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Practicing Asexuality in Late Imperial Chinese Literature:
Abstaining from Sex as a Form of Women's Autonomy

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

by

Cindy Chen

2026

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Practicing Asexuality in Late Imperial Chinese Literature:
Abstaining from Sex as a Form of Women's Autonomy

by

Cindy Chen

Master of Arts in East Asian Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2026

Professor Yinghui Wu, Chair

This thesis examines the practices of asexuality as performed by women in late imperial Chinese literature; by abstaining from sex, I argue, these women wrested autonomy over their sexual bodies from societal norms constructed by men. By understanding asexuality as practices, rather than an identity, I present these women as deviating from typical tropes of female characters in the likeness of fox-spirit succubi or lecherous nuns. Previous works in asexuality studies have focused on Western or modern-day identity, whereas studies on Chinese fictional tales have mostly been focused on both the reader's and author's fascination with sex, rather than its absence. This paper seeks to highlight how the boundaries that women set for their own bodies can be interpreted as a spectrum of asexual practices in late imperial Chinese literature. Based on stories of Pu Songling's *Liaozhai zhiyi*, Li Yu's *Twelve Towers* and *Silent Operas*, and the novel *Haoqiu zhuan*, I argue that the women's choices to abstain from sex may have enabled

women in late imperial China to reclaim autonomy over their sexual bodies from men. This thesis explores these choices through three categories: 1) religion as an avenue through which women's bodies are no longer defined by their ability to reproduce in their social roles as wives and mothers; 2) the metaphor of the supernatural, which presents women along a spectrum from exhibiting aggressive female desire to sexual restraint; and, 3) the changing norms of chastity when viewed through women's social practice rather than absolute moral precepts.

The thesis of Cindy Chen is approved.

Andrea S. Goldman

Stephanie Balkwill

Yinghui Wu, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2026

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Introduction

A woman's place in late imperial Chinese society was at her husband's side, providing him sons to continue his family line. Throughout her life, from adolescence to adulthood, a woman was expected to follow the "Thrice Following" (*sancong* 三從), which as noted in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記): "in her youth, she follows her father and elder brother; when married, she follows her husband; when her husband is dead, she follows her son."¹ Yet, there are many women who resisted this narrative by seeking ways in which they might deviate from this social path from young maiden to wife and mother, either by finding solace in the convent, by pursuing a life as a faithful maiden to one's fiancé if he died before the marriage, or by engaging in Daoist practices of female alchemy in pursuit of a genderless body. Even within marriage, some women may have wished to abstain from sex out of lack of desire, or due to bodily constraints. Underlying this narrative of a woman's place in society as wife and mother was the male interest in female desire and in what women do with their sexualized bodies.

We see this interest and control within literature as well. The use of the supernatural and the strange in *zhiguai* 志怪 stories speaks of cautionary tales about the dangers of male lust and the temptations of the female body. Creatures like fox-spirits turned into beautiful women to lure men into their clutches and devour them. There was something monstrous about this idea: where women's bodies transform into demonic beings or morph into something sensuous beyond the physical body in the male gaze. However, in my exploration of *zhiguai* narratives, I have also noticed a handful of stories that resist this narrative, where characters use religion, medicine, or their own authority to refrain from sexual intercourse with men. These stories speak to more than just a woman's virtue of chastity, but rather some women's disinterest towards the sexualization

¹ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Stanford University Press, 1994), 6.

of their bodies, particularly through the eyes of men. Similarly, in *caizi jiaren* 才子佳人 stories, the protagonists encounter many difficulties in their relationships due to the constant harassment or attention the woman receives from lustful men who do not have the discipline and honor the scholar does. Yet, despite the many attempts by these men to marry the beauty, she remains steadfast in her resolve towards propriety. It is through these tales that I begin my exploration of the practice of asexuality in fictional narratives, including within *zhiguai*, *caizi jiaren*, as well as Li Yu's subversive tales, from the Ming-Qing period.

In this thesis, I will analyze nine stories through the perspective of asexuality as it pertains to religious cultivation, the supernatural and medical practice, and the boundaries of chastity. Among these stories, I have selected works from famous authors such as Li Yu 李漁 (1611–1680), a writer of vernacular and unconventional fiction, and Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715), more known for his work in classical Chinese and his collection of *zhiguai* narratives. Li Yu is known for writing a spectacle for his audience to frame himself as “Li Yu the entertainer, who shows himself ready to compromise in order to amuse and interest his public.”² His stories are often “inversions of normal, accepted, or stereotyped situations in life or literature.”³ Within his stories, I am interested in the inversions of social perceptions on women's choices during times of hardship, especially surrounding the moralistic views of chastity and the women who make their own choices about their own bodies. The narrator of Li Yu's stories mock moral standards and conventions, sometimes even resorting to self-mockery.⁴ The comedic challenge to social norms allows for Li Yu's tales to confront the rigidity of social practices, such as marriage and sex that I am analyzing. Li Yu is both pushing the boundaries beyond social norms, as well

² Patrick Hanan, *The Invention of Li Yu* (Harvard University Press, 1988), 42.

³ Hanan, *The Invention of Li Yu*, 21.

⁴ Hanan, *The Invention of Li Yu*, 78.

as making fun of said boundaries. Still, they offer us a window into what it might be like for women in late imperial China to test and break these social conventions. Like Li Yu, Pu Songling involves himself in the narrator of his tales, posing as the “Historian of the Strange” (*Yishi shi* 異史氏), and the focus “of [his] commentary were not state affairs or eminent political figures but ghosts, fox-spirits, and abnormal human experiences— things he considered ‘strange.’”⁵ In many of these stories, conventions are also inverted, such as Buddhist enlightenment not relying on precepts, supernatural women being more than a male fantasy, and women whose boundaries about their bodies are not limited to the male definition of chastity and purity. The fact that the practice of asexuality within the choices women make about their bodies in these narratives may be considered “strange” to some speaks to the atypical circumstances these women are navigating. Yet, it is in this abnormality that I begin to search for asexuality in late imperial China.

I have selected six stories from Pu Songling’s *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異 (1740): “Yue Zhong” 樂仲, “Chang’e” 嫦娥, “Lotus Fragrance” 蓮香, “Liansuo” 連瑣, “Rouge” 胭脂, and “Xianü” 俠女; two short stories from Li Yu: “Fengxian lou” 奉先樓 from *Twelve Towers* 十二樓 (1658) and “The Female Chen Ping Saves Her Life With Seven Ruses” 女陳平計生七出 from *Silent Operas* 無聲戲 (1656); and the novel *Haoqiu zhuan* 好逑傳 (1683). Though each of these stories are written by men, I aim to focus on the practices of asexuality displayed by the women in these narratives, rather than view these works as completely reflective of women’s actions in the late imperial period. However, just as Dorothy Ko found use in Pu Songling’s illumination of “female perspectives on the burdens and utilities

⁵ Judith T. Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford University Press, 1993), 1.

of footbinding in the early-Qing period” that shed light on the social practice of footbinding for women, these practices of women’s asexuality in literature shed light on a possible broader practice of women who resist the sexual expectations imposed upon them.⁶

During a talk on his recent book, *The Fox Spirit, the Stone Maiden, and Other Transgender Histories from Late Imperial China*, Matthew H. Sommer spoke on how he “focused on the practice, not the identity” when trying to understand the crossing (or “transing”) of gender boundaries in late imperial times. He follows Susan Stryker’s approach to transgender studies by using “transgender” as a term to refer to “people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain their gender.”⁷ It is not about examining the destination or the mode of transition, but about this crossing over of gender boundaries that is important to analyze. Instead of an identity marking those who now identify as a different gender than the one they were assigned at birth, Sommer uses “trans” as a verb, “as in ‘to trans gender,’” signifying “a process or practice without claiming to understand what it meant to that person or asserting any kind of fixed identity for them.”⁸ This informs his choice to include within this category the clergy or eunuchs, people who deviated from social norms that we associate with gender, and thus in some way transed gender as well.

I aim to do the same with asexuality studies, by examining the practice of asexuality rather than seeking to find asexuality *identity* in the same way we define it in modern terms. An asexual (ace) person, as defined by the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), is

⁶ Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (University of California Press, 2005), 181.

⁷ Matthew H. Sommer, *The Fox Spirit, the Stone Maiden, and Other Transgender Histories from Late Imperial China* (Columbia University Press, 2024), 8.

⁸ Sommer, *The Fox Spirit*, 9. This usage of “trans” as a verb comes from the historian Jen Manion, who is also building off of Stryker’s framework.

someone who “does not experience sexual attraction.”⁹ AVEN considers asexuality to be a part of one’s identity, not simply a choice, such as celibacy. However, this is a rather Euro-American centric understanding of asexuality. As Yo-Ling Chen puts it, as asexuality spread around the globe, “there have also been many documented instances of ace communities and researchers outside of Europe and the United States noting divergences from the Euro-American emphasis on asexual identity.”¹⁰ In India, “asexual advocacy work...is ‘much less for the concept of identity,’” and is “primarily driven by a motivation to serve Indian women who confront a patriarchal system of compulsory marriage and legalized marital rape.”¹¹ Through analyzing a popular asexual brokering website in China, Day Wong argues that the “particular strand of asexuality in China reflects ‘not so much a globalized asexual discourse’ led by AVEN than diversely asexual peoples’ attempts to cope with the compulsory sexuality of China’s sexual revolution.”¹² In both of these cases, asexuality functions less as a sexual identity, but rather as advocacy work to combat traditional norms and societal oppression that harm minority groups in society. For modern China, asexuality serves as a means to break down compulsory sexuality in marriage and understand how people who choose to have a sexless life might navigate the world of romance, companionship, and marriage.

I adjust this framework of asexuality to examine the actions of women in fictional narratives in the late imperial times. Like Sommer cautions, we should not impose modern terms on the practices and lives of real people, as we do not know how they may have wished to

⁹ “Overview,” Asexual Visibility and Education Network, 2001, accessed March 28, 2026, <https://asexuality.org/?q=overview.html>.

¹⁰ Yo-Ling Chen, “Toward a Global Asexual Solidarity Beyond Identity,” in *Asexualities*, ed. KJ Cerankowski and Megan Milks (Routledge, 2024), 383.

¹¹ Y. Chen, 391.

¹² Y. Chen, 384.

identify or live their lives. However, through the examination of fictional characters, I wish to pursue the outline of asexual practice, not as an intrinsic identity, but as a practice of choice in rejection of sexual practices as a means of control over one's own body. When I discuss acts of asexuality within the stories, as well as a character's "asexuality," I am referring to these concerns that they have over their bodies and the choices they make in regards to sex. I argue that through the choice of abstaining from sex, the women in these stories are able to reclaim authority over their sexual bodies that have been previously defined and controlled by male lust.

Literature Review

Asexuality as a field of studies is an understudied discipline, with little to no scholarship done in premodern Chinese studies on asexual practices. Though my work does not focus on asexuality as an identity, it is important to begin with a survey of asexuality as understood in early modern English literature as a comparison point for how we might read into the practice of asexuality in premodern Chinese literature. As Simone Chess discusses in her chapter, “Asexuality, Queer Chastity, and Adolescence in Early Modern Literature,” scholars have often dismissed signs of asexuality in adolescents as a sign of presexuality, as “children are assumed to be naturally presexual, and then assumed to grow into sexual beings.”¹ She begins her chapter with the example of Adonis from Shakespeare’s poem “Venus and Adonis,” where Adonis’s rejection of Venus’s advances has been viewed as “either he isn’t yet adult enough to have sexual desires, or his desires are oriented away from Venus, towards male companionship.”² This is especially prominent when discussing male adolescents, as they are on the cusp of manhood, which society dictates to be sexual. Men grow up and develop sexual attraction, in which they will then go on to marry a woman and be secure in their sexual identity. Any deviances from this social script implies homosexuality, where men find interest in other men, rather than women. This take, while applicable to many of Shakespeare’s more queer representations, dismisses the possibility that one might simply be disinterested in the act of sex or romance.

Chess poses several other interesting points that direct my own research. She speaks of how when adolescents “resist or opt out of sex and marriage,” they are able to do so due to the rhetoric of chastity or childhood, and it is this resistance that “articulates a queer option outside

¹ Simone Chess, “Asexuality, Queer Chastity, and Adolescence in Early Modern Literature,” in *Queering Childhood in Early Modern English Drama and Culture*, ed. Jennifer Higginbotham and Mark Albert Johnston (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 33.

² Chess, 31.

of hetero- and homosexual constructions of sexuality.”³ Past literary scholars have only focused on the possibility of presexuality and homosexuality. Either the character has not grown out of their childhood and thus does not understand sexual attraction, or if male-female relations cannot be considered, then the character must be attracted to someone of their own gender. Now there is a third option to consider: asexuality. In addition, she notes that it is easier to discover the possibility of asexuality in male adolescents, as “female chastity was a codified social and sexual norm (especially in adolescence and before marriage),” and so “its articulation in early modern literature and drama is frequently praised and normalized, rather than queered.”⁴ In order for female chastity to be coded queer or asexual, it had to be extraordinary to stand out among social standards. This is particularly relevant to this thesis, where in Chinese society female chastity and virtue is highly valued, with cults towards the faithful maiden and chaste widows, or a heavy emphasis on the virginity of a woman being a marker for their virtue. A woman avoiding sex did not mean she was not sexually attracted to others, but rather it meant she was upholding social norms surrounding her body and her virginity. I am interested in the choices that women in literature make that go beyond merely upholding social norms of chastity and instead are directed towards protecting their own bodies for personal agency. In a time where women’s voices were often silenced or told from the perspective of men and where the norm was to marry and bear children, it is difficult to pinpoint whether or not a woman lacked sexual attraction.

Religion has often been an avenue women have taken in order to abstain from sex or move away from the gendered, sexualized female body. Hsiao-wen Cheng’s *Divine, Demonic, Disordered: Women Without Men in Song Dynasty China* includes a chapter on renunciants, with attention to these women’s rejection of their gendered female bodies when they join the convent.

³ Chess, 32.

⁴ Chess, 32.

Once a woman joins the convent, a female renunciant “does not always identify herself—nor is she necessarily identified by others—as a woman.”⁵ This is not because they are unaware of their gendered identity and their differences from monks, but rather since a “nun is first and foremost a *celibate* renunciant,” the sexualized parts of what makes a female a “woman” in society is retracted.⁶ This is because the gendered role of a woman in society involves marriage and reproduction, and the vow of celibacy that renunciants undertake prevent them from fulfilling those social roles. In several texts on female renunciants that Cheng discusses, such as *Lives of the Nuns* (Biqiuni zhuan), *Students of the Dao* (Daoxue zhuan), and *Records of the Assembled Transcendents of the Fortified Walled City* (Yongcheng jixian lu), “‘womanhood,’ or ‘female quality,’” refer to one’s “capacity of being a wife” and thus if a woman “made herself unmarriageable, [then] she rid herself of her ‘womanhood.’”⁷ She argues that through these female renunciants, a new identity for women is constructed, one that would differentiate “between the female body ‘itself’ and the social norms attached to it.”⁸ The stories I examine also toggle the line between the social norms of a woman as wife, mother, and daughter, and the personal choices they make about their bodies. Some may choose, like renunciants, to give up most if not all of their sexual body and its reproductive functions; others only relinquish parts of their body in defense of their personal agency. These lines, however, are often mixed and hard to distinguish when women face difficult choices.

The Daoist practice of *neidan* 内丹 (inner alchemy) also negotiates the line of the choices one makes about one’s sexual body. Much of *neidan* revolved around transcendence through the

⁵ Hsiao-wen Cheng, *Divine, Demonic, Disordered: Women Without Men in Song Dynasty China* (University of Washington Press, 2021), 119.

⁶ Cheng, 120.

⁷ Cheng, 131.

