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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages and Literatures

# **Sworn Siblings in *Sanyan* Stories**

By

Daowen Chen

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Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
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Degree of Master of Arts

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# Sworn Siblings in *Sanyan* Stories

## Introduction:

It has long been a tradition in China for people who are not related by blood to become sworn brothers or sisters because they shared similar interests, ambitions or responsibilities. In terms of the five Confucian rankings of interpersonal relationships, brotherhood is superior to friendship.<sup>1</sup>“The purpose of converting friendship into mock kinship is to allow the relationship to become ‘more intimate’ and ‘longer lasting’ than ordinary friendship.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, taking such an oath allowed people to establish a non-kinship family bond. As proof of their commitment, many people conducted formal rituals such as toasting each other with wine into which their blood has been mixed. Usually, sworn siblings took on dual responsibilities as brothers or sisters as well as friends.

Not until the late imperial period did the writing of sworn sibling stories reach its peak. *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義) begins with the oath taken by Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei in the peach garden. In *Outlaws of the Marsh* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳), 108 heroes and heroines from all over the country become sworn siblings linked by a common goal of correcting wrongs. Even *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅), a novel full of debauchery starts with Ximen Qing’s taking an oath with his “wine-and-meat friends.” Compared with the original stories, the plot

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<sup>1</sup> The highest one is the father-son relationship, then king and official, then husband and wife, then brothers, and friends. (five rankings of interpersonal relationship 伍倫).

<sup>2</sup> David K. Jordan. “Sworn Brothers: A Study in Chinese Ritual Kinship.” In Hsieh Jih-chang and Chuand Ying-chang eds. *The Chinese Family and its Ritual Behavior*. 1985. P 233.

elements about sworn siblings in *Sanyan* 三言 are added and highlighted with various descriptions and with much significance.

The *Sanyan* (lit., *Three Words*) collections were compiled by Feng Menglong (1574-1646) who was known as the most knowledgeable connoisseur of popular literature in the late Ming Dynasty. *Sanyan* include three individual collections of short stories: *Illustrious Words to Instruct the World* (also known as *Stories Old and New*) (*Yushi mingyan* 喻世明言 or *Gujin xiaoshuo* 古今小說) (1620), *Comprehensive Words to Warn the World* (*Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言) (1624), and *Constant Words to Awaken the World* (*Xingshi hengyan* 醒世恒言) (1627).<sup>3</sup> There are 120 vernacular short stories in total in the *Sanyan* collections, and each collection contains forty stories. A majority of the plots upon which the *Sanyan* stories are based can be found in earlier *huaben*, which Feng Menglong selected, edited, and adapted for the *Sanyan* collections.

Before proceeding to analyze and investigate the sworn sibling stories in *Sanyan*, it is necessary to ask why “swearing to be siblings” was emphasized so much more in the stories in *Sanyan* than in their respective original stories.

A major social change in the late Ming period was the prosperous development of business, the rise of the position of merchants,<sup>4</sup> and the affirmation and espousal of *qing*, which can be translated variously as desire, love, emotion, etc. At that time, merchants led a much better life than intellectuals. With their great wealth, they were even able to

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<sup>3</sup> *Sanyan* stories will be referred to as GJ (for *Gujin*), TY for (*Tongyan*), and HY (for *Hengyan*) in this study, with their position in the collections.

<sup>4</sup> For more historical studies on the business and merchants in late Ming, please refer to Fan’s *Late Ming History* and Lufrano’s *Honorable Merchants*.

buy some official titles that literati were eager to secure.<sup>5</sup> Wang Yangming's 王陽明 Neo-Confucianism 心學 as well as Li Zhi's 李摯 "Theory of Preserving Childlike Innocence" 童心說 greatly supported people in expressing their personal and real emotion and desire. Under this commercial and more individualistic social climate, more and more people pursued their personal interests and private desires, sometimes with disregard for social morality. In 1617, Zhang Yingyu 張應俞 compiled the *New Book of Deceits* (*Dupian xinshu* 杜騙新書), which contains accounts of how people tricked each other to get what they wanted in the markets. Wang Qi 王圻 concluded in his *Compilation of the Late Ming Unofficial History* (*Mingji baishi huibian* 明季稗史彙編) that it was not only that gaining wealth became the aim that a majority of intellectuals were pursuing, it also constituted the measure to evaluate people's ability. As long as someone had lots of money, their morality, virtue, and political achievements would often go unquestioned. 以廉者為拙, 以貪者為能 (Ch. 81).

Both the new commercial social climate and the justification of the pursuit of wealth and desire overshadowed people's making friends. They were inclined to make friends with ulterior motives. Once their motive was achieved, the friendship would break up. Also, many people made friends when they were poor, but once one of them had some money, they would end their friendship with their poorer friend. In other words, friendship became materialistic. It yielded to wealth and private desire, and loyalty was not the foundation of friendship, as it used to be, just as Feng Menglong criticized in the

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<sup>5</sup>Wu Shiqi 吳士奇 documented in the "Biography of Merchants" in *Zhengyan lu* 征言錄 that during the Wali Reign, a wealthy merchant Wu Yangchun donated 300 thousand *liang* to the court, and the court offered five official positions to the people in Wu's family. (This material was also seen in Yu Jideng 余繼登 ed. *Diangu jiwén* 典故紀聞, Vol. 14.)

opening poem in “Wu Bao’an Abandons his Family to Random his Friend” 吳保安棄家贖友 (GJ 8) that “Men of old made friends of the heart; Men of today know friends but by face. Friends of the heart share life and death; Friends by face share not poverty. . . . A clash of interests, let alone true peril, suffices to turn friendships sour.”<sup>6</sup> This immoral society can also be seen in many other stories in *Sanyan*. The story “Squire Gui Repents at the Last Moment” 桂員外窮途懺悔 (TY 25) and “For one penny, a small grudge ends in stark tragedies” 一文錢小隙造奇怨 (HY 34) are two examples. The former story recounts that Shi Ji helped Gui Fu in danger. He gave Gui 300 *liang* as well as ten *mu* land to alleviate his poverty. Later, Shi was in need, and Gui became a squire. At that time, when Shi turned to Gui, Gui was relentless and did not help him at all. The latter story relates that people fought for and died for one *wen*.

