

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Re-membering *First Love*:

Complicit Spectatorship and Mnemonic Labor from *The Nine Righteous Ones* to *Faithful*

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in East Asian Studies

by

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2026

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Master of Arts in East Asian Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2026

Professor Huijun Mai, Chair

Taking Lin Yi-han's *Fang Si-Chi's First Love Paradise* (2017) as an ethical and literary antecedent, this thesis examines Li Bojian's novella *The Nine Righteous Ones* (2019) and its screen adaptation, *Faithful* (2023). Although Chinese and Taiwanese educational and institutional contexts differ, both associate teaching with moral exemplarity. I ask how teacher-perpetrators exploit that authority to disguise sexual violence as romance and how literary narratives prompt readers and viewers to reconsider the interpretations that sustain it.

My comparative close readings show that these works do not present victims as incapable of voicing their traumatic experiences and passively waiting for outside listeners' rescue and redress, as envisioned in the post-modernist branches of trauma studies. In *First Love*, Si-chi rereads and annotates her own diary, undertaking an act of self-witnessing that rebuts the

language of romance the teacher has used to disguise the assault. Si-chi's friends and later readers become witnesses by allowing her counter-interpretation to reshape their previous misunderstandings and to shoulder ethical responsibilities to take action and respond to the tragedy's unresolved claims.

The Nine and *Faithful* not only feature protagonists who refute the imposition of a patriarchal interpretation on their experiences, but also disseminate this rereading practice to a wider network of survivors, silent bystanders, indirect beneficiaries, and enabling institutions. The pursuit of justice therefore requires a collective labor I call "re-membling": the work of weaving social relations into an accountable community of witnesses attentive to survivors' claims.

The two later works draw on the classical Chinese concepts of reciprocity (*bao* 報) and righteousness (*yi* 義), which function not only as theoretical tools of literary analysis but also as interactive and ethical devices that position outside readers and viewers within unresolved *bao* obligations. Rather than treating *yi* as the inherent virtue of a solitary hero, these works reimagine righteousness as an incremental communal practice of remembering, believing, and acting. This practice recognizes power asymmetries, social vulnerability, and survivors' authority to determine how they participate in the pursuit of justice. Together, these three works begin to form a women-centered literary lineage of self-interpretation and responsive witnessing, complicating both a male-centered Chinese canon and branches of Euro-American trauma theory that favor silence and unspeakability in narratives of trauma.

The thesis of Jingyan Zhang is approved.

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University of California, Los Angeles

2026

“It’s hard enough to spend our whole lives mastering Chinese,” they said.

—Lin Yi-han, *First Love*

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PREFACE

When I was writing my thesis, one of my roommates, Ruby, who is a college freshman, would sometimes check in on me: “Are you done with your thesis?” Whenever she asked, I felt a little stressed. One day, she looked into my eyes as she asked, and suddenly, as if the camera had turned backward, I saw another scene from seven years ago: I was at UC Santa Barbara, working on my undergraduate thesis alongside my friend Jungah, who was writing her dissertation. At the time, I had no prior exposure to independent research. I remembered how I used to check in on her exactly the same way: “Are you done with your dissertation?” She would laugh and tell me that the question made her feel stressed.

Perhaps asking whether someone is “done” with a thesis or dissertation makes the work sound like a task that can be completed in a fixed number of days. But throughout my experience of writing this thesis, I learned that writing is never like that. It is a process: it can be slow and cumulative. From one day to the next, it may feel as though very little has changed, but gradually, the work begins to take shape.

Seven years ago, I wrote my undergraduate thesis focusing on a close reading of *Fang Si-chi’s First Love Paradise*, while the Fuzhou incident continues to ferment in public memory. Seven years later, Meng Wan is seeking justice for Rulan in *The Nine Righteous Ones*, while cases like Li Yiyi’s continue to bring *First Love* back into public view. When I began looking for a topic for my master’s thesis, I hesitated about whether to return to the same text. I worried that I might be judged as someone with too narrow an interest, as someone who “only” works on Lin Yi-han’s works.

And yet my mind kept returning to a sunny afternoon shortly before I left UCSB seven years ago. I was sitting in the office of one of my advisors, Professor Elisabeth Weber. She was speaking about the absence of witnesses in traditional theories of trauma and the troubling implications of that absence: if we assume that there can be no witness at the moment

catastrophe occurs, then we risk arriving at the dangerous claim that the catastrophe itself never existed.

Our discussion stayed with me. Later, when I took my first class at UC Los Angeles with Professor Huijun Mai, I found myself drawn to Chinese literary theories concerned with presence. The tension between presence and absence had begun to exert a gravitational pull on me. The discussion from that sunny afternoon became something like the earth, and I found myself orbiting it. I think here of Dori Laub's account of trauma: we speak around it, or about it, but can never fully speak the trauma itself. This struggle between presence and absence has preoccupied me ever since. For many years of my own life, I have circled around a blank, a gap in memory whose presence I can feel precisely through its absence. Again and again, I return to this blank and knock at its edges, asking what happened there, and whether it will ever answer.

Lin Yi-han died in 2017 at the age of twenty-six. Now, I am older than she was when she died. In one sense, I, and many others fortunate enough not to have experienced what Lin called the "back side of the world," have survived past her age. And *First Love* continues to reverberate. We can see in its afterlives how memory persists and prevails. Again and again, people return to the questions raised by the novel and by Lin's life. If none of this mattered, Meng Wan would not still be seeking justice for Rulan. People would not continue returning to these stories, these wounds, these unresolved questions. Their return itself means something. And so I, too, return.

If "advancing a pawn each day" can be understood as a form of ethical intervention, then writing this thesis has also felt like a practice of daily incrementalism: one sentence, one page, one small movement at a time, gradually taking shape into something I could not fully see at the beginning. I have enjoyed this journey deeply. And I want to express my gratitude to everyone who accompanied me along the way.

First and foremost, I would like to thank all of my committee members. To my chair, Professor Huijun Mai, I am deeply grateful for her scholarship in medieval Chinese literature and

cultural history, as well as for her care and guidance throughout this journey. Her knowledge has often inspired me, like an unexpected and refreshing flavor in a dish, opening possibilities I had not previously imagined. I thank Professor Whitney Arnold for her gentle nudges, which gave me the momentum to keep moving forward. Her encouragement often came at just the right moment, giving me direction while leaving room for my own thinking. It has been a great honor to work with Professor Michael Berry and to benefit from his incisive and insightful advice throughout the process. His careful reading and thoughtful questions continually encourage me to sharpen my arguments and see the project from new perspectives. I am also profoundly grateful to Professor Shu-mei Shih for her willingness to invest in my project and for the inspiration her scholarship has provided throughout my academic journey. Her breadth of knowledge has introduced me to a wider range of literary works, critical approaches, and theoretical perspectives.

Beyond my committee, my thanks go to Professors Yinghui Wu and Hyun Suk Park, with whom I greatly enjoyed discussing my project during office hours. In the course of carrying out this research, I also benefited tremendously from a graduate writing seminar taught by Professor William Marotti and a research methodology course taught by Professor David C. Schaberg, as well as from my classmates in both courses. Their collective intellectual generosity has convinced me that an academic project is never the work of a single person but the result of a community of thought, conversation, encouragement, and care.

I am likewise grateful to graduate students in UCLA's Department of Asian Languages and Cultures, including, but by no means limited to, Chih-hen Chang, Alan Dai, and Guanrui Gong. Thank you for your encouragement, which gave me confidence to continue pursuing this project, and for so generously sharing your insights with me. My thanks also go to my student affairs officer, Yumi Kawanishi, for her patience and assistance in navigating the many administrative processes that accompanied my years at UCLA.

Outside UCLA, my deepest gratitude goes to Dr. Aryeh Amihay and Dr. Ofra Amihay. I am grateful not only for their academic guidance and intellectual nurturing, but also for their care, support, and willingness to share with me what they have learned through both research and life. I first came to know them at UCSB, and our friendship now reaches back seven or eight years. Their presence has been an important part of my journey.

I owe an immeasurable debt to my parents and grandparents for their unconditional love and support. They have cared not only about the progress of my academic life, but also about my health and everyday well-being, sometimes in the most concrete way possible: feeding me with delicious Cantonese food.

I am also grateful to my roommates, Ruby Guan, Sylvia Li, and Rita Xu. I feel incredibly fortunate to have shared a home with you. Thank you, especially, for so generously sharing your homemade dishes with me.

My thanks also go to Carleigh and Danelia for the fitness classes they taught from spring through summer, and to the classmates who exercised alongside me and encouraged me to step away from the computer screen. You brightened my days and reminded me, again and again, that there was a world beyond the thesis.

I hope these acknowledgments convey more than a list of names. Each of your names holds a constellation of endearing memories: conversations, meals, classrooms, walks, moments of encouragement, and small acts of care. I hope that when I return to these pages, your names will bring those memories back to life.

Last but not least, my heart goes to my community down Clover Avenue: You are my rock, my refuge, and the place and people I hold dearest.

I. Introduction: from *First Love* to Re-membering

A. Opening Problem and Central Argument

Across the respective cultural and institutional contexts of China and Taiwan, a teacher's authority has often extended beyond the role of an educator. Teachership is associated with moral cultivation: a teacher is expected not only to instruct but to exemplify moral values of Confucianism. Contemporary political and legal discourse continues to draw upon this association. Xi Jinping 習近平, president of the People's Republic of China (PRC), in his 2013 "Letter to All Teachers Nationwide," for example, invokes Confucius as the paragon of the teacher. The letter quotes from the *Liji* 禮記 (*Book of Rites*), a foundational Confucian ritual text, in the chapter "Wen Wang Shizi" 文王世子 ("King Wen as Son and Heir"): "The master taught them by means of occurring things, and made them understand what was virtuous" (師也者，教之以事而喻諸德者也; "Wen Wang Shizi"; trans. Legge).¹ The sentence articulates a model of teachership in which instruction (*jiao* 教) is inseparable from moral transformation (*de* 德).

Meanwhile, Taiwan's Constitutional Court, in Interpretation No. 702, cites Article 14.1 of the *Teachers' Act*, which permits dismissal, suspension, or nonrenewal only on specified grounds. One such ground, formerly Clause 6 and now Clause 7, concerns "improper conduct" (行為不檢) that undermines *shidao* 師道, the "Way of the teacher" (*Teachers' Act*, art. 14).² That is, the law explicitly invokes the ethical "(Confucian) Way of the teacher" in defining conduct incompatible with the profession. Although these respective examples should not be taken as

¹ The character *de* 德 is translated as "virtue" by Legge in this quote. More specifically, as Kroll notes, *de* means a "quality conducing to proper action in realm of social or community interaction" (80). Kroll also notes that *yü* 喻, which Legge translates as "make...understand," means to "elucidate" and "illustrate" (573). Taken together, the teacher, according to traditional Chinese views, is not simply an educator but one who embodies virtue through lived experience. That is, pedagogy, moral speech, communal well-being, and the image of a nation all converge in teachership.

² Here, *dao* 道, meaning "the Way," or the underlying moral order, conveys, as in classical Chinese philosophy, a Heaven-bestowed potency that enables its possessor to influence "charismatically" but "without effort the behavior of others in the same direction" (Kroll 81). It is an invisible yet compelling force conferred by Heaven that allows sages, rulers, or teachers to serve as a pathway for moral cultivation (79-80).

evidence of a universal cultural conception of teachership, they reveal an underlying cultural grammar in which pedagogical authority can also confer moral credibility.

Consequently, within this cultural framework, a teacher's perpetration of sexual abuse is more than violence against victims. Such a crime risks rupturing the very *dao* and *de* on which the role of teacher, and, by extension, the moral legitimacy of the wider community, depends. To further complicate this matter, how do we view a teacher-perpetrator who deliberately exploits the image of a moral exemplar to legitimize his crime and shape its interpretation? Literary cultivation can be weaponized as "proof" of moral refinement, and the power asymmetry between teacher and student can give the perpetrator disproportionate leverage to justify the assaults. The problem, then, is not only what social conditions enable sexual violence, or whether victims can articulate their experiences. It is who possesses the authority to name the event and whose interpretation will be believed.

This thesis analyzes Lin Yi-han's 林奕含 *Fang Si-chi's First Love Paradise* 房思琪的初戀樂園 (2017; hereafter *First Love*), Li Bojian's 李薄蘭³ novella *The Nine Righteous Ones* 九義人 (*Jiu Yi Ren*; 2019; hereafter *The Nine*) published on the Chinese digital-literature platform Douban Reads (豆瓣阅读; *Douban Yuedu*), and Tencent's 騰訊 screen adaptation *Faithful* (2023) directed by Zang Xichuan 臧溪川 and written by Huang Fen 黃芬 and Cao Xiaotian 曹笑天. These works examine sexual violence perpetrated by teachers in settings that link teaching with morality. They show how narratives of romance can make that violence socially illegible. In *First Love*, a teacher exploits literary language, together with the moral authority attached to teachership, to rewrite sexual assault as romance; Si-chi's friends, neighbors, and legal institutions misinterpret such an abusive relationship as a love affair at first through the same romanticizing frame. Nevertheless, Si-chi initiates her counter-reading as she gradually becomes aware of the teacher's deception. Through annotations she later adds to her earlier diary entries,

³ The name Li Bojian 李薄蘭 appears to be a pen name; her legal name has not been publicly confirmed (Li, "Li Bojian—Zuozhe Zhuye").

she revisits the sites of the trauma and assaults which the teacher disguises through the language of romance and asserts her counter-interpretation of what has occurred.

The Nine relocates the struggle over interpretive authority to an imagined premodern city, where a famous embroidery master's violence is sustained by civic prestige, legal inaction, and commoners' desire to consume it as an amorous affair. The novella sketches a relational architecture for responding to such illegibility by gathering various people through moral obligations to address the unresolved claim first set forth by the heroine. Building on this moral architecture, *Faithful* expands and concretizes its mnemonic dimension through the protagonists' prior connections to the heroine, the inclusion of other female victims and implicated characters, and mnemonic objects and records that carry memories across time. As an audiovisual work streamed on an online platform, it also extends this ethical field to real-life spectators through its "bullet comments" *danmu* 弹幕⁴, making the viewing and commenting of outside audiences part of the complexity of spectatorship in the narrative stages.

Across these three works, the central problem is not the absence of testimony but a struggle over interpretive authority and ethical reception. Survivors speak, write, remember, and reread their own experiences, despite the fact that their accounts and experiences can be romanticized, publicly discredited, or met with silences or inaction. These works show that sexual violence persists not because nothing has been said, but because unequal social relations take part in shaping the reception of survivors' accounts and what actions are taken after they are heard.

Beginning with *First Love*'s depiction of sexual violence made illegible by the language of romance, this thesis argues that *The Nine* and *Faithful* develop successive versions of a shared ethics of response. Rather than only asking whether a perpetrator has received deserved punishment or not, my comparative reading examines the broader asymmetries of power and onlookers' reception that shape how a survivor's account of violence is read and acted upon. *First Love* first exposes the complexity of spectatorship while also locating the beginning of

⁴ Real-time comments that viewers of the drama can post, which shoot across the screen like bullets.

resistance in the protagonist's refusal of the language of romance and in her friends' subsequent correction of her earlier misunderstanding, which was skewed by the same deceptive framing. *The Nine* and *Faithful* respond to this issue via an economy of *bao* 報 ("response," "reciprocate," or "recompense"), in which past injuries and prior favors remain unsettled and create intersecting obligations that draw beneficiaries, witnesses, and survivors in relation to claims that demand response. In doing so, the works reconceive *yi* 義 ("righteousness," "moral obligation," or "acting rightly") not as the inherent virtue of a solitary hero but as a contingent practice of responding and assuming moral responsibility under social conditions of unequal power structures.

I call the collective labor brought about by these relations *re-mem-bering*. *The Nine* offers a sketch of this labor by drawing various people into a potential witnessing community, while *Faithful* makes its mnemonic and relational dimensions more explicit through characters' prior connections to the heroine, their encounters with surviving records and mnemonic objects, and their attempts to reconstruct relations that violence, shame, and institutional inaction have severed or prevented from realization. Re-mem-bering therefore does not mean restoring the voice of a silenced victim envisioned by mainstream theoretical frames of trauma studies. Re-mem-bering makes explicit the ethical practice suggested in the novella. Through remembrance, it reconnects memories, counter-interpretations, records, and moral claims with people who can respond. These connections begin to reshape a field in which teaching authority and morality are intertwined. Under this intervention, implication differentiates among types of entanglement; *bao* explains why past favors and injuries continue to demand an ethical response; re-mem-bering designates the shared labor of response; and *yi* orients the ethical form that this labor takes.

This thesis shifts the discussion of justice away from the victim-perpetrator dyad and the catharsis of retributive closure. It focuses instead on interpretive struggle, spectatorship, and ethical responsibility within the unequal power structures that shape whether sexual violence becomes legible. The latter works do more than offer a courtroom verdict that *First Love*

withholds. They emphasize different layers of ethical reading that help alter the social landscape, from a survivor's articulation of her own testimony to another person's willingness to refuse a patriarchal interpretation to the formation of a larger community prepared to remember, believe, and act. In doing so, the works place the burden of ethical interpretation not on victims by asking them to make themselves legible "enough," but on characters, institutions, and real-life audiences who should reflect on how they read and what moral obligations they should shoulder from this kind of reading.

B. *First Love*: Plot and the Problem of Legibility

First Love centers on the abusive relationship between thirteen-year-old Fang Si-chi 房思琪 and Lee Guo-hua 李國華, a much older, married Chinese-language teacher. Lee's authority lies not only in age and his position as a teacher but also in his mastery of literature. He exploits the language of classical poetry to shape his persona as a refined scholar and give his predation the appearance of romantic love, manipulating Si-chi into interpreting the abuse through such literary discourse. The novel thus makes legibility a central problem: the focus is not only on sexual violence itself, but also on how rape becomes legible to the victim and to others when a respected teacher has already imposed the language of romance onto this exploitative dynamic.

At the beginning, *First Love* presents Si-chi's abusive relationship with Lee through the focalization of her friend, Liu Yi-ting 劉怡婷, who mistakes it for a love affair. After discovering Si-chi's diary, Yi-ting realizes that the relationship was abusive. Guo Hsiao-chi 郭曉奇, another student whom Lee abused, faces a parallel dilemma when she posts her online disclosure of Lee's abuse: commenters recast her story as the stereotypical trope of a young mistress and a powerful older man. Both cases show how audiences' interpretive frameworks shape whether disclosures of sexual abuse receive empathetic recognition and response.