⁸ Cheng, 137.

regulation of one's *qi* (vital energy). Over time, this practice led to sexual practices of inner alchemy, such as the withholding of semen during sexual intercourse to preserve the *yang* vitality within a man's body, leading to long-term health benefits.⁹ By the Qing dynasty, inner alchemy evolved further into non-sexual alchemy, as Daoist practitioners continued to view sexual union as resulting only "in the loss of vital energies, and that immortality is only achieved by uniting spiritually."¹⁰ Practitioners would join together spiritually through their *qi*, rather than physically through sexual intercourse, and thus together, they would create the spiritual child for immortality. A subsection of *neidan* was *nüdan* 女丹 (female alchemy), focusing on the "refinement of blood into a less heavy, less polluted and more ethereal substance."¹¹ Elena Valussi argues that *nüdan* informs us that "the female body can and does transcend this world and gender differences through a physical, but at the same time also spiritual, practice," not unlike the process that male bodies undergo by withholding ejaculation.¹² In the case of women, that process is heavily linked to separating the body from its distinctively gendered attributes, notably the female reproductive system. One specific technique that practitioners of *nüdan* aim to master is "slaying the red dragon" (*zhan chilong* 斬赤龍), which is "a form of voluntary

⁹ Rodo Pfister, "The Sexual Body Techniques of Early and Medieval China - Underlying Emic Theories and Basic Methods of a Non-Reproductive Sexual Scenario for Non-Same-Sex Partners," in *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Medicine*, 1st ed., ed. Vivienne Lo, Dolly Yang, and Michael Stanley-Baker (Routledge, 2022): 343, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203740262>.

¹⁰ Elena Valussi, "Daoist Sexual Practices for Health and Immortality for Women," in *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Medicine*, 1st ed., ed. Vivienne Lo, Dolly Yang, and Michael Stanley-Baker (Routledge, 2022): 449, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203740262>.

¹¹ Elena Valussi, "Female Alchemy in Late Imperial and Modern China," in *Situating Religion and Medicine in Asia: Methodological Insights and Innovations*, ed. Michael Stanley-Baker, vol. 38 (Manchester University Press, 2023): 133, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.9345410.10>.

¹² Valussi, "Female Alchemy," 155.

amenorrhea.”¹³ Both *neidan* and *nüdan* desexualize the body by turning away from the social norm of sexual union and reproduction as the most essential part of human life. Instead, Daoist practitioners reject sexual practices to cultivate their bodies spiritually. For women especially, this practice was a way by which women separated themselves from their sexual bodies and from their roles in society as a mother and a wife.

Women who do not pursue a religious life and wish to remain without men in secular society are often viewed as unwell, as many physicians believed that “women without sexual contact with men suffered from unfulfilled sexual desire, and that desire was related to the readiness of their reproductive bodies.”¹⁴ Chapter 1 of *Divine, Demonic, Disordered* examines the classification of “husbandless women” in Song dynasty medicine. It is in the Song that “women’s reproductive body and sexual desire” are linked together, often attributing many of women’s health problems to lack of sexual activity.¹⁵ This chapter also speaks to the genre of bedchamber literature, and how it is in this genre that desire is addressed in great lengths, often connecting a person’s health with their sexual desire. “The art of the bedchamber” (*fangzhong shu* 房中術) views “sexual intercourse as a body of knowledge” as valid in itself as subjects of “ritual propriety, moral conduct, or the art of war.”¹⁶ Sex is more than merely “a lustful, sensual act, carried out blindly and mindlessly,” it is a practice to be cultivated and mastered.¹⁷ These texts emphasize how there is “‘benefit’ for women in having (properly conducted) sexual

¹³ Louis Komjathy, “Sun Buer: Early Quanzhen Matriarch and the Beginnings of Female Alchemy,” *NAN NU -- Men, Women & Gender in Early & Imperial China* 16, no. 2 (2014): 205, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685268-00162P01>.

¹⁴ Cheng, 22.

¹⁵ Cheng, 31.

¹⁶ Keith McMahon, “The Art of the Bedchamber and *Jin Ping Mei*,” *NAN NÜ* 21, no. 1 (2019): 4-5, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685268-00211P01>.

¹⁷ McMahon, “The Art of the Bedchamber,” 5.

intercourse with men, and problems resulting from the lack thereof.”¹⁸ The former warns women against having improper sex or from overindulging themselves with their desires, and the latter details how abstaining from sex with men can also cause medical ailments. Here, we see not only “a fear of women who devour men,” but also “the fear that women will not desire men.”¹⁹ The concern is “less about women’s lives and health than about their bodies and sexuality beyond men’s surveillance.”²⁰ The emphasis is both on the control of women towards their desire, but also ensuring they do not completely renounce desire. Charlotte Furth’s *A Flourishing Yin* also speaks to bedchamber literature, and the focus on *fuke* in *To Benefit Yin*, the medical treatise authored by Wu Zhiwang on women’s gynecological health. Like its mirror in *To Benefit Yang*, *To Benefit Yin* incorporated “a natural hierarchy of gendered generative powers, facilitating paternalistic consideration for female weakness while implying male responsibility for controlling the outcome.”²¹ Medicine was a method through which male scholars attempted to control and understand some women’s lack of desire for men.

Some of this understanding of women who were not sexually active with men as unwell may stem from the ways in which supernatural women are depicted in literature as a metaphor for both men and women’s uncontrollable desire. Xiaofei Kang’s *The Cult of the Fox* traces how the fox cult has managed to flourish throughout northern China despite crackdowns and bans from the bureaucratic level. In Chapter 3, in particular, Kang examines how foxes and ghosts both hold similar associations, as they were both considered “the cause of a particular kind of

¹⁸ Cheng 37.

¹⁹ Cheng, 37.

²⁰ Cheng, 37.

²¹ Charlotte Furth, *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China’s Medical History, 960-1665* (University of California Press, 1999), 216.

illness: through sexual intercourse they would drain men's *yang* essence and endanger their lives."²² Fox women and female ghosts were then a danger to men, who were depicted as naively lured in by the unnatural beauty of these women. Likewise, Rania Huntington's *Alien Kind* also addresses the dangers that men perceive in fox women. Huntington argues that foxes are often linked with prostitutes, as "both prostitutes and vixens who have become women are sexually aggressive, available women of unknown origins, whom men pursue at their own cost."²³ Foxes in literature serve as a metaphor for the dangerous women that men wish to pursue without fear, and in this literature, it is inconceivable that the woman would be uninterested in sex with a man. Thus, women who are "without men," as Cheng puts it, are susceptible to illness.

Women's authority about their own bodies is linked to the conversation in late imperial China surrounding chastity, sexuality, and agency. In order to speak to how one might practice asexuality in regards to the choices they make with their sexual body, we must first understand how chastity and virtue governed the female body in the eyes of men. Weijing Lu's *True to Her Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China* examines the faithful maiden cult and the choices these young women made in regards to resisting their parents' authority towards remarriage in order to maintain autonomy over their own bodies and futures. These faithful maidens chose suicide, "marriage" into their fiancé's homes, or chaste widowhood rather than the common custom of a second betrothal because of their beliefs that they must remain loyal to their deceased fiancé. Yet, in *True to Her Word*, Lu addresses the dissonance that would have come from the young maiden's natal family, or the concerns that some male scholars had towards how these women would face "bitter fidelity" in the form of "the sexual abstinence a

²² Xiaofei Kang, *The Cult of the Fox: Power, Gender, and Popular Religion in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Columbia University Press, 2005), 74.

²³ Rania Huntington, *Alien Kind: Foxes and Late Imperial Chinese Narrative* (Harvard University Press, 2003), 188.

faithful maiden must bear.”²⁴ Though faithful maidens were valorized by both the Ming and Qing courts for their chastity, it is clear that many men still pushed back against allowing these young women to decide what to do with their own bodies. Similarly, Janet Theiss’s *Disgraceful Matters* addresses how female suicide often occurred when a woman felt that her chastity and honor was being threatened, and she would choose death in order to prove her innocence when compromised by a man. Due to the honoring of chaste women such as faithful maidens, “the sexual virtue of women was a critical element of individual and family reputation.”²⁵ As female chastity was a highly monitored virtue and female sexuality was a concern for the whole family and for the state, women “made deliberate and considered choices about how to respond when their virtue was impugned.”²⁶ Suicide was considered by these women with deliberate care, rather than an emotional outburst as some men may have thought, in order to prove their chastity.

Through all these avenues—religious devotion, medical treatment, or chastity preservation—women in late imperial China practiced asexuality through rejecting the idea that a woman’s place must be at a man’s side, being a wife and mother to his children. Asexuality as a practice works as a spectrum across these three categories. Through religious devotion, asexuality manifests in the inner cultivation of a devotee or transcendent, allowing them to resist sexual desire and abstain from sex. In medical discourse involving the supernatural, asexuality is a deliberate choice undertaken by the women to transform the supernatural into a metaphor of cautionary desire. Finally, beyond the framework of chastity, asexuality reflects the necessary decisions women might make during difficult circumstances in order to defend their bodies

²⁴ Weijing Lu, *True to Her Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China* (Stanford University Press, 2008), 114.

²⁵ Janet Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China* (University of California Press, 2004), 20.

²⁶ Theiss, 196.

against violators, by thinking of their bodies beyond the limitations of social expectations. It is through these manifestations of practicing asexuality that I examine the Ming-Qing fictional tales, highlighting the ways women reclaimed authority over their sexual bodies from the eyes of men. For each of the stories I analyze below, I identify a reason behind why each woman chooses to have or to not have sex, which I associate with the agency these female characters exerts to reshape the perception of their sexual bodies.

Chapter 1: Asexuality in Buddhist and Daoist Cultivation

Religious celibacy has often served as an avenue through which women were able to escape from the social expectations to be a wife and a mother; the convent provided a safe haven in which they were not expected to be sexual. For laypeople who did not join the convent, raising a family was to be expected, as they did not take on the precept for abstaining from sex.

However, managing one's desire and practicing celibacy were still highly valued virtues and goals of self-cultivation. Asexuality in this section is traced through the enlightenment and transcendence of the characters, expressed through their rejection of sexual desire and their corresponding embrace of asexuality via religious celibacy and asceticism. To begin with, the short story "Yue Zhong" in *Liaozhai zhiyi* is a Buddhist tale portraying the lives and eminence of the two protagonists who effortlessly display a lack of sexual desire. Though the titular character Yue Zhong is the main protagonist of the story, my focus of analysis will be on Coral, as I am interested in the practice of asexuality through the woman's body in religious cultivation. However, to discuss Coral's enlightenment and asexuality, I must first examine Yue Zhong's enlightenment journey, as the two characters are tied through their reciprocal relationship towards cultivation. Religious enlightenment, presented through the characters' natural inclination towards celibacy, is one factor through which we can understand Coral and Yue Zhong's asexuality.

Effortless Asexuality in Buddhist Enlightenment

The story follows the protagonist, Yue Zhong, whose mother was a devout Buddhist and strictly followed the precepts of abstaining from meat and wine. When she fell ill and Yue Zhong fed her his own flesh to cure her, she was so distraught from having consumed meat she starved

herself to death. When he was twenty, Yue Zhong married a young woman, but after consummating the marriage, he found himself utterly disgusted by the act of sex and divorced her. He then dedicated his life to helping his neighbors, giving away all of his wealth. One night, on the anniversary of his mother's death, Yue Zhong was too ill to tend to her grave, so she visited him in his dreams, informing him that she now resided at Nanhai. Upon waking, Yue Zhong quickly set off on a pilgrimage, intent on reaching Nanhai to visit his mother. On the road, he meets Coral, a courtesan, who is eager to join him on the pilgrimage. The two quickly become close companions, yet they are never physically intimate. When they reach Nanhai, they are visited by the visions of Guanyin and Yue Zhong's mother, while the other pilgrims who had journeyed there with them, but scorned them both for Yue Zhong's omnivorous diet and Coral's occupation, saw nothing. Sometime after the pilgrimage, Yue Zhong stumbles across a young boy, who he discovers to be his own son from his first marriage. He raises him with Coral, who has finally left the courtesan world, and together, the two achieve enlightenment and ascend after their deaths.

Coral and Yue Zhong are both shown in the story to have a deep understanding of Buddhism that goes beyond simply following the precepts or texts. Yue Zhong's mother was a "pious Buddhist and abstained completely from meat and wine," yet it is her piety that leads her to starve herself to death after Yue Zhong feeds her meat off his own leg in order to cure her illness.¹ His act is "the epitome of filial devotion," using his own flesh "to give back nourishment in a condensed form as a direct recompense for what he had received during pregnancy and childhood," and yet feeding his mother this meat breaks her vow of vegetarianism.² This moment

¹ John Minford, trans., *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (Penguin Classics, 2006), 436.

² Jimmy Yu, "Self-Inflicted Violence," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Chinese Religions*, ed. Randall L. Nadeau (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), 468.

represents an interesting dichotomy between a taboo and a virtue: “filial slicing” (*gegu* 割股) was recognized by the late Ming state to be the highest standard of filial piety; however, this practice involved the act of slicing one’s own flesh, which goes against Confucian notions of protecting the body from harm as a show of filial respect to one’s parents.³ Similarly here, Yue Zhong is both a highly filial son for his devotional act, but he also violates his mother’s vow, leading to her death. Yue Zhong is “unable to drive the thought of his mother’s fanatical piety” from his mind, and he believes that it is her “blind obstinacy that had driven her to her death.”⁴ This is why he burns all of the Buddhist icons she worshiped and set up a shrine for his mother in replacement, as he did not view her way of practicing Buddhism as the right way. Rather than guide her towards enlightenment, her rigid focus on following the precepts caused her to become disillusioned when he had given her a piece of his own flesh as an act of filial piety, and thus she felt she had to take her own life to repent for it.

Yue Zhong practices Buddhism much differently than his mother did, as he was not strict about following the precepts and was “fond of drinking and eating,” which had served as “a source of friction between himself and his mother” before her death.⁵ When Yue Zhong embarks on his pilgrimage to visit his mother’s resting place in Nanhai, he is spurned by the pilgrims’ group, as they do not see him as a true follower of the Buddha due to his meat-eating diet. When he is joined by the courtesan Coral, the pilgrims “mocked [them] heartily” and “refused to perform their devotions in their company.”⁶ Rather than get angry at the pilgrims for rejecting them, Coral and Yue Zhong are courteous and understanding, allowing the pilgrims to pray first

³ See Jimmy Yu, *Sanctity and Self-Inflicted Violence in Chinese Religions, 1500-1700* (Oxford University Press, 2020), Chapter 3 “Nourishing the Parent with One’s Own Flesh,” 62-89, for more details.

⁴ Minford, 436.

⁵ Minford, 436.

⁶ Minford, 438.

before coming forth. Their controlled temperament in the face of prejudice is a sign of their cultivation. Despite the pilgrims' convictions that they are the most faithful to the Dharma and that Guanyin will recognize their cultivation, there is no divine response to the pilgrims' prayers. Instead, when Coral and Yue Zhong pay their respects to Guanyin, "lotus-flowers with shimmering strings of pearls hanging from them sprang up over the entire surface of the sea."⁷ This recognition alludes to something that Yue Zhong's mother and the Buddhist pilgrims had been unable to see: Coral and Yue Zhong possessed some inner quality that Guanyin admired that only they had achieved. Though Coral and Yue Zhong do not follow the precepts strictly, they still have captured the true essence of the Dharma.

This true essence of the Dharma manifests in their complete lack of desire. Both Coral and Yue Zhong display an effortless ability to be in the presence of each other and not fall prey to lust or desire. Despite Coral being a famous courtesan, Yue Zhong is never once tempted by her beauty. Their relationship together is one that was "chastely, with no physical intimacy of any kind."⁸ It is a relationship that is in the purest form of companionship, rather than one born from love or desire, as most male-female scholar-beauty relationships tend to be. Coral is immediately drawn to Yue Zhong's lack of desire towards her, as she understands it to be his innate understanding of the Buddhist teachings. After she leaves her profession, Coral seeks out Yue Zhong, wishing to return to how they "once lived as husband and wife...in [their] own fashion."⁹ A relationship without physical intimacy reflects the Buddhist practice of ridding oneself of material desires, including strong emotions such as desire and lust. Neither Coral nor Yue Zhong seem to struggle with this within the story. After consummating his first marriage,

⁷ Minford, 439.

⁸ Minford, 438.

⁹ Minford, 441.