Feng Menglong was born into a Confucian family, lived in the southern region of the Yangtze River, which was the leading place of the national business. Witnessing the immorality proliferating in the late Ming Dynasty, he attempted to use his literary works to warn and awaken people to behave in terms of the orthodox Confucian doctrines under which people were encouraged to be filial, be loyal, be trustworthy, and be chaste. In the preface of his *Mountain Songs* 山歌 collection, he criticized the late Ming Dynasty as a declining society. In the preface of *Constant Words to Awaken the World*, he contended that “Besides Classics and national histories, the rest were stories. However, those stories were either too abstruse or too embroidered; therefore, they could not serve as the tool to stimulate people’s ears and enlightened their hearts. My *Constant Words to Awaken the World* was edited after *Illustrious Words to Instruct the World* and *Comprehensive Words*

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<sup>6</sup> I use Yang Shuhui’s translation of this story in *Stories Old and New*, 2000, P 143.



*to Warn the World*. Illustrious words were to guide the fool, comprehensive words were to be adjusted to the mundane, and constant words were eternal and would last for a long time. Although these three collections did not share the same book title, their intention was identical. ...I do not know whether these three collections can act as the aid of six Classics and the national history or not.

Similarly, in the preface of *Illustrious Words to Instruct the World*, the Master of the Green Sky Studio (generally recognized as Feng Menglong himself) claimed that “Now common ears outnumber literary minds in our world, and fiction draws less from the elegant than from the colloquial style. Just ask the storytellers to demonstrate in public their arts of description: they will gladden you, astonish you, move you to sad tears, rouse you to song and dance; they will prompt you to draw a sword, bow in reverence, cut off a head, or donate money. The faint-hearted will be made brave, the debauched chaste, the unkind compassionate, the obtuse ashamed. One may well intone the *Classics of Filial Piety* (Xiaojing) and the *Analects of Confucius* every day, yet he will not be moved so quickly nor so profoundly as by these storytellers. Can anything less accessible achieve such effect?”<sup>7</sup>

It is obvious that in Feng Menglong’s point of view, literature, especially popular literature such as vernacular stories, was a tool to enlighten people and correct the aberrant social climate, so that “The faint-hearted will be made brave, the debauched chaste, the unkind compassionate, the obtuse ashamed.” On the basis of this literary thought to save the immoral society and to enlighten people to treat friends and siblings in a righteous way, sworn sibling stories emerged in his *Sanyan* collections.

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<sup>7</sup> Here, I use Yang Shuhui’s translation of *Stories Old and New*. 2000. P 6.

This paper is an effort to study and examine “sworn siblings” in *Sanyan*, with a focus on six stories “Yang Jiao’ai Lays Down His Life for the Sake of Friendship” 羊角哀舍命全交 (GJ 7), “The Chicken-and-Millet Dinner for Fan Juqing, Friend in Life and Death” 范巨卿雞黍死生交 (GJ 16), “Yu Boya Smashes his Zither in Gratitude to an Appreciative Friend” 俞伯牙摔琴謝知音 (TY 1), “Li Xiuqing Marries the Virgin Huang with Honor” 李秀卿義結黃貞女 (GJ 28), “Zhao Taizu Escorts Jingjiang for Thousands of *Li*” 趙太祖千里送京娘 (TY 21), and “The Liu Brothers in Brotherhood and in Marriage” 劉小官雌雄兄弟 (HY 10). The former three of the stories involve sworn siblings between two males, and the latter three are between a male and a female. None of their source material stressed the theme of “sworn siblings.” I will first examine three male-male sworn sibling stories in order to show how they exemplify loyal and unwavering brotherhood both in life and after death. Then, I will explore the transgression and the protection of the boundary between the sworn siblings in three male-female stories to reveal the chastity, righteousness, and filial piety. Finally, I will look at the characters besides the sworn siblings in the stories, who actually serve as the mouthpiece of the writers and the editor, as well as a lens through which we can have a glimpse of the late Ming society.

In the course of the research, I refer to the stories beyond these six in *Sanyan*, Feng Menglong’s other written works such as *Folk Songs* (Shan ge) 山歌 and *History of Qing* (Qing shi) 情史, and his contemporaries’ comments as the primary sources. Also, as Robert E. Hegel observes, “Editors played a significant role in the interpretation of earlier

literature,”<sup>8</sup> I compare the six *Sanyan* stories with their source material to see the adaptation of the sworn sibling stories and to explore the editor’s intention of the adaptation. Moreover, I use a close-reading approach to read and explain the stories within the late Ming social and cultural context. Some philosophical theories on morality and brotherhood and ancient friendship are also addressed.

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<sup>8</sup> Robert E. Hegel, *Novel in Seventeenth Century China*, 1981, p. 58.

## Unwavering Trust and Loyalty: Sworn Siblings both in Life and after Death

Confucius drew a parallel between filial piety with brother love, as he said “A young man’s duty is to be filial to his parents within the family and to respect his elder brothers out of the family.”<sup>9</sup> Mencius held that “Father and son need to have intimacy, king and official need to have loyalty, husband and wife need to have difference, the elder and the younger need to have hierarchical order, and friends need to have trust.”<sup>10</sup> This indicates that brothers should obey the hierarchy of age, and that friendship should be built upon trust. Zhuangzi claimed: “Filial piety, brotherliness, benevolence, righteousness, loyalty, trust, honor, integrity—for all these you must drive yourself and make yourself a slave of Virtue.”<sup>11</sup> This implies that trust and loyalty are closely related to, and by extension, form the foundation of, brotherly bonds.

