Women, Autonomy, and Desire in Feng Menglong’s Short Stories

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Introduction

Feng Menglong’s (1574-1645) collection of stories constitute some of the most important works in Chinese fiction. The Ming Dynasty author and late-blooming scholar recorded a total of 120 stories, forty in each of three volumes, referred to as the *Sanyan* (literally “three words”). The three works’ individual titles are *Stories Old and New*, *Stories to Caution the World*, and *Stories to Awaken the World*. Although these stories are largely based on inherited material, his curation of these stories and his standardization of these tales, finally provided a clean, straightforward presentation of stories that had been recounted for centuries.

The stories feature courtesans, scholars, demon spirits, murder, romance, and more than a bit of dysfunction. They vary widely in content, length and focus. Yet the stories also seem to have cohesiveness that appears to be because they are rooted in morality tales. Structurally, they start off with a brief bit of verse, and an anecdote that relates thematically to the principal story, which in turn transitions into the principal story. The principal story has verse interspersed in the prose, and often ends with a poem that summarizes the lesson to be gleaned from the story.

However, just because these stories are rooted in morality tales does not mean that the lessons in morality are very straightforward. Each poem at the end of a tale provides direct advice or admonishment in the summary of the story, but the rather black-and-white presentation of the poems does not reflect the moral ambiguity in the stories. This is particularly true when it comes to the way that women are treated within the stories. In these stories, women often suffer punishments that seem disproportionate to their actions or they reap rewards that seem too good for the decisions that they made, and this is particularly true when they attempt to exercise autonomy. This is a contrast to the outcomes that men have within the stories when they exercise
autonomy. For men, broadly speaking, ambition and scholarly pursuits are rewarded, while deceit and undue violence are punished.

Women, on the other hand, have mixed results when they exercise autonomy. In one case, a courtesan remains devoted to her lover, buys her freedom, saves a fortune to impress his parents, and still commits suicide by the end because her husband decides to sell her. In another, a woman is very happily married, has an affair, divorces her husband, and still manages to be reunited with him and continue her blissful life. A third story has a single woman copulate with a single man and have a child that becomes an illustrious child. In another, a woman marries a bandit and they live happily ever after.

This seeming inconsistency in what happens when women exercise their desires is an issue not just because there is a clear double standard between what happens when women act on their desires versus when men do (especially because that double standard is almost inevitable). The inconsistency is an issue because when women exercise autonomy, it is a much more radical act since they have fewer opportunities for it in society. Determining when these women can exercise it and have a positive result is important because it reveals the limits that women have in society and in which areas of it they can have power.

In this thesis I plan to explore under what circumstances women are able to exercise autonomy when pursuing their desires and have positive results. That is, I will determine how women can act autonomously on their desires and have a happy ending. This is a crucial idea to wrestle with because as readers, we need to understand why the female characters have a particular type of outcome in a story. This is especially important because these stories are rooted structurally in morality tales, and if we figure out how women can have a positive outcome when
they exercise their desires, we can implicitly figure out what rules of morality they are meant to adhere to-- or whether it is even possible to have a positive outcome when they exercise their desires. By the end, I determine that women in these stories are operating within a system of heavenly retribution, and this system is what determines whether their outcome will be positive or negative.

**The Importance of the Stories**

The stories themselves vary a great deal in content and length, but they are united stylistically in a way that gives the stories a sense of cohesiveness. One is the manner in which Feng Menglong standardized the stories. They are united not just by the fact that he made each title seven or eight characters, but also by the syntax of the individual titles. As John Bishop states in his book, *The Colloquial Short Story in China*, each title follows the format of “so-and-so does such-and-such” (29). Most importantly, Bishop points out that, “The adoption of uniform titles for the San-yen stories shows an awareness on the part of the compiler that the hundred and twenty stories constitute a genre, and it probably represents an effort to make examples of the genre recognizable by title” (30). For example, some titles include “Du Shiniang Sinks the Jewel Box in Anger” or “Ruan San Repays His Debt at Leisurely Clouds Nunnery.” The standardization of the format of these titles is a way of, as Bishop points out, creating a genre from stories that appear rather dissimilar on the surface.

However, the stories have much more in common than the title of a similar length. The stories also share a consistent narrative structure. This structure, with its combination of verse and prose, most likely came from Chinese Buddhists adapting Indian religious tales. As a result,
the stories often end up feeling like morality tales, ones in which the reader is meant to learn a lesson.

For example, many of the stories start out with a shorter, vaguely related anecdote before diving into the principal story. Part of this was because these stories were modeled on the performances of oral storytellers and a storyteller would delay the principal story in order to accrue more listeners. But part of this was also because having an anecdote before the story gave the story itself legitimacy by showing that it was rooted in a precedence.

Additionally, the stories also end with verse at the end that summarizes the lesson the reader is supposed to glean from the story. “Du Shiniang Sinks the Jewel Box in Anger” ends on these words: “Those who don’t know what love is, hold your tongue!/ ‘Love’ is a word too deep to understand./ If its meaning can be grasped in full,/ Feel no shame when you’re called a lover” (565). The poem is a direct call to action and chastisement of those that do not fully understand the concept of love and use the word freely without appreciating its power.

The issue with the poem is that within the context of the story, it provides rather one-sided advice without giving much-needed insight about a large issue within the story, and that issue is the ending that the female protagonist came to. “Du Shiniang Sinks the Jewel Box in Anger” is about a courtesan (Du Shiniang, often translated as Du Tenth) who falls in love with a failed scholar named Li Jia. She buys her freedom from her brothel in order to be with him and secretly saved an enormous amount of money in order to impress her future in-laws. When they board the boat so that he can return home, a passenger named Sun Fu approaches Li Jia about the prospect of selling Du Tenth’s hand in marriage to him. The spineless and greedy Li Jia agrees to the deal and tells Du Tenth of his plan. The next morning, Du Tenth meets Sun Fu and Li Jia on
the boat deck and chastises the both of them before throwing away the money and treasure that she saved overboard and committing suicide.

The poem shames the lover who does not understand the word “love” and we are meant to understand that that is Li Jia. But the poem deprives us of a clear sense of why exactly Du Tenth suffered such a horrible ending. It spends time admonishing those who do not understand love and praises those that do, yet the poem does not clue us into exactly why Du Tenth was the one that had to suffer for Li Jia’s mistakes.

To put it bluntly, the ending is unfair. And while it is easy to write off life as being unfair, the poem implies that there is some sense of fairness and that if certain rules are adhered to and certain advice is taken, one does not have to suffer quite so much. The poems invite us to imagine that there is some rationale to the outcomes in these stories, yet in this case, they do not help us understand why Du Tenth had to suffer. As a result, Du Tenth’s suffering is treated as a byproduct of Li Jia’s own stupidity and nothing more. In other words, the poem does not give us a sense of how things could have been different for her.

This problem is endemic in each story. While the narrator provides advice through interjections and lines of verse throughout every story, this advice rarely centers around how women can have positive outcomes. The issue with this is that it does not provide room for women’s autonomy. If women are not given examples of how to make autonomous choices with positive outcomes, then that relegates female protagonists to being tools to teach men how to behave. Determining how women can have positive outcomes is crucial because it demonstrates that they do have autonomy and that they too have the ability to construct their own destinies.
Methodology

In order to figure out how women can exercise autonomy and have positive outcomes in these stories, I have chosen to examine seven stories that feature female protagonists making choices with various consequences. More specifically, I chose stories that have an obscure relationship between the choices a woman has made and the outcome and stories that have a clearer relationship between a woman’s choices and her outcome. For example, Du Tenth technically did everything in her power to make her relationship work but ended up being betrayed by her lover and committing suicide by the end. On the other hand in “The Pearl-Sewn Shirt,” a woman has an extramarital affair and still manages to return to her husband and have a happy life. These two stories are both cases in which women make choices that do not seem to justify their outcome, and I believe that the complexity in the relationship between their choices and outcomes will be helpful in determining what exactly it takes for a woman to exercise autonomy and have a positive ending.

I also examine stories where it feels as though there is a stronger correlation between a woman’s choices and her outcome. In “Qiao Yanjie’s Concubine Ruins the Family,” a wife commits murder in order to avoid shame and her husband’s concubine assists her in the murder. Both of those women end up in prison and eventually die. In this case, the relationship between their choices and punishment is much more clear-cut. But examining that relationship is helpful because it establishes some of the few rules for how women can have positive outcomes (or perhaps more accurately, these stories provide examples of what to avoid if women want to have positive outcomes). Additionally, putting a story with a more obvious choice-and-result relationship into a discussion of stories where that relationship is murkier has the potential to
help readers determine the more nuanced rules that come with decision-making and positive outcomes.

The discussion of these stories is supplemented by scholarly writings that relate to common themes in Ming Dynasty literature, the system of heavenly retribution within Feng Menglong’s stories, and various writings on women’s roles and autonomy. These stories exist within their own universe, but in certain cases, understanding the cultural context in which Feng Menglong was writing will help illuminate why the narrator decides to emphasize certain pieces of information or why the narrator expresses a sentiment in a particular way. Additionally, some historical and cultural context, particularly in the discussion of widow suicide during the discussion of virtue in Chapter 1, will be helpful in understanding the importance and limits of virtue and the tradition in which these female protagonists were operating in. This discussion will aid the reader in appreciating what a character’s actions mean in the context of that cultural tradition, and this in turn will deepen the reader’s understanding of a the female characters’ actions.

By examining these stories, I plan to determine how women can make choices that will result in positive outcomes for them. Determining the relationship between choices and outcomes will reveal why women end up with outcomes when they make choices, whether they seem morally correct or not. Ultimately, my goal is to figure out the character of women’s autonomy in the context of these stories.
Chapter 1: The Limits of Virtue

Feng Menglong’s stories do not provide clear guidance on how women should exercise autonomy and pursue their desires, but that does not mean that women do not have any power at all within society. Here, I define power as the ability to make autonomous choices and exercise control over one’s outcome. The area where women have the most power is in the spheres in which they operate, and that would primarily be the domestic sphere, and by extension, the familial sphere. Additionally, women must project a certain image in society in order to legitimize their control within the private sphere. As a result, some would argue that chastity and virtue allow women to have some power because they project a positive image in society, which in turn strengthens their control within the private sphere. However, I argue that chastity and virtue are qualities that do not necessarily provide women with the power to pursue their desires and exercise autonomy because even when women are virtuous, sometimes they do not truly have control over their own outcomes.

Virtue and Chastity

The power of women in literature is limited by where they stand in society, and in many cases, their status is often lower than male characters. Additionally, females, especially “model” women, were often meant to be subservient to men. According to Ban Zhao’s Admonitions for Women, a treatise on model behavior for women in China, the ideal woman was yielding and would not only respect and obey her husband in life, but also remain unmarried after his death.¹ These norms that Ban Zhao described in the first century were not religiously adhered to in China, but they did reinforce a standard of loyalty that endured well into Feng Menglong’s time.

This loyalty can be seen in Ming dynasty stories centered on widows who committed suicide so as to resist temptation and remarriage were pervasive. The widows would commit suicide to avoid remarriage or rape by enemy soldiers, and their willingness to sacrifice their bodies as a way of rebelling against a potential transgression committed against them was one of the ultimate ways of proving that they were virtuous. By committing suicide, they showed that their commitment to their dead husbands and chastity was more important than their commitment to their earthly bodies.

While subservience and chastity were both important qualities in a virtuous woman, the ideal woman was also shrewd, wise, and sensible. These standards were set up by an even older work, Liu Xiang’s first century B.C.E. work *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, a popular textbook of famous women that was used to form the moral education of women in China well past the time of Feng Menglong. In fact, shrewdness and wisdom were actually important components in the local histories describing widow suicides, because they often involved having to sneak away to commit suicide, or otherwise do it in a way that would evade detection. A local history from 1541 described a woman who attempted suicide and failed in her attempt. Her family kept watch over her, but she tried “a hundred different schemes to kill herself. After a year, she managed to find a moment when she was not being watched, and she hanged herself.”

The woman was extolled for her virtue and her persistence in chasing death because it showed an even greater commitment to her husband than to her biological family that wanted her to stay alive.