Yue Zhong immediately declared that the “act of love performed by a man and a woman is surely the vilest thing in the world,” and he found “no pleasure in it.”¹⁰ Similarly, while Coral is active as a courtesan at the beginning of the story, she is never described as someone finding pleasure in sex, or someone who seeks it out aside from fulfilling her clients’ wishes. Typically, men are shown to crave sex and desire it to strengthen their vital energy, whereas women are meant to avoid it to preserve their chastity. Both characters subvert this expectation: Yue Zhong in his distaste for coitus and Coral in her natural detachment from sexual desire even in (or, perhaps, due to) her occupation. Their aversion to sex only further affirms the strength of their religious cultivation, as it goes against the social perception of what is the norm for men and women; Yue Zhong and Coral follow precepts that only they are able to perceive. Coral also seems to act as Yue Zhong’s foil in cultivation, instrumental towards his enlightenment. After living together post-pilgrimage, Yue Zhong warns Coral that if he is caught drinking too much, she must not let him see her, lest he succumb to immoral actions. This seems to reflect a fear in losing his restraint to alcohol, just as his mother had once craved meat during her illness and thus died in shame for breaking her vow. Instead of following his direction, Coral goes to him dressed in her finest clothes. Rather than fall into desire and lust, Yue Zhong “stare[s] at her a long while” and exclaims that he “is enlightened” while “dancing wildly for joy.”¹¹ Coral’s body, which has been a temptation for many men before him, is nothing but a material object that he does not desire. Yue Zhong realizes at this moment that he has completely rid himself of any material desire. His asexuality, in other words, reflects his achievement of enlightenment.

Yue Zhong also acts as a foil to Coral’s enlightenment journey, as her challenges toward letting go of material desires involve her attachment to Yue Zhong. Though Yue Zhong informs

¹⁰ Minford, 436-437.

¹¹ Minford, 442.

her that the “day [the crimson lotuses on his legs] open and flower,” their “‘marriage’ of twenty years will be at an end and [they] will part,” Coral is unable to let go of him when it is his time to pass.¹² Instead, she closes “the petals together again with both her hands” and entreats him to stay.¹³ Rather than allow for the natural course of his life to, Coral anchors him back to the human realm, desperate for a bit more time together, as the twenty years he had promised had not completely come to pass yet. Yue Zhong obliges and returns to life, but he chides her that she has “[her] life to lead in this world,” so why does he “need to be part of it?”¹⁴ More than a decade has passed since his enlightenment, and Yue Zhong has become completely detached from material desires, so he understands that death is nothing to be mournful about; Coral should be able to live her own life without him. However, out of companionship with Coral for the years they have spent together in Buddhist cultivation, Yue Zhong remains in the human world for three more years. Coral’s attachment to him and her journey to enlightenment are gendered in contrast to Yue Zhong’s path to enlightenment, as she is portrayed as the more emotional of the pair, unable to let go of the family she has found. Her reasoning to ask Yue Zhong to stay is that she “raised [his] son and instructed [his] daughter-in-law,” both tasks that a typical wife and mother would do.¹⁵ Coral plays into the gendered roles she has claimed in their makeshift family, using them as a means for Yue Zhong to linger a little longer. Still, Coral’s attachment to Yue Zhong remains only on the surface of their companionship, proving the strength of her cultivation in regards to sexual desire. As the Historian comments at the end of the story, their relationship “sometimes seems like it has *qing*, and sometimes seems like it has no *qing*; this is

¹² Minford, 442.

¹³ Minford, 443.

¹⁴ Minford, 443.

¹⁵ Minford, 443.

the bodhisattva's true face, how can ordinary people fathom it?"¹⁶ 若有情，若無情，此為菩薩真面目，世中人烏得而測之哉？¹⁷ The *qing* between Coral and Yue Zhong is not sexual love; it reflects more the compassion that Guanyin has towards all people. Guanyin does not love the people with desire and lust, but she does care for the people, just as Coral and Yue Zhong's relationship is one of deep companionship. Yue Zhong sees Coral as "a companion to cultivate beside," rather than "as a lover in bed" 樂仲對麗人，直視之為香潔道伴，不作溫柔鄉觀也。¹⁸ Together, they had aided one another on their enlightenment journey and were deeply connected to each other through their innate understanding of Buddhism.

The lotus flower imagery within the story reflects Coral and Yue Zhong's eventual enlightenment, as it represents the purity and wisdom of their cultivation. When Coral and Yue Zhong are at Nanhai paying respects to Guanyin and Yue Zhong's mother, lotus flowers sprout up all over the sea. In the lotus flowers, Coral "saw the image of the Bodhisattva" and Yue Zhong "saw his own mother's face on every lotus-petal."¹⁹ The lotus flower in Buddhism has "a significant meaning of purity," as the flower itself "grows in mud...but pushes its blossoms up through the mud and the water, thus coming to full bloom above the water."²⁰ The petals above the water remain white and pure, unstained by any of the mud from which it grew. Guanyin is often portrayed in a white robe holding a lotus flower, and the flower is also representative of her purity and virtue. Coral and Yue Zhong's innate understanding of Buddhism manifests on the

¹⁶ Throughout the thesis, I have chosen to use translations rendered by other scholars when available. However, translations without citations are my own.

¹⁷ Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi* (Qilu shushe, 2006), 459.

¹⁸ Pu, 459.

¹⁹ Minford, 439.

²⁰ William E. Ward, "The Lotus Symbol: Its Meaning in Buddhist Art and Philosophy," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 11, no. 2 (1952): 137, <https://doi.org/10.2307/426039>.

surface through their asexuality, representing the purity of their bodies when they are meditating together. Additionally, Yue Zhong's scars on his legs grow "into the shape of two tiny crimson lotuses, budding from his flesh."²¹ These scars are a symbol of his filial piety towards his mother: one scar from cutting his flesh to feed his mother in her illness, and the other scar from cutting deep to the bone in his grief over his mother's death. The symbolism of his scars change, from filial piety to his mother through self-mutilation to filial piety tied with the insight of his religious cultivation. These lotus flowers manifest on his skin after he has already achieved enlightenment; with this enlightenment, he is able to predict the time of his death.²² Yue Zhong's story resembles origin stories of other Buddhist figures such as Princess Miaoshan or the Sixth Patriarch, as he already had the wisdom to rid himself of material desires from a young age, without needing to be taught such knowledge. His lack of sexual desire, as well as his understanding that practicing Buddhism goes beyond the precepts, is what brings him enlightenment. Aside from the lotus flower, we also see imagery such as "the world around [them being] bathed in radiant light and their humble home [being] transformed into a palace of jade" when Yue Zhong achieves enlightenment.²³ This setting resembles a sort of miracle moment that is often found in Buddhist narratives surrounding eminent people. We are told that at the time of Coral and Yue Zhong's death, "[a] bright aura emanated from [Yue] Zhong's limbs and lit up the hall," and "Coral's coffin gave off a richly perfumed mist that permeated the whole house."²⁴ The light and fragrance preserving their coffins mirror the deaths of saints or Buddhas

²¹ Minford, 442.

²² The lotus flower marks resemble the "marks of a great man" that the Buddha has, which are the physical signs of religious attainment. Similarly, being able to predict one's death is part of this attainment.

²³ Minford, 442.

²⁴ Minford, 444.

within Buddhist literature as well. The religious symbolism further conveys the eminence both Coral and Yue Zhong hold in their cultivation.

The body has important significance in this story, as well as in Buddhism—especially the female body. Yue Zhong’s body, with the lotus flowers budding from his scars, represents the enjoined values of filial piety and religious devotion. Coral’s body, however, manifests the greater difficulty women might find in being able to attain enlightenment. As a courtesan, Coral is seen as not a true practitioner in the eyes of the pilgrims. And yet, in this story, Coral’s body does not resemble that of a typical courtesan. Her body is never sexualized within the story: she first appears entertaining Yue Zhong’s friend, but all of her time as a courtesan happens off-page, dismissing these moments as irrelevant to understanding Coral as a Buddhist practitioner. The closest moment of Coral’s sexual body is when she “dressed in her finest clothes” for Yue Zhong, implying that she was intentionally trying to be alluring and desirable.²⁵ As discussed above, this is the moment in which Yue Zhong realizes that he has gained complete enlightenment, as he feels no material desires. Still, the description in this passage is only implicit, without actually sexualizing her body.

Similarly, when Yue Zhong tipsily “asked Coral to massage his legs for him,” there is no elaborate description of this action.²⁶ However, the physical touch between a man and a woman is typically charged with intimacy. As a reader, one might find this scene to be particularly erotic, as we are privy to a private moment between husband and wife. Yet, for the protagonists, this moment is simply a wife fulfilling the request of her husband, with no desire involved. Neither of their bodies is understood as sexual, as the characters have long surpassed the desire and lust with which other people struggle. This is perhaps the “strangeness” of this story that

²⁵ Minford, 442.

²⁶ Minford, 442.

appealed to readers: an erotic scene stripped of its intimacy that is instead a reflection of the characters' advanced enlightenment. Though "Yue Zhong" is a story primarily about male asceticism, we may also understand Coral's journey of enlightenment alongside Yue Zhong's as an unusual but admirable partnership between two characters who, under literary convention, would likely have been physically and sexually intimate. As Yue Zhong is not attracted to Coral's body, the story does not function to serve a male's fantasy; instead, their effortless asexuality teaches readers the ease with which anyone can achieve such enlightenment if they too are detached from material and physical desires.

Coral is also very particular with the cleanliness of her body. Upon reuniting with Yue Zhong, she informs him that if she were to "stay single, [she] shall be a defenseless woman," but if she were to "marry any man other than [him], [she] shall feel unclean."²⁷ Sex had only been an obligation to her clients when she was a courtesan, but now she was free to live her life the way she wished to. She did not wish to give outsiders intimate access to her body. Yue Zhong respects the boundaries of her body, as he is uninterested in sex, and likewise, Coral enjoys their companionship devoid of desire. At the end of her life, Coral wishes to make preparations for their coffins, as she felt it would be "so unclean and undignified" if they allowed their "bodies [to] be moved around this way and that at the hands of others."²⁸ After she informs their son and his wife of her departure from the human realm, she "climb[s] into her own coffin" so that nobody would have to touch her body after death.²⁹ Unlike Coral, Yue Zhong dies peacefully in his room, and it is his son who moves him into the other coffin. Yue Zhong is unconcerned with what happens to his body after death, as he is not attached to his physical body. Coral, on the

²⁷ Minford, 441.

²⁸ Minford, 443.

²⁹ Minford, 444.

other hand, is much more concerned, as a woman must be vigilant about who touches her body in order to preserve her chastity. The female body is often considered unclean in Buddhist scripture, such as the Blood Bowl Sutra, which believes that “women must be punished for the pollution they produce during childbirth and/or menstruation.”³⁰ The female sexual body is polluted, and thus Coral is diligent in maintaining the purity of her body, especially after she is able to leave prostitution. While not all courtesans in literature are depicted to be full of desire, as sometimes they are “presented as being those most capable of detaching themselves from sensuous existence [and turning to Buddhism] precisely because they have lived it to the full,” Coral is completely detached from the sexual body.³¹ She does not turn away from sex because she has experienced it to the full, but rather because, like Yue Zhong, she has already been enlightened to the Buddhist teachings. Her focus on cleanliness is gendered through separating herself from the female polluted body in religion as well as emphasizing her purity and chastity through her lack of sexual desire.

The narratives of sex revolving women in religion can also be further examined through comparing Coral and Guanyin. The bodhisattva has many forms, not all of which involve the virgin white-robed bodhisattva. One of her transformations is known as Lady Yanzhou, and in this form, she appears as a prostitute, and “any man who has intercourse with her is freed from sensual longing.”³² In this form, Guanyin “use[s] her appearance to stir male desire and

³⁰ Lori Meeks, “Women and Buddhism in East Asian History: The Case of the Blood Bowl Sutra, Part I: China,” *Religion Compass* 14, no. 4 (2020): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12336>.

³¹ Wai-ye Li, “The Late Ming Courtesan: Invention of a Cultural Ideal,” in *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, ed. Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang (Stanford University Press, 1997), 71.

³² Yuhang Li, *Becoming Guanyin: Artistic Devotion of Buddhist Women in Late Imperial China* (Columbia University Press, 2020), 29.

transform[s] that desire into longing for enlightenment.”³³ Guanyin takes on the form of a prostitute because they are representative of male desire and are the most accessible to the common man aside from his wife. Yet, like Coral, Guanyin’s body is never sexualized, as the focus is rooted in salvation for lecherous men and teaching them to turn away from lust. If a bodhisattva is able to turn into a prostitute and maintain her purity, then it is plausible for a prostitute to become a bodhisattva. Courtesans in late imperial China were sometimes referred to as “living Guanyin” (*huo Guanyin* 活觀音), someone who “represents female desire out of control” and “seeks sexual pleasure for its own sake.”³⁴ They were presented as a foil to the bodhisattva, where Guanyin educated men on the wrongs of desire and courtesans enticed that desire. In the Buddhist texts, “bodhisattvas who took on the bodily form of courtesans used sex as a way to lead men toward enlightenment,” but “from the perspective of female sexuality, a courtesan’s desire was considered antithetical to her attaining enlightenment.”³⁵ Thus in order to attain enlightenment, Coral possesses an admirable lack of sexual desire, which manifests in her asexuality. Her effortless detachment from sexual desire is more akin to Guanyin, literally embodying the notion of “living Guanyin” by possessing the same disinterest in sex. Additionally, Coral and Yue Zhong are on the same path of cultivation together, so her role as a “living Guanyin” tests Yue Zhong’s lack of desire as well as her own.

Likewise, we can understand Yue Zhong’s asexuality to also be a manifestation of his insight towards Buddhist teachings. His asexuality does not conflict with the Confucian narratives within the story, such as producing an heir to continue his family line or filial piety towards his mother, though the filial story of Mulian has resolved much of this conflict already.

³³ Y. Li, *Becoming Guanyin*, 29.

³⁴ Y. Li, *Becoming Guanyin*, 31.

³⁵ Y. Li, *Becoming Guanyin*, 26.

Still, there is something queer and remarkable about Yue Zhong's lack of desire from the perspective of Confucian family obligations. While "virginity and chastity have been idealized for women," asexuality in men is "regularly marked as a 'queerer' form of masculinity than it is for femininity" due to men being perceived as sexual creatures.³⁶ This aligns with Simone Chess's argument about why it is easier to study asexuality in the young male adolescent in early modern English literature, as they are the ones poised to enter the sexual world, and thus asexuality is perceived as deviant. Yue Zhong's distaste for sex stands out in the story, as filial piety demands that he invest in trying to have an heir to continue his family line. Yet the issue of an heir does not cross his mind for many years after he divorces his wife, up until he meets his son by chance, at which time he discovers he has been fortunate enough to have produced an heir through only one sexual encounter. Rather than "exploring the obstacle of Yue Zhong's 'asexuality,'" the story gives Yue Zhong an easy solution, focusing more on his celibate relationship with Coral and his religious cultivation towards enlightenment.³⁷ The uplifting of his asexuality as something positive within the story only further emphasizes his eminence in practicing Buddhism.

Temptation and Desire in Daoist Transcendence

If the effortless asexuality portrayed by the two protagonists of "Yue Zhong" is understood to be a manifestation of their innate wisdom towards Buddhism, the *Liaozhai* tale "Chang'e," in contrast, depicts the Daoist deity Chang'e, whose display of asexuality and resistance towards sexual desires comes into contention with her transcendence. The story begins

³⁶ Thomas William Whyke and Melissa Shani Brown, *Queering Gender, Sexuality, and Becoming-Human in Qing Dynasty Zhiguai: Querying the Strange Tales* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 176.

³⁷ Whyke and Brown, 177.

with Zong Zimei, who is torn between two beautiful women: the former transcendent Chang'e and the fox-spirit Diandang. Due to Diandang's insistence, he does end up marrying Chang'e, but after a period of time, bandits enter their home and kidnap Chang'e. Devastated by the loss of his wife, Zong Zimei searches everywhere for her, when he comes across Diandang once again. She informs him of Chang'e's whereabouts, and Zong Zimei discovers that Chang'e had actually been a Daoist deity exiled to the human world. After some persuasion, Chang'e rejoins Zong Zimei in their marriage and coerces Diandang to join them as his concubine. Having regained her place in heaven, Chang'e now turns away from physical intimacy with Zong Zimei, instructing Zong Zimei to direct all his affection to Diandang. In turn, Diandang focuses all her affection towards Chang'e, testing her newly regained transcendence. By overcoming Diandang's temptation, Chang'e fully transcends in her self-cultivation and produces two children for Zong Zimei without needing to engage in sex with him.