Regrettably, the diary reaches a legal impasse. After Si-chi's mental collapse, her friends seek legal advice, but the lawyer tells them that the diary is not solid courtroom proof and warns

that accusing Lee without externally verifiable proof may prompt a defamation suit. The novel pairs this impasse with the passivity of ordinary bystanders, resulting in a lack of institutional action and redress. Standing on her apartment ledge, Si-chi considers suicide, but the building manager on the ground floor merely gazes at her as if he were just checking the weather, and he never calls for help. In the end, Lee is never brought to trial, and no official action is taken in response to the diary. Therefore, the novel places an ethical demand on readers to read against the facade of romance and identify the abuse shaped not only by the villain but also by onlookers.

C. Reception and Contemporary Context

It is essential to differentiate among Lin's fictional writings, her personal biography, and the ensuing public disputes, even though readers often conflate them. Lin published *First Love* in February 2017 and died by suicide in April of that year.⁵ Subsequently, her family asserted that the novel drew on her real experience, and readers often view Fang Si-chi as the author herself. This thesis does not assume that Fang is Lin herself. However, the biographical reading of *First Love* matters because debates over whether the novel could be read as legal evidence mirror the novel's concern with the credibility and legibility of victims' accounts.

Regarding the judicial outcome, some members of the public reported Chen Kuo-hsing 陳國星, the cram-school teacher often associated with the fictional character Lee Guo-hua. The Tainan District Prosecutors' Office (Tainan DPO) investigated allegations of sexual offenses. On August 22, 2017, the office issued a non-prosecution disposition, stating that it had found no concrete evidence of a crime. Lin's family did not file a complaint, and the office's analysis of the allegations it investigated concluded that the available evidence did not substantiate the

⁵ The novel's opening statement, "based on a true story," or more literally, "adapted from real people and events" (改編自真人真事), makes the relationship between fiction and lived experience more nuanced (title page). Together, the timing of the author's death and this statement greatly shape the novel's widespread reception as Lin's own testimony. As a result, some readers view passages from the novel as "clues" to be matched against Lin's biography. However, this thesis does not claim that the novel is Lin's autobiography.

alleged offenses. The press release relied in part on an earlier manuscript that prosecutors characterized as depicting a consensual relationship and contrasted it with the published novel. Whatever one's opinion of that reasoning, the procedural result was a prosecutorial decision not to indict, implying that, to this day, no judicial determination of whether Chen was guilty or not has been reached (Tainan DPO).⁶

The novel continued to evolve after its mainland Chinese publication in 2018, when Weibo⁷ feminism and MeToo-China were expanding the vocabulary for people to discuss sexual abuse and how institutions should protect victims. For instance, the expression *rigong yizu* 日拱一卒 (“advance on pawn each day”) captures the ethic of incremental action in Chinese feminism (Xue and Rose 5).⁸ Set against this backdrop, the Fuzhou controversy brought the questions posed by *First Love* to the center of vigorous public discussion in mainland China. In April 2019, evidence was posted on Weibo by a user indicating that Chen, using the name ‘Chen Yi’ 陳藝, was involved in instructional activities at Fuzhou E-Fly Education and Training School.⁹ The Fuzhou Municipal Education Bureau investigated and requested that the associated online platform be shut down (Lin). This episode made what appeared to be a Taiwan-specific issue suddenly feel urgent in China: Chinese readers and institutions therefore became participants in the novel's ongoing public afterlife, rather than distant observers of an exclusively Taiwanese

⁶ A non-prosecution disposition is a prosecutorial decision not to indict; it is not a judicial verdict of acquittal (Tainan DPO).

⁷ Chinese version of Twitter

⁸ Xue and Rose introduce *rigong yizu* as an expression describing how small actions of each individual can, through daily accumulation, completely change the game (5). The expression evokes the image of a pawn moving in Chinese chess, advancing one step at a time. I refer to it as a contextual lens for *The Nine's* and *Faithful's* emphasis on small and cumulative acts.

⁹ The Fuzhou controversy soon went beyond literary and feminist discussion into China's mainstream news coverage. On 6 April 2019, the verified Weibo account of *The Beijing News* (新京報) reported both the online allegation and Fuzhou E-Fly School's denial that the person worked there. On 10 April, *China Youth Daily* (中國青年報) reported the Fuzhou Education Bureau's investigation and official response. The report confirmed only that the person had been identified as affiliated with Fuzhou; it did not establish official confirmation of the allegations that he had committed sexual assault (Luo; Lin).

controversy.¹⁰ Published that same year, *The Nine* becomes part of this reception history: Li Bojian closes the novella by dedicating it to Lin Yi-han and asking forgiveness for being unable to provide a more satisfying or perfect ending.¹¹ The dedication identifies *First Love* as the ethical and literary antecedent.

A second case in China, the 2018 death of nineteen-year-old Li Yiyi (李奕奕, a pseudonym) in Qingyang, provides another important contextual echo. Two years earlier, Li had reported sexual misconduct by her high-school head teacher.¹² On June 20, 2018, she remained on a shopping mall ledge for a prolonged period while people gathered below. Some members of the crowd recorded or livestreamed the scene and urged her to jump, while firefighters attempted to talk her down. The moment Li started to slip, a firefighter grabbed her arm, and other rescuers attempted to help, but she broke free and fell (Li et al.; Cai). The contrast between the heckling crowd and the rescuers matters: those present were not of the same type of spectator. It also anticipates a central character's death scene in *The Nine*, where a guard similarly catches her

¹⁰ The Fuzhou controversy also exposes that what is at stake is not only a single person's alleged wrongdoing, but also the moral expectations attached to teachership, which is revealed by China's state-affiliated media discourse: In a commentary published in *Guangming Daily* (光明日報) and subsequently republished on People.cn (人民網) dated 16 April 2019, media commentator Zhao Zhijiang 趙志疆 invokes the Ministry of Education of the PRC's statement earlier in the year that teachers' ethics should be the primary criterion for evaluating the teaching workforce. Zhao juxtaposes the Fuzhou incident alongside two other scandals: an American fugitive wanted for murder and a Canadian whose teaching license had been revoked due to child sexual assault yet who taught in Beijing for six years. Zhao states that these cases precisely demonstrate the importance of moral integrity (*de* 德) as a fundamental criterion for the employment of teachers, whether Chinese or foreign. Hence, the role of a teacher within this cultural paradigm is not merely a personal vocation: Foreign educators, by assuming pedagogical authority, should also be held to the same expectations of exemplary moral conduct as in this framework.

¹¹ In the novella's afterword, Li Bojian writes, "I humbly dedicate this piece to Ms. Lin Yi-han. Please forgive me for being unable to offer a more satisfying and perfect ending" (僅以此文致敬林奕含女士。請原諒我無法給出一個更痛快圓滿的結局 151).

¹² Li's parents divorced in 2013, after which her father, Li Wenjun (李文軍, a pseudonym), assumed primary responsibility for Li and her younger brother. After Li disclosed her teacher's unwanted physical contact, her father took her to several cities for psychiatric treatment and pursued her sexual-assault complaint through the school, education authorities, police, and prosecutors. He also refused a settlement offered by the school because it required the family to relinquish further legal claims. The teacher initially received ten days of administrative detention, while prosecutors declined to bring criminal charges in March 2018. After Li's death, provincial authorities reopened the case; in 2020, the teacher was convicted of coercive sexual misconduct and sentenced to two years in prison. A subsequent civil judgment required the teacher and the school to compensate the victim. Reports from the time state that Li's father and another relative learned through social media that she was on the ledge and reached the building shortly after, while firefighters' rescue efforts were underway (Li et al.; Cai).

hand before she wrests her wrist free. This parallel foreshadows the novella's critique of audiences' responses to suffering.

D. *The Nine and Faithful*: Dual-Timeline Synopsis

The core narrative plot of *The Nine and Faithful* is the same, and the story consists of two main sections: the “present” vis-à-vis seven years earlier. Seven years ago, Lin Rulan 蔦如蘭¹³ was an apprentice at Mist-Rain Embroidery Tower 煙雨繡樓, the well-known workshop of an embroidery master Wu Lian 吳廉. After Wu sexually assaults her, Rulan contests the discourse of romance and brings an accusation against him. However, the institutions do not stand up for her: Wu's wealth, social connections, and his cultivated public image stifle the case, while onlookers consume Rulan's accusation as a love affair. Under social pressure, Rulan's family urges her to marry into the Wu family and become his concubine to preserve her honor. Refusing such an arrangement, Rulan dies by suicide.¹⁴ Meng Wan 孟宛, Rulan's fellow apprentice, survives; she is also one of Wu's victims. While in the drama, Meng is Rulan's closest friend and ally, she is not close to Rulan in the novella: she is present when Rulan brings her accusation against Wu to the court, yet, out of fear, she keeps silent. Nevertheless, Rulan becomes an ethical model for her. In both the drama and the novella, Meng makes an effort to reach out to other female victims and gather new allies to pursue justice for Rulan's case seven years later.

The Nine and Faithful share several central characters. Meng recruits Liu Xin 劉薪, a former constable injured by Wu's retaliation; Huang Jiaojiao 黃嬌嬌, a silk-thread merchant who supplied Wu's workshop; Feng Da 馮大, an armed escort and former outlaw; Li Chunfeng 李春

¹³ To Chinese-reading audiences, the name Lin Rulan immediately brings Lin Yi-han to mind due to their proximity in sound and rhythm, an association reinforced by Li Bojian's dedication of the novella to Lin. I return to the implications of namings in Section IV.

¹⁴ The novella depicts her death as jumping from the city wall before a crowd of onlookers. In *Faithful*, Rulan's death is presented as a relatively more private event happening at the Mist-Rain Tower. After her accusation is rejected and she is forced to marry Wu Lian, Rulan decides to die. On their wedding night, Rulan summons constables and confronts Wu before jumping from the tower, hoping that their presence will establish an official record of the event and lead to an investigation. Yet her plan ends up not bringing Wu to justice, and the case remains unresolved.

風, a thief who discovers Wu's hidden list; and Jueming 覺明, a survivor whose testimony helps reopen Rulan's case. These characters also appear in *Faithful*, but the drama gives them a more direct connection to Rulan in person while she is still alive. Whereas in the novella, Huang, Feng, and Li only hear about Rulan's story after the fact, *Faithful* places them within the unfolding of her case. Unlike the novella, the drama also introduces Liu Sanniang 柳三娘 (birth name 劉三女), another woman subjected to Wu's violence, whom the story depicts as coerced into working as a courtesan, and Shen Mu 沈牧, an imperial guard and former constable.¹⁵ In *Faithful*, Jueming is known by her birth name, Tian Xiaoling 田小玲, before she enters the nunnery. Together with Rulan and Meng, these characters form the “nine righteous ones.”

Seven years later, Meng Wan holds a more secure social position and is better connected. She begins to recruit the scattered characters involved in Rulan's case. Specifically in *Faithful*, each character is asked, “Do you still remember what happened seven years ago?” and is shown mnemonic objects tied to the case to remind them and rekindle their commitment. In the novella, Wu Lian's hidden list is a silk ledger recording the names of women Wu assaulted and the dates of the assaults. In *Faithful*, Wu's record is an embroidery depicting falling plum blossoms, identified as the “Falling Plum” design (*Luomei tu* 落梅圖). It is displayed as a decoration in the tower: the women's names and bloodstains are concealed beneath its beautiful surface, plainly in view yet not recognized. To protect the identities of the victims, Meng and her allies treat this record not as evidence to hand to the court, but instead as a map guiding them to reconnect with other survivors.

Their pursuit of justice gathers momentum bit by bit. Specifically, in *Faithful*, Meng weaves lanterns for each new ally; the group preserves Rulan's hairpin and other mementos; Liu Sanniang copies out Rulan's rejected petition and inscribes the red character *yuan* 冤 (“injustice”) on it; the protagonists move and juxtapose the plaques of the Mist-Rain Tower, the

¹⁵ Of the nine righteous ones, the novella instead includes Scholar Yan (Yan Xiucan 嚴秀才), a close friend of Li Chunfeng who is literate and helps interpret the content of Wu's record Li steals, and Dharma Master Huichen 慧沉法師, the abbess of the nunnery where Jueming lives.

local court, and an aristocratic household together so the city can see these institutions are supporting Wu at his back. Step by step, these acts create an environment that enables the women Wu abused, along with other witnesses, to participate in the reopened proceedings. Wu is eventually punished, but the group's more important achievement is their recovering the record hidden by Wu and reconnecting the people the case drove apart seven years ago.

Although both works juxtapose the present with events from seven years earlier, their different media produce distinct narrative structures: the novella uses character-centered chapters, whereas the drama alternates timelines across episodes. The novella organizes its story through successive character-centered chapters. It opens with Liu Xin after his release from prison, then returns to Wu Lian's planted evidence of a bribe that has incriminated him seven years earlier. As a result of corporal punishment, he becomes crippled and is nicknamed "Cripple Liu" 劉癱子. The following chapter introduces Meng Wan, who has married into the well-off Xu family and becomes "Lady Xu" 徐夫人. She persuades the princess consort to consider other embroideries, who is already bored with Wu's mist-rain embroidery and dissatisfied with Wu's allegation of violence. Then, the plot returns to the trauma Meng suffers as an apprentice at Mist-Rain Tower and to her witnessing of Rulan's suffering. The following chapters present the other characters Meng and Liu recruit, who are beneficiaries of Liu's and only hear about and sympathize with Rulan's story through Liu's retelling, leading to the discovery of Wu Lian's record and the reconnection with another female victim.

However, Jueming is the only one who decides to testify openly, with the support of the abbess, Dharma Master Huichen. In other words, within the chapters of the characters who are directly involved in Rulan's case, their present position is juxtaposed with their earlier injury and silence. The final "Chapter 0: Rulan" ("零：如蘭")¹⁶ returns to Rulan's failed accusation, the spectators' shaming, and her death before a detached crowd. It then reopens the case through Jueming's testimony and ends with compromised justice. The protagonists' efforts help hold Wu

¹⁶ The *pinyin* of the title is *lin rulan*, with *lin* 零 denoting "zero." Hence, it echoes the protagonist's name, Lin Rulan, and by extension, the author of *First Love*'s name, Lin Yi-han.

accountable, but the loss of the princess consort's favor and the new magistrate's political ambitions also contribute to his indictment. Eventually, the implicated systems and prejudiced spectators complicit in the injustice have yet to be reshaped and transformed.

In comparison, *Faithful* alternates Rulan's unsuccessful pursuit in the past with Meng's reconstructive work in the present, progressively revealing that the two timelines are connected through prior relations of implication. It opens with Rulan entering Mist-Rain Tower, initially mistaking Wu's abuse through the language of love and later recognizing that it is sexual assault. The next episode moves to Meng Wan seven years later, where she begins recruiting witnesses to seek justice for Rulan. Then, the following episode returns to Rulan's journey to seek justice. As this alternation continues, characters who join Meng seven years later are shown to have had previous encounters with Rulan while she was still alive. Through this alternating temporality, the drama reveals that the seemingly unrelated characters Meng recruits are, in fact, directly involved in Rulan's journey.

Whereas *The Nine* assembles its coalition largely through Liu Xin's relaying of Rulan's story and the reciprocal obligations of his beneficiaries, *Faithful* adds another layer by revealing that many recruited characters were already connected to Rulan and must confront their own earlier implication and silence. *Faithful* portrays Meng's recruitment as mending a tapestry of people implicated, wounded, or scattered by the violence. Their pursuit of justice for Rulan leads to an open trial of Wu Lian, which allows the audience, including onlookers, the other victims, and viewers outside the narrative to listen to Rulan's story, participate in the shared act of witnessing, and assume moral responsibility, however minor, for commemoration and reflection on the enabling power structures. The final episode imagines an idyllic alternate reality in which the violence never occurs; because the trauma that ties them together is not materialized, the protagonists have no shared history of implication and hence remain strangers. The episode concludes by holding up this dreamscape of mutual forgetting, one it portrays as preferable to the hard-won justice in the actual timeline.

E. Adaptation and Comparative Relationship

These three works, *First Love*, *The Nine*, and *Faithful*, are interconnected, yet none is a direct retelling of the earlier work. *The Nine* is not a simple remake of *First Love*, and the later TV drama *Faithful* likewise does not replicate *The Nine* verbatim. Each work employs different storytelling methods. *First Love* gradually unveils the truth about the abuse, foreshadowed by Yi-ting's initial misinterpretation and ultimately revealed by Si-chi's diary. Borrowing elements from traditional *gong'an*¹⁷ crime narratives and revenge tales, *The Nine* differs from modern detective fiction by not centering suspense on who the villain is. Wu Lian's role as Rulan's abuser is clear from the start; the suspense centers on why and how he remains protected and whether he will ultimately be held to account. *Faithful* draws on the novella, but it offers a unique interpretation of agency, symbolism, and the mechanisms by which justice becomes possible. Since it streams online, viewers can also post *danmu*, creating a live, on-screen layer of audience commentary.

By relocating the conflict to a fictional city in premodern China, *The Nine* and *Faithful* revisit three issues introduced in *First Love*: language, testimony, and spectatorship. In *Faithful*, the city is called Huaizhou 淮州 and is set during the Song dynasty. By doing so, they show that problems such as sexual violence disguised as romance, testimony discredited or disregarded by institutions, and public complicity are not exclusive to contemporary Taiwan. As for the aestheticization of abuse, *First Love* exposes how Lee Guo-hua uses literary language to make rape appear as romance. The later work tackles the same problem: In *The Nine*, Wu Lian's romantic story is believed because his artistry in weaving exquisite embroidery is taken as an equivalent of his refined personality. Adding to this misleading belief of Wu's personality, the drama's falling-plum embroidery, an adaptation of the novella's hidden silk list, becomes a

¹⁷ *Gong'an* 公案, literally "public desk," refers to a tradition of Chinese crime and courtroom narrative, often traced back to the Song and Yuan periods (Hao 46). Such narratives typically center on judicial proceedings in which one morally incorruptible judge investigates crimes, interrogates suspects, calls witnesses to testify, and issues judgments. For a brief account of the history and conventions of *gong'an* literature, see Hao 46.

symbol of the facade of romance: the surface of this exquisite embroidery covers and aestheticizes Wu's crime.

Moreover, the relationship between testimony, records, and legal uptake recurs in the two later works. The lawyer in *First Love* views Fang's diary alone as insufficient for the legal redress her friends seek. In *The Nine* and *Faithful*, Wu's hidden records become maps for seeking other survivors rather than being submitted directly to the court. Likewise, both works attend to the problematic role of the bystanders, from *First Love*'s building manager, online commentators, and readers of Fang's diary to a much larger group of onlookers who must learn to see past Wu's facade.

