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RESEARCH NOTE

Is Ren Gui Really Filial?

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Feng Menglong's story "Ren the Filial Son with a Fiery Disposition becomes a God," rather than illustrating the divinization of a truly filial son, points up the hypocrisy of shallow filiality in a man more concerned with his reputation for manliness in the eyes of the crowd.

KEYWORDS Filiality, Fiction, Public opinion, Diety, Feng Menglong, Morality, Adultery, Family, Analects

The title of the story "Ren [Gui] the Filial Son with a Fiery Disposition becomes a God" 任孝子烈性為神 in Feng Menglong's *Stories Old and New* labels Ren Gui both filial and fiery, raising the question of which characteristic made him a god. In answering the question, I rely on Robert Hegel's finding that late imperial people learnt to read "slowly and deliberately, rather than quickly to catch the gist of an extended passage. This habit of formal reading undoubtedly shaped the reading that China's fiction commentators expected of other readers" (Hegel, 1998: 298). We might expect to find the filial husband and wicked wife sharply contrasted, and indeed Liang Shengjin unfilially "never stopped secretly blaming her parents" (YY, 670) for marrying her off. But her complaint that her parents (like Ren Gui's) "had no eyes" 我的父母沒眼睛 (GJXS, 575) invites the reader to compare the couple, instead of contrasting them. Shengjin is unquestionably wicked, and her family travesties proper relations by acquiescing in the adulterer Zhou De's quasi-son-in-law status as soon as Ren Gui returns Shengjin to her natal home: her parents accept seats of honor at the feast he provides, give up their bedroom to the adulterous couple, and even help Zhou De escape when Ren Gui shows up. They are improper, but at least they eat together, and talk together. By contrast, when Ren Gui's father-in-law offers him breakfast he does not even answer (YY, 678), showing the shallowness of his filial habits. In fact, his betrayal of his father goes much further, providing a way for Feng Menglong to critique hypocritical filiality and contrast it with the improper desire for the approbation of the crowd.

Was Ren Gui filial? The fiction and events of the Ming and Qing present many examples of heroic filiality (Lu, 2008: ch. 5). Ren measures up to none of them. He does not undertake a ten-thousand-mile journey to find his parents and bring them home. He does not cut part of his own flesh to make a medicine; there is no sense that (unlike Princess Miaoshan) he has even tried this, to cure his father's blindness. The wife's repeated references to her lover as her "heart and liver" 心肝 (GJXS, 573) and the verse referring to his fierce disposition as "liver and gall" 肝腸烈 (GJXS, 583) remind the reader of these filial practices. Ren Gui does not do any of the other kinds of deeds of the well-known twenty-four exemplars of filial piety, like allowing mosquitoes to bite him, lying on the ice to catch fish, or tasting his father's feces to gauge his illness. He does not spend three years by the tomb in white clothes, tasting no meat or wine, and calling forth auspicious mushrooms and birds by his sincerity. Perhaps we should not expect such dramatic, heroic filiality from a shop manager. Perhaps his filiality is more mundane, more appropriate to a petit bourgeois, lying precisely in the arduous workaday world of making a living.

The story opens, not with Ren Gui's own family (his blind father and his wife), but with that of his employer, Squire Zhang. It is with this family, parents and child, that Ren Gui spends nearly all of his waking hours, managing the shop. Until the disturbing events of the story, Ren Gui honors the letter of the injunction: "While your parents are alive, you should not travel far, and when you do travel you must keep to a fixed itinerary" (*Analects*, 4.19), but not its spirit, for he is never at home spending time with his father. Nevertheless, it is true that Ren spends every day working to support his father (and then his wife), so perhaps his filiality lies in this, in his feeding his father. But he is less than perfect here. First, it is not he, but his wife at home that feeds his father; and Feng Menglong emphasizes this by making her failure to feed him one meal the trigger for his telling his son about Zhou De's visits. Second, when he has returned his wife to her parents, he has apparently made no provision for his father's meals, nor do they cross his mind when he cannot get home that night. Third, once consumed by his desire for revenge, he completely abandons his duty to feed his father, handing it off to his sister; and even this seems unplanned: he has already left the old man alone for two days and a night and is wandering aimlessly when he happens upon his sister's place and bethinks himself that she could take him in. (Tina Lu points out that filiality stories are about only children because filial duty cannot be off-loaded (Lu., 2008: 152); but Ren Gui passes his duty to his sister.)