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Although suicide was a massive sacrifice and served as a testament to a woman’s devotion, the reality is that a woman would have few guarantees in life without a husband. Women had few chances of economic independence if they were single, and their financial independence was diminished if their husbands died and the widow wanted to remarry. If the wife chose to remarry, under Ming law, when husbands died, the husband’s family kept the dowry, the heir, and the husband’s property. Additionally, there was a stigma surrounding remarriage after a husband’s death, and that stigma discouraged remarriage for women. As a result, suicide could start to seem like the most attractive decision to a young widow with few options upon her husband’s death.

While the expectations for an ideal (i.e., virtuous) woman seemed demanding, they were also the only thing that could potentially grant a woman some sort of power. Virtue has the potential to lead to power because it solidifies a woman’s position within her household, which is the sphere in which she had the most power. By extension, successfully running a household granted her power over her image outside of the private sphere. For example, an honorable woman did have to be subservient to her husband, care for the household and children, treat her in-laws well, and possibly manage her own jealousy if her husband decided to take on a concubine. When she did all of those things, the woman was operating under what society and her husband expected of her, and that subservience and loyalty to him and his family was an important component of being a virtuous woman. Although this sphere and its expectations of virtuousness seems restrictive, the private sphere was actually where the woman had the most power if she remained honorable, especially if she was able to maintain the balancing act of

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3 Ibid., 107.
being an honorable woman and asserting the power that she had in the private sphere. Yenna Wu points out in her book, *The Chinese Virago: A Literary Theme*, that the longer wives maintained those ideals and remained in their marriage, the more power they would gain due to the system of seniority.

Moreover, the longer a woman remained married, the harder it was for her husband to divorce her, which is critical because a home was one of the few places that a woman could assert her power. Their virtue and role as an ideal wife would afford them the credibility to make decisions in the private sphere, which could include financial decisions— that is, decisions that impact the entire household. The same system of obedience that made women subservient to men also asked that men respect their wives’ decisions in the private sphere due to the split between the wife’s control of the private sphere and the husband’s responsibility to the public one, a concept probably best exemplified in the phrase “男主外女主內,” or “A man controls [the public sphere], a woman controls [the public sphere].” As a result, a wife was able to make the most important decisions for the household and could effectively shut her husband out of much of the decision-making process. Virtue is the quality that gave wives the credibility to enact these decisions and assert any power that they may have. While women had to remain subservient to men, virtue would give women both power and credibility. This is perhaps best summarized in Lady Zheng’s *The Book of Filial Piety for Women*, where she remarks, “When such virtuous conduct is perfected, no one will reproach you.”⁴ Virtue made women desirable as wives, but also had the potential to empower them within the sphere where they could assert control.

This idea that women could derive power from the private sphere is one that runs counter to the standard Western idea of power, an idea that Lin-Lee Lee explores in the article, “Inventing Familial Agency from Powerlessness: Ban Zhao’s Lessons for Women.” Lee argues that Ban Zhao was writing for Chinese women with the understanding that their agency is grounded in the collective, that is, the success of their family or nation. As a result, by adhering to the standard of obedience, women had the opportunity to attain honor from their community, which in turn means that for virtuous women, their agency came from proving themselves as respectable members of a community. This is somewhat different from the Western idea of agency, which is individualistic and has more to do with personal needs.5

The subservience, chastity, and self-sacrificing nature of ideal women was a real-life standard that was also reflected in fiction, including two of Feng Menglong’s collection of short stories: Stories to Caution the World and Stories Old and New. Within these stories, women were expected to adhere to a standard of virtue similar to that laid out by Ban Zhao and Liu Xiang. However, these stories show that virtue does not exist in a vacuum, and many stories feature what happens when women decide to act on their desires. There are limits on the power of women, but we have seen that virtue should allow women to exercise at least some power. What complicates this is how women’s desires fit into this standard of virtue that has been set up by society. It leads to some provocative questions, such as whether virtuous women have more success (i.e., a favorable outcome) when acting on their desires, or more broadly, whether virtue actually has a role in whether or not they attain that desirable outcome. This question is particularly salient considering the fact that virtue appears to be the only thing that affords

women any sort of power, while desire seems to run counter to the moral uprightness that virtue demands. In other words, on the surface, the very thing that affords women power (virtue) has the potential to be undone by misplaced desire. By extension, figuring out whether there is a relationship between the two and determining what kind of relationship exists is an important question because it determines what kind of power these women have.

The stories of women in Feng Menglong’s collections offer rich and varied examples of women acting on their desires, and they are particularly helpful examples because they feature women in diverse positions in society and yield very different outcomes for each of them. In the collections, the female characters’ ability to exercise act on their desires-- and have a favorable outcome--is shown to be quite limited. However, saying that women have no power in society is too simplistic. Instead, examining the instances where women attempt to exercise their desires has the potential to reveal what desires women are allowed to act on and under what circumstances.

“Du Shiniang Sinks the Jewel Box in Anger”

Du Shiniang, better known as Du Tenth, a young prostitute who falls in love with a young scholar named Li Jia in the story “Du Shiniang Sinks the Jewel Box in Anger,” is an example of a woman who attempted to act on her romantic desire and exercise autonomy over her future. After starting a relationship with Li Jia, she puts up half of the money required to buy her freedom (Li Jia’s friend Liu Yuchun provides the other half), and once she gains her freedom, receives a number of precious items from her sisters who remained at the brothel. She and Li Jia leave on a boat, seemingly destined for a happy life together. Later, a man, Sun Fu, approaches Li Jia about his beautiful companion and asks if it would be possible to marry her.
Since he is spineless and recognizes that his father would be unhappy to meet his concubine, Li Jia decides to accept. Du Tenth is crestfallen upon discovering that her beloved has essentially sold her, but she appears to accept the proposal. When the transaction is meant to take place, she reveals all of the riches and jewels she had taken with her and throws them overboard, finally jumping in the water herself in order to end her life.

If we examine Du Tenth’s character using the established standards of virtue, then we can conclude that she is unquestionably a virtuous woman. Although Du Tenth and Li Jia were not actually married, Du Tenth remained devoted to him, even when Li Jia eventually ran out of money. In fact, the narrator reveals that, “Since Du Shiniang’s feelings for the young man were genuine, the less he had in his pocket, the more passionate her love became.”\(^6\) Du Tenth’s affection is genuine and it exists independently from Li Jia’s wealth. This completely goes against good business acumen considering she is a courtesan because for her, men are a source of money. By devoting herself to only one man (one that has lost the ability to provide for her), she leaves herself in a more economically fragile state, especially because men are her “trade.” Yet that statement shows without question that Li Jia mattered to her more than his money. She even manages to free herself from the brothel in order to start a life with him. But even though she finally leaves her workplace, Li Jia’s willingness to sell her to Sun Fu is proof that she has not completely managed to free herself from her role as a courtesan.

As a result, she commits suicide, not out of despair, but out of anger, and the similarities between the stories of widow suicide and her own suicide also reinforce this image of a virtuous woman. Even though Li Jia did not treat her as a wife and they were not actually married, Du

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Tenth’s behavior was not unlike that of the women in the stories of widows resisting remarriage and virtuous women. Those women committed suicide to resist being remarried, or allowed themselves to be killed rather than captured and raped, and despite the fact that she was not married to Li Jia, like the widows, Du Tenth committed suicide to resist marriage to someone else.

Additionally, her anger, which is alluded to in the title of the story, is a sentiment that women were afforded in a particular place—the story of widow murders, particularly widows resisting rape and capture by invaders.\(^7\) The widows would often scold the invaders that wanted to take them captive, and while Sun Fu was not technically planning to do that, his proposition and Li Jia’s acceptance was debasing, and Du Tenth does treat him like an enemy. She tells Sun Fu, in language not unlike that used by the widows, “You are my worst enemy. If my spirit survives my death, I’ll certainly bring a complaint against you to the gods. As for the pleasures of the pillow, you don’t have a ghost of a chance!”\(^8\) She declares Sun Fu her enemy, but more importantly, like the widows, she used her last bit of strength to admonish him and threatens to file a complaint with the gods against him when she dies. The widows acted similarly, such as one who used her last bit of strength to drag her attacker by the hair and shame him in front of everyone. This is because the widows understood that the men had control over their bodies, but that their last actions would be a testament to their virtue and the fact that they did not yield. Furthermore, it was a way of shaming the men that wanted to take them. Du Tenth knows that

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her situation is hopeless and embraces death in part because she knows that if she dies a virtuous
death, she wins control over her body and her final act serves as a testament to her character.

Finally, another hallmark of stories of virtuous women was uncorrupted flesh when they
sacrificed their bodies. Although Du Tenth did throw herself off the boat, after her death, she
appeared to Liu Yuchun in a dream walking on water, where her flesh is seemingly uncorrupted.
These allusions to stories of virtuous women place Du Tenth in a long tradition of women
willing to sacrifice themselves, and the similarity between the widow suicides/murders and her
own situation legitimize Du Tenth’s virtue.

On the other hand, part of the reason that Du Tenth committed suicide was because she
recognized that the virtue that she exhibited in life was essentially meaningless. In fact, she says
as much to Li Jia just before she jumps off the boat: “I am not unlike a jewel box that contains
precious jade, but you have eyes that fail to recognize value.”\(^9\) She tells Li Jia that he is unable to
see the value that is right in front of him, and that she is implicitly like a jewel box filled with
jade. Du Tenth imagined that her own value would be recognized and would allow her to be
accepted by Li Jia. Furthermore, she believes that once her freedom is paid for she would be able
to live the life of a “decent” woman. By the end of the story, she realizes that her own virtue
meant nothing and neither did the silver she used to buy her freedom because she was never truly
free from her old occupation. As a result, she took the jewels, an extension of herself and her
own value, and herself “off the market.”

By the end of the story, Du Tenth recognized that her former status as a prostitute would
prevent her from having full autonomy over herself, her image, and her desires. The incident on

\(^9\) Ibid., 564.
the boat showed that although she wanted to be with Li Jia and technically had the means to do so, she would never earn his full respect as his concubine, and there is one instance that captures Li Jia’s attitude towards Du Tenth. One evening on the boat, Li Jia asks Du Tenth to sing for him, saying, “Your voice is the very best in the courtesan’s quarters. When I first met you, my soul took flight every time I heard you sing. [...] Now, with the moon shining brightly on the clear water and no one around us in the depths of the night, would you be willing to sing for me?”

The request for her to sing for him is somewhat insulting, because wives do not sing to their husbands—only courtesans sing to their patrons. By making this request and invoking her past in the courtesans’ quarters, Li Jia makes it clear that he still does not see Du Tenth as a wife figure, which in turn indicates that her virtue means very little in practice since it did not secure her husband’s loyalty despite her own.

Furthermore, her singing was the very reason that Sun Fu became aware of her existence, and it was specifically because he knew that only courtesans sing. In fact, upon hearing her tune, he thinks to himself, “Obviously, the singer is not from a decent family. How shall I get to see her?” He knew that this woman had to be a courtesan because a “decent” woman would not be singing, and because of that, he immediately assumed that he would be able to gain access to her. Du Tenth’s virtue has no way of protecting her from other men, and her singing, which was prompted by Li Jia, shows that the men around her will never see her as anything but a courtesan. Du Tenth attempted to act on her desire, remained loyal to Li Jia, and adhered to many of the major characteristics of a virtuous woman. Ultimately, she realized that she would always be seen as a courtesan and that her virtue was largely meaningless due to her former...

10 Ibid., 557.
11 Ibid., 558.
occupation. This recognition caused her to remove herself from the system whose social norms had worked against her. By the end of the story, it becomes clear that the virtue extolled by Ban Zhao and Liu Xiang does offer some women power, but in Du Tenth’s case, it simply was not enough, and it was because Ban Zhao and Liu Xiang were talking to wives.

The reason that virtue was not enough seems to be that despite the fact that she was virtuous, nobody recognized Du Tenth’s virtue or worth, even though she proved time and time again to be loyal to her husband. But the problem is not with virtue; the main issue is that virtue is only helpful to women that are trying to preserve honor rather than attain it, which is to say that virtue is only helpful to wives. Lady Zhen was giving advice to married women, and while she was a devoted partner, Du Tenth was still not Li Jia’s wife. Li Jia was married before he met Du Tenth, and while he was estranged from his wife, they were technically still married during the course of his relationship with Du Tenth. In order for virtue to be a force that protects a woman, she has to be married to a man because the only domain where a woman has power is within the home. A home cannot be formed without a marriage, which means that virtue would have done little to protect Du Tenth or give her legitimacy because she remained unmarried (and she still only would have been a concubine if he brought her home), and the reason that she remained unmarried was because of her status as a courtesan. Essentially, the protection of virtue would probably never have been accessible to Du Tenth even if she adhered to those standards simply because her status as a courtesan would always prevent people from seeing her as worthy of respect.