Chang'e's journey through the story revolves around her struggles to overcome human desire, beginning with her exile in the human realm, where she expresses romantic interest in Zong Zimei. When Zong Zimei fails to follow through with his intent to marry her because he cannot afford her bride price, Chang'e gives him the gold necessary to arrange a matchmaker. However, by this time, Zong Zimei had already promised himself to Diandang. Though Chang'e informs Zong Zimei that she "does not blame him for being unfaithful," she warns him that his marriage with Diandang "will definitely not succeed" 君所約，妾頗知之。其事必無成；即成之，妾不怨君之負心也。³⁸ Contrary to Chang'e's eagerness to marry Zong Zimei, Diandang originally is more cautious, encouraging Zong Zimei to return Chang'e's affections and make her his main wife, while she agrees to be his concubine. However, she does her utmost

³⁸ Pu, 321.

to avoid appearing when Chang'e is with Zong Zimei, as she seems nervous about the other woman, even though Chang'e manifests in human form at this time. When Zong Zimei tries to steal Diandang's sash on Chang'e's orders, Diandang is furious, accusing him of "having one sort of intention with [Chang'e], but having a different sort of intention with [her]"

君與人一心，而與妾二。³⁹ Diandang seems to represent Chang'e's more reserved side in this first marriage: the one who is able to turn away from desire and reject Zong Zimei's advances. In her exile to the human world, Chang'e is unable to fully resist the temptations of human desire, and thus she becomes entangled with Zong Zimei.

However, there are moments in which Chang'e acts as a test to other people's desires as well. During their marriage, Chang'e imitates many beautiful women, from the dancing Zhao Feiyan to the drunken Yang Guifei. Similar to Coral's display of her sensuous body to Yue Zhong at the cusp of his enlightenment, Chang'e's imitation of the women is a temptation of Zong Zimei's desire toward her. Just as Guanyin uses her sexual body to enlighten men from their lust, Chang'e is a test toward whether Zong Zimei would be able to overcome his desires. He ultimately fails, as he feels as if "in one woman he has all the beauties of thousands of years of history right here in [his] own bedchamber."⁴⁰ This also relates back to Chang'e's incomplete enlightenment at this stage: just as Zong Zimei should not be tempted by Chang'e's display of other beautiful women, Chang'e herself should not put on such play-acting, as she is putting herself on display for Zong Zimei's admiration, gaining pleasure from his affections. While there is no explicit mention in the story of their sexual relations during this time, we can infer from her ascetic return after she has ascended back to her position as the moon goddess that they were

³⁹ Pu, 321.

⁴⁰ Keith McMahon, "The Remarkable Woman in Pu Songling's *Liaozhai zhiyi*: A Theorization of *qing*," in *Love, Hatred, and Other Passions: Questions and Themes on Emotions in Chinese Civilization*, ed. Paolo Santangelo and Donatella Guida (Brill, 2006), 219.

physically intimate during this period. Chang'e's exile to the human world exposed her to human desires and sentiments, causing her to lose control over her own emotions and actions.

When she is found by Zong Zimei after her transcendence and returns as his main wife, her demeanor completely shifts: she is cold and distant to his affections, and she no longer indulges in physical intimacy, indicating that her sexual self-cultivation has once again been achieved. During this second union, "Chang'e takes on a more solemn and asexual role," while Diandang, now their concubine, steps into the sexual role.⁴¹ Even when Zong Zimei "insisted on being intimate with [Chang'e]," she refused and asked for Diandang to take her place 宗強使狎戲，惟密教顛當為之。⁴² When he came to her room at night, she continued to reject his sexual advances. Chang'e had not wanted to return as Zong Zimei's wife, but it is Diandang's revelation of her location and Zong Zimei's threat of suicide that forces her to stay. However, she has Diandang stay with them, so that she can delegate the sexual role of a concubine to Diandang. In this second marriage, the two women "do not compete for the hero Zong's attention; on the contrary, they contrive to yield to one another."⁴³ Chang'e's manner mellows as well, where she is no longer the one imitating the great beauties to please Zong Zimei. However, her previous indulgences have influenced the maids, who overindulge in their play, nearly causing a maid to die when she imitates Yang Guifei. Chang'e regrets her actions, as for a woman "to display herself to the man and other women is an act that involves inevitable 'incrementation' (*jian* 漸)...in stirring sentiments and desires."⁴⁴ Her imitations made her more desirable to Zong Zimei, and the maids' imitation highlights how other women might perceive

⁴¹ Huntington, 265.

⁴² Pu, 322.

⁴³ Huntington, 264.

⁴⁴ McMahon, "The Remarkable Woman," 220.

Chang'e's seductiveness and wish to emulate similar traits. This overindulgence in playing is what nearly causes the maid's death, and Chang'e scolds them for disrupting the balance of the universe: "yang is born from yin, this is the teaching of the cycle of yin and yang" 陽極陰生, 此循環之定數.⁴⁵ The joys of play-acting are born from the sorrows that come from overindulgence, and thus she is warning the maids to be careful with their actions. Chang'e's distant demeanor reflects her transcendence as a Daoist deity and her detachment from human desires; her reprimand towards the maids' play-acting speaks to the Daoist cosmology of balance.

Additionally, Diandang serves as a sexual foil to Chang'e and tests Chang'e's cultivation as a Daoist deity. Throughout the narrative, Diandang seems like Chang'e's sexual alter ego: when Chang'e is drawn into human desires as an exile, Diandang pushes her further along by ceding Zong Zimei's affections to her. She directs Zong Zimei to Chang'e's location after her kidnapping, "getting [his] sentiments and desires stirred up again."⁴⁶ With Chang'e returning as "the champion of propriety and discipline," Diandang becomes the sexual counterpart to Chang'e.⁴⁷ She takes on the promiscuous characteristics of a concubine: meant to be there sexually for the husband when the main wife does not want to have sex. However, Diandang's role in the marital family goes beyond just that of a simple concubine: she is a constant challenge to Chang'e's transcendent cultivation. To please Zong Zimei, she dresses up as Chang'e, causing him to call her by Chang'e's name while he is intimately touching her 顛當凝妝作己狀,

⁴⁵ Pu, 323.

⁴⁶ McMahon, "The Remarkable Woman," 219.

⁴⁷ Wai-ye Li, *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 128.

宗擁抱，呼以嫦娥。⁴⁸ This image evokes the sexual image of Chang'e again, even if the real Chang'e is practicing abstinence. While Chang'e seems amused at first by Diandang's actions, Diandang then feels pain in her heart and realizes Chang'e has caught her in the act and is angry about it. Chang'e seems irritated that Diandang has cast her in a sexual light after she has already transcended beyond human desire. While it may be possible that Chang'e is tempted by Diandang's imitation and is jealous towards her sexual relationship with Zong Zimei, I do not read this moment as such due to her changed behavior towards physical intimacy.

Diandang's role as Chang'e's sexual alter ego is further exemplified when she tests Chang'e one final time in her self-cultivation. She kneels down on the floor in front of Chang'e, contorting her body suggestively, before "[she held] Chang'e's foot in her mouth, and bit it lightly."⁴⁹ This is a very erotic moment, and Diandang's intention is to arouse Chang'e's desires. Like in "Yue Zhong," where Coral massaging Yue Zhong's legs is meant to be an erotic moment for the reader, Diandang's sexual actions towards Chang'e also serves as temptation for the reader. However, unlike Coral and Yue Zhong, whose enlightenment prevented them from viewing the moment as sensuous, Chang'e is stirred by the passion of the moment. She "felt a thread of sensuous longing rising from the toes and heading straight for the heart," and thoughts "of sensual pleasure took hold of her, as if she were losing control."⁵⁰ Diandang nearly succeeds in breaking Chang'e's ascetic celibacy, causing Chang'e's human desires to resurface temporarily before the goddess reins it in. She furiously scolds Diandang for the temptation and attributes her self-control to the fact that she had cultivated the Way so well, or else "it would

⁴⁸ Pu, 322.

⁴⁹ W. Li, *Enchantment and Disenchantment*, 129.

⁵⁰ W. Li, *Enchantment and Disenchantment*, 129.

have been very easy for [her] to fall” 若非夙根深者，墮落何難。⁵¹ Daoist transcendence often focuses on the quest of immortality and separating oneself from the material world; this typically translates to letting go of sexual desire and attachments, especially as transcendence practices moved from sexual to nonsexual practices.⁵² However, unlike Coral and Yue Zhong’s effortless enlightenment in Buddhist cultivation, Chang’e has already been shown in the story to have wavered in her cultivation previously. While we are not told whether her exile to the human world is due to indulging in human sexual desires, we can infer that her cultivation has been tested before, and she had failed. Chang’e only barely reins in her desires in the face of Diandang’s provocation, displaying that it may take immense strength in even a Daoist deity in order to resist sexual temptation. After this moment, Diandang disappears from the narrative completely. As a concubine, one might expect Diandang to be the one to bear children for Zong Zimei if Chang’e, as the main wife, refuses to do so. Yet, Chang’e effortlessly produces the children for Zong Zimei, proving that Diandang has served her purpose completely to test the true strength of Chang’e’s cultivation.

Chang’e’s asexuality manifests in her character post-ascension back to heaven, in the ways she navigates her marital relationship with Zong Zimei without sex. Aside from her abstinence from sex upon returning and delegating sexual duties to Diandang, Chang’e also sleeps separately and keeps to herself. However, it is notable that her cultivation is self-centered; her concern over her own sexual control do not extend to other female characters like Diandang. She has no qualms about using Diandang’s body as a replacement for her own. Unlike the amicable companionship portrayed in Coral and Yue Zhong’s relationship, Chang’e and Diandang are tied through the presence of sexual desire, rather than the absence of it. Together,

⁵¹ Pu, 323.

⁵² Valussi, “Daoist Sexual Practices,” 444.

they “seem to embody two aspects of Pu’s supernatural women, the one who entangles people in desire and the one who is beyond desire.”⁵³ Despite her narrow escape from sexual temptation, Chang’e does maintain her abstinence from sex for the rest of the narrative. The story also circumvents coitus as a necessary part of reproduction for Zong Zimei’s heirs, as Chang’e asexually reproduces a son and a daughter for him. She also does not naturally give birth to them, as she cuts them out of both sides of her ribs 一天，嫦娥腹中忽然有嬰兒的哭聲，於是用利刃劃破左肋取出，果然是個男孩；不久嫦娥又有了身孕，又劃破右肋取出一個女兒。⁵⁴ The conception and birth of the two children is entirely devoid of sexual involvement and is conveniently inserted into the narrative to allow her to fulfill her duties as the main wife. It also reflects the Daoist cultivation of the spiritual *qi* child, formed at the height of one’s cultivation towards immortality. While we may view Chang’e as “someone who represents the woman’s potential as man’s fantasy object,” I have been interested in how we might perceive her detachment as a manifestation of asexuality, rather than focus on how her detachment only makes her more appealing to both Zong Zimei and Diandang.⁵⁵ Although Chang’e’s journey to transcendence is rockier than Yue Zhong and Coral’s stories, her asexuality can be read similarly as a display of firm control over sexual desire.

Asexuality is displayed in “Yue Zhong” and “Chang’e” as the culmination of the characters’ religious cultivation. Much of their stories around sex and the abstinence of it revolve around the temptations of human sexual desire and material attachment. While it is effortless for Yue Zhong and Coral, as both seem to have been enlightened in this regard early on in the story, Chang’e represents a more realistic struggle towards asexuality in religious transcendence.

⁵³ Huntington, 265.

⁵⁴ Pu, 323.

⁵⁵ McMahon, 220.

Nevertheless, through the practices of asexuality in the overcoming of temptation in the stories, the characters seize sexual autonomy over their own bodies, separating the body from lust and desire typically depicted between men and women in *zhiguai* literature.

It is notable that both “Yue Zhong” and “Chang’e” involve supernatural women: Coral is a reincarnated flower fairy, Chang’e is the moon goddess, and Diandang is a fox-spirit. However, not all of these characters follow typical literary convention of the supernatural as the pinnacle of temptation for others’ lust. Only Diandang serves as a temptation for Chang’e’s desires, but Coral and Chang’e are exemplary figures of cultivation and transcendence. In the next section, I will discuss how the supernatural functions within these stories as an agent of desire—both in extracting desire from men and in restricting that desire. It is through the restriction of desire that I trace the practices of asexuality and the navigation of women’s autonomy over their bodies.

Chapter 2: Asexuality in the Supernatural as a Metaphor for Cautionary Desire

In previous studies of *zhiguai* tales, the supernatural is often understood as a metaphor for overpowering desire, such as the fox-spirit as a representative of the dangers of both female lust and lust for women. The vixen who “appears at night and vanishes by day offers a sexual relationship distinct from the rest of a man’s life,” thus representing “a tempting and dangerous lack of responsibility.”¹ In these *zhiguai* stories, the fox body is rarely portrayed other than in death, and it is the human body that remains alluring to human men. It is a “desirable illusion” that remains constantly palpable to the male gaze.² Stories of fox possession or enchantments were plentiful, especially among the collection of stories in *Liaozhai zhiyi*. Yet, I have been able to find a few stories that do the opposite, where the supernatural instead serves as a metaphor for cautionary desire. As fox-spirits, ghosts, and other supernatural creatures are associated with *yin* energy, they are considered harmful to the human *yang* energy. Sex also is conceived as depleting *yang* essence, and the bedchamber literature genre came from men’s desire to enhance their own energy while not depleting any *qi* while participating in sex. The two stories I examine in this section from *Liaozhai zhiyi*, “Lotus Fragrance” and “Liansuo,” both contain supernatural women who caution their partner against overindulgence in sexual intercourse. However, unlike in “Yue Zhong,” sexual desire is prevalent in these two stories, both from the human male lovers and the supernatural female protagonists. Though these two *Liaozhai* tales have been well studied through the focus on the man’s enjoyment in the supernatural as forbidden, erotic fantasies, my focus is on the supernatural as expressing cautionary desire through the withholding of sex. Abstinence from sex does not come naturally to the characters and is instead

¹ Huntington, 174.

² Huntington, 176.

a heroic act of restraint in which the supernatural women protect the health of her far weaker human male lover.

Medical Discourse in the Dangers of Desire

Asexuality in “Lotus Fragrance” and “Liansuo” is traced in the deliberate choices the supernatural women in these stories make to abstain from sex. Their reasoning to abstain has little to do with a lack of desire; rather, they choose to withhold sex from their human lovers to protect the mens’ respective health. In “Liansuo,” the protagonist, Yang Yuwei, encounters a ghost girl outside of his home and quickly becomes enamored with her. However, no matter how eager he is to have sex with her, the ghost girl refuses to comply, as she knows that her overpowering *yin* essence would make him ill. They remain intimate and physically close in other ways, but sexual intercourse remains off the table because of her supernatural identity. Similarly, in “Lotus Fragrance,” the fox-spirit Lotus Fragrance quickly puts a stop to coitus with Sang when she discovers his liaison with the ghost girl Li, as excessive sex—especially with two *yin*-aligned women—would drain Sang of his vital essence. She remains adamant about abstaining from sex, despite their previously sexual relationship. Together, both of these stories display deliberate choices of asexuality in an otherwise physically intimate relationship in relation to the medical discourses involving romances between a supernatural female and a human male.