As I have noted earlier, sworn siblings assume double duties of brothers or sisters and of friends. Within both Confucian and Taoist perspectives, first of all, the younger sworn sibling must respect the elder, and the elder must be friendly to the younger 兄友弟恭. Additionally, they are supposed to be trustworthy and loyal to each other. However, neither Confucianism nor Taoism instructed people to be loyal to their sworn siblings or even their blood siblings after their death. Before the publication of *Sanyan*, most “after-death” stories and dramas featured lovers such as the “Qiannu Leaves her Soul” 倩女離

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<sup>9</sup> 子曰：“弟子入則孝，出則悌。”（孔子《论语·学而》）

<sup>10</sup> “父子有亲、君臣有义、夫妇有别、长幼有序、朋友有信。”（《孟子·滕文公下》）

<sup>11</sup> “夫孝悌仁义，忠信贞廉，此皆自勉以役其德者也，不足多也。”（《庄子·天运》）  
Translation in Burton Watson, “The Turning of Heaven,” *The Complete Works of Chuang-tzu*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1968, p 156.

魂 drama, and were designed either to describe romantic love, or show how wronged people sought revenge or vindication after death.

In this section, I will look into the trust and loyalty of the sworn siblings in three male-male stories in *Sanyan*, by analyzing their consistent brotherhood in life and after death and their sacrificing lives for the brotherhood. Although these sworn siblings have not known each other for that long, their brotherhood, their loyalty to each other is extremely deep and strong. The writer(s) deliberately exaggerated both the in-life and after-death plots showing the sworn siblings do better than what Confucianism, Taoism, and the ancestors (real and fictional) taught them about trust and loyalty.

Faithful brotherhood at a life and death crisis:

The “Yang Jiao’ai Lays Down His Life for the Sake of Friendship” story is derived from *Late Han History* (Hou hanshu 後漢書). Yang Jiao’ai is a poor scholar who lives alone in a simple and crude thatched hut. On a rainy night, he generously invites a traveler by the name of Zuo Botao to stay the night at his place. Zuo is a worthy man who is going to the Kingdom of Chu to pursue his political career. On the morning of the second day, Yang and Zuo swear an oath of brotherhood and go to the Kingdom of Chu together. During the trip, they are caught in the heavy snow in the forest. In the original story, Zuo urges Yang to leave him alone in the forest (which implied that he would die in the forest) and Yang agrees. However, in the *Sanyan* version, Yang refuses to abandon his friend, and insists that although he and Zuo are not blood brothers, their loyalty surpasses blood brothers. He does not have the heart to leave Zuo alone in the forest, so he helps Zuo to travel onward. When they see a place to take shelter from snow, Yang

respectfully obeys Zuo and goes to find some wood to make a fire to keep them warm, since he is younger and he should obey his elder brother's order. But then Zuo leaves his clothes to Yang and prepares to die. At the crucial moment between life and death, they argue with other. Zuo tries to talk into Yang leaving Zuo alone in the forest and going on to the Kingdom of Chu. But Yang disagrees. He speaks, "We should live and die together. ...If my elder brother dies in the forest, while I go to the Kingdom of Chu to fame and fortune, I would be committing an act of betrayal, and that's something I will never do." It is worth noting that every sentence of their arguments opens with "my elder brother" or "my younger brother." It means that their brotherhood does not change at all even if they know that one of them will die. Not until the end on seeing that Zuo can no longer either speak or move, Yang leaves in tears, knowing that he died as well, there will be nobody to bury Zuo, his elder brother.<sup>12</sup> As soon as Yang meets the king of Chu, he bursts into tears and requests permission to go back to bury his sworn brother. He does not forget the promise to bury Zuo that he made in the forest, and insists on returning to bury Zuo before taking up his official post. In other words, for Yang Jiao'ai, high official title and wealth are not as important as trust and loyalty to his sworn brother.

*Death in Fulfillment of a Promise to the Sworn Brother:*

The *Sanyan* version gives "The Chicken-and-Millet Dinner for Fan Juqing, Friend in Life and Death" story a brand new plot for Fan Juqing's death. After Fan Juqing and Zhang Shao become sworn brothers, Fan promises that he will visit Zhang and his mother on the next Chongyang Festival. In the original version of this story, Fan arrives at the Zhangs only to discover that Zhang Shao has died of illness. The original story ends here,

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<sup>12</sup> To bury the dead well is an important Confucian ethics.

but the Sanyan version is much more dramatic. In this version, Fan is so busy taking care of his business and household, affair that he does not realize that it is almost the time of the Chongyang Festival until his neighbor comes to give him some holiday gifts. Since Fan lives very far from Zhang, it is impossible for him to arrive on time. In order not to renege on his promise, Fan commits suicide, in the hope that his spirit will be able to make it to the Zhangs in time for the festival. It is worthy of attention that Fan has not seen his sworn brother for one year, but he still regards Zhang as his brother, and is determined to honor his promise. Obviously, Fan considers trust more important than his life, his business, and his family. He would rather lose his life than break his promise to his sworn brother.

#### *Unwavering Brotherhood in Dream and in Reality*

The trustworthy and loyal sworn brotherhood shows perfectly in the Yang Jiao'ai story when he follows his dead sworn brother's instruction in the dreams, puts them into practice in reality, and sacrifices his life as well as his bright future in the end. Yang takes the ending for granted by upholding trust and loyalty to the sworn brother.

After Zuo's death, Yang keeps calling Zuo "elder brother" even in the dreams in which Zuo appears to him. One day, Zuo tells Yang in the dream that another historic character, the famous assassin Jing Ke 荆軻 has been haunting his grave, so he asks Yang to make some fake figures around his grave to threaten Jin Ke. Yang trusts whatever Zuo says and does as he orders, regardless of whether the dream is credible or not. To him, wherever Zuo appears, Zuo is his sworn elder brother and he must be loyal to him and listen to whatever he is told. However, the fake figures do not effectively solve the

problem, and Zuo complains again and again in the dreams about Jing Ke's threats. At last, Yang decides to give up his official position and kill himself so that he can personally help Zuo deal with his problem. Here, Zuo does not suggest Yang kill himself. Yang voluntarily goes to another world to protect his sworn brother.