“Jiang Xingge Re-encounters His Pearl-Sewn Shirt”
In “Jiang Xingge Re-encounters His Pearl-Sewn Shirt,” we have the opposite situation—not a prostitute who aspires to wifely virtue, but a wife who falls victim to desire and still manages to succeed in the end. The wife, Fortune, falls in love with a man named Chen Dalang while her husband, Jiang Xingge, is away on a business trip. Jiang Xingge finds out about the affair, divorces her, and then remarries, ending what was a blissful marriage. But Jiang Xingge and Fortune are reunited at the end when Fortune’s husband, a magistrate, lets Jiang Xingge off on a murder charge at Fortune’s behest. The two remarry and continue to have a happy marriage, though Fortune becomes the second wife because Jiang Xingge remains married to his other wife.

Fortune is technically less virtuous than Du Tenth in that she is tempted by and ultimately succumbs to the charms of a seducer while her husband is away. Simply put, her actions completely violate one of the most prominent tenets of virtue, which is loyalty to one’s husband. Yet the end of her story is much happier than Du Tenth’s; she manages to end up with her beloved again, even though she is technically the junior wife after he remarries. Fortune proves to be more flawed than Du Tenth, but manages to have a more positive and fulfilling ending, which invites one to ask what role virtue may have had in leading to that end— or whether it played a role at all.

Before her husband leaves on his business trip, in many ways, Fortune is an ideal wife. Their marriage was harmonious and the two of them were deeply devoted to one another.

Nevertheless, the fact that Fortune had an affair with another man violated one of the main tenets of virtue, but the narrator takes great pains to show that Fortune was not as culpable as one might expect. For example, when Fortune first sees Chen Dalang outside of the window, she initially
thinks that he is her husband, and the only reason that she started to look out the window in the first place was because a fortune teller told her that Jiang Xingge’s return was imminent. Furthermore, the main reason that that first noticed Chen Dalang at all was because he looked like her husband. In other words, the root of her desire for Chen Dalang was actually a desire for her husband.

While a conventionally virtuous wife would not have acted on her desire for another man and Fortune ended up doing just that, the primary actor in creating that relationship was Dame Xue. Dame Xue complicates our reading of women in these stories because she was the one that manipulated Fortune into trusting her and ultimately starting a relationship with Chen Dalang. For Chen Dalang, the biggest hurdle is finding the opportunity to interact with Fortune because he has no reason to enter her home. This is why Dame Xue recognizes the importance of her being able to enter the home and she tells Chen Dalang as much when she says, “If I manage to cross the threshold of the Jiang house, you’ll be in luck.” In order to tackle this issue, he needs Dame Xue to be able to act on his behalf and enter Fortune’s home for him. For a stranger, that threshold is impossible to cross without an intermediary, and it is crucial that that intermediary be Dame Xue because she is a woman.

In order for the two of them to act on their desire, Fortune and Chen Dalang need an intermediary because in order for men and women to act on their desires, they need to transgress one another’s spaces. This goes back to the phrase “男主外女主内” because men belong on the outside (the public sphere) while women belong on the inside (the private sphere). When they start a relationship (illicit or otherwise), men and women must transgress their assigned spaces,

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and this means that they need an intermediary to act on their desires. As an old woman, Dame Xue serves as the perfect intermediary because she can navigate the private spheres that women inhabit because of their shared gender. On the other hand, since she is an older woman, she can also freely interact with Chen Dalang without suspicion as well. This is due to the fact that she does not have to worry about associating with men the way a younger woman might because older women do not have to worry about the same sexual and social expectations that younger women do. Moreover, her job as a pearl vendor allows her mobility and access to the outside world as well as the private spheres that women are allowed to inhabit.

By the end of the story, Fortune had to interact with another intermediary to act on her primary desire, which was to be reunited with Jiang Xingge. While Fortune’s end is certainly more positive than Du Tenth’s, part of the reason that Fortune and her husband were reunited was because their relationship was sanctioned by another man. When the magistrate eventually finds out that her and Jiang Xingge were happily married, he decides to let Fortune return to her first husband. Even though Fortune acted on her illicit desire for Chen Dalang, she still managed to realize her ultimate desire of being with her husband. She had the power to make that desire possible because she happened to be in a favorable position with a man who actually had power to wield—luckily, her desire to have her husband freed and be with him happened to align with the magistrate’s desire for the same thing (though this was only after she persuaded him to let her husband go). When the magistrate hears the story of her and Jiang Xingge, he says, “How can I bring myself to separate such a loving couple?”\footnote{Ibid., 47.} Even though Fortune was instrumental in freeing her husband from prison, the reality is that she would have been powerless without the

\footnote{Ibid., 47.}
help of her then-husband. The promising aspect of Fortune’s situation is the fact that she was able to exercise any autonomy at all, and have a rather happy outcome as a result. More importantly, while she did have to persuade her then-husband, she was ultimately able to fulfill her desire to be with her first husband and true love. This indicates that although she needed her desires to align with a man’s desires, she was able to manipulate his desire to match her own.

In fact, the somewhat heartening aspect of Fortune’s story is that she was imperfect and still able to achieve not just happiness, but a reunification with her first love. Fortune is an example of a woman that was able to act on an illicit desire and still have a happy, fulfilling ending to her story, and it was due to the fact that she used one of Ban Zhao’s lessons for women. Ban Zhao asks that women choose their words carefully at strategic moments when people will be willing to listen, which is essentially using a type of soft power. This is exactly what happened when Fortune told the magistrate about her husband when he was accused of murder. She told the magistrate that she would kill herself if Jiang Xingge’s life was not spared. Additionally, she very shrewdly misrepresented her relationship with Jiang Xingge, telling the magistrate that he was her brother, most likely because she realized that the reality would make the magistrate less likely to pardon him. Even though she was not perfectly virtuous, one of Ban Zhao’s lessons did manage to help Fortune achieve her ultimate desire, which was to return to her husband. Ultimately, Fortune’s story shows that even imperfect virtue has the potential to lead to a happy ending for women.

“Magistrate Teng Solves the Case of Inheritance with Ghostly Cleverness”

While some of those lessons can help wives like Fortune, it is clear that the power of virtue is limited and will not necessarily help every woman achieve a sense of autonomy over her destiny. “Magistrate Teng Solves the Case of Inheritance with Ghostly Cleverness” reinforces the idea that women need intermediaries in order to act on their desires, but ultimately suggest that virtue alone is not enough to protect them. After her elderly husband Prefect Ni’s death, Mei-shi’s stepson, Ni Shanji, is the person that runs the household and punishes his father’s second wife once he passes away by not relinquishing his half brother’s portion of the inheritance. Mei-shi, the concubine, who has been virtuous in every way, is subject to this abuse until Magistrate Teng takes on the case and ultimately gets the stepson to admit to his wrongdoing. On the surface, it looks as though the wife’s virtue was rewarded because the secret of the inheritance was ultimately uncovered and her son was allowed to have a prosperous life.

Nevertheless, that happy ending is tempered somewhat when one examines the relationship between justice and virtue within the story. For example, Magistrate Teng is revealed to be slightly less heroic when he pockets part of the inheritance. Essentially, the magistrate is rewarding himself for his work, but he also is taking something that does not belong to him. Surprisingly, he is not punished for this in the story. He is merely exalted for his cleverness and not only is the fact that he technically stole from the family overlooked— it does not appear to be an issue at all. The short poem at the end of the story confirms this by stating, “Wouldn’t it be better to be fair and just/ And be free from disputes and legal suits?”15 The story treats the ending as completely fair, and by asking if it wouldn’t be better to be fair and just, suggests that the only crime was Mei-shi’s stepson being cruel to her and that ideally, the law

should not have been brought in at all. Ultimately, the story makes it sound as though Magistrate Teng pocketing a bit of the inheritance was the family receiving its just desserts for not being able to solve their dispute in-house.

As a result, there is a strange, complex relationship between virtue and just rewards presented in the story. The second wife is ultimately able to recover the inheritance, and it is tempting to say that this favorable outcome was her reward for being so virtuous. Yet much of this woman’s suffering was at the hands of a man (her stepson) once her husband died and she was no longer under his protection. This runs counter to the idea presented by Lady Zheng that virtue would mean that a woman would be beyond reproach and offer her protection. Mei-shi’s stepson’s behavior shows that virtue does not necessarily protect women if there is a man that decides that he wants to ruin her life.

Additionally, the story reinforces the idea presented in “The Pearl-Sewn Shirt” and “Du Tenth Sinks the Jewel Box in Anger” that virtue is not enough to sustain a favorable outcome. Part of that equation is status, because virtue only serves as protection when that person is a wife. Mei-shi was technically Prefect Ni’s concubine, which meant that her status would have been lower than that of his first wife. Yet by the time he began his relationship with Mei-shi, the first wife had died, so she would not have had anybody to order her around. In fact, this was something that Prefect Ni’s manager promised to Mei-shi’s grandmother when he said, “Although a concubine, she’ll have no one above her to order her about, because the first wife died long ago.”¹⁶ In theory, the death of Prefect Ni’s first wife should have allowed her to run her household in peace because there should have been nobody competing with her.

¹⁶ Ibid., 175.
But as the story of Du Tenth shows, status also matters when we consider how virtue comes into play. It offered little protection to Mei-shi because in practice, virtue only matters if a woman is perceived as virtuous by the world at large. Ni Shanji was able to control Mei-shi because he spread vicious rumors about how his brother, who Prefect Ni fathered when he was very old, was probably not his father’s actual child. According to the narrative Ni Shanji “would refuse to acknowledge the boy as a brother and spread around malicious rumors so that, in the future, he could keep the mother and son under his thumb.”

Throughout the entire story, Mei-shi treats everyone with kindness and is said to have a gentle spirit. Unfortunately, the rumors call into question Mei-shi’s virtue, which should have been the one thing that would be able to protect her. Yet because she is a concubine and there is already implicit suspicion about her position, Mei-shi and her son, Double Ninth, both suffer. This happens because as a man, Ni Shanji has control of the public sphere and ends up using that against Mei-shi to affect how she functions in the private sphere, never allowing her to be completely comfortable in it.

Fortunately, her suffering does eventually end, but it is only because another man (Magistrate Teng) was able to help her. Like Fortune, she was only able to achieve her goal when a man aligned himself with her against the man that was causing her suffering. The fact that this man, Magistrate Teng, was not particularly virtuous and becomes the hero of the story even though he abuses his power indicates that virtue does not seem to have much to do with power and just rewards in these stories. Du Tenth and Mei-shi were both virtuous and still suffered, while Fortune did not fit the conventional idea of a virtuous woman and still managed to avoid a great deal of suffering and end up with her beloved. These women, at least on the

\[17\] Ibid., 177.
surface, only had control over their destinies if they happened to align with a man’s own desires or ideas of what their destinies should be. This dependence on a man to determine their destinies calls into question how much power these women truly have over their destinies, especially if simply being virtuous does not necessarily lead to a happy ending.

If women are not rewarded for their virtue, then this naturally introduces the question of why a person should bother with it at all. This particular question is something that comes to mind when examining the short story, “Madame White is Trapped for Eternity Under Thunder Peak Tower.” Squire Li concocts a scheme to seduce the titular Madame White by having a maid lead her to a secluded room near the back of the house. When he takes a peek while she is using the lavatory, he sees Madame White in her true form as a snake, which scares him away. The commentator addresses this scene by saying, “How remarkable that an evil spirit should know the importance of chastity.”18 As mentioned previously, chastity and loyalty to one’s husband is a crucial part of being a virtuous woman. But it’s difficult to take this phrase seriously when we consider how little virtue, one of the main tenets of which is chastity, seems to be related to women’s outcomes in these stories. Yet by saying that it is remarkable that an evil spirit knows the importance of chastity, it shows that chastity is a deeply important human value, which makes it surprising that an evil spirit recognizes its value.