The previous chapter addressed desire as an obstacle to religious enlightenment, and thus the characters worked towards ridding themselves of sexual desire. Here, within “Lotus Fragrance” and “Liansuo,” the human men are scholars who are deeply attracted to their female partners; desire plays a prominent role in the stories. On the surface, the only obstacle between

them and coitus is the supernatural identity of the female partner, with little care towards whether excessive sex may be harmful towards themselves. Additionally, desire exists within the female characters as well, though they are more reserved with acting upon that desire due to health concerns for their human lovers. Upon meeting Sang, the protagonist of “Lotus Fragrance,” the fox-spirit Lotus Fragrance climbs into bed with him, and they “enjoyed to the full the sweet pleasures of love.”³ She continues to return every few nights for pleasure, until one time she finds him “dreadfully thin” and determines it is because he is sleeping with another woman.⁴ His condition is from sleeping with the ghost Li, as he craves companionship even on the nights that Lotus Fragrance is away and satisfies his needs with Li instead. From this point on in the narrative, Lotus Fragrance refuses to engage in sex with Sang, as she fears for his health. She warns him “of the dangers of overindulgence in carnal pleasures and [discourses] on the consequences of sexual union with ghosts and fox spirits.”⁵ Her abstinence from sex is not framed as a lack of desire towards Sang, but rather as a heroic act of saving his life, even if he does not heed her warnings about excessive sex. Perhaps like Coral and Yue Zhong, Lotus Fragrance possesses her own wisdom about the dangers of sex. Likewise, in “Liansuo,” the ghost girl is constantly in the male protagonist Yang Yuwei’s orbit. While they “never made love,” the two were “as happy together as two fish sporting in the water.”⁶ They recite poetry with one another and play the pipa, all of which exhibit rather erotic or sensuous themes to their relationship. The playing of the instrument and the act of strumming the strings evokes an image of lovers stroking each another’s bodies. Even the imagery of “two fish sporting in the water”

³ Minford, 212.

⁴ Minford, 214.

⁵ W. Li, *Enchantment and Disenchantment*, 127.

⁶ Minford, 282.

implies a conjoining of a pair, frolicking and engaging playfully together. Liansuo also appeals to Yang Yuwei by declaring: “if you think of me as your wife,” alluding to how the imagery of their companionship is built almost entirely on erotic imagery, without the act of sex itself.⁷ Yet, she refuses to have sex with him because “if [they] were to make love it would be an inauspicious union” due to her identity as a ghost.⁸ Like Lotus Fragrance, the ghost girl is the one who sets boundaries for their romance. Desire plays a very big part in both of these relationships. The practices of asexuality within these two stories speak more to a cautionary message of desire, utilizing the element of the supernatural in order to push for abstinence and sex in moderation.

Typically, in literary convention foxes and ghosts are considered “the cause of a particular kind of illness: through sexual intercourse they would drain men’s *yang* essence and endanger their lives.”⁹ In many stories of *Liaozhai*, malevolent foxes and ghosts lure unsuspecting men to have sex with them in order to gain their *yang* essence for themselves. Foxes would practice *caiyang buyin* 採陽補陰 (harvesting *yang* in order to replenish *yin*) by “drain[ing] humans of sexual energy to achieve immortality, a process that led to the emaciation and eventual death for their victims.”¹⁰ As ghosts were also composed of *yin* energy—and in “Lotus Fragrance” they are characterized as even more *yin* than foxes—sex with ghosts produced equally harmful effects on humans. In these stories, men would need to rely on their “moral strength to rid themselves of the danger.”¹¹ Yet, we see the opposite occur within “Lotus

⁷ Minford, 285.

⁸ Minford, 281.

⁹ Kang, 74.

¹⁰ Huntington, 178.

¹¹ Cheng, 103.

Fragrance” and “Liansuo.” The men pursue sexual relations, even at the cost of their own health, whereas the women set firm boundaries in order to ensure that sex is occurring in a healthy, regulated manner. So although both foxes and ghosts in these stories are perceived as harmful towards the human lovers due to their excessive *yin*, they are no more dangerous than human women in terms of the dangers of excessive sex due to the supernatural women’s restraint. And while sex in general is harmful in abundance, the convention of foxes harvesting men’s *yang* essence mirrors how “men could accumulate more vigor by harvesting the sexual energy of human females” by withholding their semen during coitus.¹² In these two stories, it is the human man’s desire towards the supernatural women that threatens his health, rather than the malicious intent of foxes and ghosts as sexual succubae in literary convention. As such, it is the supernatural female who saves the human male, first through abstaining from sex and second by cautioning against the dangers of lust and desire.

The stories address how the supernatural exacerbates the negative effects on a human’s condition, especially in regards to sex. In “Liansuo,” the ghost girl is quick to inform Yang Yuwei that because she is “a creature of the night,” having sex would only “bring [him] an early death.”¹³ The ghost girl, Liansuo, is aware that her overpowering *yin* essence would be harmful to Yang Yuwei’s *yang* essence, and thus she prevents him from endangering himself. Yang Yuwei takes this explanation readily, and he settles on “merely toying with her breasts” to satisfy himself with some physical intimacy.¹⁴ Likewise, as mentioned previously for Lotus Fragrance, she abstains from sexual relations with Sang the moment she discovers his liaison with Li. Sang himself is aware of the dangers of fox-spirits, as he is wary of their ability to “cast spells on men

¹² Huntington, 178-179.

¹³ Minford, 281.

¹⁴ Minford, 281.

[and to] make them fall ill,” even to the point of death.¹⁵ Lotus Fragrance does not deny that as a fox, she must be careful not to harm Sang with their relationship, but she is adamant that a “strong young man such as [Sang] can restore his vital energy three days after the act of love” and even “a fox-spirit can do [him] no harm.”¹⁶ Excessive sex with anyone—supernatural or otherwise—is harmful to one’s vital energy, and this is heightened for Sang because Li is a ghost. In this story, Li’s *yin* composition as a ghost is much more potent than that of Lotus Fragrance’s as a fox-spirit, thus draining Sang’s *yang* essence faster than a human lover would. Both Lotus Fragrance and Liansuo maintain control in their relationships, setting boundaries about what is acceptable in terms of intimacy and what is not. When Liansuo is ready to be reborn as human, she does so “by obtaining the man’s ‘breath in bed’ (*qinxi* 寢息)” by finally assenting to sex with Yang Yuwei.¹⁷ Though they have been intimate throughout the story, this act of sex is devoid of desire from Liansuo’s perspective, as she warns that after they are finished, he will “be gravely ill for three weeks.”¹⁸ The negative effects of coitus with the supernatural is amplified in “Liansuo,” as only one act of sex is enough to make Yang Yuwei severely ill, proving Liansuo’s point about why she wishes to maintain sexual distance from Yang Yuwei, even though she allows other physical intimacies.

The Supernatural as Unattainable

In abstaining from sex, the supernatural woman only becomes more alluring to the male protagonist, further affirming the authority the women possess in holding firm to their

¹⁵ Minford, 215.

¹⁶ Minford, 215.

¹⁷ Cheng, 73.

¹⁸ Minford, 288.

boundaries. “Romances with supernatural women” are a drastic example of the tension between the “realms of fantasy” and its “reincorpora[tion]...into this world,” as they both “fulfill desires and rein them in.”¹⁹ No matter how much both the protagonists and readers might wish to liaison with a supernatural woman, she remains an illusion of the fantasy world. Yet, there is an allure in pursuing the unattainable, thus the birth of the expansive genre of fox and ghost romances in both *Liaozhai* and in other *zhiguai* narratives. As Lotus Fragrance pulls away from Sang, he only further indulges in Li’s willingness to have sex in order to satisfy his own cravings. Even after his first scare with death, the moment Lotus Fragrance leaves after nursing him back to health, he summons Li once more to spend the night. From then on, he and Li become “inseparable day and night,” and even as his health deteriorates once more, he “could not bear the thought of wrenching himself away from Li.”²⁰ His desire towards his lovers only heightens with Lotus Fragrance’s absence, until he is physically unable to act on this desire. Lotus Fragrance’s abstinence from sex and cutting off their relationship causes him to overcompensate through his relationship with Li, overriding any of her previous warnings.

Likewise, the mystery of Liansuo entices Yang Yuwei’s friend, even as he is informed that she is too timid to meet other strangers. The friend Xue believes that Yang Yuwei is being stingy with his lover and brings two more friends over, making a fuss despite Yang Yuwei’s distress. When “a beautiful sound of indescribable melancholy” finally sounds outside, Xue and his friends are enraptured by the haunting melody.²¹ Though they never get to see Liansuo in person, they are drawn to the mysterious quality of the ghost girl. Later, when Liansuo faces trouble from a ghost who wishes to make her his concubine, she and Yang Yuwei are aided by

¹⁹ Huntington, 249.

²⁰ Minford, 217.

²¹ Minford, 284.

Wang, another one of Xue's friends who had come previously. Though Wang is "glad to have done something to atone for his earlier boorishness" by helping to save her chastity, he still "ask[s] Yang [Yuwei] to put in a word with her on his behalf."²² Her inaccessibility only makes her more appealing to Yang Yuwei's friends, even if this does not make her more desirable in Yang Yuwei's eyes. However, when she finally asks to have sex in order to gain the seed of life from Yang Yuwei's *yang* essence, he is quick to point out that "it was [her] who always said no" and that he has never denied her any affection.²³ So though he does not display greater desire towards Liansuo during their time together without sex, he has been eager to fulfill this request, as it is something he has been willing to partake in since the moment they met. Through the erotic descriptions of their time spent together, from the imagery of fish leaping from the water to the poetry they recited, it is clear that sexual desire between the couple never ceased to exist. The narrative approaches "sensuality, or *se*, with no actual portrayal of a sexual affair."²⁴ Still, the sensual features of the story, as well as the enraptured friends of Yang Yuwei affirm that the supernatural only becomes even more appealing when unattainable. By holding firm in her refusal to have sex with Yang Yuwei, Liansuo upholds her message of cautionary desire for the sake of the human man's health.

Once the supernatural is retracted from the narratives, then the need for cautionary desire is removed, reaffirming that the supernatural is unattainable in these tales. Liansuo revives from living off of Yang Yuwei's food, gaining "the breath of the living," and her resurrection is completed with his semen and blood.²⁵ Under her instructions, he goes to her grave after a

²² Minford, 286.

²³ Minford, 288.

²⁴ McMahon, "The Remarkable Woman," 222.

²⁵ Minford, 288.

hundred days and “the lady’s body within the coffin was uncorrupted and still slightly warm to the touch.”²⁶ Though the story ends here and readers are not privy to their intimacy after her revival, the eagerness in which Yang Yuwei complied with the sex needed in order to give her the seed of life indicates his persistent desire to be with Liansuo sexually. He was even willing to have sex even though it would make him ill because it promised that Liansuo would return as a human and that they would be able to live out their lives together intimately. Liansuo had also only rejected coitus due to being a ghost and fearing repercussions on behalf of Yang Yuwei, so it is likely that she too has sexual desire towards him now that there are no barriers between them. Still, we can understand Liansuo’s decision to abstain from sex while she was a ghost as an act of asexuality utilized to maintain her autonomy over her body.

Likewise, both Lotus Fragrance and Li marry Sang by the end of “Lotus Fragrance” when they are reborn as humans. Their union is only attainable after the supernatural body is cast aside. When the neighbor girl, Swallow, dies, Li possesses her body and reawakens. Upon falling into despair that she was prettier in her previous form, “her body began to itch and her skin fell away,” and Li was completely reborn in her original mortal body.²⁷ Once she takes over Swallow’s body completely, this signifies that her rebirth is complete. Li—or Swallow as she is known in the story from this point on—is completely human once more, and the ghost girl ceases to exist. Now that Swallow is human, Sang must go through the proper rituals in order to marry her, such as having a matchmaker as a go-between. When Li was a ghost, there was no concern for propriety, as the union between her and Sang was unsustainable and forbidden by the narrative. Though Lotus Fragrance and Sang had become “man and wife” so that he could “return and marry Swallow afterwards” and the three would have proper cause to be able to live

²⁶ Minford, 289.

²⁷ Minford, 224.

together, Lotus Fragrance's relationship with Sang and Swallow does not last.²⁸ After two months, Lotus Fragrance gives birth to a son and passes away from illness, her body returning to that of a fox. This is a reminder that her human appearance is an illusion, and as a fox, she was unattainable. Fourteen years later, a woman appears at their door to sell her daughter for marriage, and it is Lotus Fragrance reborn. Though she did not remember her past life due to her mother feeding her dog's blood, "her features, her manner...were all exactly those of Lotus Fragrance."²⁹ She is able to rejoin the couple, reuniting the three in a mutual, loving relationship. Though fox-spirits and ghosts are both associated with *yin*, within this story, Lotus Fragrance "represents *yang* features with 'healing, laughter, warmth, and wisdom,'" while Li is associated with the *yin* features of "'disease, melancholy, coldness, and infatuation.'"³⁰ As ghosts are beyond life, they do not have any *yang* energy, whereas fox-spirits still contain some due to being living beings. Lotus Fragrance was "used to control the ghost Li's desires," as she "cures the hero of the illness brought on by his overindulgence with Li."³¹ It is Lotus Fragrance who sets boundaries for sex in her relationship with Sang in order to preserve his health and reprimands Li when her desire for Sang is taken too far. Lotus Fragrance practices asexuality to ensure Sang's safety, whereas Li proves to be less aware of the consequences of her desire with their human lover. However, the delayed revival of Lotus Fragrance due to her having to first die as a fox seems to be a reminder to the readers that the supernatural still serves as an added caution about the dangers of desire, and Lotus Fragrance must completely shed the fox form and her fox life in order to no longer be a danger to Sang as his lover.

²⁸ Minford, 225.

²⁹ Minford, 227.

³⁰ Kang, 77.

³¹ Huntington, 263.

Asexuality in the supernatural manifests in the metaphor of cautionary desire, replacing the literary convention of supernatural women as representations of dangerous female desire. In abstaining from sex, the supernatural women in these stories wrest control of the relationship from the man and sets up boundaries about what sort of sexual relations the man is allowed to have with her. Though it is framed as concern for the man's health, what goes unspoken are the sacrifices that the supernatural women give up in order to protect their lover. As is literary convention, fox-spirits and ghosts often pursue human men in order to drain their vitality and achieve immortality, or even rebirth as a human. We certainly see this to be the case with how ghosts like Liansuo required a man's semen and blood in order to revive, whereas this was not the case with Li. Since Liansuo served a purpose to warn Yang Yuwei of his natural inclination towards indulging in his desire, she also needed to take his seed of life in order to display how sexual intercourse with a ghost can have harsh effects on the man's health. Li, however, indulges in sex with Sang, but she is only depicted as harming Sang, rather than doing this in order to revive as a human. Her position in the narrative is more like a concubine fulfilling the man's sexual needs. Her revival does not come from a rebirth in her former physical body—which has already decomposed into bones—but by reincarnating into the body of the recently deceased neighboring girl. Instead, it is Lotus Fragrance who asserts her authority and sets boundaries with Sang, regulating how and when they might act on their desire. She acts more like the main wife in the family, controlling even Li's body, when she encourages Sang to embrace and engage with Li after his recovery. Similar to Diandang's working as Chang'e's foil to her transcendence, Li is the counterpart to Lotus Fragrance's abstinence, as she is less versed in controlling her desires. Additionally, even though Lotus Fragrance and Liansuo only become more desirable when the men are unable to control them, this only affirms the strength of their authority over their own

bodies. Both women remain firmly in control of their boundaries, and they become the dominant partner in the relationship, managing what is or is not allowed that the men must follow. In the next section, I discuss similar cases of human women who resist sex with men. Unlike the supernatural women who focus on the lesson of cautionary desire, these human women serve as examples of female agency in weaponizing chastity and propriety in order to maintain autonomy over their bodies.

Chapter 3: Asexuality in Women's Practice of Chastity Beyond the Social Norm

Chastity was a virtue highly valorized in the late imperial period, so esteemed that it has been referred to as the “cult of chastity.”¹ Though it started out in the early period as a term applicable to both men and women and centered around moral principle rather than bodily purity, chastity (*zhen* 貞) in the Ming-Qing period became a signifier for a woman's virginity and a wife's preservation of her sexual purity.² The “highest standard of chastity” for a woman is her “willingness to die rather than suffer pollution through sexual contact with someone other than her one husband.”³ *Zhen* became increasingly concentrated on marital fidelity, emphasizing female virtue in relation to the family. It was in this shifting environment that the faithful maiden cult, along with the cult of chastity, arose. In this section, I will be examining chastity across three levels: chastity as the moral standard for women, chastity as the law set up by men, and chastity as a social practice understood and practiced by women. Following the three levels, chastity as a moral standard means discussing it on the discursive and abstract level; chastity under the law means discussing it on the prescriptive level; and chastity as a social practice means discussing it on the practical level. While female chastity within the confines of the law can be defined as the practice of refraining from extramarital sex, in practice it is a fluctuating, malleable concept that must take into account the situations that may exert pressure on a woman in the face of the limited choices available to her. The choices the women make in these stories are often made under dire circumstances in order to protect their bodies. Occasionally, this meant

¹ Ju-K'ang T'ien, *Male Anxiety and Female Chastity: A Comparative Study of Chinese Ethical Values in Ming-Ch'ing Times* (E.J. Brill, 1988), 39.