#### *Taking Care of a Sworn Brother's Parents after Death*

The "Yu Boya Smashes his Zither in Gratitude to an Appreciative Friend" story dates from at least the third century BCE. The story was first recorded in the *Liezi* 列子 and then in the *Lüshi chunqiu* 吕氏春秋. The *Liezi* version does not touch upon Zhong Ziqi's death. The latter version just mentions that Yu Boya smashes his zither as soon as his soul mate Zhong Ziqi dies, because he does not think there is anybody else who deserves his music. Although there is no mention of sworn brotherhood in these early stories, we can see the difficulty in finding a soul mate. But in *Sanyan*, this story was adapted extensively to show the close brotherhood in life and after death. In the story, after taking an oath of brotherhood, although Yu is older and his position is much higher, he promises to visit Zhong Ziqi on the next Mid-autumn Festival, because Zhong needs to take care of his parents at home. Zhong says that he will wait for Yu on the bank of the river. One year later, Yu arrives punctually, but he does not see his sworn brother waiting for him. He plays his zither hoping to catch Zhong's attention, since only Zhong understands his music. However, his music implies Zhong's death and sadness. They had sworn to be brothers due to music, and at that moment, the music serves to indicate the death of one of them. Yu then goes in search of Zhong, and on his way happens to meet Zhong's father who tells Yu Boya that his son died because that he was too tired from



studying and working.<sup>13</sup> Zhong's father then takes Yu to visit Zhong Ziqi's grave. If the story had ended here, it would have been just fine. However, in order to show the consistency in brotherhood after death, the author adds another plot element: When Zhong Ziqi is dying, he does not want to break his promise to his sworn brother by missing the appointment, and so he asks his father to bury him along the river so that he can redeem his promise to wait for Yu on the bank after death. Yu Boya not only redeems his pledge, but also continues assuming his brotherly responsibility. He regards himself as Zhong's blood brother, and takes on the duty to take care of Zhong's parents. When he sees Zhong's father, he does not call him "old man," but "uncle," because he is Zhong's brother. The story then ends with him taking Zhong's parents along with him when he goes to take up an official position. This ending shows us the faithful sworn brotherhood, and it also shows us the continuing duty of a sworn brother that Yu is assuming.

#### *Death as Proof of Trust and Loyalty*

Although in "The Chicken-and-Millet Dinner for Fan Juqing, Friend in Life and Death," we cannot find any mention that Fan Juqing and Zhang Shao have ever vowed to die together as they become sworn brothers, Zhang Shao does so anyway. On the agreed date, instead of meeting a physical Fan Juqing, Zhang meets Fan's spirit who tells Zhang about how he died in order to fulfill his promise. Similar to Yang Jiao'ai's trusting his sworn brother's words even if in the dream, Zhang also trusts Fan Juqing's spirit. Thus, Zhang convinces his mother by saying "not that he valued his flesh and blood less, but that he honored trust more." 豈為友朋輕骨肉只因信義迫中腸 and leaves for Fan's home.

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<sup>13</sup> Before meeting Yu Boya, Zhong Ziqi was a woodcutter. After they become sworn brothers, Yu encouraged Zhong to study and be an official later.

He travels day and night in the hope of arriving at the Fans as soon as possible. On seeing Fan's coffin, he takes out an elegy and reads: "I, Zhang Shao, your younger brother, do hereby offer a chicken roasted in wine and other sacrificial offerings to the spirit of my older brother, Fan Juqing. ...Old friends honor their friendship in life as well as in death. Who would be willing to betray an eternal pledge? A true man makes light of his life and readily takes up the sword. His sword never dulls throughout eternity; his promise he never fails to keep."<sup>14</sup> He then turns to Fan's wife and says, "My elder brother died for my sake and for the sake of trust. How can I live without him?" He asks her to bury him together with Fan after he has committed suicide as an expression of his loyalty to Fan.

We can see that throughout the three male-male sworn brother stories, the protagonists take the oaths of brotherhood as creating the equivalent of brotherhood by birth. They are constantly loyal and trustworthy to their alive and dead sworn brothers. Even after their sworn brothers' deaths, they keep the brotherhood the same as when they were alive. They listen to and believe what their sworn brothers say even if it is in the dream, and they regard the sworn brothers' parents as their own parents to take care of.

### **Chastity and Righteousness: Transgression of the Boundary between Sworn Siblings**

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<sup>14</sup> I use Yang Shuhui's translation here. 2000. P. 289.

In this section, I look at three male-female sworn sibling stories. By “the transgression of the sworn sibling boundary,” I mean the violation of sexual propriety. For example, firstly, the woman totally conceives herself as her sworn brother’s “brother” so she is not quite constrained by etiquettes. She can casually take off her clothes in front of her sworn brother like other boys do. Secondly, one of the sworn siblings wants to further their relationship such as having a sexual affair or becoming a real couple.