This still does not do an adequate job of explaining why it is an important value for women to practice. While the story exalts Madame White’s knowledge of how important chastity is, her relationship is still plagued with issues in spite of the fact that she has proven to be a caring wife in a happy relationship. After their marriage, the narrator states that, “Henceforth, the

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two spent all their time in delirious pleasure in Mr. Wang’s inn, inseparable as fish and water.”\(^9\)

Even though Madame White was clearly the one that put more effort into the relationship (for better or for worse), Xu Xuan was undeniably happy with her for a while. Moreover, during their wedding night, “Madame White used such charms on Xu Xuan that he was thrown into ecstasy as if he had met a divine being.”\(^{20}\) The comparison to a divine being is hyperbolic, but it is also important to take note of here specifically because Madame White is the opposite of a divine being. She is referred to throughout the story as an evil spirit, but that statement shows that she is capable of being something more in Xu Xuan’s eyes.

Xu Xuan wanted to be with Madame White when it was convenient, and based on the previous stories that were addressed, having a man’s desires line up with hers should have been enough for their relationship to continue. Unfortunately for her, being arrested twice and being told that she was a demon was finally enough for Xu Xuan to decide that she was dangerous and choose to abandon her. The formidable Abbot Fahai traps her by the end of the story. Ultimately, Abbot Fahai’s desire to see her defeated is greater than Xu Xuan’s desire to be with her. If we assume that Madame White’s desires are neutral since they’re only relevant if they align with a man’s desire, then naturally Abbot Fahai would be able to follow through with his desire to defeat her. Even though Madame White’s desire initially aligned with that of her lover, which would normally be enough for her desire to be realized, Abbot Fahai’s desire to see her gone was more powerful.

However, after Xu Xuan tries to hire a snake charmer to capture her (which ends up failing), Madame White makes an offhand comment that solidifies the idea that virtue is not what

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\(^{19}\) Ibid., 486.
\(^{20}\) Ibid.
ultimately grants women power. She wonders to herself, “I wonder who poisoned my husband’s mind against me. I’ll have it out with him when I find out!” The power of virtue is that it constructs a particular image of a woman, one that is appealing not just to husbands but also to society at large. The image of virtue offers women that adhere to it a form of protection and the opportunity to exercise power because they are adhering to society’s expectations. As a result, they are perceived as nonthreatening and should have more of an opportunity to act on their desires. Unfortunately, when that perception changes, women are vulnerable again and they lose any power that they have gained.

By extension, this means that image matters for virtuous women, and the case of Madame White shows that if a woman does not appear to be virtuous, then she may as well not be virtuous. Madame White may have stolen silver and gotten Xu Xuan into trouble a number of times, but she undoubtedly remained devoted to him. Madame White was not allowed to be as flawed as Fortune, and part of that is because her station was illegitimate due to the fact that she was not technically human. Even though she had all the normal trappings of a human relationship, her chastity and devotion to her husband did not mean that they were able to be together in the end. Her desire was to be with him and to be accepted in the human world, yet her virtuousness was not enough to make that happen.

Virtue, even the imperfect virtue that Fortune exhibits in “Jiang Xingge Re-encounters His Pearl-Sewn Shirt,” has the potential to offer women like her not just familial autonomy, but the ability to make a romantic mistake such as her affair with Chen Dalang and still end up with her husband. But when referring to “women like her,” a better definition is women, especially...
wives, that adhere to the social station they have been assigned to. Du Tenth was a courtesan who aspired to be a wife, Mei-shi was technically a concubine who should have been treated like a first wife, and Madame White was a snake who wanted to be treated like a human wife. These women were virtuous to varying degrees, but in each case, their original stations prevented them from having an ending quite as happy as Fortune’s. In other words, Ban Zhao and Lady Zheng’s advice for women only matters for women that already have the foundation of a marriage and a household to assert their power. For anybody else, virtue is irrelevant because of their station.

This selection of stories suggests that the autonomy of women and the control that they have over their destinies does exist, but the way that it exists within the stories reinforces the idea that it is limited. Women do appear to have a certain amount of control, though they only appear to have control when a man’s desires happen to line up with theirs. Naturally, this leads to the question of whether women have any true autonomy at all, or whether they’re doomed to only attain what they desire when it is sanctioned by someone else. What is troubling about this is that virtue initially seems to be a viable way of women being able to have power and control in their own spheres. Yet the stories seem to show that in the end, women still only have power over their desires if they align with a man’s desire, and that overall, the standards of virtue do not seem to consistently offer women agency over their own desires.
Chapter 2: Heavenly Retribution

The crux of the question that remains after the first chapter is not just whether women can exercise autonomy, but whether they can exercise autonomy and have a favorable outcome. The idea that remains at the end of the first chapter is that a woman’s desires should align with a man’s in order to secure a favorable outcome. However, the truth is more complicated than that. Women’s autonomy and a favorable outcome relies on a system, but it is not necessarily the patriarchy. Their autonomy and a favorable outcome relies on the system of heavenly retribution. Here, I suggest that heavenly retribution is invoked to explain the satisfaction of desire when and only when desires dovetail with family cohesion.

Heavenly retribution is a concept that has been part of Chinese thought for thousands of years. Initially, the understanding of heavenly retribution was that a person was going to get their just deserts, whether the outcome is favorable or unfavorable for a particular character. However, this concept was made a bit more complex by an unearthed text from the Warring States Period called “San De,” which argues that the heavenly reward and retribution program was actually much more complex than that. This is particularly important given the idea of humanity as the offspring of Heaven (as Scott Cook suggests in his article “‘San De’ and Warring States Views on Heavenly Retribution”), because if humans have consciousness (tianjun), then so does Heaven, meaning that there is some logic behind the outcomes that Heaven prescribes.

If there is some logic behind heaven’s outcomes, then it is crucial to define what exactly that logic is. Xun Zi suggests that heaven acts with no purpose and that “order” is a human characteristic. That directly contradicts that principle that humans are heaven’s offspring, and

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offspring resemble their children to at least some degree. Since we only know what humans are like, then we have to base our conception of heaven off of that. As a result, we can assume that humans are like the heavens, and the heavens are meant to provide order as well.

What does that sense of order look like? Cook argues that, “So long as we use well what Heaven has given us, our order is secure, but only disaster awaits lest we fail to do so.” He mentions the “heavenly officers” (sense organs), “heavenly ruler” (the mind), and “heavenly affections.” These are the things that heaven has endowed us with, so we are meant to use them correctly in order to preserve order. Yet the Heavens themselves do not provide an instruction manual for how to use these gifts.

Heavenly retribution is a concept that Patrick Hanan brings up specifically in reference to Feng Menglong in his book, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*. In fact, Hanan suggests that in “The Pearl-Sewn Shirt,” heavenly retribution was the centerpiece of the story. He says that Feng Menglong “Plac[ed] the theme of heavenly requital at the head of the story.” This is because the entire story feels like a series of incidents that are punishments and rewards for behavior. There is a constant sense that the scales are being balanced-- Jiang Xingge is away from home longer than promised, Fortune has an affair with Chen Dalang, Jiang Xingge divorces Fortune, Chen Dalang dies, Jiang Xingge remarries Chen Dalang’s widow, and Fortune returns as the second wife.

Hanan’s suggestion regarding the story is certainly an attractive one in the context of “The Pearl-Sewn Shirt” because it shows that there is a system in place that rewards or punishes

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23 Ibid., 6.
the characters. It lends a certain amount of logic to the outcome. On the surface, it also simplifies
the story due to the fact that the outcome is being guided by a particular force with rules. Of
course, the complications arise when we start to wonder what exactly those rules are. What does
the system of heavenly retribution demand in order to attain a favorable outcome? What does it
reward? What does it punish? And does it punish or reward women differently from men?

Ultimately, the heavens seem to have one major rule when it comes to doling out
punishment or rewards-- it has to do with keeping families together. Women are operating within
this system of heavenly retribution, so they are able to fulfill their desires and exercise autonomy
as long as they adhere to the “rules” of that system. Those rules mostly seem directed to
protecting the family structure, which is an idea that will be explored in greater detail during the
next chapter, when the stories from chapter one will be re-examined with that in mind.

This punishment and reward system within heavenly retribution intersects with autonomy
when women act on their desires. When women act as their own agents, their actions will have
positive or negative consequences, and the system of heavenly retribution is what decides the
outcome of those actions. In other words, heavenly retribution does not impede or encourage
women’s autonomy, but it will determine whether the actions of a given female character in
question will have a positive or negative outcome.

The idea presented in the last chapter, which was that women’s desires must align with
that of a man, also connects to the idea of heavenly retribution and the family. Ban Zhao, the
second- first-century B.C.E. writer who wrote a conduct manual for women that remained
popular in later centuries, presents the idea that the husband is a woman’s heaven (tian 天), so it
makes sense that within this system, a man’s desires do play a role in whether or not a woman
can exercise her autonomy. More specifically, a man is the head of the household and the head of the woman’s world, so it would follow that there would be some sort of connection between a man’s desires, heavenly retribution, and the outcome when a woman attempts to exercise autonomy. In the remainder of this chapter I will examine this idea as it is explored in two of Feng Menglong’s stories, “Qiao Yuanjie’s Concubine Ruins the Family,” from *Stories to Caution the World*, and “Ruan San Repays His Debt at Leisurely Clouds Nunnery,” from *Stories Old and New*.

“Qiao Yanjie’s Concubine Ruins the Family”

The story “Qiao Yanjie’s Concubine Ruins the Family” is an apt example of the system of heavenly retribution at work because every character that demonstrates “bad” behavior ends up being punished. The clear-cut crimes and punishments in this story are useful for beginning to flesh out what the system of heavenly retribution looks like in practice: that is, who it punishes and for what crime. More importantly, the omniscient narrator’s comments throughout the story help the reader understand why a character was being punished. Based on the character’s actions, the outcomes, and the narrator’s comments, I argue that the characters suffer horrible ends because their actions tear apart the family structure.

When Qiao Yanjie, a middle-aged business man, brings home a concubine after a trip, his wife, Gao-shi, demands that he find separate living quarters. The concubine, Zhou-shi, takes advantage of the consequent lack of supervision to take a lover, who in turn impregnates Qiao Yanjie’s daughter, Yuxin, pushing Gao-shi to murder him. Gao-shi, Zhou-shi, and Yuxin all die in prison.
In this particular story, it is clear what “bad” behavior the system of heavenly retribution
is punishing, but the narrator’s comments reveal why exactly a character’s actions were
unacceptable. For example, Qiao Yanjie’s wife, Gao-shi, is jailed for committing the murder of
Zhou-shi’s lover (Dong Xiao’er), which is the way that the legal system punished her. At the
same time, we can also see the system of heavenly retribution at work doling out punishments,
heavenly retribution not only punishes her by sending her to prison for her crime, but also with a
painful death after being whipped repeatedly.

In order to understand why exactly Gao-shi suffered for her crime, we need to pay
attention to the narrator’s comments and the social context. According to the suggestions
outlined in Ban Zhao’s conduct manual, a good wife is supposed to accept a concubine and the
desires of her husband (天), but in this story, Gao-shi allows jealousy to get the best of her from
the very beginning by forcing her husband to move to separate living quarters. The narrator
underscores Gao-shi’s culpability when Gao-shi asks the help to provide provisions for Zhou-shi,
wondering, “Since she was so kindly disposed toward the young woman, why not take her into
the house and be one family?” (569). In other words, the narrator puts the burden on Gao-shi to
go along with her husband’s choice in order to keep the family together. The narratorial
comments hint that Gao-shi’s choice to not accept the concubine ultimately needlessly ripped
apart the family.

Moreover, tearing apart the family was a wasted opportunity because a clever wife could
take advantage of the fact that she was in the senior position. The narrator blames Gao-shi for her
unwillingness to use the authority that she has to protect the family. She would have felt secure
in the fact that her status was higher than that of the concubine and could have potentially had
more power over her if she had simply allowed Zhou-shi to stay in the house. Gao-shi would have benefited enormously from simply allowing her to stay in the house, since it would have made her look good and she could have potentially monitored the situation with Dong Xiao’er—the hired man who in the end seduces both the concubine Zhou-shi and Gao-shi’s own daughter Yuxiu—with greater care. For example, the narrator places much of the blame for the affair between Dong Xiao’er and Zhou-shi on Gao-shi, stating, “It’s high time she kicked Xiao’er out of the house.” The narrator places at least part of the blame for the situation on Gao-shi because she did not exercise her authority to prevent a scandalous situation. By extension, by not exercising her authority, she comes off as incompetent in running a household, which is the job of a good wife—one of whose main responsibilities is to maintain a family intact.