² Yuet Keung Lo, “Conversion to Chastity: A Buddhist Catalyst in Early Imperial China,” *NAN NU -- Men, Women & Gender in Early & Imperial China* 10, no. 1 (2008): 23, <https://doi.org/10.1163/138768008X273700>.

³ Matthew H. Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford University Press, 2000), 69.

having to circumvent chastity as a social standard in making agentic decisions about when and how they may have extramarital sex.

Like the supernatural women in Chapter 2 who were outliers for straying away from the archetype of the sexual demon, the human women in *Haoqiu zhuan*, “Fengxian lou,” “Rouge,” “The Female Chen Ping Saves Her Life with Seven Ruses,” and “Xianü” offer varying perspectives on chastity as both a ritual function and a social practice during adversity. As a ritual function, chastity would be understood under the moral framework, while as a social practice during adversity, chastity is discussed at both the prescriptive level of the law as well as the practical applications of it to women’s lives. In Matthew H. Sommer’s *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*, he discusses rape law in the Qing dynasty in terms of pollution, especially in regards to female chastity. A crime could only be constituted as rape if the victim “had ‘maintained her chaste purity.’”⁴ It is the pollution to her chastity that Qing jurists were concerned with, and chastity was considered to have been broken once penetration occurred. Chastity understood under the laws established by men in the late imperial period was concerned with the physical bodily purity of a woman, whereas the social conditions and circumstances that these women encountered meant that the actual social practice of agency with chastity was much more complicated than simply whether or not penetration had occurred. In practice, women often faced difficult situations of men attempting to have illicit sex with them, and in these compromising positions, women sometimes had limited options available to them. Even if one did not resist the act of sex completely, there were other ways in which they may have set and protected the boundaries of their body. It is through these boundary settings that I examine the practice of asexuality in the stories above. How, I ask, might we still understand these women’s actions as asexuality in practice beyond the scope of “abstaining from sex” when they have been

⁴ Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society*, 68.

put in compromising situations? How do the choices they make about their bodies, even if they must have sex and break their chastity—as understood by the moral framework of chastity—still embody this notion of “asexuality” as defined in this thesis? In this chapter, I expand on the scope of asexuality beyond abstaining from sex to highlight how these women resist the violation of their chastity through negotiating and upholding what they consider acceptable to their bodies, even if it sometimes means giving into sex.

The Shifting Ideals of Chastity as a Moral Virtue

To begin with, *Haoqiu zhuan* offers a unique perspective on a woman who follows strictly along the lines of propriety, upholding chastity under the law even while she also socially practices asexuality. Shui Bingxin is the only daughter of the local official Shui Juyi, and she is raised to be her father’s heir, treated as a son due to her high intelligence. As she is beautiful and left alone when her father is exiled to the peripheries of the empire, she resists the attempts of the licentious scholar Guo who wishes to marry her multiple times. Her resistance is based on the lack of propriety and ritual that Scholar Guo evinces with his proposals, as well her insistence that she secure the best match for her father as his heir. By chance, she meets Tie Zhongyu, a respected scholar who saves her from this unwanted marriage, and in return, she nurses him back to health in her own home when Scholar Guo tries to have him poisoned. Though they both admire each other greatly for their righteousness and intelligence, the two resolve to remain friends to avoid the impropriety of an unmarried pair living within the same home. Despite their desire to remain friends, their parents push for their union, which they accept. Still, Shui Bingxin insists on waiting to consummate their marriage in order to prove that the two had remained chaste during Tie Zhongyu’s stay at her home before their marriage. Having proven their

innocence, the couple is lauded for their propriety and allowed to go through with their happy union.

Due to Shui Bingxin's upbringing as a son, her understanding of chastity is strictly along the lines of propriety as set out by men. She is firm in her ritual standards in regards to marriage and chastity. Throughout scholar Guo's attempts to marry her, she is steadfast in her insistence that he must receive the approval of her father, as marriage is one of the most important moments in a woman's life 婚姻大事，當遵父命。⁵ During her friendship with Tie Zhongyu, Shui Bingxin exhibits the pinnacle of propriety, ensuring that they are never directly face-to-face when in the same room and being cautious about how others might perceive her chastity by allowing a man she is not married to within her home. When their parents wish them to wed, Shui Bingxin corrects her father that "he is wrong "about propriety" 爹爹論人則然，只怕論禮則又不然也。⁶ When the marriage does go through, she insists on holding off on consummating the marriage to prove her chastity when their opponents take them to court. The emphasis in the court is that Shui Bingxin could not possibly be a virgin after inviting Tie Zhongyu into her home, and her accusers believe that she had broken her chastity. Chastity in the court, as Sommer has examined in Qing law, is defined through the lack of penetration during sex. To prove her innocence in the matter, she is brought to the Empress's court and examined by the maids 引入朝見皇后，就命皇后召宮人驗試水冰心，果係處女否。⁷ She is only considered chaste once the examination is complete, and it is confirmed that she is indeed still a virgin. Other forms of physical intimacy would not break her chastity, as it is only penetration during sex that matters.

⁵ Mingjiao zhongren 名教中人. *Haoqiu zhuan* 好逑傳 (中州古籍出版社, 1980), 33.

⁶ 好逑傳, 199.

⁷ 好逑傳, 248.

This aligns with the Qing court's concern with pollution, especially in regards to female chastity.⁸ Shui Bingxin's notion of chastity aligns with those of the government officials within the story: her primary concern is to ensure that her virginity is maintained to present as proof of their propriety. Likewise, the boundaries of her body remain limited to penetration as a violation of her chastity. Her abstinence from sex is in accordance with the strict norms of chastity under the law. Scholar-beauty fiction (*caizi jiaren*) explores "the possibilities of individual passion and the chaste female body as the quintessential site of human passion and individualism."⁹ It is her body that remains the essence of *Haoqiu zhuan*, and the debates of passion, lust, admiration, and chastity all revolve around the boundaries of her body. Her body becomes the site where chastity as a social standard of a woman's purity is valued. Shui Bingxin embodies the essence of strict chastity under the law, with all of her personal choices about her body aligning with maintaining her chastity and purity.

A woman's boundaries around chastity and propriety may fluctuate depending on their circumstances, and such boundaries also vary for women and men. Li Yu's short story "Fengxian lou" demonstrates the differences in gendered understandings of chastity via the conduct of Lady Shu. Li Yu suggests that rigid observance of Neo-Confucian chastity may not always suit the circumstance. "Fengxian lou" opens with a debate on virtue—and the difficulties of achieving it—even when one might need to make compromises in order to fulfill that goal. The story follows Scholar Shu and Lady Shu, at the end of the Ming dynasty when bandits are on the verge of threatening their home. The Shu clan are known for only having one heir per generation, so it is important for this couple to bear a child to continue the clan. Thus, when Lady Shu gives birth to a son, the elders do whatever they can to persuade her to allow bandits to take her when they

⁸ Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society*, 67.

⁹ Yu, *Sanctity and Self-Inflicted Violence*, 100.

come in order to preserve the child's life. She is denied the chance to preserve her chastity through suicide, and instead, she gathers her courage and wit to protect her son. Later, after the fighting ceases, she is "rescued" by a general who weds her. Upon meeting her husband again by chance, Lady Shu instructs the general to return her son to Scholar Shu, before attempting to commit suicide out of shame because she does not believe she has the right to return to Scholar Shu's side as an unchaste woman. The general manages to bring her back from the brink of death, acknowledging her attempt as a metaphorical death to the woman he wed, and he encourages her to reunite with her husband.

Unlike in *Haoqiu zhuan*, in which Shui Bingxin was very focused on how preserving her chastity under the law by maintaining the purity of her body could protect her from Scholar Guo's harassment, this understanding of chastity and purity as a moral standard that men expect from women does not save Lady Shu from the bandits; in fact, "Fengxian lou" highlights how in times of crisis, women are often pressed to sacrifice their own virtue for the sake of the men around them. Yet, Lady Shu still proves to be authoritative about the choices she is able to make about her body. At first, Lady Shu wants to commit suicide to preserve her chastity, as she espouses the belief that a woman's conduct "lies entirely in 'chastity'" and everything else is "trivial" 做婦人的操修全在『貞節』二字，其餘都是小節。¹⁰ When her husband demands that she must stay alive for the sake of their son, she refuses to make decisions about her body based only upon her husband's opinion. She insists that he consult all of the clan elders about whether she should live for his child, or if she can be allowed to die for her chastity. This matter "concerns [her] reputation" 名節所關, and so if even one of the clan elders protests against saving the child, she feels that "it would be better to die for [her] principles" 有一個不許,

¹⁰ Li Yu, *Twelve Towers* (上海古籍出版社, 1986), 229.

可見大義難逃，還是死節的是。¹¹ Though in the end the clan elders all agree that Lady Shu must place the child's survival above her own needs, she is shown to be someone who wishes to firmly live by her principles and understands that a woman's chastity is the most important virtue that defines her reputation. Prior to this decision, Lady Shu views chastity on the level of moral propriety. As a woman, she has the duty to uphold her purity, even if it means facing death to avoid violation to her body. However, we see that in social practice, no matter how valorized a woman's chastity is in this cult of chastity, the men of the family still prioritize the heir over a woman's virtue. As a final protest, Lady Shu asks: "But what if he does not live long and dies halfway through, and I have not been able to raise him properly, and I have become an unchaste woman? What then?" 萬一壽算不長，半途而廢，孤又不曾撫得成，徒然做了個失節之婦，卻怎麼好？¹² The elders in the clan remain unmoved by the idea of her lost chastity and inform her that if that was to happen, then "that is fate," and they only ask that she does her best to keep her son alive, even if he does end up dying 那是命該如此，與你何干？只問你盡心不盡心，不問他有壽沒有壽。¹³ Here, we clearly see chastity as a moral standard being rejected in favor of the continuation of the family line, reducing the woman to her roles as a mother rather than prioritizing the physical purity of her body. Even if she would then become defiled and would lose her moral standing as a woman, the clan's primary concern remains the son's life.

Now that Lady Shu has made a promise to keep her son alive as best as she can, her own priorities change surrounding her chastity and the boundaries of her body, demonstrating how the social practice of chastity and a woman's personal agency factors in shifting circumstances such

¹¹ Li Yu, 230.

¹² Li Yu, 230.

¹³ Li Yu, 230.

as the issue of an heir or the pressing matters of war. When the bandits move to kill the child, Lady Shu threatens to take her own life, saying that she “would rather be dishonored than have [her] child killed,” and if he is killed, then she “will not even suffer this dishonor; [she] will die with [her] child” 寧可辱身，勿殺吾子！若殺吾子，連此身也不肯受辱，有母子偕亡而已。¹⁴ She uses her body and its desirability to the bandits to ensure her son’s wellbeing, exchanging her chastity for his life.¹⁵ Later, when the fighting ceases, she is taken by a general who marries her. Again, for the sake of the promise she had given to her husband to protect her child, Lady Shu’s body is violated once more as she becomes the property of yet another man. Though her chastity has been broken, she still remains steadfast in her dedication to her child, bending the boundaries of her bodily integrity in order to satisfy the men around her. Her personal agency revolves around what she can control: what parts of her body can she give up to protect her child, even if it means breaking her chastity? When the opportunity arises for her to return to her husband’s side, the general asks her: “what will become of your body? He is your ex-husband, and I am your new husband; which one will you live with?” 只是你的身子作何歸結？他是前夫，我是後夫，還是要隨哪一個？¹⁶ This reiterates the notion that as a woman, Lady Shu is defined by her body and judged based on its purity and chastity. Due to her chastity having been violated by the bandits and then compromised by the general, Lady Shu declines to return to her husband’s side, as she wishes to have the authority to make her own

¹⁴ Li Yu, 231.

¹⁵ In Jimmy Yu’s *Sanctity and Self-Inflicted Violence*, Chapter 4, “Chaste Widows as Entertainment and Revenants,” Yu discusses a different scholar-beauty romance, *Story of One Gentleman and Two Sisters*, where one of the female characters, Wang Cuiqiao views female chastity as a fragile vase: once broken it can never be recovered. Yet when she becomes a prostitute in order to make money to support her father, she views her chastity as being unbroken, as she “was selling only her ‘corporeal body’ (*roushen* 肉身) and that her true or ‘chaste body’ would never be for sale.” Yu, 101. Lady Shu’s actions reflect Wang Cuiqiao, as she further asserts her chastity by allowing her corporeal body to be defiled to protect her son.

¹⁶ Li Yu, 237.

choices about her body now that her duty to her husband in raising her son has been fulfilled. It is in her next choices within the narrative that we may understand her practice of asexuality by expanding its definition to encompass a resistance towards unwanted sex.

Upon returning her child to her husband, Lady Shu attempts suicide once more as a last bid to preserve what is left of her body's purity. It is because she is "steadfast in her virtue" that she hangs herself 只因舒娘子賦性堅貞，打發兒子去後，就關上艙門，一索弔死。¹⁷ Once free from her obligations to her husband regarding her son, Lady Shu makes the executive decision to redeem what she can of her chastity and virtue. Women "whose chastity was important to them" and felt their body had been violated "made deliberate and considered choices about how to respond."¹⁸ For many, this included suicide as an indictment of the systems that had failed them. As Theiss has shown, "once the boundaries of the chaste body...has been violated, only a publicly known and violent vindication of the chastity that was destroyed" through suicide "could restore the moral integrity that was integral to so many women's sense of self."¹⁹ Suicide was not an impulse or a despairing reaction, but rather a way for these women to regain their own sense of moral integrity and identity. However, there is a distinction to be made between Lady Shu's initial reasoning to want suicide before the bandits came and this later suicide after her son has been returned to her husband. Had she succeeded in committing suicide before the bandits' arrival, her chastity would have been protected completely, and she would have died a chaste, martyred hero. Her second attempt at suicide comes from her shame at her body being compromised and her inability to return to her husband's side. Throughout the story, Lady Shu wavers between personal autonomy over her body and the social moral standards

¹⁷ Li Yu, 238.

¹⁸ Theiss, 196.

¹⁹ Theiss, 197.

expected of her. Her choice of suicide to preserve her chastity was denied by the expectation that she give up her body for her child's safety. However, she makes deliberate choices on how to use her body to protect her child, even if it means breaking her chastity. She seems empowered by her ability to leverage her body for her child's life, to the point where the general who weds her deeply admires her virtue and courage. Yet, at the last moment, she succumbs to the shame of having lost her purity, and the social expectations of a woman's moral conduct drives her to suicide. Here, I read the practice of asexuality in Lady Shu's decisions to preserve as much of her dignity as she can in an impossible situation. While she is not able to abstain from sex through death, her negotiation of her body with the bandits and the general prove her strength and autonomy—as much as she is able to regain—over her will and body. Though her suicide attempt stems from shame, it can also be read as a desperate attempt to restore her virtue and deny the other men her body for further pleasure.

The *Liaozhai zhiyi* story, "Rouge," also exemplifies what is permissible to the body for the woman versus what is considered "right" or morally justifiable when presented at the court. The daughter of the Bian family, Rouge, is a beautiful young woman who is enamored by the passing glance of the scholar, Li Qiusun. Her next-door neighbor, Madame Wang, promises to help introduce her to him, but when she fails to follow through, Rouge grows ill with lovesickness. Madame Wang has been having affairs with the scholar Su Jie while her husband has been away, and after she mentions Rouge's dilemma to Su Jie, the man immediately seizes the opportunity to sleep with a beautiful young woman. Instead of relaying her affections to Li Qiusun, Su Jie takes on the scholar's identity and tries to sneak into Rouge's bedroom. Rather than enticed by his boldness, Rouge is offended he would forgo propriety to have sex with her and attempts to force him to leave, but as she is too weak to completely defend herself, he

manages to steal one of her slippers. When trying to escape from the home, Su Jie accidentally drops the slipper, which another licentious man who wishes to have an affair with Madame Wang, Big Mao, picks up. Big Mao learns of Su Jie's confession on his encounter with Rouge, and he makes it his own mission to have sex with her. However, he finds himself entering the bedroom of Rouge's father's bedroom, and in the ensuing confrontation, he kills Mr. Bian and runs from the scene. As Rouge has believed their attackers to be Li Qiusun this entire time, the young scholar is arrested for the murder of her father. In a series of trials as more information about this web of affairs arises, the perpetrators are all punished for their individual crimes, and Rouge, having preserved her chastity through her own resistance against Su Jie's advances, marries Li Qiusun.