However, in addition to the position of onlookers, both later works complicate the role of victims as implicated subjects: *The Nine* first places Meng in overlapping positions as survivor, witness, and silent non-witness; *Faithful* expands this morally ambiguous position across a larger group of survivors and gives their coerced implication more narrative attention. Through such a complex moral landscape, both works further expose how the gaze of onlookers and the implicated space of a city help produce the conditions under which other victims remain silent or become implicated in another victim's suffering. In the end, *First Love* leaves unresolved the question of whether Lee is eventually brought to justice. Correspondingly, *The Nine* and *Faithful* stage a reckoning, but neither views juridical punishment as the consummated social repair. Hence, instead of focusing on whether the guilty are punished, they ask a more in-depth question: What forms of social relations make his violence possible, and what counter-relations must be formed to confront it?

This thesis does not give equal attention to each of the three works. In terms of their correlation, *First Love* invokes the core issues of literary manipulation, misreading, and spectatorship, while *The Nine* and *Faithful* respond to these issues through premodern narrative conventions and audiovisual storytelling. For this reason, I return to *First Love* at key moments such as the discourse of romance, the diary, and the ethics of reading, rather than giving it equal

space in every section. My comparative analysis examines the influence among these three texts, and views influence as an informed dialogue among them, rather than as a demand for precise equivalence.

F. Theoretical Frameworks and Research Methods

The thesis's argument is anchored in four main concepts. The conceptual chain is as follows: spectatorship is differentiated by respective degree of implication; *bao* keeps the past moral claim active; re-membering reconnects dispersed people; *yi* gives the communal response ethical form. Firstly, I bring Michael Rothberg's concept of the *implicated subject* to reflect critically about one's entanglement in the continuation and concealment of violence. Rothberg's concept goes beyond a clear division between victims and perpetrators. An implicated subject is a position distinct from direct perpetrators and direct victimization. These positions of implication, rather than permanent identities, should be understood relationally.¹⁸ A character may be directly victimized by the villain and yet, in relation to another survivor, become implicated when fear, economic dependence, or coerced compromised testimony contributes to that other victim's being isolated and discredited. Victimhood therefore does not shield a person from implication, just as implication does not dismiss that person's victimhood. Such overlap does not equalize responsibility: the compromised implication of survivors differs substantially from the profitable or institutionally empowered implication of merchants, officials, and spectators. The works propose that structures of violence place them within the scale of implication as vulnerable people may be compelled to be implicated in the suffering of others.

Hence, Rothberg's concept identifies a position within a spectrum of implications; it does not, by itself, determine equal culpability. Building on Rothberg's continuum of implication, I

¹⁸ According to Rothberg, "implication" derives from the Latin *implicare*, meaning "to entangle, involve, or connect closely" (1). His description of subjects as "folded into" (im-plied in) events further emphasizes such entanglement (1). The web and textile metaphor thus indicates that no one involved in such an event can be exempt from implication. The implication of the subject, therefore, is broader than that of an accomplice. It spans a moral palette of implications, including a coerced party, passive spectators, economic beneficiaries, and institutional officials. Within such moral spectrum, some can be far nearer to full culpability than others.

develop a relational model for analyzing different parties' moral responsibility. The model considers their agency and freedom to act, knowledge of the violence, material benefit, institutional power, coercion or vulnerability, and contribution to continuing harm. I identify them not as categorical distinctions but as aids to analysis. Take *Faithful* as an example. This conception makes it clear that Rulan's case is not buried by Wu alone; gossip undermines Rulan's credibility. People's ties to economic benefits restrain some from exposing Wu, and institutional inaction forecloses redress. All these factors can indirectly link implicated subjects to injustice, even though these connections are difficult to recognize because they are obscured by spatial, temporal, or social distance and by complex chains of causation (8). Hence, the concept of implicated subjects redirects analysis from Wu's individual culpability to the people and institutions surrounding him. It also asks readers outside of the story to reexamine their own positions within this wider web of implication.

If Rothberg's implicated subject identifies those entangled in violence who are not direct perpetrators, the frame of *bao* explains how such entanglement persists over time as an unpaid moral debt. *Bao* is defined by Karl S. Y. Kao as a narrative device in pre-modern Chinese novels, meaning "the necessity to reciprocate," or "to recompensate and to retaliate" (120). In other words, it is a logic of return: favors call for reciprocation, injuries call for retribution, and past actions continue to produce obligations in the present. In the story, Rulan's death is not just an inciting event that sets the plot in motion. *Bao* is the narratological mechanism that keeps Rulan's case from ever truly being closed. The law seeks closure, but *bao* brings the past back. I

therefore use *bao* not simply to mean revenge.¹⁹ Instead, it explains why an unacknowledged injustice continues to demand a response.

Kao's theory of *bao* makes memory central because memory allows an unsettled claim to persist. In Kao's account, forgetting a favor or failing to respond to an injustice carries moral consequences.²⁰ Under the frame of *bao*, memory is therefore not merely personal recollection but moral obligation. Rulan's story, as a revenge tale, cannot fully explain why it devotes so much attention to spectators, urban spaces, and mundane objects. These details show how people who appear peripheral to Rulan's case have nevertheless been claimed and entangled by its unresolved past. Furthermore, *bao* can bind those who previously had not heard of Rulan's story: in the novella, Liu Xin's beneficiaries become entangled in responding to her unresolved claim through their reciprocal obligations to Liu. The central question framed under *bao* is not simply whether Wu will be punished, but how suppressed memory and prior favors bind people into a network of reciprocal moral obligations.

If *bao* explains why the past persists as an unpaid moral claim, re-membling asks how scattered people, memories, objects, and accounts are brought back into relation. It articulates the protagonists' labor to respond to such a claim. I use re-membling here as a critical pun rather

¹⁹ On Douban Reads, *The Nine* is labeled as a work with "vengeance" (*fuchou* 復仇) as its theme, where *fu* 復 denotes "return" or "respond" and *chou* 仇 denotes "vendetta" (Kroll 123, 55). The *Guangya* 廣雅, a third-century Chinese dictionary and glossing text, glosses *fu* and *bao*, the same word that Kao theorizes, as synonyms in the sense of "requiting" (Zhang, "Shiyan"). Therefore, both *fuchou* and *baochou* mean "to avenge." When joined with *chou*, meaning an injury or enmity, *bao* is narrowed to the act of avenging a wrong. In other words, Douban Reads categorizes the story of *The Nine* as a story of characters taking vengeance for Rulan. However, the thesis invokes Kao's broader account of *bao*, which goes beyond responding to injuries, to contest the narrowing categorization. Revenge is one form of *bao*, but it does not exhaust its meaning. Li Bojian describes her wish to craft a satisfactory and complete ending, which seems to reinforce the appeal of a revenge reading, as the novella does imagine Wu's punishment. However, that catharsis alone does not account for the novella's devotion to implicated subjects, memory, collective action, and the unresolved issues of complicit power asymmetry.

²⁰ Kao notes that failing to reciprocate a favor is condemned as *wang'en* 忘恩, literally "forget-favor," while neglecting an intentionally inflicted injury may be treated as a breach of honor (123). Hence, under *bao*, forgetting takes on a much heavier moral weight. He also describes *bao* as possessing a "causative or obliging force," "enmeshing power," and as a "trigger" (122). I read his description of *bao* as a "trigger" as follows: The original act first triggers a moral obligation; subsequent reminders of that act recall that obligation, which remains unanswered. In this sense, names, objects, and encounters do not merely serve as reminders but reactivate the demand for a response. The grammar of Kao's account reinforces this interpretation; *bao* acts as the trigger, and the individual "falls within" a *bao* situation and "is thrust" into the position of an agent who must take actions. *Bao* therefore functions as both a moral and a mnemonic trigger, allowing an unresolved past to return through memory and push an implicated person towards action.

than a mere synonym for recollection (i.e., “We remember Rulan”). It involves the word “member” in two senses at once: a body part and a person belonging to a collective body. At the bodily level, what gets dismembered in the story is the body as an intact, self-possessed whole. For instance, as the novella depicts it, the victims’ bodies are not only wounded by the perpetrator but also by the gaze of the crowd, which continues that violence by dehumanizing the victims’ bodies as objects. At the level of social dismemberment, Rulan is socially cut off from recognition and credibility. The failure of her case also scatters the people connected to her, leaving members of a potential witness community separated from one another.

Re-membering responds to these kinds of separation without claiming that trauma can be undone or that victims can be restored to who they were before the violence had occurred. It reconnects people, objects, and testimony so that they can form a collective capable of bearing witness. By recollecting Rulan’s case, the protagonists also *re-collect* the members of a severed social body. Re-membering thus weaves memory with social repair: it attempts to stitch together social fabrics torn apart by violence, disbelief, and silence.

Yi, denoting “righteousness,” asks: what makes a response ethically just rather than merely reciprocal, self-interested, retaliatory, or legally expedient? Through the ensemble of nine righteous ones, both the novella and the drama revisit the meaning of righteousness. The protagonists take up the feminized labor of re-membering, such as weaving, preserving objects, caring for other witnesses, and bringing testimony to the public.²¹ Rather than presenting righteousness as an innate and unwavering moral quality, both works show righteousness as a relational practice: it is the decision, whether low-stakes or high-risk, to act in ways that help move toward justice and attend to survivors’ agency, while acknowledging that power asymmetry and social vulnerability shape people’s capacity to act. Some characters are unable to openly support Rulan at the time, not because they lack moral awareness, but because Wu Lian

²¹ I call this labor “feminized,” not because women possess a natural or exclusive capacity for remembrance or care, but because the narrative associates re-membering with textile work, care, preservation, and the patient gathering of people and objects. The term describes how these practices are culturally coded in the narrative, and the story associates them with *yi*, which is conventionally masculine-centered.

and the implicated structure that supports him make resistance risky. In the novella, Meng Wan is present at the hearing of Rulan's case, yet the fear of Wu's power and the crowd's shaming gazes prevent her from testifying.

Faithful further complicates this moral landscape through characters such as Liu Xin, Huang Jiaojiao, and other female victims outside the ensemble. In the novella, Rulan gives Liu her hairpin as payment for his help, whereas in *Faithful* he obtains it from her through deception and greed. The livelihood of Huang's silk-thread workshop previously depended on Wu in the drama. Other survivors are similarly placed under pressure. In this way, these two works shift attention away from placing all moral responsibility on a single individual toward the implicated structures of power, coercion, and the shaming gazes that isolate Rulan and obstruct justice. Therefore, righteousness is reconceived as a contingent practice negotiated at the intersection of structural power, self-interest, and social vulnerability rather than an innate, incorruptible virtue.²²

Taken together, these four major concepts designate subjects who are involved (however distantly) in the trauma. *Bao* explains why past favors and injuries continue to demand a response. Re-membling denotes the protagonists' connective practice in seeking redress. *Yi* gives such practice an ethical orientation. Through the labor of re-membling, *yi* is re-conceptualized as mnemonic duty rather than heroic righteousness.

With such conceptual tools at hand, I combine comparative close reading of the primary texts with the analysis of adaptations as my methodology, using contemporary cases and reception history as background. I attend to the textual and material media through which moral claims can travel, such as diaries, textiles, and bullet comments, and to the different kinds of

²² *Analects* 4.16 states, "The mind of the superior man is conversant with righteousness; the mind of the mean man is conversant with gain" (君子喻於義，小人喻於利; trans. Legge). *Junzi* (君子) denotes a person of noble birth or whose conduct exemplifies noble moral character according to Confucian standards, whereas *xiaoren* (小人) means a petty, insignificant, low-rank commoner. In this formulation, *yi* 義 refers to what is right or fitting, aligning with the Confucian worldview, whereas *li* 利 refers to personal profit or advantage. The contrast between *yi* and *li* distinguishes ethical obligation from self-interest (Kroll 233, 262, 503, 550). This thesis uses this passage as a point of contrast with the novella and the drama's association of righteousness with socially marginal, morally compromised, or female characters.

approaches to reading them. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from *First Love* follow Jenna Tang's 2024 English translation. For Lin Yi-han's nonfiction essay 你該去看精神科了 ["You should See a Psychiatrist"], I cite Tang's English translation, published under the title "The Landscape Has No Doors" in *Paris Review* on 4 January 2024; translations of Lin's other journal passages from her online account are my own. Because *The Nine* has no published English translation, translations from the novella are my own. Translations of dialogue and on-screen text from *Faithful* are my own, accompanied by episode numbers and timestamps. When the precise meaning of a Chinese word is critical to my analysis, I supplement the existing translation with a literal rendering of the original phrase and note this adjustment in a corresponding footnote. Quotes from other non-English sources are my own translation unless otherwise noted.

G. Overview

This thesis proceeds in three analytical sections. Section II, "Watching as Wounding," examines deferred narration, embodied and interpretive gazes, the misreading of rape as romance, and the implicated city. It shows how spectators, economic interests, and civic institutions contribute to the social conditions that make violence illegible. Section III, "From Evidence to Witness," turns to *jing* 經 as both canon and warp thread. Through Si-chi's diary and Wu Lian's embroidered records, it distinguishes author-centered biographical reading from relational reading, an interpretive practice that follows a record outward toward survivors and witnesses. Section IV, "Re-membering Social Dis-memberment: From Moral Debt to Speaking Subjects," traces the resulting social labor across three scales: the protagonists' mnemonic objects and collective action, the later works' reconfiguration of literary history, and the forms of public response solicited through plaques, online platforms, and *bao*. The conclusion summarizes the transition from watching to witnessing, compares the works' different endings, and argues that *yi* is redefined in the works as a cumulative labor of social response.

II. Watching as Wounding: Spectatorship, Misreading, and the Implicated City

Looking is not a neutral act in these works. A gaze can touch, shame, and expose a body; interpretation can turn an accusation of rape into a romance; and civic institutions can perpetuate that kind of misreading with material resources. This section asks how looking, whether through an embodied gaze, an interpretive act, or an institutional judgment, can wound. The section first shows how narrative structure places characters and audiences in a belated position of judgment. It then examines how bystanders' tactile gaze and their reading of rape as romance obscure sexual violence. Finally, it turns to the city that normalizes those distorted ways of reading. By showing how spectatorship shapes the reception of testimony, it supports the thesis's larger claim that the wound caused by violence depicted in these works cannot be repaired by simply punishing a single villain. One necessary part of that repair is recognizing how spectatorship affects whether an account is credited, treated as evidence, dismissed as "noise," or heard without prompting action.

A. Belated Recognition and Narrative Structure

The narrative of *First Love* is first filtered through the consciousness of Yi-ting, who misunderstood Lee's abuse of Si-chi as romance; therefore, when Yi-ting stumbles upon Si-chi's diary, she, and we readers, must revisit scenes once mistaken for a romance as evidence of abuse. This belatedness lets Yi-ting and we as readers recognize the abuse only in hindsight, thereby highlighting how spectators within the story, like Yi-ting and, by extension, we as readers, may perpetuate the frame of romance that obscures violence. The labor of reinterpretation is the epistemic condition that makes re-membering possible. After Yi-ting discovers Si-chi's diary, the narrative then circles back to its starting point and retells the same event through Si-chi's eyes. In other words, the novel shows that the reparative work begins when Yi-ting rereads earlier events in light of Si-chi's account.

While *First Love* deploys hindsight as a way to construct belated recognition, Li Bojian's *The Nine* elaborates on this narrative device. The *gong'an* convention Li borrows identifies Wu as the villain from the outset, yet withholds the full account of Rulan's death until the finale. This delay is not simply a suspense device. At first, real-life readers may blame the entire tragedy on Wu Lian, the obvious villain, just as the audience in the story is unaware of their own implication. Only later does the story reveal that along with the injury imposed by Wu, the social and institutional pressures, such as gossip, judicial inaction, and public shaming, accumulate, culminating in the death of Rulan. By withholding such a revelation, Li Bojian nudges us readers to move from the perpetrator-victim dyad toward a wider web of moral responsibilities. Only in retrospect do we readers realize that we, too, have been viewing the case through the same moral blind spot that allows the crowd within the story to imagine that they were "innocent." In so doing, the novella prepares us readers to see justice as collective rather than simply retributive.

While *The Nine* illuminates the relevant social field around Rulan, *Faithful* utilizes the postponed-revelation device to visualize the protagonists' prior encounters with Rulan, thereby making their implication a central object of retrospective recognition. Characters whom Meng recruits in the present timeline reappear in flashbacks set seven years earlier. These returns reveal the different relational positions each character occupied during Rulan's struggle, some as helpers, some as witnesses, and some in more morally ambiguous positions. Viewers are therefore trained to reconnect the dots: to reidentify characters who first seem peripheral to Rulan's case as implicated subjects. More specifically, as Rothberg observes, "implication consists ... of those discomfiting forms of belonging ... that cannot be grasped immediately ... because they involve spatial, temporal, or social distances" (8). *Faithful's* temporal structure allows viewers to traverse these distances; its alternating chronology, by making characters associated with Meng Wan's later efforts reappear in the earlier timeline, reveals the relational positions that connect them to Rulan's case. As seemingly distant figures were implicated and

deeply enmeshed, this exposure invites real-life viewers to also rethink how distant they actually were from injustice.

Taken together, the three works' deferred reckoning therefore places real-life readers and viewers in a position close to Yi-ting's in *First Love*. They must revisit their previous thoughts as the social conditions enabling the violence gradually become more visible as the stories unfold. That is, the deferral of revelation redirects focus on Lee's or Wu's individual culpability to the people and institutions around him, while also asking audiences to consider their own position within that wider web of spectatorship.

B. The Tactile and “Innocent” Gaze

Delayed revelation warns audiences that, like the characters, they may judge too soon. The works then make that implication concrete by portraying vision as a material act of wounding and linking spectatorship to violence. By holding the bystanders within the stories accountable for their gaze, the narratives ask real viewers to examine how their interpretive habits might reproduce narratives that discredit testimony and normalize abuse as romance. At that moment of self-recognition, when real-life spectators see how their interpretive gaze might discredit testimony in the same way as the fictional characters do, they become aware that they are not passive observers and may be implicated in practices of objectification and disbelief.

Lin Yi-han's texts convert the seemingly invisible gazes of bystanders in her narratives into tangible violence, thereby making the site of implication and moral accountability visible. In both *First Love* and her Facebook journals, Fang Si-chi and the author-narrator “feel” (感覺到) the building manager's “eyeballs thrown onto” (把眼球投擲到) their faces or bodies, even clinging “the whole way home” (一路沾黏; “Jiawu 家屋” [“Dwelling”] 91-92). In *First Love*, the expression is “eyeballs thrown onto her body” (把眼球投擲到她身上 317; my trans.). In Lin's journal, it becomes “eyeballs, softly and stickily, thrown onto my face” (把眼球軟搭搭投擲到我臉上; 91-92). The additional phrase *ruandada* 軟搭搭 (“softly and sticky”) further

renders the gaze as tangible projectiles. Sight, normally immaterial, becomes tactile, sticky, and invasive. As vision is compared to unwanted physical touch, we, as outside readers, are prompted to wonder whether our own looking might create similar harmful effects.