Unfortunately for Gao-shi, the way that she goes about keeping the family “intact” (that is, socially proper and without the extra illegitimate member) does far more harm than good. The narrator says as much when he remarks, “Even firing him at this moment would have been unwise. Killing him is the height of stupidity. It’s because she loves her daughter too much.” This sentence implies that love is somewhat separate from the success of a family, which is remarkable because it seems as though the two would always have a positive relationship. However, the narrator suggests that Gao-shi loved her daughter at the expense of the security of her family. According to the narrator, love, which has the potential to keep the family together, also has the power to destroy its structure. We can see this not only in Gao-shi and her daughter’s relationship, but also in the relationship between Dong Xiao’er and Zhou-shi.

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26 Ibid.
Even though she murdered Dong Xiao’er in order to protect her daughter, Gao-shi suffered an even greater punishment by being killed and having her daughter die in prison. Not only is there the pain of losing a child, but there is also the added punishment of the destruction of her family structure. Interestingly enough, it also guaranteed the end of her family’s line. While the system of heavenly retribution does punish people who break up the family, the punishment itself is also to break up the family. In other words, if a person takes actions that threaten the family structure, heavenly retribution guarantees the destruction of the family. Gao-shi indirectly brought about her own family’s destruction, and the agonizing part of her action is that her goal was to protect the honor of her family. In the end, her actions guaranteed the destruction of her family, including the future generation since Gao-shi’s daughter was pregnant when she died in prison as a result of her mother’s actions.

By the end of the story, the arrangement causes even more trouble because Zhou-shi was able to take on a lover due her lack of supervision. Zhou-shi also died in prison, and her crime is obvious. She is supposed to remain loyal to her “husband,” but instead she not only took on a lover, but one that created trouble in the family that she was supposed to be a part of. Under the system of heavenly retribution, which is meant to punish, these are both crimes that are both reprehensible because they break up the family structure.

While the female characters in this story are unambiguously punished because they destroy the family structure, the narrator is more ambivalent regarding the role that the men play in the family’s downfall. The male characters also suffer horrible outcomes, yet the narrator extends more sympathy towards their plight than towards the women. In fact, the narrator seems
to disagree with the way that the outcomes for the men played out at the end of the story, which is an implicit disagreement with the way that heavenly retribution played out.

For example, Dong Xiao’er is killed because he impregnates Gao-shi’s daughter, Yuxiu. This punishment is due to the fact that he did not recognize or appreciate his place within the family structure. That is, he was not even a part of the family structure, which meant that by impregnating Yuxiu, he violated that structure because only a wife is supposed to have a child—not an unmarried young girl. Moreover, he also potentially ruined this woman’s chances of being married and being able to establish her own family. However, the narrator also clearly sympathizes with him, stating, “Adultery is not punishable by death. So there was no justification for Dong Xiao’er’s murder.”\(^{27}\) While it is true that murder does seem like a harsh punishment for adultery, the narrator never extends this much sympathy to Zhou-shi or Yuxiu, even though it takes two people to commit adultery.

The narrator also has a great deal of sympathy for Qiao Yanjie, even though it is his action of bringing in a concubine that sets off the disastrous set of events in the story. Qiao Yanjie is absent for most of the story because he spent his time away at a brothel. When he returns, he finds that his entire family has died, and because he was away, all of his possessions were confiscated. The narrator wonders, “What crime did Qiao Jun commit to be thus deprived of his possessions?”\(^{28}\) This statement absolves Qiao Yanjie of any responsibility for what happened in his absence. Even though he was gone, all of the family’s problems began because he abandoned his authority and role as head of the household for his concubine. While he is not a murderer, he also certainly is not innocent.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 576.
\(^{28}\) Ibid., 579.
But regardless of the narrator’s sympathy, Qiao Yanjie is also punished for bringing in a concubine and abandoning the family structure and his authority for her. At the beginning of the story, Gao-shi issues an ultimatum to Qiao Yanjie, which was that if he chose to have a relationship with the concubine, he had to leave the home. Afterwards, the narrator says, “Never listen to a woman’s advice/ A split household violates social customs./ Ignore your wife’s words and take the high road/ But how many men have such good sense?” In other words, Gao-shi should have accepted the concubine and Qiao Yanjie should have stood his ground; and by adhering to his wife’s request, he abdicates his control to her and shakes up the family structure. Although a man is more than welcome to bring home a concubine, Qiao Yanjie did it at the expense of maintaining the family structure because he agreed to move out. By doing this, he also abandoned his authority as the man (i.e., the head) of the house. His own punishment was for his line to end, which is appropriate when one considers the fact that the system of heavenly retribution seems to want to keep the family structure intact and his actions jeopardized that.

In fact, the title of the story also supports this. On the surface, rather than fully placing the blame on Qiao Yanjie and the fact that he brought the concubine home, the title states that Qiao Yanjie’s concubine is the one that ruins the family. The implication that it is Zhou-shi’s fault rather than Qiao Yanjie that the family fell apart clarifies why their punishments were so different. By bringing home a concubine, Qiao Yanjie did not inherently do anything to break up the family. The main problem was that his wife was against the concubine and that Qiao Yanjie actually let go of control of the family. But by finding a lover, one that disrupted the family

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29 Ibid., 568.
structure by impregnating Gao-shi’s daughter, Zhou-shi was the one that actually went back on her promise.

However, the title still identifies Zhou-shi specifically as “Qiao Yanjie’s Concubine,” which shows that he does deserve at least part of the blame for the outcome. Zhou-shi is unnamed in the title, which places the emphasis on the fact that Qiao Yanjie brought someone home that destroyed his family. Leaving Zhou-shi unnamed in the title places more emphasis on Qiao Yanjie bringing in a negative element that ruined his family.

One of the final lines of “Qiao Yanjie’s Concubine Ruins the Family” is a poem with a line that reads, “Lust brings ruin to family and state,” which places some of the blame for the story’s ending on the male characters. Lust was what made Qiao Yanjie bring home the concubine, and it was the fuel for Dong Xiao’er and Zhou-shi’s relationship. Unlike the title and the narrator’s moments where he defends Dong Xiao’er and Qiao Yanjie, the fact that the poem blames lust for the horrible conclusion of the story shows that the male characters in the story deserve at least some of the blame. Yet nonetheless, as we have seen, in the eyes of the narrator, the men deserve more sympathy for their actions than the women.

The reason that the men are viewed more sympathetically is because the women actively destroyed the family. Zhou-shi was the instigator of the relationship with Dong Xiao’er, while Gao-shi was the one that killed him in her state of rage and shame, and both of those were actions that destroyed the family in very defined, socially unacceptable ways. On the other hand, the men were punished because they actively avoided responsibility within the family structure, which meant that they destroyed the family in a more passive way.

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30 Ibid., 578.
For example, Dong Xiao’er has an affair with Zhou-shi and impregnates Yuxiu, which is a perversion of the role that a man should play in the household. Ideally, a man is supposed to get married and have children with his wife. Instead, Dong Xiao’er starts a romantic relationship with another man’s wife and then impregnates a single woman that he has no intention of being with. He reaps the rewards of being the head of a household because he gets to have a romantic relationship and produce a child (though he does not know it), but the manner in which he goes about it is an affront to the role that a man is supposed to play within a household, especially because he plays the role of father and lover with two different women. In other words, lust has the potential to ruin the family because it can tear apart its structure. Lust means that people will overstep the boundaries created for them in order to be with someone else, which in turn makes the family structure unstable. Since the system of heavenly retribution shows a proven interest in maintaining the family’s structure, it is bound to punish lust-fueled actions because they erode at that structure.

Essentially, “Qiao Yanjie’s Concubine Ruins the Family” not only demonstrates that the system of heavenly retribution is at work, but also gives the reader a sense of what the system punishes and why. Additionally, the narrator’s sympathy towards the men in spite of their negative outcome gives the system credibility. Since the system of heavenly retribution is infallible, any outcome in the story is supposed to be justified. Yet the narrator repeatedly makes statements that indicate that he believes that the outcome is unfair. As a result, the discrepancy between the narrator’s sympathies and the actual outcome give the system credibility because if a person is unsatisfied with the outcome in the system, then it means that it is truly divorced from human influence and will have a just outcome regardless of a person’s biases. Most importantly,
the fact that everyone is punished in this story demonstrates that at least in the eyes of the system, men and women are both equally worthy of being punished.

“Ruan San Repays His Debt at Leisurely Clouds Nunnery”

The story of Qiao Yanjie’s concubine is one where the heavens vigorously punish wrongdoing. However, the system of heavenly retribution also provides rewards. “Ruan San Repays His Debt at Leisurely Clouds Nunnery” is a story that is specifically about how the system of heavenly retribution can reward people, and it allows us to see under what circumstances people can be rewarded in this system. The story also demonstrates how the system of heavenly retribution has the potential to protect women, which is an important contrast to “Qiao Yanjie’s Concubine Ruins the Family,” where women were admonished more than men. Moreover, this story shows how women can act on their desires (even if they are not socially sanctioned) and still be rewarded.

In the story, an unmarried woman, Chen Yulan, consummates a relationship with an unmarried man, Ruan San. But Ruan San’s longing for Chen Yulan had weakened him, and when they consummated their relationship, he died from the pleasure of it. Despite this inauspicious beginning, the union produces a child who ends up being an exceptional scholar. Chen Yulan technically transgressed the social norms by having sex and a child out of wedlock, yet she ended up with a favorable outcome (that is, a successful son and social acceptance).

Due to the favorable outcome (i.e., her son, Chen Zongruan’s success and her own social acceptance), we can conclude that the system of heavenly retribution sanctioned her desires in this particular case. We as readers can see this due to who orchestrates the meeting between Ruan San and the woman--a nun. The narration describes the nun, Wang Shouchang, as “a
woman of easy virtue before converting to Buddhism.”31 This nun could be considered an extension of heaven, and as a result, the fact that she helps the two of them meet pushes us to assume that heaven has played a role in the happy ending of this particular relationship.

Additionally, the fact that this woman was previously a woman of easy virtue foreshadows Chen Yulan’s outcome to some degree. While Chen Yulan’s affair would not necessarily be what defines her as a woman of easy virtue, the nun’s own current state considering her past of easy virtue shows that Chen Yulan has the possibility of having her own positive outcome. And since the nun could be seen as an extension of heaven, her outcome shows that the system of heavenly retribution has the potential to reward people even if they have had a past of “easy virtue,” which in turn suggests that Chen Yulan could have a positive outcome as well.

In fact, Ruan San’s story is full of references to fate and the heavens. When Ruan San’s brother, Ruan Er, learns of his brother’s death, he says, “It’s my brother’s fate and the doings of the gods that he should end like this.”32 This statement reveals an acceptance of the heavens’ judgment and also foreshadows a conversation that Ruan San has with Chen Yulan towards the end of the story. He returns to her as a spirit and tells her the story of how they were in love in a previous life and how he had to abandon her in order to marry someone else. He elaborates, “Since our predestined relationship was not severed, our brief meeting at Leisurely Clouds Nunnery rekindled our love. It was with intention of demanding repayment for the injustice you


suffered in your previous existence that you went to the nunnery.” Here, we can see a part of heavenly retribution that was not emphasized in the story of Qiao Yanjie’s concubine: the concept of fate and predestination. Since the two of them had unresolved issues from their previous lives, the heavens brought them together because they had to be brought together in order to address these issues.

By extension, Ruan San’s conversation with her brings up the concept of debt in the context of heavenly retribution. Ruan San implicitly brings this up when he mentions repayment. That statement about repayment comes right after the statement about love being rekindled, and the two sentences read very differently. The first feels romantic, but the second feels much more clinical, as if Ruan San is simply talking about a transaction. In a way, he is, because he is talking about a debt that he needs to settle with her. But he settled a debt simply by dying. He tells her, “My immediate death evened our score.” This incident is important because it shows that the system of heavenly retribution also serves as a way of righting wrongs and fulfilling debts. Ruan San’s death, which occurs right after he and Chen Yulan consummate their relationship, was an example of pleasure cut short, much the way that Ruan San ended their relationship in their past life. The fact that they experience parallel pain shows that the system of heavenly retribution seeks to have people pay off the debts that they may have accrued in a past life.

Additionally, Ruan San’s actions in his past life prevented Chen Yulan’s past self from being able to start her own family because she waited for him. As a result, this wrong was made up for by the arrival of Chen Zongruan. Ruan San alludes to this when he tells her that, “It was

33 Ibid., 109.
34 Ibid., 110.
with high aspirations and moral integrity that you ended your previous life. You are therefore entitled to glory and wealth in this one. Your child is bound to be a prominent figure in the future.” The fact that she ended her past life with integrity meant that she would be awarded in this one, and her child was the way that this past wrong would be corrected.