#### *Chastity and the Sworn Sibling Boundary*

In terms of my definition of transgression of the sibling boundary with a focus on women’s dressing, none of the women transgresses the boundary. In the “Li Xiuqing Marries the Virgin Huang with Honor” story, when she was young, Huang Shancong was dressed like a boy so that she help her father out with his business. Unfortunately, after a short time, her father died. Since she is unable to take his coffin to her hometown, it is safer for her to continue being a “man.” When Li Xiuqing meets her and takes an oath of “brotherhood” with her, he assumes that Huang is a man. When Huang stays in the same room with Li, she always sleeps in her clothes. She does not even take off her socks or shoes. Similar to Huang Shancong, Liu Fang in the “The Liu Brothers in Brotherhood and in Marriage” was also dressed like a boy when she left her hometown with her father. During their trip, her father died, and she was adopted by Mr. Liu as his “son.” Later on, Mr. Liu adopted another boy Liu Qi, and Liu Fang became his sworn “brother.” To Liu Qi’s surprise, even in a hot summer, Liu Fang wears two pieces of clothing in bed with her socks. Among the three stories, only Zhao Taizu knew that Jingniang was a woman when he rescued her from the temple where Jingniang was kidnapped by two villains, so

they swore to be brother and sister before Zhao Taizu escorts her home. During the long trip home, Jingniang does not sleep with him. In the context of the stories, their behavior is quite commendable. Feng Menglong praises them as chaste women in the stories.

“Chastity” was often used to compliment widows who remain single after their husbands’ deaths; it was greatly advocated in late imperial China. In *Brief Biographies Affiliated to Ming Poetry* (*Liechao shiji xiaozhuan* 列朝詩集小傳), Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 wrote a special chapter for exemplary female poets of the Ming Dynasty. A close look at those poets reveals that nearly all of them were not only talented in writing but also very virtuous, and some of them kept chastity. While Feng Menglong supported women’s chastity after their husbands’ deaths, he also paid attention to women’s chastity before their marriage. In the Huang Shancong story, when she returns home, her sister does not believe that Shancong is still a virgin since she has been staying with a man for more than seven years. Not until examining Shancong’s body herself is she convinced that Shancong has maintained her chastity. In the Zhao Taizu story, when Jingniang arrives home, her brother suspects that his sister has had a sexual relationship with Taizu and proposes that she marry Taizu. Jingniang bursts into tears and decides to kill herself to show her chastity.

Chastity is also shown in protecting the “boundary” between the sworn siblings. In the “Li Xiuqing Marries the Virgin Huang with Honor” story, Li tries to cross the sibling border and marry Huang as soon as he discovers that this sworn brother is actually a woman. After all, he has been living with Huang for more than seven years and he is very comfortable with her. This also suggests that in the premodern times, men felt insecure to marry women whom they never know. This might be the writer’s criticism of

the traditional marriage system. Li also admires Huang's virtue. When they are doing business together, Huang never tricks him. Their money and luggage are put together. More importantly, he appreciates Huang's chastity. However, Huang turns down his offer of marriage, which means that she is determined to maintain the boundary between them. In the original story, Huang accepts his offer, but here she repeatedly rejects it. She also likes and trusts Li, but she is afraid that if she marries Li, people might question whether she has already had sexual relationship with Li. Therefore, she prefers to marry a stranger. In her mind, a reputation for premarital chastity is more important than marrying a reliable man.

Jingniang in the "Zhao Taizu Escorts Jingniang for Thousands of *Li*" story kills herself to prove her chastity. This ending powerfully shows that Jingniang values chastity. In the original story, after Jingniang's death, she becomes a spirit so as to be able to go after Zhao Taizu. In this story however, Jingniang does not betray the oath of brotherhood. Later on, when Zhao Taizu becomes an emperor, he thinks of his sworn sibling. When he learns that Jingniang has died in order to preserve her reputation, he bestows on Jingniang the posthumous title of "Chaste Lady" and has a shrine built for her in the village.

#### *Sworn Sibling Boundaries and Righteousness*

Besides "chastity," *Sanyan* stories also highlight men's righteousness. Zhao Taizu can serve as a good example. Zhao Taizu rescues Jingniang, whom he does not know, from his uncle's temple, where she was kidnapped by two villains. It is notable that in the previous version, the man who is in charge of the temple is a common old man, not Zhao

Taizu's uncle. The two villains threatened his uncle that if he releases Jingniang, the temple would be ruined. Considering righteousness the vital important thing, regardless of his uncle's safety, Zhao Taizu releases Jingniang and decides to send her back home. When his uncle cautions that the way might be dangerous, Zhao replies that he will learn from the righteous general Guan Yu who escorted his sworn brother Liu Bei's two wives on a thousand-*li* journey, crossing five passes and slaying six generals before arriving in Gucheng for a reunion with Liu Bei. Zhao Taizu regards Guan Yu as a model, which shows that Zhao Taizu values righteousness. During the trip to escort Jingniang home, Jingniang feels extremely grateful to Zhao Taizu, and is eager to return Zhao Taizu's favor. However, the only thing she has to give is herself. Modeling herself on stories of renowned prostitutes who married righteous men, she attempts to seduce Zhao Taizu by pretending that she has a stomachache and then she leaning towards Zhao Taizu and clinging to him. This is very similar to Honglian who seduces an old monk in a similar way.<sup>15</sup> While Yueming Monk is easily seduced, Zhao Taizu controls the sibling "border" quite well. Three days later, Jingniang speaks to Taizu directly. She tells him that she is willing to serve him to return the kindness. However, Zhao Taizu blames her for misunderstanding him. He claims that the reason that he rescues her is purely out of righteousness, not because of personal desire. He even asks, "If we transgress the sibling boundary, what would be the difference between me and the other two villains?" Even when Jingniang arrives home and her father raises the issue to encourage Zhao Taizu to marry Jingniang, Taizu insults him, "You old fool! I came here out of a sense of loyalty. If I were a lecherous man, I would already have married her along the road." Feng

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<sup>15</sup> This story is "Monk Moon Bright Redeems Willow Green 月明和尚度柳翠" in GJ 29, in which a prostitute Honglian seduced the monk according to a prefect's scheme.

Menglong's *Sanyan* stories do not lack righteous men. Often, people who are poor or of low status end up well, thanks to their righteousness. For example, thanks to his righteousness, the oil peddler Qin Zhong ends up marrying a pretty woman named Wang Meiniang. (HY 3). The righteousness of Zhao Taizu also earns him a good ending—becoming an emperor. Here, “righteousness” also indicates the control of emotion and desire. It is true that late Ming society was the one in which more and more people dare to pursue sexual desire which can also be evidenced in many *Sanyan* stories such as “Han the Fifth Sells her Charms in New Bridge Town” (GJ 3), “Suiyang di's Castigated Desire and Entertainment” (HY 24), and so forth. However, none of the characters who are addicted to satisfying their own private desire enjoy a good ending.