Lin next exposes how a gaze that appears neutral is, in fact, deeply implicated and thereby morally responsible. While Fang considers suicide on the ledge, “the wind from high up blew her skirt flat, blowing the roses on her dress alive” while the manager watches as though “he were looking at rain or clouds” and neither calls the police nor shouts up to her (114). In Lin’s journal, the manager looks with a “clean gaze” (眼神清潔 92). The adjective *qingjie* 清潔 (“clean”) sanitizes indifference: a word with positive connotations of hygiene is used to describe a scene in which the manager does nothing as Si-chi is in danger. His gaze turns her into a mere weather event, rain or clouds, to be viewed with the detachment of a television forecast. Ironically, the narration’s animation of the rose pattern sharply contrasts with the manager’s disregarding Si-chi as a person in immediate danger.

This sanitized indifference also implicates real-life readers or viewers. Sitting before a page or a screen, an audience can consume a scene as passively as they would a weather report. The manager’s “clean” gaze is therefore far from innocence. Its detachedness treats Si-chi as a spectacle rather than a person in need of assistance. Hence, this episode warns real-life spectators that, in addition to judging “too soon,” the paradox of the innocent gaze, which seems not to judge at all, can normalize objectification and nonintervention under the guise of neutrality.

The story gives that warning a visceral impact by placing Fang on a literal edge, turning implication from a theoretical concept into something tangible. Lin writes: “her feet stepping on the bottom rail, her toes absorbing the smell of blood from the metal underneath” (114). On such a rail, a person is in immediate danger as she could actually fall. The author-narrator also thinks, “I couldn’t very well let him see everything: my underwear and (should I fall,) the scatter of my brains; so, at last, I managed to crawl back inside” (我總不能被他看光內褲又看光腦漿/終於是爬了回去; “Facebook post, 31 July 2016” 10). The banality of being watched in that manner

becomes shaming. She faces both physical exposure, as her underwear becomes visible, and existential exposure, as her death risks becoming a spectacle. Here Lin links the manager's gaze to a withdrawal shaped by shame and unwanted exposure, showing that the voyeuristic look inflicts additional humiliation and shame on victims, precisely the kind of social injury that real-life spectators must learn to recognize and repair.

Lin elsewhere describes people's looks as "stinging me like the rain outside."²³ Following Lin Yihan, Li Bojian's novella elaborates on this tangible sensation of rain by turning Rulan's courtroom spectatorship into stitched-in violence. It is in this way that Li articulates that voyeuristic violence does not end when a public spectacle is over. It can create a social atmosphere in which other people subjected to violence may dread being ridiculed or objectified:

...the gaze of the crowd pricked her with thousands of needle-stitches. They discovered that her appearance was not, in fact, as beautiful as they had imagined. At other times, those needle-pricks did not vanish; they hovered in the stifling, humid air, falling again and again as showers of sticky, turbid rain.
...人群的視線在她身上扎出千萬個針腳。他們發現她的相貌原來並不如想象中美麗。其他時候這些針腳也不會消失。它們浮游在悶濕的空氣裏，下成一場又一場黏稠混沌的雨。(Li 127)

The crowd's gaze becomes "thousands of needle-stitches" (千萬個針腳) that prick Rulan's body. Seemingly part of the "air" (*kongqi* 空氣), the multitude of gazes from spectators within the narrative, like water drops accumulating, makes that air feel stifling and humid (悶濕) until it falls as rain. The adjectives "sticky" or "viscous" (*nianchou* 黏稠) and "murky" (*hundun* 混沌) substantiate the insidious gaze. It does not vanish when the trial ends; it remains in the atmosphere and drizzles again and again, making public testimony socially risky and

²³ In "The Landscape Has No Doors," Lin writes that people's looks were "stinging me like the rain outside" ("Landscape"). Lin's original word for "sting" is *shi* 螫, as her sentence goes: 出入K館，目光排排螫在臉上，像外頭的雨 ("When I came in or out of K Hall, row upon row of gazes stung my face like the rain outside" 93). Kroll defines *shi* 螫 as the "sting or bite of a deadly insect or venomous snake" (417). The verb therefore reveals that the crowd's gaze is not merely irritating or painful but venomous: its assault is metaphorized as a deadly bite to her body.

discouraging some potential witnesses from participating openly. By turning the crowd's gaze into something tangible, Li exposes voyeurism as a social practice. Because it is a communal perversion, the remedy must be collective repair rather than the punishment of a single villain.

Rulan's trial externalizes the shame as communal violence, which Fang internalizes. Li thereby shows that Wu is not the only person accountable for the conditions enabling Rulan's isolation and failed pursuit of redress: onlookers also participate when their gaze pierces, soaks, and writes on the victim's body for public consumption. By confronting real-life readers with this complicity, the novella shatters the illusion of innocent spectatorship and asks them to recognize how passive looking becomes implicated when it turns Rulan into an object of public consumption.

C. Reading Rape as Romance

The violence of spectatorship lies not only in the crowd's gaze, but also in the story it imposes on what is being gazed at. As John Berger writes, "we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves" (9). Berger argues that vision is relational. This formulation helps support how spectators may impose familiar cultural paradigms on a victim's account. In other words, gaze becomes interpretation, and interpretation shapes whether audiences receive the account as testimony.

With that relation between gaze and interpretation in mind, I turn from the sensory violence of looking to the hermeneutic violence of reading and interpreting. I trace how online commentators and courtroom spectators respectively force Guo Hsiao-chi's online disclosure in *First Love* and Lin Rulan's courtroom plea into the mold of a stereotypical love-story plot. Reading rape as romance shows the crowd's dismissal of the assault as a mere scandal. The crowd's appetite for scandal shows how these works distinguish a perpetrator's direct violence from the community's role in discrediting testimony and normalizing abuse as romance. As a result, victims' accounts are misread, and, more importantly, these interpretive practices

discourage some potential supporters from openly corroborating testimony. Take Meng in the novella as an example. Seven years ago, her own vulnerability, power asymmetry, and the crowd's shaming spectatorship make standing beside Rulan costly. Because this interpretive frame is sustained collectively rather than imposed by the perpetrator alone, the misreading of rape as romance also implicates a community that perpetuates, consumes, or legitimizes that narrative.

In *First Love*, Guo Hsiao-Chi, whom Lee Guo-hua also abuses, posts her experience online in an attempt to expose him. Under the public's fantasies, however, she becomes the pretty young mistress of a rich and powerful teacher. Her disclosure becomes a "landscape for the most evil and barren languages," while people look at it as "a dull stream of words, an 8:00 p.m. soap opera" (Lin 204). The soap-opera framework turns testimony into leisure and entertainment. Instead of acknowledging her suffering, commenters within the story consume her account as a melodrama and blame Hsiao-Chi instead for being the seducer. Reading the online replies feels to Hsiao-chi like "thousands of knives chafing against [her] body" (204). This image of knives figuratively portrays the commenters' cruelty as a painful bodily assault within Hsiao-chi's experience, in addition to violence committed by Lee himself. The episode therefore places responsibility beyond Lee himself to the interpretive community that converts Hsiao-chi's testimony into a patriarchal narrative.

Rulan's trial exposes the same erotic pattern of "reading rape as romance" in a premodern setting. Spectators silently relish Wu Lian's "amorous exploits" (*fengliu jiyu* 風流際遇), regretting only that Rulan is not beautiful enough to consummate the "elegant affair" (*yunshi* 韻事; Li 129).²⁴ These two expressions aestheticize Wu's sexual abuse of Rulan as a "scholar-

²⁴ Kroll glosses *fengliu* 風流 as a term of positive regard associated with "natural dignity with flair," "cultivated manners," "stylish refinement," and "panache and urbanity" (115). 萌典 (*MoeDict*) defines *yunshi* 韻事 as 雅緻的事, "an elegant affair" (my trans.). Together, these terms with approving undertones aestheticize the violence and highlight Wu as a "cultivated gentleman."

beauty” (*caizi jiaren* 才子佳人) story²⁵; the former subtly implies that Wu is a cultivated gentleman, while the latter turns Rulan’s testimony into an elegant and entertaining affair. Their disappointment with her appearance shows that they are trying to fit her into an existing romantic paradigm rather than listening to her complaint regarding her sexual abuse. Once again, the communal misreading transforms testimony into entertainment, proving that the communal script needs to be replaced.

Animal imagery gives this collective distortion a bodily form: bystanders become predators or scavengers who twist victims’ accounts into stories for public consumption. In *First Love*, Lin compares the grey-haired neighbors’ raised voices while gossiping to an eagle opening its beak as the prey drops from its mouth.²⁶ Correspondingly, Lin also compares Lee Guo-hua to a predatory hawk by describing him as having “deep-set eyes and moth-like brows” (深目蛾眉 94).²⁷ Taken by itself, the phrase may sound like an admiration of Lee’s melancholy comeliness. It comes, however, from the Western Jin writer Sun Chu 孫楚’s “Rhapsody on the Hawk” (鷹賦), which depicts the predatory hawk attacking its prey (“Ying Fu”; juan 60).²⁸ The active verbs “plunging headfirst” (*xian shou* 陷首) and “crushing” (*cui* 摧) portray the bird as directly attacking and killing its prey. The neighbors, by contrast, resemble an eagle that lets its prey fall.

²⁵ Geng Song defines the “scholar-beauty” narrative paradigm, in its narrow sense, as a conventional model of romantic stories in late-imperial Chinese drama and fiction. Its standard plot pairs the *caizi*, a handsome young scholar gifted in poetry and prose, with the *jiaren*, a beautiful young woman who possesses comparable literary talent. After meeting under an unexpected circumstance, they fall in love at first sight. Obstacles may delay their marriage, yet the scholar’s success in the imperial examinations results in their eventual happy union (19–20).

²⁶ The neighbors’ grey hair evokes Primo Levi’s “grey zone” and Rothberg’s notion of implication (Levi 42). As Rothberg interprets the idea of the “grey zone,” he notes that “the process of victimization...does not only produce victims who are clearly set against perpetrators, but...characters marked by shades...of complicity who are not easy to place on ...moral...maps” (39). Given Primo Levi’s concept, the grey-haired image foreshadows that the two neighbors are implicated because grey sits between the moral binary of black and white.

²⁷ Lee teaches Yi-ting the phrase “deep-set eyes and moth-like brows” during a literature lesson. Si-chi never receives the corresponding lesson because her supposed classes with Lee become occasions for abuse. This contrast reveals how Lee’s literary and teaching authority is intertwined with the abusive relationship. This knowledge asymmetry creates an epistemic inequality: the literary source reveals the attractive-looking man as a predator, but Si-chi, as the victim, is denied that interpretive clue.

²⁸ Sun Chu describes the hawk as having “deep-set eyes and moth-like brows, appearing like a sorrowful Hu person” (深目蛾眉，狀似愁胡; “Ying Fu,” juan 60). Later, after depicting it pursuing its scattered prey, the rhapsody portrays that “at last it plunges headfirst and crushes their breasts” (紛連薄以攫竄，遂陷首以摧臆; juan 60).

Just like an eagle that lets go of its catch when it opens its beak, the neighbors participate in implication by opening their mouths to spread rumors that reinforce the narrative of romance. Their gossip, therefore, indicates that violence is sustained not only by the perpetrator who inflicts the wound but also by a shared interpretive frame that legitimizes victim-blaming narratives. Hence, challenging that frame requires a communal effort to adopt an interpretive perspective grounded in repair and restoration.

In *The Nine*, onlookers at Rulan's hearing "like fish waiting to be fed, they vied to crane their necks; like a flock of excited crows, they chattered incessantly" (他們像等待投食的魚兒一樣，爭相支楞起腦袋，又像興奮的群鴉，嘰喳不停; Li 63). The phrase "waiting to be fed" frames spectatorship as a kind of craving: the crowd consumes her charge as a titillating tale. This craving helps explain Rulan's suicidal crisis the novella depicts at the city wall, where Rulan again faces the crowd:

Some said she was already a ghost before she ever ascended the city wall...Lin Rulan had climbed to that vantage point to make herself clearly heard by the masses; yet as she looked down at the excited crowd rapidly gathering below, her breathing suddenly eased. Everything that needed to be said had already been said, and it was not as if the people had never heard it.

有人說，她在登上城牆之前就已經是個鬼魂了...蘭如蘭登上高處，本是想讓更多的人聽得清楚明白。但望著底下迅速聚攏的興奮的人群，她的呼吸忽然松弛下來。要說的都已經說了，人們也並非不曾聽見。(Li 132-133)

Hearing is not the issue; interpretation and response are. Rulan climbs the wall to project her voice, but the crowd's problem is not audibility: what is missing is a shared act of rewriting that can turn the city from an amphitheater of scandal back into a forum for understanding.

D. The Implicated City

If the act of gazing can wound, what kind of social space legitimizes such spectatorship? Individuals are not implicated in an empty or abstract field, while space is first experienced and understood via each individual's body. Both Lin and Li situate them within the city's institutions, signs, buildings, and reputation economies. In this view, urban space is not merely a background. It normalizes violence by constantly making distorted interpretations appear intelligible. Since no single citizen designs the entire city, the community must engage with the broader social ecology to remake the space in reparative ways.

In *First Love*, moral and patriarchal language is spatialized at Longshan Temple in Taipei. When Lee preaches his knowledge of traditional Chinese values, Si-chi observes:

Longshan Temple was full of words at every corner. All the pillars were engraved with poems or dictums. The characters written in clerical and regular script were in square, lantern-like blocks; as for the characters in cursive and semicursive script, they streamed downward like falling rain (96).

The temple, filled with text at every corner, is therefore more than architecture; it is a discursive environment. While Lee delivers his twisted sermon on Confucian values, Si-chi is immersed in a semiotic landscape and experiences “loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and righteousness poured down on her like rain” (97). The term for righteousness here, *yi*, which Lee weaponizes to justify his abuse, becomes part of this moral “rain” that soaks her. In this way, carved inscriptions materialize and secure moral authority as visible objects, such as lanterns, by engraving moral language into space. The depiction of patriarchal moral discourses as raining down upon her body reveals that Si-chi's interpretive agency is constrained by the temple as an implicated space. The temple thus acts on the body: it makes patriarchal morality tangible and felt, like rain and illuminated lanterns. As the inscriptions and their prescribed values were layered over time rather than authored by a single person, the temple, rather than a lifeless structure, speaks in a collective voice with “divine” authority.

The advertising billboard that Lin comes across in Taipei achieves the same effect as the inscriptions in the old temple: it makes violence intrusively present by etching the language of legitimization into a common space. Taking a walk through the city, the author-narrator encounters the teacher's name on advertisements for a cram school: "Your name hangs in bold, high up on the billboard; every time I see it, it feels as if I've been stabbed by a knife" (你的名字粗體地、高高地懸在廣告看板上，每次看到我都像被殺了一刀; Lin, "Yin yu shi zhi wushisi: Shishi 隱於市之五十四：時事" ["Hidden in the City No. 54: Current Affairs"] 135). The simile of being stabbed reveals that the billboard is more than an ordinary object; it "stabs" the survivor each time she passes. The billboard, appearing unremarkable, publicly validates the alleged wrongdoer as an educator. Although the city does not explicitly declare the alleged wrongdoer innocent, its billboard validates his value as an educator. Hence, by folding that portrayal into the city's everyday vista, the urban space becomes a recurring source of distress for the author-narrator, making an ordinary walk through the city a repulsive confrontation with the publicly validated teacher. The billboard's personification suggests that holding a single accused individual accountable would not, by itself, transform the implicated city. Changing its environment of signs and meanings requires collective labor.

Faithful recasts this modern city hostility in a premodern cityscape by embedding Wu Lian's abuse within the Mist-Rain Embroidery Tower. At the opening of the drama, the Tower is portrayed as part of the peaceful and prosperous Huaizhou during the Song Dynasty (fig. 1). This scene of a thriving city resembles that of *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, which depicts urban life in Northern Song Bianjing, present-day Kaifeng (fig. 2).²⁹ This visual resemblance matters: Wu's workshop is depicted as woven into and integrated with Huaizhou's city life: Female students are sent there, customers purchase its embroidery, and state institutions

²⁹ *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (清明上河圖) is a handscroll painting attributed to Northern Song painter Zhang Zeduan 張擇端. Its idealized depiction of Bianjing's everyday urban life serves as a visual backdrop in *Faithful*. In *Faithful*, however, the presence of refugees displaced by war beyond the Song frontier in Huaizhou complicates the city's apparent prosperity and tranquillity, pointing to a broader landscape of conflict and instability.

support its operations. In this way, the everyday life hides Wu's violence in plain sight, incorporating the Mist-Rain Embroidery Tower into the city's everyday prosperity.



Figure 1. Still from *Faithful*, episode 1 (00:01:57).

Meng Wan's two-leg metaphor casts Huaizhou's implicated institutions as parts of Wu Lian's body. She explains: "If we truly want to bring a man down, mere shoving won't suffice; even if he's knocked over a hundred times, he can still get back up" (若真想讓一個人倒下，只是推搡是不夠的；縱然倒下去一百次，還是有站起來的可能; *Faithful*, ep. 10, 34:00–34:08). She then adds, "Only by cutting off both his legs could he truly prostrate himself and confess his guilt" (只有將他兩條腿完全砍斷，才能真正地伏地認罪; 34:10–34:15). The limbs signify civic structures that protect and support Wu. One is the Duchess of Ningguo 寧國公夫人, an aristocratic patron who supports Wu with her social and political capital and gives Wu's Mist-

Rain embroidery cultural prestige. The other is the Huai Prefecture *yamen* 淮州衙門, the legal institution of Huaizhou, which turns a blind eye to Wu's unlawful trade and wealth accumulation. Hence, the metaphor of limbs rejects the model of justice that punishes only Wu as an individual wrongdoer: Wu can stand because institutions hold him upright.



Figure 2. Rainbow Bridge (虹橋), detail from Zhang Zeduan's *Qingming Shanghe Tu* (《清明上河圖》), Northern Song dynasty, ink and light color on silk, Palace Museum, Beijing.

Wu's cultural capital is also tied to Huaizhou's civic prestige. Li Bojian writes that the city's fame depends partly on Mist-Rain embroidery. Li uses the word *pinge* 品格 to describe the embroidery's refined artistic style (9), but it also means a person's moral character (“品格”). The other word Li uses is *qi* 氣, meaning “air” or “style” (9); Kroll also notes that this word can refer to a person's disposition (358). The words' dual meanings suggest that the city's self-image includes not just the artistry of Wu's embroidery, but also Wu's upright persona.