She was also awarded for the “delay” in having a family by having an exceptional son in this life. Moreover, the fact that her son was meant to be illustrious was a reward not just for her integrity, but also for the absence of his father, who was meant to be an illustrious scholar himself. Finally, having a particularly illustrious son also protects her from the initial dishonor of a child out of wedlock. It affords her protection from criticism, which makes this feel like a particularly just reward. This incident shows that the system of heavenly retribution does not only punish; it also has the potential to reward people. Heavenly retribution completed the family that Chen Yulan and Ruan San were meant to have in their previous life, which is why Chen Yulan was able to have at least part of that outcome in her currently life.

This also shows that there will always be some mystery when it comes to how people are rewarded and punished in life. Because the story of Ruan San shows us that a person’s current life and death cannot be separated from their last one, we can see that even though there is a system of rewards and punishments in place, sometimes we will never actually know the motivation behind it. As readers we were fortunate in the story of Ruan San to explicitly see how the past life influenced the outcome of the characters. But even though we had that information available to us, Chen Yulan did not. Additionally, this is information that is not available in every story, which means that sometimes characters will make the incorrect choice. Had Chen

35 Ibid.
Yulan chosen to go about her affair the same way with a man that did not happen to owe her something in the afterlife, she would have simply been a single woman with a child out of wedlock, ostracized and alone.

This seems somewhat unfair because Chen Yulan had no way of knowing that Ruan San just happened to be the right person when she was exercising her desires. In fact, no woman has any way of truly knowing that she is choosing the “right” person within the system of heavenly retribution, which means that she has no way of predicting whether she is going to have a positive or negative outcome when she attempts to exercise autonomy. The system of heavenly retribution offers rewards and punishments without firm guidelines to ensure or avoid a particular outcome. The lack of firm guidelines is particularly important in the context of women because women already have strict societal and familial rules to follow. Yet when they attempt to exercise autonomy, those guidelines disappear, and they are left to the mercy of a murky system that seems to reward and punish without much clarity as to why.

That is, except for the fact that the system of heavenly retribution attempts to protect the family structure. This can at least begin to explain some the outcomes that women experience. However, women are already often only considered in relation to men and the family. As a result, if heavenly retribution punishes and rewards based on the fact that the family must remain intact, it is unclear whether or not women have any autonomy at all. If women are punished for going beyond the family structure, then that suggests that they do not have autonomy to begin with.
Chapter 3: Retribution and Balance

The second chapter determined that women in Feng Menglong’s stories are operating within a system of heavenly retribution, which means that acting on their desires can have a favorable outcome as long as they adhere to its rules. We have seen that the system of heavenly retribution punishes those that disrupt the family system and also pushes people together in order to keep the family structure intact. However, another component of what allows women to act on their desires successfully is if they make the right choice in terms of what society expects. In other words, the system of heavenly retribution reflects what is acceptable in society. Additionally, it rewards women who end up making the right “choice” even if it looks socially unacceptable on its face. I contend that the system of heavenly retribution allows women to have favorable outcomes if they choose the “right” person, whether it is due to predestination within that system, society’s expectations, or simply a person that values the woman as much as she loves him.

For example, we saw in “Ruan San Fulfills His Debt at Lesuereily Clouds Nunnery” that a woman can act on her desire and consummate a relationship outside of marriage with a (mostly) positive result if you ignore Ruan San’s death. Part of the reason that that was deemed acceptable was because that relationship was predestined. After all, Ruan San and Chen Yulan were brought together because Ruan San left her in a past life, so when they consummated their relationship, the positive outcome was due to the fact that the system of heavenly retribution had to ensure a positive outcome.

A component of having a positive outcome within the system of heavenly retribution is choice. Chen Yulan was able to have a positive outcome (i.e., have a brief relationship with this
man and then have an illustrious son that brought glory to the family) because she happened to choose the right person. If she hadn’t chosen the right person, the circumstances would have been completely different and she may not have had such a favorable outcome by the end of the story. The reason that that affair was not deemed completely unacceptable was because the birth of her exceptional son negated the scandalous nature of the relationship.

The system of heavenly retribution and society’s expectation and the choice of the “right” person suggests that there is a chicken and egg question. That question is whether heavenly retribution is a reflection of society’s values or whether heavenly retribution reinforces society’s values. In the end, this is a question that does not affect our reading of the stories because the relationship between society, family, and heavenly retribution isn’t what’s important. What’s important is the acknowledgement that this relationship exists, and that this relationship influences the outcome of women in these stories.

Revisiting “Jiang Xingge Re-encounters His Pearl-Sewn Shirt”

In Chapter 1, we saw that in "Jiang Xingge Re-encounters His Pearl-Sewn Shirt," Fortune's pursuit of her desires is ultimately sanctioned despite the fact that they lead her to transgress conventional standards of morality. Here I will explore how the concept of heavenly retribution is used within the story to further justify and explain her actions. I will show that in this particular case, heavenly retribution reunites husbands and wives (in this case, Fortune and Jiang Xingge) that are truly meant to be with one another, even if one of them has committed a moral transgression. This is because heavenly retribution is interested in maintaining the family structure, and although Fortune’s outcome as the second wife is certainly not a reward, it is a decidedly positive outcome considering her transgression.
The story starts off with a poem that mentions the heavy role that heavenly retribution will play in the story. The poem states, “The human heart may be blinded/ But the will of heaven never errs/ If I debauch not other men’s wives/ Other men will not debauch mine.”36 As an opening, it appears to be a straightforward testament to the power of heavenly retribution. But in the context of the story, it reveals the ambiguity of this system. The first two lines are straightforward, and they simply state that people are fallible and heaven is not. But the last two lines are the more interesting ones in the context of the story. Since the poem is at the very beginning of the story, the reader may not initially realize the irony in those two lines. The irony comes from the fact that Jiang Xingge did not debauch someone else’s wife, but another man debauched his. Inversely, Chen Dalang debauched his wife, but nobody debauched his.37 This is significant because it shows that adherence to certain rules will not guarantee a positive outcome in and of itself. However, the first two lines of the poem still say that heaven is infallible. As a result, when the reader revisits this poem after they finish the story, they know that the last two lines are not true. But this could have the effect of reinforcing the truth of the first two lines because even if men err and do not respect one another, the will of heaven is the ultimate arbiter of justice.

This theme is further reinforced when the narrator introduces the story proper by saying, “Dear audience, now hear me tell the story of ‘The Pearl Shirt’ as an illustration of the never-failing retribution of heaven to serve as a lesson for all young men.”38 This statement

37 It is worth noting that Jiang Xingge does end up marrying Chen Dalang’s widow; however, one can hardly call this “debauching.”
38 Ibid.
cements the idea that heavenly retribution is infallible. The narrator’s statement combined with the poem that precedes it tells the reader that the system of heavenly retribution is complex, but ultimately infallible. By extension, this means that the reader can place their faith in it even if the decisions of heaven seem obtuse. In other words, the poem and the narrator’s statement that follows it directly tells the reader that heavenly retribution is going to have a heavy hand in the story, and this in turn will make the reader more aware of its presence when examining the events in the story.

The complexity of the punishments and rewards from the heavens is apparent in “The Pearl-Sewn Shirt,” particularly in the way that the relationships end. For example, the heavens are invoked after Chen Dalang’s death when Jiang Xingge realizes that Ping-shi is his widow. The narrator states, “The ways of heaven are not to be slighted/ To whose advantage is the exchange of wives?/ Interest must be paid on any debt incurred;/ The marriage bond is but briefly suspended.” When the narrator says that the heavens are not to be slighted, this indicates that some aspect of the way the characters acted out their romance was in violation of the heavens. The obvious answer was that their love affair was the slight against heaven. But the reason that an extramarital affair is a slight against heaven, especially in Fortune’s case, is because it is an example of someone choosing the wrong person. When someone gets married, the right person has been implicitly chosen for them, and this is reinforced a number of times when the strong love between Fortune and Jiang Xingge is mentioned. As a result, when someone has an extramarital affair, they are choosing the “wrong” person because their spouse is supposed to be the “right” one for them. To put it more bluntly, an extramarital affair is a slight

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39 Ibid., 43.
against heaven because it indicates that that person believes that heaven made the wrong choice for them.

Later, at the very end of the story, the narrator admonishes Fortune for her crimes, revealing his own bias about how justice was served. The narrator says, “Loving though they were for the rest of their lives,/ How shameful that she fell from wife to concubine/ How true that one’s deeds are repaid for ill or fair/ Heaven above weighs the scales; you need not seek far.”40 This reinforces the idea that Fortune had to pay for her mistake (i.e., her affair) through her demotion in status. As we have already established, the system of heavenly retribution has a demonstrated interest in maintaining the family structure, which is partially what it does when it reunited Jiang Xingge and Fortune and they subsequently rekindle their relationship. She violated the agreement she made when she married Jiang Xingge, which is why she was still punished in a small way in their reunification.

Simply put, “The Pearl-Sewn Shirt” is a cautionary tale that shows that the heavens ultimately decide the outcome of a love affair. Fortune and Jiang Xingge were meant to be together, which is why Fortune had a comparatively happy ending compared to many other women who acted on illicit sentiments in Feng Menglong’s other stories (“Qiao Yanjie’s Concubine Ruins the Family” comes to mind as a counterexample). However, as the narrator mentioned, the “slight” against heaven in the story was not entirely because Fortune and Chen Dalang had an affair. It was because heaven meant for them to be with their spouses (and this is particularly true for Fortune), which means that the biggest insult to heaven was the fact that they did not value their relationship enough. But the reason that Fortune was able to act on her desires

40 Ibid., 48.
and continue her relationship with Jiang Xingge (even if it was as a second wife) was because, as mentioned previously, the system of heavenly retribution reinforces the family structure. As a result, since her husband was the person she was meant to be with, the heavens brought them back together.

Revisiting “Madame White is Kept Forever Under the Thunder Peak Tower”

Fortune and Jiang Xingge provide a clear example of what a relationship is meant to look like in which the two partners are meant to be together, and Madame White’s relationship to Xu Xuan is a direct counterpoint to that. The difference in Jiang Xingge and Fortune’s story is that the heavens brought them together against all odds, whereas in Madame White’s story, Madame White tried to fight heaven in order to be with Xu Xuan. In Chapter 1, we established that Madame White was loyal and faithful in ways that Fortune was not, and yet she was punished for her relationship with Xu Xuan. I argue that the reason that the relationship was doomed to fail was because the heavens did not sanction the relationship due to the fact that Madame White is not human. As a result, the relationship would have been impossible because no matter how faithful she may have been, the heavens could never sanction the unnatural pairing of a human and an evil spirit.

The problem with Xu Xuan and Madame White’s relationship is not that Madame White was a bad wife; it was the fact that she was an evil spirit. Madame White is repeatedly shown to be morally upright. For example, when Abbot Fahai proves that Madame White and Little Green aren’t human, Madame White extolls Little Green’s virtues, telling the abbot, “She acquired immortality after a thousand years of spiritual cultivation. I met her quite by accident and made her my companion. She hasn’t had any fun, not even for one day. Please have pity on her,
Abbot!”\(^{41}\) Despite the danger that she is in, Madame White still thinks to defend Little Green rather than herself, demonstrating that she is morally upright. The commentator says as much, stating just afterwards, “In such a desperate situation, she still remembers to put in a good word for Little Green. A truly kind evil spirit she is.”\(^ {42}\) But Madame White wasn’t punished due to her morality. She’s punished under the system of heavenly retribution because she is an evil spirit attempting to have a relationship with a human.

At one point, Xu Xuan says, “You foul evil spirit! A fine mess you got me into! I’ve been punished twice by the law because of you!”\(^ {43}\) Xu Xuan had been punished a number of times for Madame White’s own crimes, but there is something greater than the law of man at work here. Xu Xuan had previously acknowledged that he believed that Madame White was an evil spirit and decided to remain in a relationship with her anyway (he explicitly thinks to himself, “I do have the feeling that she’s an evil spirit”).\(^ {44}\) He was subsequently punished by the law, but those punishments could also be punishments from the system of heavenly retribution. Heavenly retribution evens out scores and reinforces social norms, and being with a demon spirit (especially if he already had suspicions) goes against social norms and the laws of heaven. This means that the punishment looked like it came from the law, but it was also the heavens punishing Xu Xuan for being with a demon spirit even though he knew she was a demon. Heavenly retribution can often push people together to reinforce social norms, but in this case,


\(^{42}\) Ibid., 504.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 493.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 487.
the system attempted to push Xu Xuan and Madame White apart because they were violating them.