#### *Sworn Sibling Boundaries and Filial Piety*

In the “The Liu Brothers in Brotherhood and in Marriage,” Liu Qi and Liu Fang end up as husband and wife, but it is out of filial piety that they transgress the boundary between sworn siblings. They cross the sibling border for filial piety. About ten years later after they became sworn brothers, some matchmakers introduce some women to Liu Qi so that he can marry. However, his “brother” Liu Fang opposes Liu Qi's marriage. Although Liu Qi is very confused, he respects Liu Fang's opinion. One day, Liu Qi writes a poem, and Liu Fang responds with another poem in which she indicates that she is actually a woman. When Liu Qi realizes his sworn brother's true gender, he proposes to her, and she agrees. However, the reason that she wants to marry him is primarily because in front of the house in which they would live as a couple was located graves of

their respective parents as well as that of their benefactor Mr. Liu. If she marries Liu Qi, they can look after their parents' graves easily.

It is also interesting to note that the main reason that both Huang Shancong and Zhao Taizu decisively maintain the sibling boundary is because of their desire to protect their chastity and righteousness. Similarly, that Liu Fang and Liu Qi are willing to cross the sibling boundary is not for romantic reasons, but rather because of they are ostensibly concerned about filial piety.



## **Authority, Close Relatives, Outsiders' Views on Sworn Siblings**

It is important to analyze the characters besides the sworn siblings in the stories. In the six sworn sibling stories, those characters include the sworn siblings' family members, social authorities, and their neighbors and friends. To some extent, they influence the sworn siblings, foreground the virtues of the sworn siblings, act as the representatives of the writers to voice their opinions, and reflect the social attitudes of people in the late Ming Dynasty. In what follows, I will look into three types of characters: authorities (emperor and high officials), the sworn siblings' close relatives (their parents and blood siblings), and their friends as well as neighbors. By examining how they deal with the sworn siblings, I attempt to further explore the authors' opinions on the morally declining society, the authorities, and subordinates.

Authorities' recognition of sworn siblings:

In the Yang Jiao'ai-Zuo Botao story, on meeting the King of Chu, Yang Jiao'ai submits ten proposals, all of are applicable to the most urgent issues. As a result, Yang Jiao'ai is honored with the title of Ordinary Grand Master 中大夫. When he accepts this title, he bursts into tears and tells the king everything about his sworn brother Zuo Botao. The king feels sorrowful, too. He not only allows Yang to go back immediately to bury Zuo, but also confers on the deceased Zuo Botao the posthumous title of Ordinary Grand Master, grants a generous amount of money for Zuo's funeral, and sends a carriage and a retinue of men to escort Yang to the mountain where Zuo has died. We can see that the King of Chu is deeply moved by the sworn siblings. He supports Yang in redeeming his pledge to bury his sworn brother, even though he urgently needs Yang to get to work

implementing his proposals. This also suggests that the king highly values loyalty as well as doing good things after a loyal person's death. Later on, when he learns that Yang Jiao'ai has committed suicide in order to helping his deceased sworn brother fight against Jing Ke in the grave, the King of Chu also greatly appreciates Yang's loyalty. Although Yang had not yet assumed the office of Ordinary Grand Master, he is posthumously granted the title of Senior Grand Master 上大夫. This implies that the king considers loyalty more important than one's official achievement. Besides granting both Yang and Zuo higher title, the king also sends some officials to build a "Temple of Loyalty" in front of Yang and Zuo's grave. This temple is still standing today. It is notable that the original story in *Late Han History* ends with Yang Jiao'ai's suicide. The king does not take any further steps to laud Yang Jiao'ai's loyalty. It is evident that this added action in this story shows that the king praises trust between sworn siblings and among all of the people. He builds the temple of loyalty to remind and encourage people to be loyal.

The Fan Juqing story is another good example to demonstrate how the authority lauds trust and loyalty between the sworn brothers. Fan Juqing dies so that his spirit can visit Zhang Shao, his sworn sibling, on time to redeem his promise. On discovering that Fan killed himself for the trust and loyalty, Zhang Shao also commits suicide. When this matter reaches the ears of the local prefect, he writes a memorial to the emperor to report the matter. Impressed by the loyalty between the sworn siblings, Emperor Ming grants the two men posthumous titles, although they never held office in life. Fan Juqing is granted the title of Duke of Shanyang and Zhang Shao that of Duke of Runan. Very similar to what the King of Chu has done, Emperor Ming also asks people to erect a "Shrine of Loyalty" in front of Fan and Zhang's grave, on which is inscribed "Tomb of

Loyalty” to provide inspiration for posterity. The two men’s families are given great honor and provided by the government with food and clothing to raise Fan Juqing’s son. In the story’s original version, the authorities do not know anything about the death of Zhang Shao, ,while in this story, the emperor awards them posthumous titles, erects shrines of loyalty in their honor, and takes care of Fan’s son. He appreciates the loyalty between the sworn brothers and wishes that more people could learn loyalty from them.