The magistrate demurs when Liu Xin questions why Rulan's case must be kept quiet: "Mr. Wu Lian is a well-known gentleman of refinement in our city" (吳先生是本城的知名雅士; Li 65).³⁰ Here, *yashi* 雅士 denotes a person not only as a man of elegant tastes but a cultivated scholar-gentleman. The term *shi* 士 invokes a social identity that carries a Confucian ideal that literary and artistic cultivation is correlated with moral self-cultivation. The magistrate, therefore, views Wu's cultural refinement as evidence of his moral character. Furthermore, the prefix *ben-* 本, "our" or "belonging to one's own side," does more than geographically locate Wu in Huaizhou. It creates a unified "we" that includes the official, Wu, and Huaizhou, so an accusation against Wu can be taken as an accusation against the city that identifies with him. Additionally, Li writes that "this city throbbed restlessly again" (這座城市再次躁動起來 135) when the protagonists reopen the investigation in Rulan's case. Here, the city is the grammatical subject, like a unified body with nerves and anxieties. "Again" indicates that Rulan's accusation seven years ago disturbed this collective person and that the reopened case now threatens its prestige once more. Li's writing reveals that Wu is protected not only by one corrupt magistrate but by a civic economy of reputation: Wu Lian belongs to "our" city, and his disgrace becomes the city's disgrace.

Therefore, violence is socialized and spatialized and is not confined to a victim-perpetrator dyad. Spectators may interpret rape as romance; institutions give Wu the "legs" that allow him to stand; the city's architecture, advertisements, workshop, and his public reputation help normalize the structures that protect Wu. In this sense, to be implicated is to be caught in systems of unreflective reading. At the same time, however, the social structures that enable romance narratives to obscure Lee's and Wu's abuse also constrain the capacity of those who are socially vulnerable to respond. Hence, the implicated subjects do not share equal culpability with the perpetrator, yet implication reveals how discursive, social, and institutional mechanisms

³⁰ The Taiwan Ministry of Education's *Revised Mandarin Chinese Dictionary* defines *yashi* 雅士 as 品格高雅的讀書人, "a learned person of noble character" ("Yashi"; my trans.). Kroll defines *shi* 士 as "a scholar, man of learning," increasingly in imperial usage (416). *Ya* 雅 includes qualities such as "dignified," "cultivated," "refined," and "elegant" (525). On this basis, I translate *yashi* as "cultivated scholar-gentleman."

render Rulan's claim illegible. Having shown how those structures render violence legible as romance, the next section turns to the records that must be read differently for their testimonial significance to be recognized.

III. From Evidence to Witness: Text, Textile, and Relational Reading

Section II showed that violence is perpetuated when the interpretive frames of romance are used both to mask and to decode events. Lee Guo-hua invokes the literary discourse of romance as a pretext to justify his abuse; Huaizhou, through the same lens, views Rulan's accusation as a scandal. Wu Lian presents the persona of "a well-known cultivated Confucian gentleman" by displaying embroidery whose refined "air" seems morally self-evident.³¹ The implicated civic institutions lean on Wu's cultivated persona as part of the civic self-image, giving Wu credibility and benefiting from his cultural prestige.

One shared mechanism is the assumption that literary mastery or artistic refinement reveals moral character. Both Lee and Wu exploit this assumption as an alibi for their crime, while onlookers interpret their cultivation as proof of their moral righteousness. I call this reductive inference *author-centered biographical reading*: the perpetrator presents his mastery of literature or artistic work as self-portrayal, while spectators view it as a mirror of his moral interiority.³² Pedagogical authority and civic prestige support and empower this kind of inference. I relate the device involved in this kind of (mis)reading to the notion of *jing*, which denotes both "canon" and, literally, "warp thread." Lee and Wu exploit the habit of reading every artifact as its author's portrait by turning that supposed moral straight-edge into camouflage.

This section, therefore, asks how survivors' testimony and other written and material records can be received in ways that challenge the imposed interpretations of perpetrators such as Lee or Wu, thereby contributing to the pursuit of justice. I argue that Lin's novel and the subsequent two works depict an alternative mode of reception, which I call *relational reading*. Instead of asking whether a work confirms the author's personality, relational reading asks

³¹ See Section II, page 33, for the magistrate's description of Wu and for the analysis of *pinge* and *qi* as terms that frame the elegance of his embroidery as evidence of his moral character.

³² I use "biographical reading" in a narrow sense to refer to the inference that the aesthetic qualities of a work are a straightforward reflection of the artist's moral character. This definition is not a dismissal of biography as an interpretive approach, or of a diary as a record of its author's lived experience. Instead, it highlights a specific moral shortcut: treating Wu Lian's refined embroidery as proof of his refined disposition.

“Whom does the work connect us to, and what moral obligations follow from that connection?” This practice attends to testimony that survivors have already given and uses existing records to reach other survivors, potential witnesses, and implicated people. It thereby helps form a community capable of bearing witness.

In *First Love*, Si-chi’s self-rereading contests Lee’s imposed interpretation, followed by Yi-ting’s encountering the diary. Yi-ting’s rereading becomes ethically consequential as Si-chi’s account alters her earlier misunderstanding of the abusive relationship. In *The Nine* and *Faithful*, Meng Wan and her allies use Wu’s records to seek other survivors and implicated subjects, creating networks through which existing survivor claims can receive support and response. All works problematize the idea that an artifact is a transparent reflection of its author and encourage characters and real readers to develop an alternative reading practice to counter that mirror logic. In a sense, relational reading is another step towards re-membering. After raising people’s awareness of the implications, it carries both fictional characters and real readers beyond the page, creating conditions in which the women’s existing accounts can receive attention and response. Relational reading, therefore, illuminates the people and relations that re-membering must subsequently reconnect with.

The pages that follow trace Si-chi’s self-rereading, Yi-ting’s altered reception, and Meng Wan’s un-weaving, asking how these interpretive practices encourage other characters to make ethical responses and what moral obligations these works invite outside readers and viewers to consider.

A. The Collapse of *Jing* 經 as Text

The term *jing* 經, as Mychael Nylan notes, designates both a canonical text and “the lead thread,” or the “warp,” which is the lengthwise thread stretched on a loom, keeping a fabric straight (11). She also notes a wordplay between *jing* 經 and *jing* 徑 meaning “a straight path or

direct route”; the classic is imagined as a foundation that both disciplines and guides (11–12).³³ Lin Yi-han and Li Bojian problematize the assumption that mastery of the canon keeps one’s moral path straight.³⁴ Perpetrators twist that “straight thread” into a facade of upright morality, while spectators read the facade as proof of moral character. At stake is the presumption that mastery of the canon guarantees an educator’s moral trustworthiness. However, in the perpetrators’ hands, the warp does not guide; it hides.³⁵

This first example shows how Lee weaponizes textual *jing* and turns it into an alibi for sexual violence. His entire wall of classics becomes a billboard advertising his cultivated personality, while Yi-ting and her family, Si-chi’s family, and other female students read this billboard as transparent proof of moral depth. As Lee displays them, canonical texts seemingly validate his account, and this display attempts to impede Si-chi from recognizing and narrating the abusive relationship on her own terms. Lee’s collection of books is not merely reading

³³ Nyilan attributes this wordplay and the warp metaphor to Xunzi 荀子, a Confucian thinker of the later Warring States period (11–12). I use this association as a framework to understand the theme of the crisis of sincerity and relational reading as a redress in Lin’s and Li’s works, without claiming that either author explicitly references this idea.

³⁴ In fact, the anxiety that classical learning might fall short of disciplining its readers’ moral conduct has premodern precedents. In the Southern Song judicial case collection *Minggong shupan Qingming ji* 名公書判清明集 (Collection of Clear and Enlightened Judgments by Eminent Officials), there is a judgment concerning a highly praised Confucian scholar named Wang Gui 王桂 who entered an illicit sexual relationship with a woman betrothed into a neighboring household. It is a judgment attributed to the Southern Song adjudicating official Fan Yingling 范應鈴, who writes this account regarding Wang and condemns his behavior. Intriguingly, Fan describes Wang’s conduct through the language of the classics by quoting “Meng” 氓 in the *Book of Songs*: “Carrying cloth to exchange it for silk” (抱布貿絲; stanza 1; trans. Legge). In this way, Fan paradoxically casts Wang’s sexual misconduct as an enactment of a canonical narrative of courtship and betrayal. The magistrate then asks: “How could he not have read the book of Mencius? Yet, to read it and then violate what it forbids is to become a transgressor against the sages” (孟子之書，安可不讀？讀其書而犯其所戒，是聖賢之罪人也; Fan, juan 12). As his punishment, Wang receives twenty strokes and is expelled from the academy. In other words, the judgment upon Wang evades questioning the moral validity of the *jing*. As a result, the angst over canon as the moral pillar is managed by the school disciplining and expelling Wang, who is viewed as an inattentive reader disregarding the classics’ guidance. Lin and Li, by contrast, challenge this very gap between canon and its promise of virtue.

³⁵ Stephen Owen writes that the “Great Preface” to the *Book of Songs* is “the most authoritative statement on the nature and function of poetry in traditional China” (*Readings* 37). He reads it as articulating a “theory of manifestation,” in which outward expression reveals an inward condition. This correspondence also has a social and political dimension: the tones of an age register the conditions of its government and people. In her interview “這是關於《房思琪的初戀樂園》這部作品，我想對讀者說的事情” (“This is What I Would Like to Tell Readers about *First Love*”), Lin herself invokes its formulation “在心為志，發言為詩” (“In the mind it is ‘being intent’; coming out in language, it is a poem,” trans. Owen) to criticize the perpetrator’s exploitation (Lin 72). Exploiting this understanding of expression as revealing both inward intention and the surrounding moral landscape, the perpetrator uses literary language to reverse it. As a result, the outward pattern of literary language conceals what it should make legible.

material; arranged across an entire wall, it becomes a stage set for his performance of a learned, solitary, and misunderstood soul. The narrator observes: “The entire wall of classics marked all his academic knowledge. One textbook marked his solitude; one novel represented his soul.” Regarding the repeated word “mark,” the original word Lin uses is *biaobang* 標榜, “to flaunt,” with a connotation of being actively self-promotional (155).³⁶ That is, Lee’s wall of books does not simply reflect his literary knowledge: it displays that knowledge as a cultural credential and turns literature into an advertisement for his cultivated interiority. The more carefully Lee curates the display, the more deceptive it becomes to its viewers.

Lee’s abuse of his persona as a revered teacher is also revealed by his framing of the sexual assault of Si-chi as a reward she owed to him: “Let’s not forget, it’s Teacher’s Day a few days from now. You’re the best present for Teacher’s Day” (61). By invoking Teacher’s Day, a holiday that commemorates Confucius and his ethical teachings, Lee twists the warp of *jing* beyond the written canon and into the teacher-student relationship itself.³⁷ The ritual that should honor a teacher’s moral value becomes his alibi for sexual entitlement: The novel figures Lee’s Teacher’s Day rhetoric as a tightening thread: he frames his assault as a tribute Si-chi owes him and reduces her to a gift for his use. Because Teacher’s Day is an occasion for students to honor their instructors, Lee can invoke the teacher’s presumed moral exemplarity to frame sexual violence as a tribute owed to him. He thereby turns a cultural practice of expressing gratitude into an instrument of interpretive dominion: coercion is presented as the student’s obligation to “reciprocate.”

Regarding Lee’s linguistic perversion of *jing*, Lin Yi-han explicitly condemns Lee’s as well as the alleged teacher’s behavior, stating he “perverted and raped the language”: he exploits

³⁶ Tang renders *biaobang* 標榜 as “marked” (41). Kroll glosses *biao* 標 as a “sign” or “emblem” and as “make known; show forth” (22), while *bang* 榜 can denote a publicly displayed placard or list, including a list of successful examination candidates (338). I make reference to these character-level meanings as resonances that give a more in-depth perspective on the novel’s presentation of Lee’s book wall as a display of cultural credentials, not as a claim that the compound’s meaning is simply the numeric sum of the two characters’ semantics.

³⁷ Taiwan observes Teachers’ Day on 28 September to commemorate Confucius’s birthday and educational legacy (“Jiaoshi Jie”).

literary language and his position of authority to warp the female student's understanding of rape. That is, Lin's metaphor presents Lee's violation of language as inseparable from the rape that language helps him disguise:

Some teachers asked me what I was unable to read: *The Zuo Tradition, Records of the Grand Historian, Songs of Chu*... There is really no need to list that much. The truth, the very core, of human life can be fully captured in a single sentence: it took me years to learn that this was rape.

有老師問我「不能閱讀」是什麼——《左傳》、《史記》、《楚辭》，其實不用寫那麼多，人間與生命的真相或內核只要一句話就可以徹底描述：花了幾年知道這叫姦。（“Jinxue Jie 進學解” [“An Explication of Advancing in Learning”] 95)

Lin's nonfiction juxtaposes extensive literary learning with the belated recognition that “this was rape.” The *Zuo Tradition* 左傳, *Records of the Grand Historian* 史記, and *Songs of Chu* 楚辭 present the authority of the literary tradition she had learned to trust. Read alongside Si-chi's experience, this juxtaposition problematizes the assumption that one's literary cultivation guarantees their trustworthiness. Lee exploits that presumption, using language from prestigious literary works to frame rape as romance. His distortion gains credibility when those around him treat mastery of literature as evidence of moral authority. Furthermore, Lin questions how someone (e.g., Lee Guohua as a well-versed Chinese teacher) who believes that “a person must be trustworthy in his words” (*ren yan wei xin* 人言為信) can betray that principle of sincerity (“What I Would Like” 72).³⁸ More than despising Lee's hypocrisy, she probes what becomes of the tradition of sincerity when a more powerful reader has the authority to define the meaning of another person's vocabulary.

³⁸ Regarding the connection between one's words and sincerity, Xu Shen's 許慎 *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, an early second-century dictionary of Chinese characters, defines *xin* 信 as “sincerity” (誠也) and analyzes the character as “composed of 人, “person,” and 言, “speech” or “words” as a compound ideograph” (從人從言，會意 367). Duan Yucai 段玉裁, a Qing-dynasty philologist and commentator on the *Shuowen*, explains: “A person's words should never be untrustworthy (lit. ‘As for a person's words, there are none that are not trustworthy.’); therefore, the glyph is composed of 人 and 言” (人言則無不信者，故从人言 367).

Lin shows the collapse of person and language forming trust in a single graphic image; the imagery portrays Lee's language as acting upon Si-chi's body. In Lee's criminal ideation, he fantasizes, "The index and middle fingers on his right hand formed 人, the character for 'person,' walking into her vagina" (Lin, *First Love* 43). Lee plans to carry out his crime by pushing Si-chi onto "Nobel Prize-winning anthologies" and imagines her first "shatter[ing] in these words" (43–44). The character 人 no longer supports the graphic and ethical relation among trustworthy (信), person (人), and speech (言); Lee twists it into the violence of sexual assault. Moreover, the same wall of Nobel Prize-winning books behind Si-chi's back, which advertises Lee's cultural capital, does not guide her toward the truth of her experience. This billboard of literary prestige becomes a material wall that imprisons Si-chi, physically blocking her escape route from the assault, and Lee's words attempt to define that experience before she can grasp it. The passage therefore makes it clear that Lee corrupts and exploits *jing* through both language and body: the passage's imagery of fracture shows Lee attempting to use the language of personhood and literary cultivation to violate Si-chi's bodily autonomy and destabilize her ability to recognize the abuse.

Extending the novel's image of Lee's attempt to sew Si-chi's mouth shut, Lee deploys the rhetoric of sincerity against Si-chi as he demands that she write her essay in an autobiographical manner. Lee Guo-hua assigns Fang Si-chi an essay on honesty and cajoles her into writing about herself. For Si-chi and Yi-ting, who receive the same assignment, the essay homework is viewed as a pedagogical exercise, yet their initial belief cements the credibility of Lee's performed Confucian sincerity. Si-chi obliges, writing: "The true meaning of honesty is that I can still be proud after confessing to my mother that I broke a vase" (57). Reading her essay, Lee probes Si-chi's psychological interiority only to seize control of it. Concluding that "Fang Si-Chi had such self-esteem," he reasons that a girl who values self-respect dreads public humiliation all the more (57). He weaponizes that insight, as he imagines that "self-esteem had always been a needle that harmed others and oneself, but here the needle would sew her mouth

shut” (49). Lee’s coaxing Si-chi to write autobiographically is the very notion of *jing* that the author problematizes: that a text transparently reveals the moral essence of its author. Because Lee holds greater age, pedagogical, and interpretive authority than Si-chi, the demand for transparency renders her vulnerable; he weaponizes the assignment’s demand for honesty to assess what forms of humiliation Si-chi fears. The needle image joins text and textile. It turns the rhetoric of sincerity and *jing*’s promise of moral cultivation into a literary suture: Lee draws the canon’s moral warp across Si-chi’s mouth and disguises abuse as moral discipline.

Si-chi’s vase imagery reveals her belief that honest speech can repair her relationship with her mother: When she broke a vase, Si-chi can transform guilt into dignity through *confession*, that is, language. As a result, even though the external object, the vase, is broken, her inner self-dignity remains intact, and language repairs her relationship with her mother. Nevertheless, in rape, language becomes the instrument of breaking: the novel’s breakage imagery makes language the medium through which Lee attempts to control Si-chi’s interpretation of his abuse: Lee imagines shattering her in these literary words. When Si-chi once questions their relationship, Lee declares that she is the person “I love the most in life” (108). As a result, “with that single sentence, he had pierced her open completely. She was shattered” (108). Lin’s original words further explicate the relation between breaking and language: “A single remark laid her bare; her whole person broke” (一句話說破她。她整個人破了 311). Although *shuopo* 說破 (lit. “speak-broke”) conventionally means to “disclose” or “expose,” here the exposure is literal breakage: Lee’s language does more than lay bare something about Si-chi; the novel represents Lee’s declaration as an attempt to disrupt Si-chi’s ability to recognize the relationship as abuse and narrate it on her own terms.

The novel further expands the breakage metaphor by imagining language as a lesion on the body. As a result of the twisted *jing*, words have been used to turn against Si-chi; they become the wound. In the aftermath, Si-chi imagines her diary surfacing on her own skin and tattooing her with its sentences, “a type of lupus in the shape of a map” (Lin 95). Lupus is an

autoimmune disease in which the body turns against itself: Although the diary contains her own words, the lupus-map image reveals how those words preserve an experience framed by his words. Despite Teacher Lee's attempt to invade and take over her interpretive autonomy, she still tries to write with resistant interpretation and responses. Moreover, the map shape allows us to interpret the rash image beyond a person's wound, linking Si-chi's diary to the wider social relations traced by the novel. They demand readers who can interpret the "map," which is the diary, responsibly.

Once the warp of canonical honesty has been turned into a noose, Lee's manipulation attempts to obstruct Si-chi's ability to expose the abuse publicly within the story. Those around her initially believe in his cultivated persona, while Si-chi tries to revisit and challenge his credibility in her diary. When Yi-ting encounters her account, the question becomes whether she will realize how such a framework of honesty can be weaponized and accept the moral obligations that Si-chi's account demands.