The prefect re-investigating the murder of Mr. Bian seems less concerned with Rouge's chastity, as he does about her moral integrity in lying about the events that occurred. The fact established by the court is that Rouge had been assaulted by Li Qiusun, which is why he was originally arrested and convicted of the crime. However, Prefect Wu found the case to be incomplete, so he reopened it and questioned Rouge on the matter. He does ask once if "anyone else know[s] about [her] secret encounter with the young man," or if anyone had been with her when she spotted Li Qiusun on the street, in which she lies and says no.²⁰ His concern later in the trial is her omission about Madame Wang being present in the latter occasion, but he does not question her chastity or whether she was truly able to fight off the intruder in her bedroom. Even when Madame Wang accuses Rouge of being a "little slut [who] is obsessed with men," Prefect Wu does not perform any physical examination to determine whether or not Rouge still remains

²⁰ Minford, 414.

a virgin.²¹ Instead, he discovers Su Jie is the one who assaulted Rouge, and he convicts Su Jie of the murder. The case is picked up yet again by Commissioner Shi, who believes the conclusion of the case to be incorrect, once again questioning all the perpetrators if there was more information they had omitted. He also does not question the intrusion of Su Jie into Rouge's home, perhaps because this is a case on her father's murder, rather than on whether anyone has violated Rouge's chastity. Even at the end of the case, when the commissioner reports that it is only thanks "to her courage [that] she has been able despite everything to preserve her chastity," there is still no examination of her body.²² Unlike in *Haoqiu zhuan*, where many of the men in court doubted Shui Bingxin's chastity because she had invited Tie Zhongyu into her home before marriage, there is no doubt as to whether Rouge has kept her chastity, as she had valiantly fought off Su Jie when he tried to force his way into her room. Though he had managed to make it inside to steal her slipper, her resistance proved worthy of approval because penetration never occurred. Perhaps, had Su Jie managed to follow through with his assault, the opinions on Rouge might have changed due to concerns over maintenance of her chastity. In Qing court law, if "the boundary of consummation had been crossed during rape," then the "victim had been polluted irrevocably, regardless of her previous record of chastity [or] the intensity of her resistance."²³ However, since the confessions of both Rouge and Su Jie do not indicate consummation, there is no need for a physical examination to confirm Rouge's chastity. Even so, chastity is an important moral virtue for Rouge, as she is able to escape from the trial unscathed and still of marriageable status because her chastity remained intact.

²¹ Minford, 416.

²² Minford, 420.

²³ Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society*, 79.

Rouge herself has no questions on whether her own chastity has been broken, not even after Su Jie breaks into her room and seizes her body. She even first allows his request to “vouchsafe him one touch of her slender wrist as a sign of their love,” which is why he was able to obtain the opening to force his way into her room.²⁴ She does demand propriety in courtship, as she advises that if “Li Qiusun” really loved her, he would send a matchmaker to properly propose to her. Her indulgence in this small physical touch nearly ruins her reputation, but as nothing had truly come from it, Rouge does not seem concerned with whether her chastity is still intact. She acknowledges that if she “raise[d] the alarm,” then “both of [them would] be ruined.”²⁵ An unmarried man and woman is cause for others to question their reputation, which would include Rouge’s chastity, but for herself, the boundaries of her body have not been breached. She also remains firm in what boundaries she is willing to cross, as she rejects Su Jie’s continued advances to meet her again in secret or for a love token. She only relents to protect her space because he would not leave otherwise, and even after she “flatly refused” his request for a love token, he “seized hold of her foot” and pulled off the slipper.²⁶ Any violations to a strict sense of chastity under the law are caused by Su Jie’s impropriety, whereas Rouge is clear on her stance on what should or should not be allowed for her body. Because these violations are the fault of the man, Rouge does not perceive her own chastity as being broken, as she has maintained her practice of asexuality and upheld her own propriety.

²⁴ Minford, 410.

²⁵ Minford, 410.

²⁶ Minford, 411.

Chastity in Social Practice: Bending the Boundaries of the Body

Another one of Li Yu's short stories, "The Female Chen Ping Saves Her Life with Seven Ruses," displays the social practice of chastity during desperate times even more clearly, as the protagonist, Erniang, cleverly prevents the chieftain who kidnaps her from having sex with her. The setting of this story reflects much of "Fengxian lou": it is at the collapse of the Ming dynasty, when bandits rampaged through villages, raping and kidnapping the women who were not brave enough to preserve their chastity through suicide. When Geng Erniang is taken by the bandits, she immediately sizes up the chieftain and begs him to take her in as a maid or a concubine. However, he falls in love with her beauty, and thus he proclaims her as his wife. He is eager to have sex with her, but Erniang was sincere in her promise to her husband to not allow herself to be sullied by the bandits, and she devises a series of ruses to prevent the chieftain from succeeding in his advances. These ruses involve manipulating both her body and the chieftain's body so that he can never consummate their marriage. Through her intelligence and quick thinking, Erniang tricks the chieftain into bringing her back to her village, where she is reunited with her husband with her chastity intact. Her conduct within the story is unconventional, but she illustrates the lengths to which women would go to preserve their chastity.

The story opens with a cursory look on chastity: chastity is one of the core tenets women uphold, and those who sacrifice their lives to ensure their chastity is not broken are among the most admirable of all women. The couplet that begins the story comments that "in peacetime chastity is easy to swear," but "in war it is hard to uphold."²⁷ With pressing external forces that may force a woman to give up either her life or her chastity, many women preserve life over chastity. The narrative then goes on to rank the women by their reactions to the harrowing

²⁷ Patrick Hanan, trans., *Silent Operas* (Research Centre for Translation, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1990), 77.

circumstances of the bandits' threat. Women who commit suicide to keep their vows to their husbands should be held in the highest esteem. Those who were raped by the bandits and later committed suicide out of shame for the act were in the middle category. Women who were not brave enough to face death and thus submitted to the bandits yet felt constant remorse over losing their fidelity to their husbands were at the bottom of the middle category. Finally, the lowest rung of women was those who found pleasure in the attention of the bandits and indulged in the unrestrained sex with their captors.²⁸ This discursive way of looking at chastity reflects the standards by which Lady Shu was held in "Fengxian lou," as Lady Shu wished to commit suicide before the bandits could defile her body. The narrator is satirizing the situation by making light of what is at stake for these women. The ranking of the women are done by martyrdom: which women are willing to sacrifice their lives for the purity of their bodies, whereas which women are more willing to give up their body to save their own lives. It is a matter of the autonomy women should hold over their own bodies versus the moral expectation of chastity placed upon them by men. Yet, the protagonist of this tale is exceptional in that she does not wish to commit suicide when the bandits come, and instead she manages to trick her way out of captivity without having to give up her chastity. She neither gives up her body nor her life. For Erniang, chastity is still something that must be maintained at all costs, but in social practice, it does not always have to come with the price of the woman's life.

Erniang's ruses are devised to stop sex before penetration, as that is the measure for the purity of her chastity. She deploys a creative set of ways to manipulate her body and its functions to prevent the chieftain from having his way, all while maintaining his favor so that he does not discard her. In her first ruse, Erniang dons her stale period rags, lying about being on her period so that the chieftain would refrain from sex with her. She plays on the notion of the female

²⁸ Hanan, *Silent Operas*, 78.

body's pollution from menstruation, citing that "if a woman has sex during her period, she is sure to get ill."²⁹ A woman's body is considered unclean, no matter one's gender and status, and this pollution is especially potent around the female reproductive system. We see this perspective in both religious and non-religious narratives, such as in the Blood Bowl Sutra, or the story of Woman Huang.³⁰ In Ming times, pollution beliefs surrounding childbirth resurfaced, bringing in discussions of "the rhetoric of birth pollution" in tandem with "Ming moral discourse on eros and health."³¹ Erniang rebuffs the chieftain's desire to have sex with her by utilizing these discourses surrounding the pollution of the female body. She warns him that if he "want[s] to have children [with her] some day," then he must hold off a couple of nights so as to not cause her to fall ill while she is menstruating.³² Her deception allows her to retain autonomy over her own body and prevents the chieftain from having his way, but this ruse only protects Erniang's body. To distract him from his unspent desire, she directs him to the "plenty of substitutes available" in the other women he has taken, sacrificing the other women to protect her own chastity.³³ Preserving her chastity involves only the boundaries of her own body, and in trying times such as these, Erniang is unable to extend that protection to the other women around her. The narrator of the story, presumably male, places the blame of rape on the women themselves, so this moment of sacrifice by Erniang of her neighbors' wives can also be understood as an

²⁹ Hanan, *Silent Operas*, 84.

³⁰ Lori Meeks, "Women and Buddhism in East Asian History: The Case of the Blood Bowl Sutra, Part I: China," *Religion Compass* 14, no. 4 (2020): 1-14, <https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rec3.12336>. and Beata Grant, "The Spiritual Saga of Woman Huang: From Pollution to Purification," in *Ritual Opera, Operatic Ritual: "Mu-lien Rescues His Mother" in Chinese Popular Culture*, ed. David Johnson (Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1989), 224-311.

³¹ Furth, 178.

³² Hanan, *Silent Operas*, 84.

³³ Hanan, *Silent Operas*, 84.

extension the narrator's belief that every woman must be prepared to defend her own body, either through suicide or through cleverness like Erniang. Her second ruse similarly manipulates her body to prevent penetration during sex: with the croton-oil beans she purchased before the bandits arrived, she rubs it all over her vagina to cause it to swell. When the chieftain again tries to penetrate her body, he finds that there is "no gate left to enter," as the skin has swollen shut.³⁴ Both of these ploys dissuade the chieftain from consummating sex with her, as penetration would be unhealthy for her in the first scenario and impossible in the second. Her main goal in her deception revolves solely around penetration, since she allows him to "clip, suck, fondle and pinch" the rest of her body "as if unaware of what he was doing."³⁵ Though these acts are sexual in nature as well, they do not break her chastity, as the chieftain never succeeds in penetrating her body.

Erniang also does not limit her ruses to her own body; she inflicts pain and damage on the chieftain's body to further prevent him from being capable of having sex with her. There are only so many excuses she is able to orchestrate around her own body before he may become suspicious of her motives, but it is also likely she intended to punish the chieftain for his lust. When her vagina is closed and he is disappointed in being unable to consummate their "marriage," the chieftain settles for "do[ing] it eunuch-fashion and [rubbing himself] against [her]."³⁶ As she fends him off with the protest that the action is hurting her, she "squeezed his member" with "a kerchief wrapped around her hand" that was smeared with the same oil used on her own body.³⁷ This causes his penis to swell, terrifying the chieftain that this consequence

³⁴ Hanan, *Silent Operas*, 89.

³⁵ Hanan, *Silent Operas*, 90.

³⁶ Hanan, *Silent Operas*, 89.

³⁷ Hanan, *Silent Operas*, 89.

came from him rubbing up against her and causing him to swear off touching her until she has fully recovered from the inflammation. Finally, as they are journeying back to her village under the pretense of finding the money she had buried, Erniang grounds the croton-oil beans into his diet to cause diarrhea extreme enough that he is unable to move without her help. In the same way these ruses have helped her reclaim autonomy over her own body from the chieftain's grasp, she also seizes control over his body. She keeps him alive long enough to endure the questioning of the villagers, so that "his testimony [can be used] in vindicating her own conduct."³⁸ She is aware that her own word is not enough to validate her unbroken chastity, but the confession of the chieftain reveals both her quick wit and her purity.

Her persistence in avoiding sex—her act of asexuality—is a reflection of chastity in social practice, where women make decisions based on their current circumstances to determine the methods she may use to preserve her chastity. To Erniang, preserving her purity is about not allowing penetration to occur during sex, whereas the rest of her body—her skin, her lips, etc—is available to the man, especially as she must continue to please him to ensure his cooperation in her plan. Her autonomy is shown in her decisions to not sacrifice either her body's purity or her life, even if that means giving up parts of her body for his pleasure. Erniang practices asexuality through her clever ruses to abstain from sex and radically redefines what chastity means in an age of crisis.

In this final story, "Xianü" from *Liaozhai zhiyi*, the social practice of chastity is expanded further, where sex without desire may also be considered unbroken chastity for the archetype of the swordswoman. The male protagonist, Gu, is fascinated when a young woman and her mother move in next door, as he finds the young woman beautiful and enchanting, even though she maintains a cold front with him. She often visits Gu's home to help his mother with chores,

³⁸ Hanan, *Silent Operas*, 95.

acting like a filial daughter-in-law to her. In return, Gu brings rice and other necessities to the young woman and her aging mother. Due to his care and kindness towards her mother, the swordswoman feels indebted to Gu and wishes to repay him. So, after her mother dies, in a sudden turn of demeanor, the young woman invites Gu to have sex with her, indulging his infatuation once before warning him that what has happened cannot ever happen again. To satiate his desire, Gu turns to a handsome young man who had stopped by to buy Gu's paintings and who is quite willing to be Gu's sexual partner. Subsequently, in a second invitation to Gu to have sex, the young woman discovers Gu's lover, who she exposes to be a fox after she beheads him. Later, after giving birth to Gu's son, she explains that she is in fact a *xianü*, a swordswoman, who is on a mission to avenge her father's death, leaving behind his young son whom she promises will be successful as she steals away into the night.

Though the swordswoman engages in sex with Gu twice within the story, she remains cordial and distantly polite with him for most of the narrative as a shield against his sexual desire for her. Her coldness is off-putting to many of the characters, and though both Gu and his mother find her to be "as beautiful as a peach blossom," they also notice that she "is [always] silent and never smiles," someone who is "as cold as ice." Thus, they find her to be "a strange person" 爲人不言亦不笑，豔如桃李，而冷如霜雪，奇人也！³⁹ No matter Gu's attempts to draw her attention, the young woman remains indifferent, mostly spending her time helping to care for Gu's mother or doing the chores around the Gu house. With his mother, however, she is the perfect image of a daughter-in-law, always "eagerly do[ing] all the chores inside and outside the house, just like a daughter-in-law in a household" 日嚙至生家，見母作衣履，便代縫紉，

³⁹ Pu, 67.

出入堂中，操作如婦。⁴⁰ Her care towards both her own mother and Gu’s mother, gives an illusion of the young woman as a filial daughter. On the surface, her appearance aligns with gender conventions, but her attitude toward marriage, sex, and the roles of a wife does not.⁴¹ Even though Gu’s mother laments that she may never “find such a good daughter-in-law to serve [her] until [she] die[s],” the young woman is adamant in her refusal to marry Gu 安得新婦如兒，而奉老身以死也！⁴² She may act as a filial daughter-in-law to Gu’s mother, but she does not wish to sexually be available as Gu’s wife. Her routine standoffish manner intimidates Gu, as he finds himself constantly trying not to offend her, and this prevents him from pursuing her improperly. Instead, both of their sexual encounters occur entirely on the young woman’s terms—she is in complete control over her own body and her boundaries. Though she seems “aloof and asexual” with Gu, she initiates the two illicit unions with Gu in order to conceive his child to continue his family line.⁴³ Yet, after these encounters are over, she returns to “coldly reject[ing] Gu’s sexual advances and the marriage proposal tended by his mother.”⁴⁴ Each interaction with Gu is carefully managed, so as to not give him the wrong idea about their relationship. By returning time and again to a cold demeanor, even after they have had sex, the young woman indicates to Gu that their sexual encounters have nothing to do with the desire he feels, but rather come from an obligation the young woman wishes to fulfill.

⁴⁰ Pu, 67.