According to the late Ming history, in reality, people including emperors, officials, and commoners all indulged in the pursuits of personal interests and excessive sexual desire. *The Unofficial History of the Wanli Dynasty* (Wanli yehuo bin 萬曆野獲編) records how popular aphrodisiacs were in the court (Chapter 21). Many *Sanyan* stories such as “Jin Hailing Dies because of the Excessive Sexual Desire”金海陵縱欲身亡 (HY 23) also describe and criticize that situation. Jin Hailing uses his power to capture women and have sexual intercourse with hundreds of women. But, these *Sanyan* sworn sibling stories end with the emperors and officials’ appreciation and encouragement of the loyalty. It might be sarcastic here, but, in terms of Feng Menglong’s theory of the function of literature, I think those stories were not only written to set good examples for the contemporary emperors, they also reminded the emperors to use their power appropriately to encourage and enlighten people to be virtuous. Since the Han Dynasty, people have known that folk songs and stories represent the people’s voice. They advised the ruler to listen to the popular songs collected from the people as a means of keeping in

touch with the ruled even in the remote provinces of the empire. “Thus the king, without going to the window or leaving the door, knows fully the sufferings in his realm.”<sup>16</sup>

In the Li Xiuqing story, the most critical figure who helps Li Xiuqing cross the sworn sibling boundary and facilitate Huang Shancong and Li Xiuqing’s marriage is Grand Commandant Li, a eunuch. In the Ming Dynasty, eunuchs were extremely influential. They were authorities. This figure of Mr. Li was newly added in the *Sanyan* version. When Mr. Li ascertains the truth of Huang Shancong’s chastity and Li Xiuqing’s sincerity, he supports Li Xiuqingin marrying Huang Shancong. He summons a matchmaker and asks her to go to Huang Shancong and seek her agreement for marriage. Using his own money, Mr. Li pays for Li Xiuqing’s betrothal gifts and rents a vacant house as the venue of the wedding ceremony. He also personally hosts the wedding ceremony. When the bridal veil is lifted after the ceremony, Huang Shancong realizes the trick, but it is too late to change her mind. Mr. Li adopts Li Xiuqing as his nephew and buys Huang Shancong lavish gifts for her dowry. He also tells the local authorities and various government branches about this matter.

As Crawford notes, “The Ming Dynasty, however, marks the zenith of eunuch power. One of the most basic characteristics of Ming political history is the degree to which the imperial authority came to be directly wielded by eunuchs.” It is true that eunuchs took charge of all the major offices including the important Palace Treasury. Eunuchs were influential, but they were very corrupt and immoral. Any intellectual who said anything evil of the eunuchs would be killed. Ironically, in this story, the writer

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<sup>16</sup> From *Chunqiu gongyang zhuan Heshi jiegu (The Gongyang Commentary Annotated by He Xiu of the Han Dynasty)*, *Sibu beiyao* ed. 16.11a, commentary, 15<sup>th</sup> year of Duke Xuan; “Gu wangzhe bu chu youhu, jinzhi tianxia ku, buxia tang er zhi si fang 故王者不出牖户，盡知天下苦，不下堂而知四方” translation by Anne Birrell, *Popular Songs and Ballads of Han China*. London: Unwin Hyman. 1988. P 15.

deliberately had a eunuch to do a good thing in bringing together the chaste and the righteous. Two poem lines written in the end of the story praise the fine qualities of Mr. Li: He helped preserve virtue and love; Who among eunuchs is as worthy as he was? (501) 节操恩情两得全，宦官谁似李公賢? In Feng Menglong's own words, *Sanyan* was edited to alarm, warn, and enlighten the society. I do not think this story was written to exculpate the eunuchs. Mr. Li appreciates chastity, and helps to connect two virtuous people, by using his own money. This action was precisely in contrast with contemporary people's quibbling over small amounts of money. According to these two lines of poetry, the writing of this eunuch character is to give the contemporary eunuchs a model of good behavior.

#### *Close Relatives' Doubts about Real Sworn Siblings*

Theoretically, the sworn siblings' close relatives were supposed to be the people who most trust them; however, in these stories, all of the close relatives are more or less skeptical about the sworn siblings' relationships.

In the Zhao Taizu story, when Jingniang's parents and blood brother see her coming back, the first thing that they think about is that Jingniang must have had sexual relations with Zhao Taizu. In her brother's words, "My sister was kidnapped by two villains, but today she came back with this ruddy-faced man (Zhao Taizu). As the saying goes: 'Who'd be willing to rise early without some personal benefit? So, this man must have got some good benefits from my sister. There must be some reason that this guy sent Jingniang back. Furthermore, everybody knows that Jingniang was kidnapped. Who will marry her? Therefore, it will be good if we make them marry.'" Admittedly, he does

think of his blood sister's future and reputation. However, he does not believe that Jingniang has preserved her virginity. virginal. Although Jingniang insists on her chastity and on Zhao Taizu's righteousness, neither her blood brother nor her parents believe them. When her father suggests that Zhao Taizu marry his daughter, Taizu leaves at once with indignation, angry that they do not believe in his righteousness. Even after Taizu left, Jingniang's close relatives still do not trust her. Her sister-in-law says that "Taizu's abrupt departure means he does not really love you. If he were kind, he would have married you." Their distrust hurts Jingniang. She thinks that even if her close relatives cannot trust her, how will other people believe in her chastity? Therefore, she kills herself in order to prove to them she is indeed chaste.

In the Li Xiuqing story, after seven years, Huang Shancong returns home dressed as a man. On seeing her, her blood sister criticizes her. "You've been in business with a man for so many years, you must already be man and wife. As a proverb has it, 'Holiest people do nothing under the table.' Why don't you tie up your hair into a chignon with a circlet? You'll look better that way. How shameful you look now, neither like a man nor a woman!" Obviously, Huang Shancong's blood sister objects to cross-dressing, distrusts Shancong's chastity, and questions whether it is possible for a man and a woman to be real sworn siblings. Not until she examines Shancong's body is she persuaded of her blood sister's chastity.

Among all of the sworn sibling stories, it seems that only Zhang Shao's mother in the Fan Juqing story can understand a sworn brother relationship. When Zhang Shao tells his mother that he gave up the examination to save a righteous man on the way, and they sworn to be brothers, his mother supports him. She says, "The official career is

predestined. I am very happy that you swore and oath with a righteous man.” However, on the appointed date, Zhang Shao asks his mother to kill a chicken and prepare for the dinner. His mother says, “Fan Juqing lives very far. He might not be arriving on time.” When Fan Juqing’s spirit arrives, Zhang Shao cries. His mother consoles him that a missed appointment is not critical enough to deserve tears. When Zhang Shao tells his mother that he has seen the spirit of Fan Juqing, his mother replies that it must be his dream.