B. Reading Against Distorted *Jing*: Fang's Diary and Its Readers

Si-chi's diary, included in the novel, is a record of Si-chi's recounting the tragic events and her rereading. The narration distinguishes her earlier entries in blue from her later footnotes in red, which are written in the manner "just like how Si-chi did her homework" (23–24). After Lee's assault, she recorded her experience in blue: "It felt like I just failed my homework, even though it was not my homework" (23–24). She feels as if she just failed her homework, which suggests how Lee tries to frame his crime in the voice of pedagogical authority. Nevertheless, her following statement that it is not her homework indicates her effort to recognize and expose the deception of this pedagogical frame. Her diary becomes a battleground between Lee's language and Si-chi's voice, each struggling to shape her interpretation of the assault. Through her later annotations, Si-chi begins to reclaim her autonomy.

The red annotations, like “the face of a famous political commentator,” revisit the traumatic experience and go: “Why did I say I didn’t know how? What if I didn’t want to? What if I told you that you couldn’t?” (23–24).³⁹ When the younger Fang Si-chi encounters the violence, she tries to reject Lee, saying “I didn’t know how” (24). In other words, the grown-up Si-chi addresses Si-chi’s earlier self and vocalizes those refusals to Lee, which were not available to her when she was exposed to Lee’s violence. At the same time, her addresses to her earlier self seem to contain a layer of self-incrimination and self-questioning, revealed through the interrogative “why” and “what if.” This is perhaps due to an internalization of shame, which suggests that her diary is a site of an ongoing contest over self-autonomy. Nevertheless, this time Si-chi’s own voice prevails as her articulation further challenges Lee’s framing of her rejection of his violence as the failure of homework. Instead of having the teacher “grade” the diary with red marks, as with a homework assignment, Si-chi takes up the work of rereading it and narrating the event in her voice. This account challenges a psychoanalytically informed strand of trauma studies, which holds that the history of trauma, because of its “inherent belatedness,” can emerge only through another person’s listening (Caruth 11). Although elder Si-chi’s address comes belatedly, she communicates her story of trauma. Yi-ting and later readers thus encounter the account with Si-chi’s statement: “I didn’t want to.”

After Si-chi’s friends read her diary and seek legal advice, however, the lawyer responds: “There’s nothing we can do. We need evidence. Without any evidence, his team would sue you for defamation, and he would win” (233). Excluding Si-chi’s diary as evidence, the lawyer demands externally verifiable proof: “Condoms, tissues, things like that” (223).⁴⁰ In the story, the

³⁹ The original sentence of “What if I told you that you couldn’t” goes “為什麼不是你不可以,” more literally, “Why wasn’t it that you couldn’t?” (125). The English translation’s “What if I told you” explicates a virtual verbal confrontation between Lee and Si-chi. Although “you” refers to Lee, the question can also be read as Si-chi asking herself why she did not tell Lee “you couldn’t.” This annotation thus reveals that self-questioning and challenging Lee are intertwined and indicates how Si-chi’s diary is a site of ongoing struggle against Lee and her earlier internalization of Lee’s words, much like lupus on the body.

⁴⁰ *First Love* juxtaposes Si-chi’s diary with externally verifiable forensic objects, with the lawyer’s warning that accusation with the diary alone is considered unsupported. I treat this as the novel’s representation of an judicial impasse, not as a claim that diaries are legally inadmissible in Taiwan.

lawyer views the diary alone as insufficient for legal action and demands additional material evidence. The scene therefore presents an evidentiary impasse: if the diary is viewed only as a window into the victim's psychology, without taking into account the ongoing struggle within that psychology, then its judicial value depends on whether that interiority can be verified according to legal standards.

What the lawyer discounts as insufficient evidence, the novel presents as ethically consequential testimony. By presenting Si-chi's diary through Liu Yi-ting's belated reading, Lin stages how Si-chi's account alters Yi-ting's earlier misunderstanding and makes her confront moral obligations of making a response. Yi-ting comes to realize the diary's testimonial power, while the novel simultaneously invites its readers to consider their own moral responsibilities in making a response. In the opening chapter, "Paradise" (*leyuan* 樂園), events unfold from Yi-ting's romanticized viewpoint; she mistakes Si-chi's relationship with Lee for a love affair. That illusion shatters when she opens the diary: "the story needs to be told again from the beginning," and she breaks down "like a crow shot by a hunter's arrow" (25). The simile of the crow that this thesis has earlier mentioned, where a flock of curious spectators is like an excited flock of crows, now pinpoints a reader jolted out of detached spectatorship by the diary.⁴¹

The next chapter, "Paradise Lost" (*shileyuan* 失樂園), rewinds the plot and retells it from Si-chi's perspective, threaded with her diary excerpts. Crucially, Lin never simply says, "Fang wrote..." to refer to the content of Si-chi's writing. Instead, she repeats phrases such as "Later, Yi-ting would find this paragraph in Si-chi's diary..." and "Liu Yi-ting would later read from Si-chi's diary..." (78, 59). This wording foregrounds the act of reception rather than the text's content alone, reminding us that the passage shifts attention from the diary's existence to the reader's responsibility toward it. Moreover, it further challenges Caruth's formulation of belatedness as an inherent feature of trauma: Although Caruth confirms the importance of outside listeners, Yi-ting's belated recognition is socially constructed because the cultural

⁴¹ See Section II, page 29, for the earlier crow imagery associated with spectatorship.

association between teachership and exemplarity predisposes her to accept Lee as a trustworthy mentor, and his abusive relationship with Si-chi as romance. Through this encounter, Liu receives the diary as testimony and reconsiders the events she previously misread. The diary thus becomes a catalyst that turns Liu, and, by extension, us readers into an emerging community of witnesses. Thus, where the law demands material proof, the novel proposes an ethical alternative to offer a way forward.

Reading, however, does more than reveal; it obliges. Si-chi's diary confronts its external readers with her articulation of the traumatic events. When Yi-ting finishes reading Si-chi's diary, she feels it is "like the back of the moon, never able to be seen," reflecting how the association of teachership and canonical learning with moral trustworthiness obscures Yi-ting's and other outside readers' perspectives (222). However, Yi-ting's repeated reading makes a difference: She "read the diary repeatedly, to the point where she knew every page by heart" and "felt like everything that had happened to Si-Chi had just happened to her" (223). Although reading an account is distinct from undergoing the abuse, the experiential immediacy that Yi-ting feels prompts her to seek legal advice, to ask who else has been hurt, and reconsider how Si-chi's account should be received. Through relational reading, an emerging community of witnesses continues to make response in spite of an institutional impasse.

The diary scene links the reception of testimony to readers' responsibilities. The ledge image visualizes the same interdependence among body, writing, and reading while warning against idle spectatorship. Together, the scenes establish relational reading as an ethical responsibility toward Si-chi's account. As Fang stands on the ledge during the suicidal crisis, the building manager stands and observes her in a detached manner. Specifically, Lin writes of Si-chi's "feet stepping on the bottom rail, her toes absorbing the smell of blood from the metal underneath" (114). Lin's original words reveal that the ledge is turned into a three-level precipice: physical iron bar, graphic brush-stroke, and the thread binding the pages of a manuscript. Her sentence goes: 腳踩在柵字式欄杆的那一橫劃上, "stepping onto the horizontal

bar of the railing,” or more literally, “her foot rests on the bottom *bar* of the fence shaped like the character 柵” (321). The glyph 柵 (*zha*, “fence” or “railing”) is written with a long horizontal stroke resting on two vertical posts, visually resembling a physical railing. Regarding the ledge’s meta-textual layer, the right-hand element of 柵 is the character that contains 冊 (*ce*, “book” or “volume”), whose lowest stroke is the same long horizontal line that binds the book’s pages together. The sentence lets one horizontal line function at once as an iron rail, a written stroke, and the thread binding a book. Hence, Lin’s writing about the toes that absorb the smell of blood from the metal converts the ink stroke of 柵 into an open wound, implying that embodied experience of distress and memory seeps into language.

Later, Lin reflects on the process of writing the ledge scene, commenting on her own essay depicting it on Facebook: “I kept writing, pouring my life into it” (用命下去寫的 93). Grammatically, the verb-complement *xiaqū* 下去 indicates continuing or carrying an action (i.e., writing) through. This continuative expression *xiaqū* 下去 combines 下 (*xia*, “down”) with 去 (*qū*, “to go away”), literally meaning “downward” as a combination. The meaning of “downward” adds a resonance of plunging into the continuative sense of *xiaqū*. The more the story progresses, the more fully the author-narrator represents writing as sustained personal investment. It is as if the traumatic reality presses against the fence of words, and the author-narrator stands on the boundary between lived trauma and fiction, a line no thicker than a brushstroke. By visualizing writing as the very edge where trauma meets us, readers, the brushstroke metaphor places lived experience and written texts in extreme proximity. Therefore, the novel asks readers to acknowledge and repay a debt. If the author pours life into the text, readers must risk the comfort of detached reading and become threads that bind the written work to lived reality.

That is why *First Love* confronts us: “Don’t just be idle spectators of other people’s suffering, all right?” (53). Si-chi’s diary does not “become true” merely because Yi-ting believes it; it becomes consequential when ethical reading alters the writer-reader relation and prompts

spectators to make a response. The novel thereby answers the legal impasse with an ethical counter-court action: a community formed by relational reading.

C. *Jing* Falling Apart: Textile

Just as the mirror that should reflect an author's "soul" instead shows the image the predator wants the public to see, the novella portrays Wu as bending the textile warp into an instrument that catalogs the women and attempts to suppress their accounts (here the camouflage aspect of *jing* comes to the fore). In the novella, the distortion of *jing* lies in Wu's use of textiles to catalog his sexual assaults; the *jing* he weaves does not lead or guide multiple threads into an ethical or social fabric but orders the women as entries in his private catalog. That is, the very medium that persuades the city to read Wu's art as a portrait of virtue also permits him to hide his private textile.

In the novella, the stitches of Wu's silk ledger, like the literary sentences Lee utilizes, replace the living women as entries in his private ledger of assault. Specifically, Wu Lian's list is a silk record that catalogs twenty-three women:

In the 'mist-rain' embroidery technique, the names of twenty-three girls, their family backgrounds, and the dates on which he 'had his way with' them were meticulously stitched onto the silk surface. These dates stretched over more than a decade. Lin Rulan's name was second to last, and Meng Wan's was the final one. 絹面用煙雨繡的針法，細細繡出了二十三個女孩的名字、門戶和得手的時日。各個日期橫跨十幾載。蘭如蘭是倒數第二個名字，孟宛是最後一個。
(Li 96)

By turning the warp of *jing* into a bookkeeping grid, Wu Lian provides the most literal proof that moral "straightness" can be bent into camouflage, which contradicts the public perception of him as a cultivated gentleman. The record is in the form of bookkeeping; Each entry repeats the same formula: name, household background, and date. That is, twenty-three

lives are flattened into standardized categories. The phrase “dates on which he ‘had his way with’ them” (得手的時日) identifies the dates of Wu’s assaults, yet it is from the perpetrator’s perspective. Its verb, *deshou* 得手, is a lexicalized verb meaning “to succeed,” where *shou* 手 means “hand.” In this context, the compound’s association with grasping, or laying hands on, visualizes Wu Lian’s objectification of the women as items to be obtained. It imports commercial logic into sexual violence. As the proprietor of an embroidery enterprise, Wu uses the classificatory habits of business to itemize each woman he assaults. In other words, the textile *jing* that should bind a social fabric is reduced to columns of commercial data. This ledger-like record introduces a dark irony into his gentleman persona; it reveals how commercial habits of enumeration and proprietary control operate beneath the cultural prestige of his cultivated persona. Yet it is the city’s belief in his “sincere” biography, as presented by his artifacts, that maintains this disguise.

In the novella, because this ledger is kept out of sight, the city never confronts the disjunction between Wu’s public refinement and hidden criminality. Their author-centered biographical reading persists precisely because it focuses on the aesthetics of Wu’s embroidery’s appearance. In Li Bojian’s novella, Wu’s silk ledger is literally submerged in a goldfish bowl. Specifically, Wu conceals the silk inside the removable porcelain pistil at the center of a lotus-shaped goldfish bowl, around which the fish continually swim (Li 94).⁴² The fish swim only inches from the evidence yet remain oblivious to it. Likewise, the city’s spectators crowd around Wu as a cultivated scholar-gentleman without recognizing the violence his refinement conceals: because they read the refinement of his work as evidence of his moral refinement, his artistry obscures rather than reveals the violence it records. The image of the fish echoes an earlier scene at Rulan’s hearing, where spectators vied to crane their necks like fish awaiting to be fed (Li 63). In a sense, this symbol reflects both sides of a coin: Their biographical reading does not literally

⁴² Li credits the fishbowl mechanism to Robert van Gulik’s *The Chinese Lake Murders*. Li writes, “魚缸蓮蕊藏絹的部分致敬高羅佩狄公案中《湖濱案》的機關” (“The part involving the lotus pistil of the fishbowl, where the silk is concealed, pays homage to a mechanical device featured in Robert van Gulik’s Judge Dee novel *The Chinese Lake Murders*” 149).

hide the record, but it helps keep Wu's violence socially illegible by making Rulan's accusation against such a "cultivated scholar-gentleman" appear implausible.

Similarly, in *Faithful*, Wu Lian weaves a flawless embroidery that serves as his visual alibi. His embroidery turns visual refinement into a plaque advertising his supposed moral refinement. Visually, Wu Lian's catalog is hidden beneath the surface of an embroidery with a falling plum design. It is like a kind of palimpsest: Its exterior appearance dazzles the onlookers, and they read moral virtue into the textile. Simultaneously, the textile interiority puts Wu Lian's twist of *jing* and his crime out of the public's sight.

Read alongside the classical imagery of the falling plum, Wu's design reveals an additional layer of literary irony in his distortion of *jing*. "Piao You Mei" 標有梅 ("Falling Are the Plums"), a poem from the *Shijing*, or *Book of Songs*, whose title identifies it as a *jing*, gives voice to a woman who observes the falling plums and urges prospective suitors to act before the proper time passes: Bickford renders one line of her exhortative appeal, or directive speech act, as "Seize the chance to speak up!" (54).⁴³ Although the poem depicts falling plums rather than blossoms, Bickford traces the merging of the plum, the female experience, and the passage of time into the later plum-blossom imagery tradition.⁴⁴ However, Wu Lian transforms the image of the falling plum into a pattern that records women's names and bloodstains. Read against this poem, Wu's design constitutes a betrayal of *jing*: the poem's articulation of a woman's desire contrasts with a visual record organized under Wu's objectifying perspective. The contrast exposes how the embroidery replaces the woman's direct speech with the perpetrator's inventory of women he has assaulted. At the same time, because the workmanship appears flawless, the

⁴³ The original line reads 求我庶士，迨其謂之， meaning "Would the gentlemen who seek me; [Only] speak about it!" ("Piao You Mei," stanza 3; trans. Legge). *MoeDict* glosses the verb sense of *wei* 謂 as "to say" or "to tell." Within the context of the poem, *wei* refers to voicing the intention or proposal of marriage. It also signals the poem's movement toward speech.

⁴⁴ Bickford describes "Piao You Mei" as the earliest combination of the motifs of woman, plum, and the passage of time. Although the poem concerns ripe plums, she explains that during the Southern Dynasties, plum blossoms, feminine beauty, and transience converged into a unified literary theme (54–55).

city reads the embroidery as the candid self-portrait of a sensitive artisan, leaving the catalog of assaults hidden in plain sight.

Knowing the secret of this embroidery, Wu's wife gives a hint of this contradiction, saying "the evidence is right before their eyes, yet everyone is turning a blind eye to it" (證據就在眼前，大家卻視而不見; *Faithful*, ep. 14, 19:09–19:19). The phrase *shi er bu jian* 視而不見 ("turning a blind eye to," or literally, "looking without seeing") distinguishes visual acuity from attentive recognition. The object is displayed in public, but its incriminating contents remain concealed beneath the exquisite facade. Admiration for Wu's artistry obscures people's recognition of his violence.

People's admiration of Wu serves as a cover that prevents them from noticing the victims' scars. Tian Xiaoling is among the women Wu assaults. He inscribes a falling plum blossom on her back. During a private embroidery discussion Wu purposefully arranges, she ventures: "Falling plum blossoms are a bit too bleak and desolate; those still on the branch possess a far nobler, unyielding spirit" (落梅未免太過淒涼蕭瑟，還是開在枝頭的梅花更有傲骨; ep. 23, 35:25). Her use of the word *aogu* 傲骨 associates the blossom that remains on the branch with an upright and unyielding moral character.⁴⁵ Offended, Wu assaults her and tattoos a single falling blossom on her shoulder blade so it will "stay with [her] for the rest of [her] life" (他說，要讓這朵落梅跟我一輩子; 36:12–36:16). A listener of her account recites the Confucian maxim "Our bodies—to every hair and bit of skin—are received by us from our parents" (身體髮膚，受之父母; trans. Legge), revealing how the tattoo violates both Tian's body as part of the social fabric and the moral *jing* meant to defend it (36:47–36:49).⁴⁶ Her skin becomes an unwilling archive, a page on which Wu attempts to impose his interpretation through such an inscribed flower.

⁴⁵ *Moedict* glosses 傲骨 as "lofty and unyielding character" ("Aogu"). Bickford explains that, when grouped with pine and bamboo, the flowering plum serves as an emblem of endurance in adversity and of unblemished integrity, which are traditionally associated with Confucian virtues (53).

⁴⁶ The line comes from the opening chapter of *Xiaojing*, or the *Classic of Filial Piety*: 身體髮膚，受之父母，不敢毀傷，孝之始也 ("Our bodies—to every hair and bit of skin—are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them. This is the beginning of filial piety"; "Kaizong Mingyi 開宗明義"; trans. Legge). I invoke this passage as the listener's intertextual reference, not as a normative claim that parents own Tian's body.

Additionally, Tian's retreat to the nunnery and adoption of a new name are presented as forms of social separation produced by Wu's violence and the absence of public redress.

In this way, *jing*, meaning the warp that ought to guide, conceals. The "portrait" hermeneutic that equates aesthetic achievement with inner virtue allows wrongdoers to deceive people about their moral character through seemingly flawless fabrications. Wu goes further: the wounds he inflicts become a script that imposes his distorted interpretation on each woman, turning each into an itemized entry or an isolated "plum flower." This makes relational reading an ethical task in which the "warp" is repurposed by recognizing the survivors' self-interpretations and attending to how their accounts may have been disregarded or discredited. It follows the "threads" outward to the women whom Wu has attempted to isolate, reconnecting their stories with other people who are willing to respond and with other survivors whose stories resonate with Si-chi's.

