁷⁸ Widows intervened with authority in the business of their husbands' lineages, and they wrote their own biographies using the discourse of female exemplarity to justify having done so.⁷⁹ In some cases, late imperial women's strategies of self-determination seem to have been inspired directly by the *Biographies*.⁸⁰ Of course, not all feminine virtues were equally easy to redefine in real life. Women's authoritative speech and public action could win praise, while sexual purity and patrilineal inheritance were never seriously re-examined in nonfictional writing. But fiction

⁷⁷ Ibid., 99.

⁷⁸ I-Fen Huang, "Gender, Technical Innovation, and Gu Family Embroidery in Late-Ming Shanghai," *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine*, no. 36 (2012): 77-129 .

⁷⁹ Dennerline, 190-94; Yang, 88-93.

⁸⁰ Faithful maidens used ethical argumentation to defy their parents in ways that recall Liu Xiang's accomplished rhetoricians, and biographies of faithful maidens often specifically mention the *Biographies*' influence on them. We can surmise that this influence included both their emphasis on ritual propriety and their sense of independent moral determination. Lu Weijing, *True to Her Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2008), 147-49; 160.

allows for a thorough and imaginative “revaluation of values” that differs in extent rather than quantity from the rhetorical strategies available to historical women. In these story collections of the eighteenth century, fantasy is inseparable from moral idealization.