Almost none of the close relatives of the sworn siblings trust them in the stories, even though the sworn siblings are their blood siblings or their children. From the close relatives’ behaviors and dialogue, we can see they are too realistic and materialistic. In their minds, theirs is no such thing as a pure sworn sibling relationship. There must be some self-interest between them. Actually, these characters are representative of late Ming people. Some of the close relatives such as Jingniang’s blood brother and parents’ who distrust her chastity with her sworn brother destroy her life. Again, the stories were designed to alert people to the fact that real virtue still does exist.

#### *Neighbors and Friends’ Mockery of Sworn Siblings*

The sworn siblings’ close relatives are skeptical about them, let alone the neighbors and friends. Those people mock them.

The Yu Boya-Zhong Ziqi story not only added the part about Yu Boya’s taking care of Zhong Ziqi’s parents after Zhong’s death; it also includes an elaboration that deals with Zhong Ziqi’s neighbors. Yu Boya and Zhong Ziqi knew each other because of music; they swore to be brothers due to their musical telepathy. Therefore, when Zhong’s

father leads Yu to visit Zhong's grave, Yu plays a piece of elegiac music with his zither in tears. On hearing the music, the neighbors applaud and laugh. Yu is confused; Zhong's father tells him the neighbors are uneducated. They do not know about music. They only regard music as entertainment.

In the Liu Xiaoguan story, when Liu Qi wants to marry, Liu Fang prevents him from doing so, since actually she wishes to marry him because their parents' graves are put together, and if they get married, it will be convenient to look after the graves. Before Liu Qi discovers that his sworn brother Liu Fang is a woman, he tells his friend Qin Dalang about the marriage. Immediately, this friend tells him that that Liu Fang's objection to Liu Qi's marriage is due to jealousy. While Liu Qi insists that Liu Fang is a righteous man, this friend suggests that he ask a matchmaker to test Liu Fang.

Those people are commoners. They reflect the values of late Ming society and late Ming people. People were snobbish, indifferent and lacked trust. They could not understand the loyalty between the sworn siblings. They did not even think people should take the sworn sibling relationship too seriously. Feng Menglong's *Sanyan* was written especially for those people. He adopted popular literature which was more accessible to commoners, in the hope to enlighten people and correct the aberrant social climate, so that "The faint-hearted will be made brave, the debauched chaste, the unkind compassionate, the obtuse ashamed."



## Conclusion

Finally, it is worth examining under what circumstances the characters in the *Sanyan* stories swear to be siblings. The sworn siblings in *Sanyan* stories come from all walks of life. They include intellectuals, merchants, woodcutters, recluses, officials, and emperors. They typify the majority of people. Different from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the characters in *Sanyan* do not take an oath of brotherhood in order to achieve a shared political aim, nor do they swear like Ximen Qing to form special brotherhood with a group of indecent people. In terms of the six stories discussed in this essay, oaths of brotherhood take place after a time of difficulty (患難交). In the Fan Juqing story, Zhang Zhao saves Fan's life while on their journey, and because of that, he misses his examination. They swear an oath of brotherhood to each other when Fan recovers. In the Yang Jiao'ai story, Yang Jiao'ai accepts Zuo Botao and shares his home with Zuo on a rainy night. These two plots in the two stories were newly added on the basis of their original Han Dynasty versions. In the Zhao Taizu story, Zhao Taizu kills the villains and rescues Jingniang from the temple where she was being held after being kidnapped. In the Li Yuqing story, Li takes an oath of loyalty with Huang Shancong and they start their business together after Huang's father passes away. Another situation in which two people become sworn siblings is when they find the soul mates 知音交. The phrase "knowing my sounds" 知音 comes from the Yu Boya- Zhong Ziqi story. Yu is an official, and Zhong is a woodcutter. They meet during Yu's journey when he takes shelter from the rain. Every time when Yu plays a piece of music, Zhong can tell what Yu is thinking about. Recognizing Zhong Ziqi, a commoner, as his soulmate in music, Yu Boya humbles himself and swears to be brothers with Zhong. Nevertheless, from its original

story, we only know that Zhong can understand Yu's music. It does not tell us how Yu humbles himself to swear with a commoner merely due to the musical telepathy. It is also notable that in *Sanyan* stories, people swear to return gratitude to a common person 報恩交. The "Liu Brothers in Brotherhood and in Marriage" story fits in this type. Mr. Liu adopts Liu Fang and Liu Qi when their fathers pass away. Then, they become sworn siblings to return the kindness to Mr. Liu. In other words, none of the characters in these stories are motivated by wealth, self-interest, or private desire. On the contrary, throughout the sworn sibling stories, there are examples of bonds between commoners, between poor and rich (Yang Jiao'ai and Zuo Botao), between commoners and officials (Yu Boya and Zhong Ziqi), and even between a commoner and a future emperor (Jingniang and Zhao Taizu). The rich man, the official, and the future emperor all humble themselves in order to establish a bond with commoners of lower status. Those sworn siblings keep loyal and trustworthy to each other in life and after death. They transgress the sibling boundary for filial piety, and they protect it for chastity and righteousness. Actually, those people are the models that Feng Menglong wished people to learn from through his stories. The writing of the characters around the sworn siblings was to enlighten people and correct people's behavior.

The sworn sibling stories in *Sanyan* can also reflect Feng Menglong's viewpoint of *qing* 情. Feng Menglong's *qing* encompassed pure love, romantic relationships between chaste women and righteous men, brotherhood based on mortality and loyalty, wholesome friendship and so on. His *qing* cannot be separated from virtue.

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