⁴¹ Roland Altenburger, *The Sword or the Needle: The Female Knight-errant (xia) in Traditional Chinese Narrative* (Peter Lang AG, 2009), 169.

⁴² Pu, 68.

⁴³ Sing-chen Lydia Chiang, *Collecting the Self: Body and Identity in Strange Tale Collections of Late Imperial China* (Brill, 2005), 143.

⁴⁴ Chiang, 143.

Many scholars have examined the relationship between Gu and the young woman, particularly through the lens of understanding how the archetype of the *xianü* plays into what could be understood as a love story from Gu's perspective. Keith McMahon, in discussing remarkable women in *Liaozhai zhiyi*, views the swordswoman's secrecy of her mission as "part of her plot to take advantage of the man," and "her secrecy also provides a context for exploring the conditions of possibility (or impossibility) of the love relationship itself."⁴⁵ He focuses heavily on this idea of the "love relationship" between Gu and the young woman, attributing the secrecy of the woman's mission to be part of how she asserts control over the man, and this is what makes her so "remarkable." Though one might view this young woman as a seductress, sleeping with men only to depart after, we must take note of "her delimiting of when, even *if*, Gu is allowed to have sex with her throughout the tale."⁴⁶ In their book, *Queering Gender, Sexuality, and Becoming Human in Qing Dynasty Zhiguai*, Thomas William Whyke and Melissa Shani Brown offer a new angle to understand the swordswoman's relationship with Gu: asexuality. Like Whyke and Brown, I understand the woman's actions towards Gu to be a defense mechanism against the expectations that men have towards beautiful young women. When she invites Gu to have sex with her, she dons the persona of an alluring woman, "smiling sweetly at Gu" 女忽回首，嬌然而笑.⁴⁷ The drastic shift in her personality, from a stoic persona to the sweet temptation, reads to me as a changing of masks. The young woman knows that Gu would be enticed by a smile, as it would embolden him to pursue her, whereas her continued stone-cold front after the deed is done intimidates him. Her actions are one of necessity, playing into social

⁴⁵ McMahon, "The Remarkable Woman," 217.

⁴⁶ Whyke and Brown, 154.

⁴⁷ Pu, 68.

expectations of a sexual, available young maiden in order to repay her debt to Gu. She informs him after their first encounter that: “What has happened once cannot happen again” 事可一而不可再.⁴⁸ Sex was not for pleasure, and she would not indulge in his desires any more than she had to, which was only because her first attempt at conceiving a child had failed. McMahon calls the swordswoman “the coldest of remarkable women,” as her withdrawal from the man is in defiance of his desire to keep the woman for his own good.⁴⁹ The description of the swordswoman, both in scholarship and in the story, as cold, solemn, and stoic only further affirms my understanding of her actions as practicing asexuality. Due to the pressures of what Angela Chen has coined “compulsory sexuality,” the term “asexual” often implies “a slew of other, negative associations: passionless, uptight, boring, robotic, cold, prude, frigid, lacking, broken.”⁵⁰ The term “compulsory sexuality” is adapted from Adrienne Rich’s notion of “compulsory heterosexuality,”⁵¹ and it refers to “a set of assumptions and behaviors that support the idea that every normal person is sexual” and thus deviating from this assumed social norm marks one as queer or unnatural.⁵² The readings of the swordswoman as cold in the story speaks to a worldview of compulsory sexuality, where her aversion towards reacting positively to Gu’s desire might seem unnatural, or strange—just as Gu’s mother calls her a *qiren* 奇人. By reframing Gu and the young woman’s relationship as something other than a love relationship,

⁴⁸ Pu, 68.

⁴⁹ McMahon, “The Remarkable Woman,” 217.

⁵⁰ Angela Chen, *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* (Penguin Random House, 2020), 47.

⁵¹ Adrienne Rich’s concept of “compulsory heterosexuality” is the social expectation that everyone is assumed to be heterosexual by default. Adrienne Cecile Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980),” *Journal of Women’s History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 11-48.

⁵² A. Chen, 45.

we are able to discover the possibility of the swordswoman's commitment to practicing asexuality, even as she upholds other social norms such as being a filial daughter and daughter-in-law.

In contrast, the young man who becomes Gu's lover acts as a foil to the swordswoman's asexuality. Though Gu is attracted to the young woman from the beginning and is curious about her origins, he is also drawn to the young man who stops by to peruse his paintings. Having no luck pursuing the young woman next door, he turns to this young man, who responds eagerly to Gu's affections. Eventually, "they developed a secret affair" and from then on "became very close" 稍稍稔熟，漸以嘲謔，生狎抱之亦不甚拒，遂私焉。由此往來昵甚。⁵³ To satisfy his unspent desire, Gu "transfers his libido onto a 'pleasure-body,' who stands for unrestrained erotic pleasure outside the functional context of reproduction."⁵⁴ As the young man is male, their sexual relationship is entirely derived from pleasure and cannot be mistaken for anything else. However, the young man is also a fox-spirit, and thus as a supernatural creature, he stands for more than simply sex between males; he represents "unrestrained libidinous desire that knows no cultural boundaries."⁵⁵ His death also has a lot of sexual connotation attached to it: the swordswoman unsheathes her blade as he mocks her chastity, an act of defense meant both to defend her own chastity and Gu's health. This confrontation occurs because the young woman had approached Gu for a second liaison, but the fox-spirit arrives as he wishes to "watch the chaste woman," implying that she has broken her chastity due to having illicit sex with Gu

⁵³ Pu, 67.

⁵⁴ Altenburger, 168.

⁵⁵ Chiang, 147.

我來觀貞潔人耳。⁵⁶ The young woman takes offense to this statement, “flushing red” and without saying a word, draws her sword on him 女眉豎頰紅，默不一語，急翻上衣，露一革囊，應手而出，而尺許晶瑩匕首也。⁵⁷ The sword is often a euphemism for the phallus, so her “gesture of producing the dagger resembles one of undressing.”⁵⁸ Rather than undressing to expose the female body, she reveals a masculine sexual weapon. This moment is thus charged with sexual connotation, from her intention to have sex with Gu to the sword as a phallic instrument. Upon killing the fox-spirit, the woman informs Gu that the mood has been spoiled, and she will return the next night to have sex with him. If the woman were to have gone through with coitus after the sexually charged encounter with the pleasure boy, her relationship with Gu in that moment would have been tainted by the accusations against her chastity. The swordswoman does not view sex with Gu as a breach of her chastity, even though penetration occurs. Instead, because she feels duty bound to provide Gu with an heir, she remains “sexually agential” with the sole intent of reproduction.⁵⁹ Her lack of desire and sense of duty strips coitus of its debasing element, turning it into a tool by means of which she fulfills her debt.

Though the sword serves as a phallic and masculine symbol, the archetype of the *xianü* remains feminine, just as the swordswoman does not deviate from other norms of womanhood. *Xianü* stories were popularized in the Tang and had a resurgence in the Ming, before continuing to gain momentum in the Qing. Just as the chastity cult emerged in the late Ming dynasty, stories of *xianü* who exhibited a different sort of chastity gained prominence at that time. In these

⁵⁶ Pu, 68.

⁵⁷ Pu, 68.

⁵⁸ Altenburger, 169-170.

⁵⁹ Whyke and Brown, 155.

stories, when a *xianü*'s chastity is threatened, she "defends herself with a knife, wounding the man," whereas "Neo-Confucian moral standards established for the elite [would have] expected [her] to turn the weapon against herself and commit suicide out of shame about the dishonor suffered."⁶⁰ The sword again makes an appearance as a display of defense towards one's honor, but the *xianü* remains loyal to feminine virtues. Likewise, the swordswoman defends her honor by killing the fox-spirit when he questions her chastity. Despite their swordcraft, "they remain emphatically not only female but feminine."⁶¹ We see this in "Xianü," with the young woman acting as a perfect daughter-in-law to Gu's mother by cleaning and helping with the sewing. Additionally, she acts as a pseudo-wife to Gu by providing him an heir. When he pushes for marriage, the young woman points out that she has "already shared a bed with [him] and done chores such as fetching water and cooking," thus they have "already become husband and wife" and do not need to bother with marriage 枕席焉，提汲焉，非婦伊何也？業夫婦矣，何必複言嫁娶乎？⁶² So while she refuses to formally marry him, she believes that she has done everything a wife should do. This includes her willingness to engage in sex with him twice for the purpose of reproduction. The child, however, does not tie the woman to motherhood due to her self-identity as a *xianü*. The child's function as repayment becomes "symbolic of her agency: his begetting was entirely her decision, not happenstance."⁶³ Thus, she does not have to follow previous tropes of *xianü* stories where the swordswoman kills the child before departing to sever all ties she has with both the man and motherhood. Instead, the young woman gifts the child to

⁶⁰ Altenburger, 144.

⁶¹ Whyke and Brown, 153.

⁶² Pu, 68.

⁶³ Altenburger 158.

Gu, absolving herself of all responsibilities as a wife and mother once she has completed her mission of avenging her father.

Though the swordswoman engages in sexual intercourse twice within the story, the entire purpose is to provide an heir to Gu as repayment for her debt. When framed in the language of reciprocity (*bao* 報), coitus becomes something the swordswoman feels she must do to complete this mutual exchange. In the eyes of the law, the swordswoman would be considered to have her chastity broken, but in the story, the swordswoman is unconcerned with her purity. She had been angry at the fox-spirit's mocking of her chastity, but I read that moment as more taking offense than being embarrassed at being caught. The swordswoman's practice of asexuality lies in her aloofness towards sex, viewing it as more of a transaction than something pleasurable. The same is applied to her chastity: as sex is not something to be guiltily enjoyed, her purity has thus remained unbroken, and her resolve towards her mission remains her first priority. It is here we witness chastity as a moral expectation of women set aside for the personal agentic choices of a woman in regards to her own body.

These five stories explore the range of chastity in literature, from the prescriptive level of chastity under the law to the practical level of women's social practice during difficult situations. Within each of these stories, the women's acts of asexuality allow them to maintain autonomy over their sexual bodies, either through maintaining their chastity or by reshaping the boundaries of their bodies to fit their circumstances. Unlike the medical discourse surrounding the supernatural women in Chapter 2, these stories focus entirely on the women's bodies and their health, virtue, and propriety. In some narratives, such as at times of conflicts, these human women are the victims of violence and under the threat of rape. Practicing asexuality through abstinence was an act of resistance and is the personal choices these women made that are

outside the control of the men. Chastity and propriety, originally standards constructed by men, became tools women wielded to protect themselves.

Conclusion

Fiction reflects social practice, emulating and exaggerating circumstances that the authors explore. The fact that we see nine cases in this thesis of the different ways in which women are imagined to be resisting the sexual narrative of being desired, lusted after, and conquered by men—as well as the countless other stories I have not looked into—means that we can infer a social practice of women abstaining from sex for various reasons large enough to be noticed and written about by men. I opened this thesis with Sommer’s framework of “transing gender” as the method for understanding asexuality as a practice, not an identity. Similarly, I would like to turn to Sommer’s epilogue of his book, *The Fox Spirit, the Stone Maiden, and Other Transgender Histories from Late Imperial China*, to place my research of women’s practices within late imperial Chinese literature in a broader context of actual social practice performed by late imperial women. Sommer’s book on transgender histories in late imperial China only offers up the select few cases he was able to find in the Qing court records, but the fact that we are able to “‘see’ trans people in late imperial China, despite every limitation and absence/erasure, invites us to imagine the many more lives that we *cannot* see.”¹ Likewise, we may understand the woman’s place in late imperial China as contingent on the men around her, as per the Thrice Following. Her social role hinged on her ability to reproduce children for her husband’s family line. However, that there is a body of literature that represents women abstaining from sex—for religious causes, for medical concerns, or to uphold chastity and beyond—speaks to a wider, hidden presence of women who may have defied social norms but went unrecorded.

The “cult of chastity” was well documented due to the valor and monetary rewards that chaste women received upon committing suicide or other drastic forms of resistance against rape or remarriage. Their recognition in abstinence involved great sacrifice and success in remaining

¹ Sommer, *The Fox Spirit*, 248.

pure. In the stories I have analyzed, none of the women successfully choose suicide, yet all are lauded in their own ways in the narrative for their virtue and conduct. Fiction has given voice to those who may not be recognized: women who resisted marriage, sex, and the duties of a wife to pursue their own freedom. Under the banner of religion, older widows and young women alike flocked to become nuns to preserve their chastity or take on vows of celibacy. Records such as those in the *Lives of the Nuns* (*Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳) detail how many women found solace in the convent as means to escape from the sexual duties and expectations of their social roles as wives, mothers, and daughters.² In the rural regions of Guangdong, there is documented practice of marriage resistance, from the early nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. These women would refuse to marry, forming sisterhoods and communities where these unmarried women would not need to rely on the labor and support of men.³ All of these practices point to a larger, unspoken possibility of women who rejected the social norms of marriage, sex, and family.

However, not all lack of desire towards men means asexuality. I would like to return to Simone Chess's framework of considering asexuality within early modern English literature. Chess mentions that when Adonis expresses no desire for Venus, this lack of desire is either categorized as presexuality or homosexuality. Chess then moves away from this dichotomy, offering asexuality as a third option to be considered. In this thesis, I have offered readings on these nine stories through this third option of asexuality, but a lack of desire towards men can also point towards lesbian love. In searching for asexuality within these stories, I have mostly

² Kathryn Ann Tsai, trans., *Lives of the Nuns: Biographies of Chinese Buddhist Nuns from the Fourth to Sixth Centuries* (University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

³ Marjorie Topley, "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung," in *Cantonese Society in Hong Kong and Singapore*, ed. Jean DeBernardi (Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 423-448, <https://doi.org/10.5790/hongkong/9789888028146.003.0017>.

looked at heterosexual relationships, without considering what asexuality might look like with homosexual relationships instead. In stories such as “Chang’e” or “Lotus Fragrance,” female relationships are prominent and heavily implied to be sexual or romantic. Diandang serves as Chang’e’s sexual foil, and her temptation of Chang’e’s desire may imply her own desire towards the goddess. Lotus Fragrance and Li’s relationship may have started off tenuously, but by the end of the story, the two of them are very fond of each other, and together with Sang, the three characters seemed to be in an interchangeable romantic relationship with one another. In fact, a love triangle of three equal parties consisting of a man and two women who are all attracted to one another is “a common structure in many late-imperial genres,” and it is prominent across many tales in *Liaozhai zhiyi*.⁴ Though depictions of female same-sex love in late imperial Chinese literature are scarce, H. Laura Wu suggests that perhaps it is the fault of our research methodologies that limit our search for female same-sex love within popular, well-studied literature. If we were to delve deeper into understudied or overlooked works of fiction, perhaps then we would be able to discover “that the representation of lesbianism in literature is not as meager as current studies suggest.”⁵ We can infer that with this deeper dive into understudied works of fiction in the late imperial period, we may also find more representation of asexuality.

Additionally, I have explored the different facets of asexuality practices through celibacy, asceticism, chastity, and propriety. Through my exploration of these nine stories, I have maintained that these are practices of asexuality, not asexual identity. However, within these stories, it is possible to explore a couple of the characters as asexual. Yue Zhong and Coral both exhibit a lack of sexual desire and attraction due to their enlightened states of mind. Though they

⁴ Tze-lan D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 49-50.

⁵ H. Laura Wu, “Through the Prism of Male Writing: Representation of Lesbian Love in Ming-Qing Literature,” *NAN NU -- Men, Women & Gender in Early & Imperial China* 4, no. 1 (2002): 6.

are religiously driven, their lack of desire is so effortless it does not need to be cultivated as in the cases of other ascetics. Thus, they seem to completely lack sexual attraction or desire, aligning similarly with asexuality as an identity. Likewise, the swordswoman in “Xianü” exhibits no desire or attraction towards Gu. As explored in the analysis in Chapter 3, her coldness matches the traits that others constantly attribute towards asexual people. Desire remains completely detached from these stories. By expanding to look at social practice beyond the literature, I hope that there might one day be more scholarship considering the actions and practices of women who may have chosen for whatever reason to abstain from sex or who seemed to lack sexual desire. Not unlike the research and scholarship that Day Wong and others have done on asexuals in modern China today, there may be a possibility to explore and discover asexuals in late imperial China.

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