D. Cutting Open the Text/Textile

Li's novella itself can be read as a practice of relational reading. Her dedication to Lin invites us to reflect on what a reader can and must do in response to *First Love*, even though we encounter the text belatedly. Following the conception of relational reading, Li imagines Wu Lian's record, a *bo juan* 薄絹 ("thin silk")⁴⁷, whose entries are used by Meng and her allies to seek and reconnect with other witnesses (77). Hence, both the novella's plot and its intertextuality demonstrate relational reading: as Meng seeks the women recorded in Wu's ledger, Li, as a reader of Lin, shoulders its ethical demand for recognition and responds by

⁴⁷ *Bo juan* 薄絹 ("thin silk") slightly echoes Li Bojian's first name, 薄蘭, in terms of its phonetics, graphematics, and semantics. Kroll defines *jian* 繭 as both the cocoon spun by a silkworm and a callus on a palm or sole caused by repeated friction; the latter sense may evoke the callused hand of a writer, revealing their arduous labor (197). *Juan* 絹, meanwhile, denotes "tabby silk, plain weave; pongee; thin tabby" and as a verb, "to tie up, knit together" (230). The transition from cocoon, or writing hand, to silk can be viewed as a depiction of Li's relational reading of Lin: Through Li's mindful rewriting, what is enclosed in Si-chi's diary is drawn outward into threads that knit the righteous ones and larger audiences together. I treat this wordplay as potential resonances without claiming that this is Li's intention.

writing a novella as a meta-reflection on how literary works can contribute to the advancement of justice.

Read alongside *First Love*, *The Nine* and *Faithful* show that even when a material record exists, how it is read remains crucial to the pursuit of justice. Different from Si-chi's diary, Wu's record catalogs the women from the perpetrator's perspective. The records, featuring the mist-rain stitches, mark Wu's workmanship and his violence. However, they also become potential means of identifying and connecting with other survivors. Rather than treating public disclosure of the record as sufficient for justice, Meng and the other protagonists read it relationally. They contact the women named in it, offer support, and invite each woman to choose whether and how to participate while the group continues to pursue accountability for Wu.

Firstly, in the novella, Meng and other protagonists use Wu Lian's ledger to locate potential witnesses and build a support network. If it were used solely as proof of Wu's guilt, without attending to the listed women's privacy and safety, or allowing them to decide whether and how their names and experiences can be involved in the case, it would risk repeating the logic of objectification. Thus, in their ongoing pursuit of justice, the protagonists refuse to treat the women merely as evidence and recognize their agency within a constraining world shaped by power asymmetry.

Their relational reading attempts to reconnect the women whom public shaming, family pressure, and institutional disbelief have sought to isolate. The narrative shows how stigma, threats, and concerns about family reputation separate each victim, potentially turning down her statement and dismissing it as a single, unverifiable accusation. At Rulan's hearing, Meng Wan, another survivor, does not dare to speak up for Rulan publicly due to family pressure. She notices how Rulan's gaze upon her "resembled a faint cluster of fire, flickering amidst a crowd as oblivious as the long night" (藺如蘭的眼神……像一簇微弱火堆，在長夜一般無知無覺的群體中閃爍不定; Li 38). Rulan, by speaking up and confronting Wu, is like the lone fire, as the implicated spectators are oblivious to her suffering, blinded by Wu's prestige, while other victims

like Meng hide themselves in the long night of anonymity out of stigma and fear. That forced isolation lets Wu Lian and the authorities frame Rulan's trauma as a private grudge between a teacher and a single student.

Wu's ledger, however, exposes a pattern: the assaults are not a single event, even though he lists them as discrete incidents. By following the list of names in that ledger, Meng attempts to connect survivors who have been isolated from one another. The lanterns symbolize this relational practice: one flame kindles many lights that illuminate the night. Abbess Huichen invokes the Pure Land Buddhist teacher Master Yinguang's 印光 image of one flame kindling, as in "if one is willing to pass the flame on, then the brightness of the hundreds of thousands of millions of immeasurable, innumerable lamps will be beyond all description" (若肯轉燃，則百千萬億無量無數燈，其明蓋不可喻矣) when she agrees to support the protagonists' effort to reach out to Jueming (Li 113–114). Meng and her allies' relational reading is like the transmission of light: it carries the flames outward and turns them into new relations of recognition and response. Hence, Rulan's lone flame is joined by other characters' fire and support, such as Jueming's and the abbess's. Although the city is implicated, the collective resistance brightens up the long night and makes Wu Lian's crimes far harder to deny.

Faithful begins its challenge to Wu Lian's objectifying logic with Rulan's rejection of the falling-plum design and his distorted interpretation of *jing*. When Rulan confronts and questions him about why he deceives and assaults her and other victims, he replies: "You are like these falling plum blossoms. Each one is unique" (你們就像這朵朵落梅，每一朵都是獨一無二的; "Official MV" 1:02–1:05). He invokes the literary image of falling plum blossom to aestheticize his assault as incorporating each victim into an exquisite artwork. However, Rulan retorts: "Are we nothing more than a flower on a piece of embroidery?" (我們只不過是繡品上的一朵花? 1:07–1:08). Her rebuttal shatters his literary metaphor through which he interprets his crime as an artist's composition of an artwork. Rulan exposes his objectifying logic by pointing out that he is flattening each living individual into a lifeless design.

Following Rulan's rejection of Wu Lian's artistic facade, the drama further gives this mode of relational reading a symbolic gesture: Meng Wan cuts open the woven threads beneath the embroidered falling plum blossoms that cover the victims' names. More specifically, she uses scissors to cut apart the interlaced threads of each flower's pistil. Then she uses a needle to brush away the loosened threads. In this way, Meng symbolically cuts through Wu's distortion of *jing*: the design's advertisement of refined sentiment gives way to the record of violence beneath it. Read alongside "Falling Are the Plums," this gesture also brings into view the confrontation between the poem's female speech and Wu's objectifying inventory. Meanwhile, the drama juxtaposes the scene in which Meng cuts each blossom and reveals the victim's name with the scene in which each protagonist seeks this particular woman: some arrive at a deserted, dilapidated house, some are turned away, and others stand before a lone grave. That is, Meng's symbolic gesture of cutting the textile and text open shifts the focus away from the biographical reading that is like a veil before the eyes and draws attention to reconnecting the women and records that the narrative depicts as socially dis-membered, thereby paving the way for the shared work of community formation.

Faithful's animated prologue visualizes this process of unraveling. The sequence begins with a crimson thread passing through a needle's eye. The needle then becomes a key that unlocks the doors of the Mist-Rain Embroidery Tower (fig. 3). The thread passes every imprisoned female apprentice, gathers the disparate strands of Wu's plum-blossom design into one living thread, then finds and connects each of the nine righteous ones and their respective mnemonic objects, and finally becomes the string of an unseen kite that Meng and Rulan fly under a freshly blooming plum tree. That is, the animation transforms the thread from Wu's control of the women's bodies toward connections among the women, witnesses, and mnemonic objects. As Shoshana Felman frames it, in contrast to "the language of the law," literature "encapsulates not closure but precisely what in a given legal case refuses to be closed and cannot

be closed,” thereby doing justice to “this refusal of trauma to be closed” (8).⁴⁸ By cutting open Wu Lian’s falling-plum design as a stitched text, Meng is creating a counter-narrative with the open-ended crimson thread as its visual language: it expresses the refusal of closure and the need to reopen Rulan’s “closed” case. This continuing chain of relations lays the groundwork for remembering a living network of witnesses, accounts, and material records.

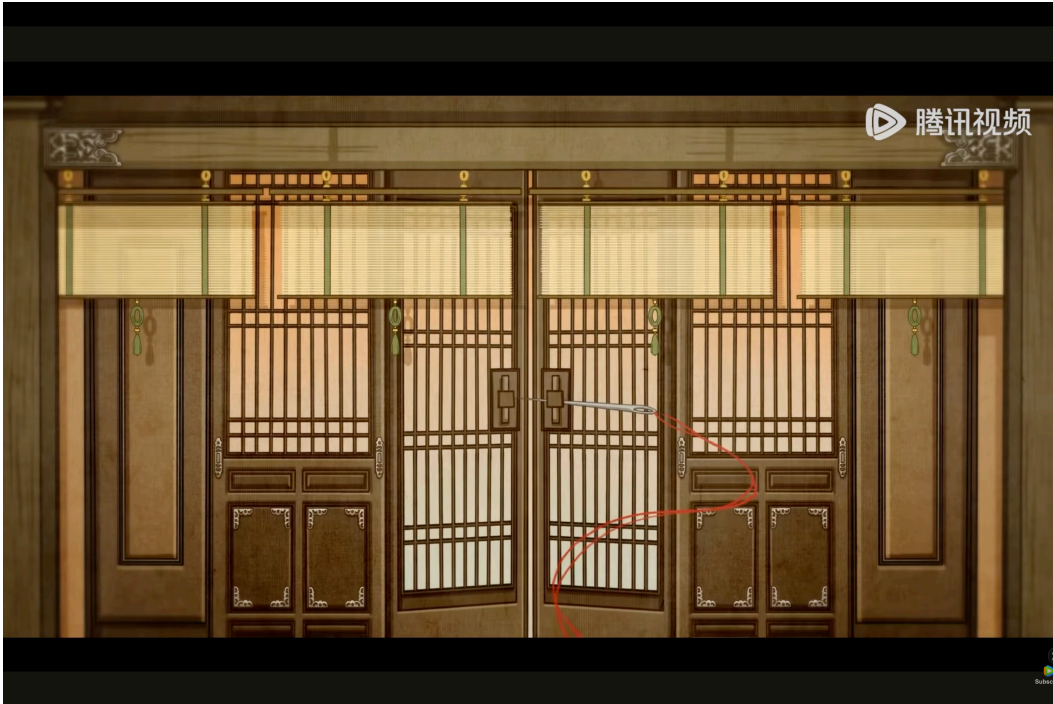


Figure 3. Still from *Faithful*, episode 1 (00:00:18).

In sum, this section argues that relational reading challenges the moral authority culturally assigned to literary or artistic cultivation by redirecting attention from author-centered biographical reading of the texts toward the people, unresolved moral claims, and power relations implicated in the records. In *First Love*, Si-chi’s diary, recording her process of counter-reading Li’s distorted *jing*, leads Yi-ting to reexamine her previous misconception. At the same

⁴⁸ Felman argues that literature preserves what a legal case tries to close (8). I invoke that distinction to describe literature’s capacity to reopen an unresolved claim, not to claim that literary witnessing can substitute for legal or material redress.

time, Meng and her allies use Wu's record to seek other women he has reduced to names and isolated incidents. Such reading transforms reader-author relations and encourages viewers to move from detached recipients to ethical readers willing to shoulder the moral responsibility of attending to survivors' voices and connecting with other implicated people. In other words, reading a record in a relational manner turns it into a map; it provides direction for seeking and reuniting disparate individuals, so that a witness community can begin to take shape.

IV. Re-membering Social Dis-memberment: From Moral Debt to Speaking Subjects

My previous sections show that sexual violence in Lin's work, Li's work, and *Faithful* is simultaneously an assault on the body, a crime made possible by implicated subjects and institutions, and a crisis of literature itself as narration can be weaponized to mask violence. I call the counter-practice re-membering, a collective response to *bao* obligations that works across three arenas: first, inside the plot; next, within literary history; and finally, within real-life reception. Re-membering, therefore, turns remembrance into a moral debt that compels the characters and real-life viewers to act. In this manner, both the characters and real-life viewers are encouraged to become speaking subjects answering Si-chi's and Rulan's claims.

A. Re-membering within the Narratives

Building upon the novella, *Faithful* explicates the mnemonic dimension of re-membering: Within its narrative, Meng's symbolic gestures of cutting open each falling plum blossom and weaving bamboo lanterns gather the drama's scattered characters into a mended social fabric capable of response. Unlike Wu Lian's ledger, which objectifies each victim, this process of re-membering regathers scattered people and mnemonic objects through unresolved moral obligations, bringing personal memories of Rulan into collective remembrance. As a result, it encourages victims and characters to speak, remember, and make ethical choices.

When they are recruited, each character is asked the same trigger question: "Do you still remember what happened seven years ago?" (你還記得七年前……?) This question is like a thread woven through the characters, knitting them together with memories. It acts less as a test of factual recollection than as an act of summoning the protagonists who still carry the past as a moral obligation to act in the present. Whereas several characters in the novella are drawn into Rulan's case via favors owed to Liu Xin, *Faithful* reveals the recruited members' prior encounters with Rulan. Their memories become the mnemonic moral debts, reminding them of

Rulan's unresolved claim and bringing more and more people together to attend to survivors' voices and take action in the present to advance justice.

Furthermore, the drama uses mnemonic objects as nodes in the binding thread of memory, tying each character to their moral debts. Although some of the mnemonic objects are not directly related to their memories of Rulan, they serve as mementos of their own private memories and regrets from seven years ago, which eventually draw them to Rulan's claims. The hairpin episode is the most salient example. Unlike the novella, where the hairpin Rulan gives Liu Xin is lost, in the drama, Liu still keeps the pearl hairpin. Seven years ago, out of greed, Liu Xin obtained the hairpin from Rulan through deception. He planned to give it to a woman he admired, but before he could, Wu sent him to prison in retaliation.

Seven years later, when Liu asks Meng why she decides to recruit him, she points out the hairpin Liu carries and says to Liu: "You keep it because you haven't let go" (既是帶着，說明心中還有未放下的; *Faithful*, ep. 4, 33:20–33:24). By pointing out that he has not let go, Meng not only reminds him of his moral debt to Rulan but also his personal regret of an unfulfilled love. Liu insists that it "is worth only a few copper coins" (也就值幾枚銅錢而已; 33:28–33:30), yet her follow-up, "seven years ago, when its owner handed it to you, she entrusted you with a task. Do you still remember?" (七年前它的主人將它交托於你時，是有囑託過的。可還記得? ; 33:38–33:44), turns memory into a test of moral responsibility. His affirmative answer, "I do" (lit. "I remember") 記得, confirms Liu's acknowledgment (33:45). As a result, Meng Wan said: "Then it is yours" (那它便是你的了; 33:47). On the one hand, her affirmative words acknowledge the hairpin as his possession, thereby acknowledging his grief over what could have happened and what Wu owes him personally. On the other hand, her words frame his possession as moral responsibility towards Rulan: to keep the object is to keep the debt.

Visual grammar of how Meng gathers the characters also reinforces this motif. In the novella, the symbol of Meng's recruitment is her playing chess with the princess consort, who gradually loses interest in sponsoring Wu. The chess motif foregrounds the strategic dimension

of Meng's planning. In *Faithful*, the regrouping of the characters is represented by her weaving lanterns and writing a line of character verse on each lantern to summon each protagonist.⁴⁹ Unlike chess pieces, this motif foregrounds distinct characters as individuals, each with their own emotions, private struggles, and personal flaws. In other words, re-membling is not simply an assemblage of components that look the same; it views and values each individual as a speaking subject with their own voice. It is about how each character, with their own feelings and experiences, along with their personal memories of Rulan, adds an extra strand to the collective process. Furthermore, unlike a flat chessboard, weaving suggests the layering of multiple memories and moral debts, like many water drops that eventually coalesce into an ocean.

As sexual violence tears not just a body but the very cloth of society, the weaving imagery presents social repair as collective, hands-on work that brings dispersed people into relation. Episode 4 illustrates this visual logic when Meng sends Liu Xin to find Liu Sanniang. It juxtaposes a close-up of Meng's hands bending bamboo strips (fig. 4) with a shot of Liu Xin's horse in motion. Specifically, in the shot of Liu Xin, the camera first focuses on the horse's legs, then gradually tilts upward to reveal Liu Xin. This camera editing conveys Liu's mobility despite his leg injury; motivated to form a network of witnesses, he rides a horse to seek other protagonists and participates in the re-membling process as he is woven into the mended social body.⁵⁰ Moreover, the scene is accompanied by the voice of Meng Wan: "Within Xunzhou Prefecture...a celebrated courtesan lives there, known as Liu Sanniang... She may be able to

⁴⁹ Meng's lantern verse is reminiscent of the genre of 判詞 (*panci*, "verdict verses") and the prophetic riddles in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Ou Li-chuan 歐麗娟 defines such 預言表述 ("prophetic expression") of characters as elliptical expressions that hint, predict, or anticipate their fates (55). In addition, Wu Xinzhe 吳修喆 describes lantern riddles (燈謎) as a means of 「登場人物の運命を文中の燈謎を通して仄めかす」 ("foreshadowing the characters' destinies within the narratives"; 86). That is, the *panci* is formally proleptic but hermeneutically retrospective: it announces a future destiny, yet readers can fully decipher it only after that destiny has unfolded. In comparison, Meng's verse is future-oriented and performative: rather than encoding the character's fate, it turns Rulan's unresolved injustice into a poetic order that mobilizes each character to continue pursuing justice.

⁵⁰ This communal logic is also expressed onstage when Liu Xin touches his injured leg and decides to join Meng Wan: "Just as one hand cannot clap, one leg alone cannot walk" (孤掌難鳴，獨腿難行; ep. 4, 35:38–35:40). This further enhances the idea of mnemonic restitution as a persistent work of reassembling a collective body: names restored, wounds acknowledged, memory shared.

lend us a hand” (潯州府內...住著一位花魁娘子，名喚柳三娘...這位女子，或許可以助我們一臂之力; ep. 4, 37:39–37:59). The phrase “lend a hand” (*yi bi zhi li* 一臂之力) suggests how Liu Sanniang’s help is like another hand of mending. In other words, the process of re-membering not only seeks out another disparate individual but also reconstitutes a collective body that is capable of bearing witness for Rulan and restoring the torn social fabric.



Figure 4. Still from *Faithful*, episode 4 (00:37:50).

B. Re-membering Literary History (Mnemonic *Jing*)

For the second layer of re-membering, I read the three works as responses to the distortion of textual/textile *jing* analyzed in the previous section. Their reworking of literary language and imagery contests the moral authority claimed by Lee and Wu and attempts to mend the classical texts and the fabric torn by their distorted patriarchal interpretation. According to

David Der-wei Wang's definition of "poetic justice," it is "an imaginary deployment in a narrative sequence that vindicates authorial wish-fulfillment as it coalesces with a consensual notion of 'justice'" (121). The later works imagine justice not only as reuniting scattered people and holding Wu Lian accountable within the narrative, but also as repairing the poetry and poetics that he has distorted. That is, they are also doing justice to poetry or poetics itself.