This reinforces the idea that the reason that Madame White was punished under the system of heavenly retribution was not due to how she was as a wife; it was due to the fact that she was a demon spirit married to a human. Heavenly retribution has a vested interest in maintaining the family structure, and a demon spirit simply cannot be part of the family structure because the spirit is not human. When Xu Xuan goes to talk to his neighbors, before he leaves the house he tells Madame White and Little Green, “Don’t, on any account, go out the door!” It sounds like a simple command meant to keep her from going out and causing more trouble, but that phrase is also a subtle reinforcement of social norms. Traditionally, the woman’s realm is the home. In other stories, such as “The Pearl-Sewn Shirt,” trouble arises when the woman looks beyond her realm (i.e., when Fortune looks out the window, she sees Chen Dalang and that is how their infatuation with one another begins). Madame White’s original sin was that she stepped out of the animal realm into the human one, which means that Xu Xuan’s admonishment is a request for her to at least adhere to the boundaries set up by humans. But more importantly, it reminds the reader of the initial issue with Xu Xuan and Madame White’s relationship, which was the fact that she overstepped her boundaries.

That desire to keep her inside was not only an implicit need to reinforce social norms; it was also a much more explicit need to keep up appearances. Xu Xuan’s previous statements indicate that he knew his wife was actually a demon spirit, which is why he wanted her and Little Green to stay indoors. There is not an inherent issue with wanting to maintain these social norms.

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The issue is over the fact that his desire to hide Madame White demonstrates that he knows that his relationship with her is improper. He wants to save himself from having his social status ruined, and that need to hide her shows that he cares far more about his social status than he cares about her. Xu Xuan recognizes that there are consequences to this relationship, which is why he wanted to hide Madame White.

In the end, he was right about the relationship having consequences, though the system of heavenly retribution gives Madame White the more severe punishment. When Abbot Fahai finally traps her, she pleads, “Unable to control my desires, I violated the heavenly rules, but I never took a life. Please have mercy on me, Abbot!” Madame White did violate the heavenly rules, but not only did she not kill anybody; she actually proved to be a decent human. In fact, her previous actions have demonstrated that she was a kind wife who was loyal to her husband and spent a great deal of time doting on him. This means that her final punishment, which was being trapped by the abbot under a tower for ten thousand years, seems to be very disproportionate to her actual crime, which was choosing to have a relationship with a human man.

Moreover, it seems that the system of heavenly retribution gives Madame White a harsher punishment than Xu Xuan because although neither one of them was supposed to be with the other, Madame White’s transgression was more severe. Madame White was the one who stole from others in order to keep up appearances and earn her husband’s love. More importantly, Madame White’s transgression was more problematic because she was the one who had the definite burden of knowledge. Xu Xuan suspected that Madame White was actually an

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46 Ibid., 503.
evil spirit and chose not to investigate much further. At the same time, Madame White was the one that knew she was actually a snake and still pursued the relationship, knowingly deceiving Xu Xuan. Additionally, there is the issue of each one’s social station. Xu Xuan is a human, which means that by having a relationship with an evil spirit, he is lowering himself. On the other hand, Madame White pretends to be a human and by extension, elevates herself. This makes her deception worse in the system of heavenly retribution because she did not earn the higher social rank through honest means. As a result, the system treats Madame White more severely because she wanted to elevate her position to that of a human, which is a more severe transgression than lowering oneself as Xu Xuan did.

Abbot Fahai summarizes the issues with their relationship in an eight line poem at the end that warns against abandoning oneself to lust. He intones, “Be advised! Do not abandon yourselves to lust;/ Those who do will be held under its spell/ Evil eschews the pure in heart/ Bane visits not the virtuous/ Consider how Xu Xuan, a victim to his lust,/ Found himself in trouble with the law./ Had it not been for this old monk’s succor,/ The white snake would have swallowed him whole.”

The interspecies relationship between Madame White and Xu Xuan was never legitimate under the system of heavenly retribution in part because Madame White is a demon. As a result, the very foundation of their relationship is corrupt.

In Xu Xuan’s case, “Madame White is Kept Forever Under the Thunder Peak Tower” is a cautionary tale about lust overcoming the need for decency and a human relationship that would promote a typical family structure. But in Madame White’s case, the story is a cautionary tale about lust overcoming the recognition of one’s status and choosing the wrong person. In the end,

47 Ibid., 504.
the relationship between Madame White and Xu Xuan ended, and it was not entirely because she was a demon spirit; it was largely because Xu Xuan chose not to protect her. Madame White feigned being a human wife, yet Xu Xuan never treated her the way that someone treats a legitimate wife. Had Xu Xuan chosen to treat her like a human wife rather than help the abbot hunt her down and trap her, their relationship could have had a chance to last longer, even in the face of the disapproval of the abbot. The system of heavenly retribution did not punish Madame White because she was a demon spirit, but because falling in love within the system would cause nothing but harm because she would never be valued. In other words, neither Xu Xuan nor Madame White chose the right person.

“A Double Mirror Brings Fan the Loach and His Wife Together Again”

The need to choose the right person (that is, someone that values the other person) is deeply important for the success of romantic relationships in Feng Menglong’s stories, and one of the true tests of the success of the relationship is whether or not the system of heavenly retribution will reunite a couple against all odds or pull them apart. The story of Fan the Loach is a helpful example of what happens when two people happen to choose the “right” person, even if that person does not seem to be the right one on the surface. I argue that the need to choose the “right” person is what determines the success of relationships in his stories, and if one does that, the system of heavenly retribution will allow the relationship to have a positive outcome.

“A Double Mirror Brings Fan the Loach and His Wife Together Again” is the story of Fan the Loach, a morally upright bandit, who falls in love with a woman he is made to kidnap named Shunge. They fall in love once she realizes that he is a virtuous person, but they are separated once her father’s army approaches. However, before they separate they each take a part
of a double mirror, and when circumstances reunite them after the war, Shunge’s father sees the young man that has the other half of the double mirror and allows Shunge to marry Fan the Loach (who ultimately becomes a scholar). The coincidences that reunite the two demonstrate how powerful the system of heavenly retribution can be in bringing people back together if their love is strong and meant to be.

The story starts out with a shorter anecdote about two couples that lose their spouses in the war, and ultimately end up remarrying the other’s spouse. By the end of the story, they reunite with their original spouses and become great friends. The poem that summarizes this exchange acknowledges that it was the heavens that brought them back together, and it states, “The husbands changed wives; the wives changes husbands/ All this shuffling around-- how senseless!/ And so they meet by the will of heaven/ And reunited in joy by the lamp.”48 That poem makes heavenly retribution out to be an organizational system, one that counters all of the shuffling around that mortals do. The second marriages of the two couples were loving and there was nothing morally remiss about them, yet the heavens brought everyone back to their original spouses. Since the second marriages were perfectly adequate, reuniting the original spouses goes beyond the idea that the system of heavenly retribution is meant to keep families together. It indicates that not being with the person that one is supposed to be with is its own injustice, and heavenly retribution is meant to remedy that.

This theme, which is that there is a “heaven sent” person that one is meant to be with, is an important component in “Fan the Loach.” However, part of the reason that the heavens even deem him worthy of being with Shunge is his character. There are two important components of

his character that the reader has to pay attention to: one is that he is a scholar, and another is that he is morally upright. The text tells the reader that the only reason he even became a bandit was because, “He had been forced by Fan Ruwei to give up his unsuccessful pursuit of a scholarly career and take up banditry.”\(^{49}\) Moreover, “Even though he was a member of a gang of bandits, he took every opportunity to help people and refrained from acts of robbery and looting.”\(^{50}\) Not only is Fan the Loach morally upright; he is morally upright in the face of adversity and in a context where it would be easy for him to succumb to selfish impulses.

When they finally do marry, the narrator takes great care to emphasize their commonalities. A poem describing their wedding states, “He a descendant of landed gentry/ She an offspring of a distinguished clan./ He a learned man with refined manners;/ She a woman of a warm, gentle nature./ Though among bandits, he kept his lofty bearing;/ Though a captive, she maintained her dignified air.”\(^{51}\) The poem exists to convince the reader that these two belong together in order to justify the fact that a woman is going to marry a bandit. In other words, this poem is meant to show that the two are worthy of one another, and it legitimizes their relationship in the eyes of the reader.

Later, Shunge professes her own loyalty to Fan the Loach. When she finds that her father’s army is pressing, she tells Fan the Loach, “I’ve heard the saying ‘A loyal minister does not serve a second sovereign; a chaste woman does not serve a second husband.’”\(^{52}\) Her statement makes it clear that she is willing to remain with her husband even in adverse conditions, and it shows that she is committed to her new family unit. Part of the reason that the

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 191.
\(^{50}\) Ibid.
\(^{51}\) Ibid., 192.
\(^{52}\) Ibid., 193.
relationship worked out was because the system of heavenly retribution has a demonstrated interest in keeping families together. Since Fan the Loach and Shunge married, they formed a family unit. As a result, even though they were separated and their relationship would have been frowned upon due to Fan the Loach’s unsavory circumstances, they were brought together by the heavens because they were a pairing that was sanctioned by the heavens. That commitment is particularly important to the success of a couple within the system of heavenly retribution because the system of heavenly retribution reinforces the family structure.

She also adds, “If I do indeed survive, I vow never to remarry. But if I fall a captive again, I’d rather die by the sword than lose my chastity,”53 which further demonstrates her commitment and the legitimacy of the relationship. Her statement is reminiscent of the Ming dynasty widow suicide stories, which puts her in a strong literary tradition of women committing to chastity above all else. More importantly, that statement also legitimizes Fan the Loach to the reader. Widows used to make those statements when bandits attacked and threatened to rape them, yet Fan the Loach is a bandit. She turns the widow suicide archetype on its head by committing herself to a bandit, which in turn absolves him from his status as a bandit. By being willing to commit her chastity to a bandit, Shunge makes him seem like something more to the reader. Her statement unites them against the rest of the world that wants to keep them apart and puts the reader’s sympathies with her and Fan the Loach.

But more importantly, her statements demonstrate her commitment to her husband, which is important because it shows that Fan the Loach chose the right person. That is, he chose someone that was as committed to him as he was to her. That balance in affection is part of what

53 Ibid.
made their relationship viable. In other words, Fan the Loach and Shunge’s relationship shows that part of what makes a relationship sanctioned in the system of heavenly retribution is that they each chose the right person. This is crucial to consider because recognizing that the success of a relationship is the matter of choosing the “right” person means that one has to recognize that virtue, love, and treating one’s partner a certain way are not what determines the success of a relationship (as anyone that has loved and lost can testify). Additionally, the “right” person is not the one that is most compatible personality-wise with someone else. The right person is the person that has been determined to be the correct person under the system of heavenly retribution. That is, the quality that determines the success of a relationship is whether or not the heavens bring two people together that were actually meant to be together. If that occurs, then the pairing is guaranteed success.

It’s important to recognize the importance of balance in affection specifically because the system of heavenly retribution is based entirely on a sense of balance. As stated in “The Pearl-Sewn Shirt,” “Heaven above weighs the scales.” Balance does not only come into play when it comes to a person’s actions. “Fan the Loach” and Feng Menglong’s other stories demonstrate that there must be balance in a couple’s affections as well. The balance in affection makes sense because affection is established through a set of reciprocal actions and emotions, and the equilibrium is meant to be a mutually loving relationship. Similarly, the system of heavenly retribution is based on reciprocal events that are meant to establish balance in the world. As a result, we can conclude that the need for balance in affection (that is, a relationship where two people love and value one another equally) is an extension of the balance that the system of heavenly retribution seeks to establish. The very nature of that system means that it
must destroy relationships where the affections are not equal (such as Madame White and Xu Xuan), and it must protect the ones where the affections are equal (Fortune and Jiang Xingge).

**Revisiting “Du Shiniang Sinks the Jewel Box in Anger”**

One of the most painful relationships to witness in the collection is the relationship between Du Tenth and Li Jia specifically because there is such a noticeable gap in the affections between the two characters. Du Tenth makes enormous sacrifices to be with Li Jia and truly did everything in her power to legitimize their relationship. She even managed to buy her freedom from the brothel and saved money to win the favor of her future in-laws. Additionally, unlike Madame White, she was not an animal spirit, and she remained loyal to her lover, something that even Fortune was not capable of doing. Theoretically, the relationship had a favorable chance of working out, perhaps even more so than many of the other relationships highlighted in these stories. But I argue that Du Tenth’s relationship had a horrible outcome specifically because of the imbalance in the affections between Du Tenth and Li Jia. This imbalance is indicative of a larger problem, which is simply picking the wrong person.

Du Tenth’s ending is particularly heart-rending in the context of the rest of these stories because although she was selfless and virtuous, she did not choose the right person. There is a consistent trope that involves scholarly men as being the apex of what the ideal man is. For example, in “Ruan San Repays His Debt at Leisurely Clouds Nunnery,” the crowning achievement of the woman is having a son that ended up being a successful scholar. Similarly, one of the characteristics of Fan the Loach that is meant to make him more sympathetic to the reader is that he aspired to be a scholar. In the context of Feng Menglong’s stories, a scholar is
one of man’s ideal aspirations, something to be celebrated, something that shows the world that the man in question is right in the eyes of the society.

Yet Li Jia doesn’t fit this image of the perfect scholar. In fact, Li Jia goes against the trope that we see in the rest of the stories of the accomplished scholars. The problem with Li Jia is that he’s a failed scholar. In his article “Scholars and Courtesans,” Hsu Pi-ching describes the Ming Dynasty as a time “when the romances of talented scholars and devoted courtesans reached their peak of popularity” and that there was a particular focus on “unrecognized” scholars. Hsu argues that in Ming fiction about scholars and courtesans, the courtesan’s own unrecognized worth is supposed to mirror the existence of the unrecognized scholar (though Hsu also points out that courtesans tended to be closer to perfection than the scholars in the stories). Du Tenth and Li Jia’s relationship is an example of the well-worn scholar-courtesan relationship, and based on the stories, their relationship was doomed to fail.

Being a part of a well-worn trope does not necessarily mean that Du Tenth should have been doomed to a failed relationship. The reason that their relationship failed had to do with something that is incredibly obvious but is nevertheless connected to the system of heavenly retribution: Du Tenth simply picked the wrong person. In the aforementioned stories, the women act on the desires that do not seem as though they should have a positive outcome, and in some cases, they do not.

For example, under normal circumstances, Chen Yulan’s brief tryst with Ruan San should not have had such a positive outcome. Granted, Ruan San did die at the end of the story, but Chen Yulan gave birth to a successful son and was not alienated socially as a result of her

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54 Hsu Pi-ching, “Courtesans and Scholars in the Writings of Feng Menglong: Transcending Status and Gender,” *NAN NU -- Men, Women & Gender in Early & Imperial China*, 2, no.1 (2000), 42.
illicit relationship, which is a remarkable outcome considering the scandal that should have ensued. But the reason that Chen Yulan did end up having such a good outcome was because she chose the right person. Not only did she choose an accomplished man, but she also happened to choose the man that owed her something from a previous life. In other words, she was able to act on her desires and have a positive outcome, even if the relationship was not technically socially acceptable, because she chose the person that she was “supposed” to choose under heaven’s will.

On the other hand, Madame White’s relationship failed because there were two issues with their relationship: as previously mentioned, she was a snake, and, unlike Chen Yulan, Madame White chose the wrong person. The relationship was illegitimate on the grounds that Madame White was a demon, but even if it had been legitimate, the relationship almost certainly would not have worked out anyway because there was an imbalance in affection between the two of them. Madame White trusted Xu Xuan enough to let him repeatedly go to a Buddhist monastery, yet Xu Xuan spent their entire relationship doubting her.

Essentially, heaven makes a way for a relationship to work out if the woman has chosen the “right” person. What is so frustrating about Du Tenth’s story is that it is a story of a woman who tried extremely hard to do everything properly. She remained devoted to her “husband” at great financial expense, still managed to buy her freedom, and even saved money to make a good impression on her in-laws. Yet all of the great actions in the world were not enough to overcome the fact that she chose the wrong person. She chose a person that did not appreciate her, was unwilling to make her a part of his family, and was already married by the time he met her. These are common warning signs even outside of the system of heavenly retribution, which means that in some ways, the women that choose the wrong men are punished for choosing
incorrectly. Heavenly retribution reinforces the demoralizing idea that our poor romantic choices are our own fault, and the ending for the women in certain stories punishes them for their poor choices in romantic partners.

What is more interesting is that this means that the system of heavenly retribution also reinforces a certain standard for women to adhere to in terms of choosing a partner. The successful relationships in this collection have a common theme: two people that value one another. Part of the issue with Madame White and Du Tenth’s relationships was that their partners did not value them as much as they valued their partners. On the other hand, even when Fortune had an affair, she chose someone that valued her as much as she valued him and she still managed to return to her first lover, which demonstrates that Fortune managed to find two people that truly loved her. This could also be why the end that Fortune came to was so much happier than the endings of other women in these stories despite her transgression; although she may have temporarily forsaken her first love and had an affair, she also chose well in both relationships. As a result, we can conclude that to some degree, these stories are cautionary tales for women to choose their partners wisely, and the system of heavenly retribution serves as a way of illustrating the rewards and consequences of those choices.
Conclusion

The readings of the seven stories I have presented here make it clear that women have autonomy and they have the ability to attain a positive outcome when they act on their desires. However, the system of heavenly retribution in Feng Menglong’s stories affects their ability to have positive outcomes when they act on those desires. That is, the outcomes of the women in the stories and the system of heavenly retribution seem to indicate that there are certain guidelines for success when a woman acts on her desires. Although these rules are not necessarily obvious, careful examination of the stories have allowed us as readers to uncover them.

One of the most important things that a woman can do in order to have romantic success is to choose someone that values her. This seems like rather broad relationship advice rather than a rule specific to operating within the system of heavenly retribution, but the reality is that choosing someone that values her equally creates an equilibrium within the relationship that reflects the equilibrium within that system. We can see this at work in the relationships between Fan the Loach and Shunge, Jiang Xingge and Fortune, and Ruan San and Chen Yulan. These relationships managed to be successful because the affections between both parties were equal. This not only meant that their love achieved balance, but the fact that their affections match each others’ in intensity means that they will work to keep their relationship alive.

On the other hand, the stories of Madame White and Du Tenth are both cautionary tales about the hazards of choosing a man who does not love a woman as much as she loves him. The couples who were members of a healthy relationship were not only able to be together; they were actually brought together against all odds. They were reunited by coincidences so improbable or
their relationship was predestined so long ago that there is no doubt that heavenly retribution is what brought them back together when they were separated by time or space. However, the stories of Madame White and Du Tenth are heart-breaking because the relationships reflected the opposite. That is, the relationships failed despite devotion and caring on the part of the women in them. Du Tenth bent over backwards in order to be with Li Jia, making financial sacrifices along the way, and yet he ended up choosing to sell her to someone else because he was never able to see her as anything but a courtesan. In a similar vein, Madame White and Xu Xuan had a blissful relationship until Xu Xuan chose to conspire against her, even though she was nothing but a devoted wife to him. Basically, when Du Tenth and Madame White exercised autonomy and acted on their desires, they chose the wrong person to devote their attention to, and heavenly retribution caused these relationships to fail because there was such a distinct lack of balance within them.

Additionally, maintaining and promoting the family structure is an important component of the system of heavenly retribution. Fortune and Jiang Xingge were reunited because they had formed a family unit, as did Fan the Loach and Shunge. These two couples were reunited against great odds because their union constituted a family, which would be protected within this system. On the other hand, the family in “Qiao Yanjie’s Concubine Ruins the Family” took actions that destroyed the family, and the system of heavenly retribution simply managed to finish that job.

It also helps to choose a person that the heavens have specifically sanctioned. This was the case in “Ruan San Repays His Debt at Leisurably Clouds Nunnery” because although Ruan San and Chen Yulan consummated a relationship while both were unmarried, that relationship was considered acceptable due to the fact that they were meant to be with one another in their
past life and Ruan San had a debt to repay. Predestination overcame the potential problems with that relationship (i.e., under normal circumstances, a woman having a child out of wedlock could have been looked upon with shame indefinitely) because when Ruan San repaid his debt, part of that repayment involved helping to conceive a child whose achievements could overcome any gossip regarding his mother’s actions.

However, the case of Ruan San and Chen Yulan was rather exceptional. Normally, it would be enough for women to seek out a relationship that is fundamentally rooted in social decency and virtue. For example, Fan the Loach was considered a decent man due to his strong sense of morality and passion for scholarly pursuits, which endeared him to the reader, Shunge, and her father. That strong sense of morality and passion for scholarly pursuits is important in the context of a relationship because those features make it much easier for someone to adhere to society’s expectations, and they are indications that a person will fit smoothly into society and a woman’s life. A man is often what will grant a woman legitimacy and stability, which is why the system of heavenly retribution seems to demonstrate an interest in women having a particular “type” of partner, specifically one that is morally upright and has interests that are acceptable in the eyes of society.

Finally, women must act on their desires with the understanding that within this system, debts must be repaid. This can work out in their favor, and the case of Ruan San and Chen Yulan is a very apt example of this. The main reason that that story managed to have a positive outcome for Chen Yulan was because Ruan San had a debt to repay from a previous life, so the consummation of their relationship resulted in an exceptional son. In this case, having to have a debt repaid to her helped Chen Yulan attain happiness after acting on her desires.
In a similar vein, “Qiao Yanjie’s Concubine Ruins the Family” demonstrates that sometimes women also have to pay debts for their behavior. Gao-shi kills the man that impregnated her daughter, while Qiao Yanjie’s concubine aids in the murder and also has an affair. Having the example of women acting badly and experiencing negative results shows that women too have to pay debts in the system of heavenly retribution, and this story is a way to instruct women on how to make good choices when they act autonomously. From the beginning of the story, Gao-shi took a number of missteps. She did not truly accept her husband’s concubine, was not attentive enough to her household to notice when that concubine was having an affair, and when her family’s honor was at stake, she chose to kill Dong Xiao’er, the man who impregnated her daughter, in order to preserve it. The story is helpful in understanding the idea that the system of heavenly retribution must maintain a sense of balance, and so in this context, Gao-shi’s death in prison makes sense. But more importantly, her clear-cut negative actions serve as an example for what women should not do when they exercise autonomy.

Although we have established a set of rules that women must adhere to, the presence of these rules does not mean that women cannot exercise autonomy. In fact, these rules that we have established should be comforting in a way because they confirm this idea that women can exercise autonomy. If there are rules in place, then that means women have a way of imagining what their fate would look like if they decide to act on their desires, and it means that they can make choices and imagine the result.

In other words, the system of heavenly retribution should not be seen as a restrictive force. Instead, it may be more useful to see it as a system that teaches women how to act on their desires and have a productive, happy outcome. While the system of heavenly retribution does
seem to have an interest in reinforcing social norms, adherence to those social norms has the potential to guarantee a happy, stable life. Once we acknowledge that happiness and stability are both clearly desirable, then it is easier to see the system of heavenly retribution as a system that is not meant to be restrictive. Instead, we should see it as a system that does not restrain women but instead provides guidance on how they can act in order to secure their own happiness. This means that the punishments in the stories are not punishments for acting autonomously. The punishments in the story are for acting autonomously and not making the right choice. That is, this entire issue of autonomy is not quite as gendered as it appeared on the outset. Women can exercise autonomy and secure a happy ending for themselves, and heavenly retribution offers guidelines that women can follow to achieve their happiness. Although the system of heavenly retribution does seem to favor a particular type of relationship, based on the rules we have established, the type of relationship that it seems to favor is one in which there is a shared affection between partners. The other rules that we have established are important, but this was the one factor that was present in every successful relationship that we have seen in these stories. This tells us that the system of heavenly retribution actually protects women by encouraging relationships where they are loved and valued and discouraging relationships where that is not the case.

As a result, we can conclude that the system of heavenly retribution is not necessarily a restrictive force. Instead, it allows women to put their energies towards positive relationships rather than waste time and energy on ones that will not. It means that when women exercise autonomy, their actions will be more meaningful because there is no randomness to their fate,
and they are not just props for male characters. They are able to make choices and act on their desires, make mistakes, and find their own happiness.
Works Cited


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