In terms of canonical patchwork, as literary afterlives of *First Love*, the two later works also attempt to graft women's experiences of trauma into the canon rather than letting the discourse of romance erase them. Orchid, plum, and bamboo, traditional emblems of the integrity of Confucian gentlemen, are reappropriated as symbols of female endurance. For example, Meng Wan's reinterpretation of the lantern rewrites the bamboo's virtue in feminist terms.⁵¹ "This lantern is wrapped in *xuan* paper, soft on the outside, yet woven from bamboo strips within—resilient and unyielding. Does it not resemble women in the world?" (這燈籠以宣紙包裹，外表柔軟；內裡以竹條編織，堅韌不屈；像不像這世間的女子; *Faithful*, ep. 8, 30:45–30:58) The soft paper encodes an empathic acceptance of another's pain, and bamboo ribs indicate an unyielding resolve to set the record straight. In other words, Meng Wan reworks bamboo's conventional association with the Confucian gentleman to value women's resilience and responsive labor of re-membering. In this scene, *Faithful* contests the patriarchal appropriation of classical imagery by weaving women's experiences into its interpretation of the bamboo motif. In this manner, the novella and drama repair the classics by patching misogynistic gaps that Wu and Lee create and adding women's experience as a new warp thread.

In terms of rewriting the literary history of *jing*, the two later works affirm *First Love* as the new foundation for voicing sexual trauma. As artistic afterlives of *First Love*, they become members of the literary lineage that bears witness to the experiences of injured women. The

⁵¹ Bamboo is traditionally "the icon of the Confucian gentleman" (Owen, *All Mine!* 139). Furthermore, it is "not just an image in the eyes or mind but a growing organism": beginning as an "inch-long sprout in the ground or in the mind," it possesses an inherent tendency to continue "growing and increasing" (131, 137). As Meng Wan understands it, bamboo not only signifies feminist moral character, but also suggests how seemingly small feminist practices can grow into a collective force for intellectual and social transformation. It again echoes the ethics of "advance one pawn each day" in MeToo China.

names Lin Yi-han, Li Bojian, and Lin Rulan trace the circulation of literary memory. Through Li's novella and the drama written by Cao and Huang, Lin's work enters a developing lineage of Sinophone feminist literature; the connection extends beyond the names' shared sounds or symbolism. This lineage also challenges a strand of trauma theory that treats survivors as lacking an integrated understanding of what happened to them: "the listener ... becomes the Holocaust witness before the narrator does" (Felman and Laub 85). However, we do have writers such as Si-chi and Lin Yi-han, and vocal female characters like Rulan and Meng Wan, who challenge the model that views survivors as lacking and deficient.

As an eloquent work articulating sexual trauma, *First Love* nourishes an ongoing dialogue about reception and counter-reading. It offers a counter-vocabulary through which readers can contest narratives of romance and respond to claims that those narratives discredit. Previously, when Si-chi faces the "unspeakable love," "all she could do was take in ample ancient Chinese poems and Western novels," which offer "intelligible" scripts, such as secret romance, illicit romance, tragic romance, and the miraculous union between two lone and sensitive souls (Lin 107).⁵² However, readers of Si-chi's diary and of *First Love* can refer to these texts to articulate victims' experiences or to refute the patriarchal ideology of romance, with the novella and the drama as examples of such relational reading.⁵³ Hence, *First Love* is remembered and kept vividly in cultural memory, and the ever-evolving literary lineages acquire a durability on par with the canonical scriptures, another kind of *jing* in the sense of "endurance" of literary memories.⁵⁴

⁵² The original expression for "to take in" in the novel is *yinjin* 引進, "to import" (Lin 119). This suggests that the literary works Si-chi can make reference to at the time are all foreign to her true experience.

⁵³ For instance, following the report that the alleged wrongdoer has been employed in Fuzhou, many readers cite quotes from *First Love*, Lin's interview, or their own thoughts after reading the novel to express their discontent and outrage online. Hence, the novel furnishes readers with a language to contest and demand institutional response (Yangzhou Fabu).

⁵⁴ Kroll also glosses *jing* 經 as "passage of time..." (217). In this sense, *jing* is to endure through time. I invoke this idea based on *Faithful's* theme song, titled *Buwang* 不忘 ("Not Forgetting"). It includes the lyric "the journey of life is long; though years may pass, we dare not forget" (世路長，縱經年，不敢忘; Jiang and Qingyan). Here, *jingnian* 經年 means "year after year." Hence, as the drama understands it, to remember is both to endure the passage of time and shoulder the moral responsibility of not forgetting.

As for righting the wronged *jing*, *Faithful* adopts the lantern as an alternative mode of poetics, countering the mirror model of biographical reading. With verses written on their surface, these lanterns become more than objects: they represent poems in action. Each verse summons a new character to Rulan's case. For example, Liu Xin's lantern verse goes: "a precious hairpin is gifted to the hero, flames from the firewood ignite the candle-lantern" (寶釵贈英雄，薪火燃燭燈; *Faithful*, ep. 8, 39:19). Here, the verse does not serve as a mirror reflecting Liu's or Meng's morality, but as a speech act intending to extend the thread outward, summon each protagonist, and form a group of witnesses. Like the poem "Falling Are the Plums" "speak up," the texts are poems in motion.

C. Re-membering the Audience: Accumulation, Coincidence, and *Bao*

The third arena of re-membering is reception. As purchasers, readers and viewers also carry these works as mnemonic objects. Ownership positions them to participate in re-membering Si-chi and Rulan. Moreover, the online platforms on which the novella and the drama are published allow for comments, thumbs-ups, and reposts, connecting other readers and viewers of the works. These acts can become threads of re-membering as they invite viewers outside the stories to participate in, witness, and relate them to their own lives. For example, on Douban Reads, which allows readers to post their observations in public, a reader posts an observation about the scene where Rulan is breaking free from the city guard's hand and falls; the guard's "long, wailing cry sliced through the sky above the city walls like the blade of a knife" (少年長長的哀叫像刀鋒一般，劃破了城牆上的天空; Li 134). By pointing out that the city guard resembles the firefighter attempting to rescue Li Yiyi, the reader brings this fictional scene into relation with a reported tragedy, thereby stitching the text to fact.

In *Faithful*, the mobility and fluidity of carved plaques break the fourth wall, and their resemblance to *danmu* reminds real-life audiences that they can also participate in shaping a moral landscape by posting bullet comments. For example, in the Huaizhou tribunal, the plaque

“A Bright Mirror Hung High” (*ming jing gao xuan* 明鏡高懸; ep. 24, 24:00) appears in close-up under both the corrupt magistrate who supports Wu and the more upright judge who eventually sentences Wu. Although the plaque remains unchanged, the cinematic language shifts its meaning from bitter irony to affirmation. Another example is the plaque “Great Virtue Shines Far” (*de hou liu guang* 德厚流光; ep. 9, 40:39) that crowns the manor of Wu’s relatives, who attempt to conceal his crimes. Hence, plaques in *Faithful* operate like subtitles: the words are fixed in wood, yet their stage setting and the camera’s choreography render them morally fluid.⁵⁵

Episode 10 further elaborates on the plaques’ fluidity. As shown in figure 5, the protagonists relocate three plaques: “Duke of Ningguo’s Mansion” (寧國公府), “Huaizhou Tribunal” (淮州衙門), and “Mist-Rain Embroidery Tower” (煙雨繡樓), then rehang them beneath the city-gate plaque “Huaizhou” (淮州).⁵⁶ Meanwhile, the entire city, including the placards, is plastered with Rulan’s written complaints, each topped by a large blood-red character “unjust” (*yuan* 冤). The people in the city immediately intuit the message: these two institutions sustain and support Wu and help suppress Rulan’s case. The recontextualized plaques are reminiscent of *danmu*: the plaques shape the public’s opinion within the drama, while the on-screen comments can place other viewers’ judgments beside the unfolding scenes (“This judge is suspicious,” “Poor Rulan”). That is, they foreground moral judgments, much as plaques encode moral ideals.

Episode 7 offers a vivid example of how *danmu* turn the screen into a moral scale of *bao*. After Rulan reports that Wu Lian raped her, the female forensic examiner coldly remarks:

⁵⁵ “A Bright Mirror Hung High” (明鏡高懸) is an idiom meaning impartial judgment, which is related to the story of the discerning mirror in *Miscellaneous Records of the Western Capital* (《西京雜記》), a collection of historical anecdotes and court lore. “Great Virtue Shines Far” (德厚流光) denotes virtue whose influence passes down to later generations, which comes from the *Guliang Commentary* (《穀梁傳》), a canonical Confucian commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (《春秋》).

⁵⁶ Screenwriter Cao Xiaotian states that the plaque-relocation scene is a tribute to Martin McDonagh’s *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017); He points out that both works center on “a resilient woman who seeks justice for a girl who died unjustly” (一個堅毅女人為一個枉死女孩伸冤; Cao). Whereas the mother in *Three Billboards* rents the billboards to complain about police inaction over the wrongful death of her daughter, the protagonists hang three plaques at the city gate to “incite public opinion” (製造輿論), compelling the officials to reinvestigate Rulan’s case (Cao). Both make visible the implication of institutions, thereby transforming the public space into a charged moral landscape.

“However, there is no sign of any tearing in your lower body. This suggests that either your intimate encounter with Mr. Wu was consensual, or you took the initiative to seduce him” (可你下身卻不見任何撕裂之傷。由此可見，要麼你同吳先生是你情我願地歡好，要麼便是主動勾引; ep. 7, 24:07–24:21). Her comment places all the blame on the victim; Rulan is too stunned to answer. At that exact moment, a viewer’s on-screen bullet comment timely intervenes: “How can an enoki mushroom cause tearing?” In online feminist slang, “enoki mushroom” (*jinzhenqu* 金針菇), whose literal gloss is “golden-needle-mushroom,” mocks a man whose penis is so puny that he can neither cause any injury nor sustain the patriarchy he claims (Xue and Rose 138). With this retort, the commenter ridicules Wu Lian’s sexual potency, exposes the examiner’s victim-blaming logic, and symbolically castrates the moral authority Wu claims, as his social reputation rests on the embroidery needle he wields.



Figure 5. Still from *Faithful*, episode 10 (00:39:35).

Although a single *danmu* cannot alter the plot, thousands of such micro-inscriptions accumulate like weights on opposite pans of a scale. Some comments side with patriarchal logic, as the female examiner does, while others contest it and defend Rulan. Mirroring the drama's complex moral landscape, these bullet comments make *bao*'s operation visible in real time by indicating which side of the moral scale viewers support. In this way, viewers can choose to become actors in the process of re-membering by supporting Rulan.

In *Faithful*, specifically, another device of *bao* that engages with the audience is the trope of coincidence. As Kao comments on the use of "coincidence" in the pre-modern Chinese novel, "the formation of events...fall into 'reveal'...the inevitability of the law of retribution" (126-127), exposing *bao* at work. In this narrative pattern, apparently coincidental events accumulate until they reveal the underlying operation of *bao*. What looks like sheer chance is the accumulation of moral obligations and the ripening of consequences. The most salient example in the drama is the scene where Li Chunfeng accidentally steals the largest and most valuable embroidery in the tower, which turns out to be the one with a falling plum design. In other words, Li Chunfeng's accidental theft is not merely convenient plotting.

Kao frames this narrative device of coincidence as "ideologically motivated," aligning with the premodern religious belief in karmic justice (127). However, I argue that the narrative device of coincidence in *Faithful* is a manifestation of the causality between implicated subjects: Wu Lian continues to record his assaults while victims' disclosures are suppressed or discredited by the onlookers, guards as well as maids in the tower remain silent, and civic institutions protect him and do not intervene. Hence, the embroidery has grown larger and larger. What's more, because people in Huaizhou give his artwork prestige, the piece has become the priciest object in the tower. When Li accidentally steals the embroidery, its market value aligns with the evidentiary truth as each plum blossom records a tragedy. *Bao* in the drama is like the growing of the plum blossom tree in Wu Lian's embroidery, which eventually bears fruit against him.

In this way, the drama invites its audience to ponder the question: is it also a mere coincidence that we, as readers, encounter works like *First Love* or *The Nine*? As my previous analysis has shown, sexual violence is not enabled by the villain alone but by other implicated subjects and implicated institutions who remain silent. Even when we seem uninvolved, a similar causal logic of *bao* places us under obligation, as we may still be part of the structures implicated in such violence. When the implicated structures remain silent rather than exposing and redressing the problems, the emergence of works like *First Love* or *The Nine* is not a matter of chance but evidence that society has left debts unpaid. The books are therefore more than vehicles for fictional stories. Purchasing them creates a material relationship between audiences and the works and also forges an ethical contract between us and the works.

As re-memembering connects people inside and outside the story through moral debts and mnemonic ties, *bao*, figured as a scale, gradually tilts toward *yi*. This movement culminates in the final courtroom scene, where Rulan's case is reopened, and Wu Lian confronts the righteous ones. To begin with, the stage setting visualizes the scale image, with Wu Lian standing on the west side of the court and the protagonists on the east. When the argument reaches an impasse, Meng Wan turns away from the judge to address audiences both within and beyond the story, thereby encouraging the anonymous crowd in the drama and the unseen viewers outside it to participate in the act of righteousness.⁵⁷ She pivots toward the crowd and says: "I've noticed many old acquaintances in the courtyard today... so I earnestly implore you all to step forward: please, no more hiding away" (諸位，我今日在堂下看見了許多舊人...所以我今日懇請各位，站出來...莫要再逃避了; *Faithful*, ep. 23, 37:29–39:57). The indexicals meaning "everyone," *zhuwei* 諸位 and *gewei* 各位, address the crowd within the story. At the same time,

⁵⁷ As Ichisada Miyazaki observes in "The Administration of Justice During the Sung Dynasty," unlike Ming-Qing courts, Song district trials admitted only persons involved in the case, not the general public (61). Hence, *Faithful*'s spectator-filled prefectural courtroom represents less an institutionally public scene than a construction of justice as public performance. However, this depiction of justice as highly visible signals an imaginative reworking of Song legal space into a venue for larger spectatorship, turning the courtroom into a moral theater whose authority derives as much from collective viewing as from legal procedure itself.

this appeal also summons real-life viewers, asking them to consider their own responsibilities as recipients of the account.

In addition, at the end of her speech, when she utters no more hiding away, the shot cuts to a close-up of her gesture: Meng Wan's bowed head and folded hands fill the frame (fig. 6). The zoom-in repurposes a traditional bow with a cupped-hand salute into a meta-gesture that seems to greet the digital crowd watching the video, thus redrawing the dynamics of decision-making power: the judge still wields formal authority, yet his verdict now hinges on whether the crowd, victims in the crowd, and the digital viewers choose to step forward. In other words, by speaking to those she can see, she also implicates those she cannot see: the digital spectators. The digital spectators are confronted with this question: Am I only watching a story, or am I being asked to remember, believe, and respond?



Figure 6. Still from *Faithful*, episode 23 (00:39:57).

In the end, the scales of *bao* tilt towards righteousness, as more people step forward and join the protagonists on the east side. Through this image, the drama shows that the number of the righteous ones, from the numerical nine, increases to a multitude. Accompanying the verdict of Wu, the theme song as the background music arises, singing the line: “May the mist disperse, revealing the clear blue sky—radiant and bright” (願得霧散/見青天/湛亮; Jiang and Qingyan). *Qingtian* 青天 literally denotes a clear blue sky; it also means “justice” as an idiomatic expression. In the *gong'an* tradition, *qingtian* is also an honorific for the sole incorruptible male judge. However, *Faithful* redefines what the “clear blue sky” is: it is not a single person but the cumulative actions of multiple individuals that eventually chase the mist and rain away and brighten up the entire cityscape.

V. Concluding Remarks: Watching as Witnessing

This thesis has examined why teacher-perpetrated sexual violence can remain socially illegible even when victims have given accounts within societies that cast teachers as Confucian moral paragons. I approach this question by reading three artistic works together, with *First Love* as the ethical and literary antecedent to *The Nine*, and *Faithful* as the novella's screen adaptation. I argue that the central obstacle to justice depicted in these stories is not simply an absence of evidence. In each work, the reception of the assault is skewed by interpretive frameworks, such as romance, literary cultivation, and civic prestige, which greatly shape how a record of violence is treated as valid testimony. Achieving justice therefore demands more than punishing a single offender: It requires dismantling the habits of reading and altering the institutions that discredit victims and disguise violence as love.

In *First Love*, teacher Lee Guo-hua appropriates literary language and uses pedagogical authority to render coercion as romance. The bleak end of the novel shows no juridical redress to the trauma. However, Si-chi's diary survives. When her friend Yi-ting rereads the diary, she treats it as a claim that connects one person to another, which creates a moral obligation to listen and respond. Although this relational reading cannot by itself supply legal proof, it does alter the social reception of the diary and makes testimony possible.

In response, both later works explore this problem of legibility by imagining a material record. In *The Nine*, Wu Lian's abuses are hidden in a silk account-book; in *Faithful*, it is stitched into an exquisite embroidery. Within the narratives, the record becomes consequential when the protagonists, Meng Wan and her allies, use it to connect with other survivors and people. Rather than treating the ledger/embroidery merely as evidence incriminating one offender, they transform it into threads that reconnect scattered memories and persons: a process I call "re-membering."

Regarding their respective endings, in the novella, although one perpetrator is successfully brought to justice, the narrative reminds readers that the larger social structure that

once protected him remains intact. In comparison, *Faithful* foregrounds the role of memory in this collective pursuit of justice. Its final courtroom scene expands the nine protagonists into a multitude of witnesses, suggesting that justice accumulates and pressures institutions to act through each individual's ongoing acts of remembrance and care, rather than relying on a single incorruptible judge or focusing on resolving a single isolated case of tragedy.

The thesis's theoretical concepts depict different aspects of this collective process. Implication identifies many ways in which spectators are entangled in violence, even though they are not direct perpetrators. *Bao* explains why an unresolved injury case keeps returning as a demand for a response. Relational reading describes how recipients answer that demand by reconnecting with survivors and other implicated people. Re-membering names the collective work of reconnecting people, memories, objects, and records after violence has torn them apart. *Yi* shapes the ethical orientation of this labor: it is reconceived as small, gradual acts that restore agency to survivors without reducing them to mere instruments of another person's justice.

Through narrative devices, camera language, or online platforms that allow real-life viewers to comment, these works invite audiences to move from passive spectatorship to active moral engagement. Hence, literary and cinematic works can keep unresolved claims in circulation, expose the interpretive frames that once discredited them, and model new social relations in which the claims receive recognition and can finally be heard.

The dreamscape *Faithful* depicts at the very end—an intact world where the protagonists never need to meet, and viewers never need to gather to watch the drama—underscores precisely the weight of re-membering. Although re-membering cannot restore an unimpaired past, it can help create a world better equipped to receive testimony and respond justly. Witnessing does not mean speaking for Si-chi or Rulan; it means allowing their claims to reshape how we read, remember, and act. Remembrance is itself a weight that witnesses must carry.

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