But suppose we set aside these aberrations and commend Ren Gui for supporting his blind father all these years by working all day long. Is this filial? Not impressively so. Ren Gui and Shengjin's both likening the father to "a beast" (YY, 676) remind us of the saying, "Nowadays people consider themselves filial just for feeding their parents. But even dogs and horses are fed! If you are not attentive (or reverent) 不敬, what's the difference?" (*Analects*, 2.7). Is Ren Gui attentive? The story explains: "Ren Gui was greatly filial: every day he took leave of his father and went out; only at night did he return home and inquire after [visit?] his father: such was his way of filiality" 任圭大孝, 每日辭父出, 到晚纔[才]歸參父, 如此孝道 (GJXS, 571). The

minimal nature of this filiality is somewhat hidden by the Yang and Yang translation: “Every day, Ren Gui the filial son said goodbye to his father before he left home and greeted him when returning at night” (YY, 669). In the absence of other information, carefully taking leave each morning and inquiring each night, which the story repeatedly shows Ren doing, could be construed as “respect” or even “attentiveness.” But in fact this description points to the fundamental problem of the story: Ren Gui’s parsimony with words and more precisely with the affection words can convey. I would read the phrase 如此孝道 (omitted by Yang and Yang) as “*That’s how he was filial [and nothing more!]*”

It is very clear that when Ren Gui greets his father at night he does no more than greet him. On the day when Shengjin spends so much time upstairs with Zhou De that the blind father gets hungry and suspicious, Ren Gui’s father has to hold him after his filial greeting by saying, “My son, don’t go upstairs right away. I have something to ask you about” (YY, 673), literally 一句話 要問你 “I have one sentence I want to ask you” (GJXS, 574). The father excuses himself for forgetting to mention anything months earlier, on the grounds that “you leave home early and return late” (YY, 673): apparently their conversation consists of absolutely nothing more than that “filial” leave-taking and evening inquiry. Even now, Ren Gui does not answer, but storms upstairs, where he immediately says the one sentence that seems to come naturally to his lips: “Has father eaten?” 父親 喫飯了未 (GJXS, 575).

The pro forma nature of this question — presumably the one he puts to his father each evening — is revealed on the day Liang Shengjin injures herself with a cat. (This cat, by the way, released from Shengjin’s clothes and body only after she has borne terrible pain, is the closest Ren Gui comes to having a child, although Mencius (4a26) says that having no offspring is the most unfilial action.) The story tells us that she did not prepare supper that day, but that when Ren Gui came home he greeted his father and then went on in (YY, 675). Ren must have asked “Have you eaten?” but, since his father had *not* eaten, he must have given him no chance to answer, and no chance to report anything wrong, although he had surely heard his daughter-in-law carrying on like a mad thing all afternoon. The long and short of it is that Ren Gui’s way of filiality, his taking leave and asking after, were not even “attentive” enough to yield basic information about his father’s well-being, let alone to express sincere concern and respect. As Confucius says, “It is the demeanor that is difficult. If there is a task, the young ones of course should shoulder the burden; and there are food and wine, elders of course eat first. It that all there is to filial piety?” (*Analects*, 2.8).

In addition to the normal, sincere affection and attentiveness that should be expressed in saying more to one’s father every day than “Bye for now” and “Have you eaten?,” without even waiting for an answer, Ren Gui also fails in a particular instance in which he should have spoken at more length. When Shengjin accuses the father of molesting her, Ren Gui does not “gently remonstrate” with his father (*Analects*, 4.18); he just says, “From this day on I will not so much as look at that old beast!” (YY, 676). Far from “withdrawing his mind from the love of beauty” and

“in serving his parents devoting his utmost strength” (*Analects*, 1.7), he is so blinded by Shengjin’s charms that, as soon as she accuses his father, “Filial son though Ren Gui was, when he heard the trumped-up story, a smoldering rage burned through his heart.” Far from remonstrating gently, Ren Gui does not even check the facts, and does not speak to his father again until after he has happened to hear the truth from strangers. To his wife’s accusation he even adds of his own accord that his father was lying about the questionable visits of Zhou De. Feng Menglong comments: “How can a filial son not know his father’s character? How wrong Ren Gui is! He should have known better!” (YY, 676). Feng’s commentary has been set up by the whole layout of the story from the beginning. I am not arguing that Feng does not support filiality: quite the contrary. The aim of the story is to point to the failings of contemporary “filiality,” to illustrate the truth of Confucius’ words: “Nowadays people consider themselves filial just for feeding their parents. But even dogs and horses are fed! If you are not attentive 不敬, what’s the difference?” (*Analects*, 2.7).

Ren Gui’s wordlessness affects more than his father. He does not talk to his wife, either. Nor does Mr Ren senior talk to Shengjin. The father talks, indeed, all day long: meaningless talk, intoning the Buddha’s name. (No wonder his son did not really understand filiality.) But his only interactions with his daughter-in-law are about his meals. Zhou De is a welcome contrast. Certainly not an admirable character, he is inconstant even in adultery, alternately visiting and neglecting Liang Shengjin. But when he does come, it is not just her physical lust that assures him forgiveness, but her longing for talk. When Zhou turns up, Liang immediately says, “Let’s go upstairs for a chat” (YY, 671) — a cover story with truth in it. Excusing his presence to her father-in-law with falsehoods, she focuses the reader’s attention on Zhou’s talkativeness by describing him as “so simple-minded he never has much to say” (YY, 672) 話也不會說 (GJXS, 573). In fact, upstairs, they indulge in an excess of talk as well as sex, and he swears a wordy vow never to desert her. By contrast, when her husband comes home that night, “he asked after his father and went upstairs. Husband and wife had no talk, slept till the day broke” (GJXS, 573).

Not only does the story contrast Ren Gui’s parsimony with words and affection and Zhou De’s profligacy, but talk is, in fact, what the story is about, supplemented with that other mouth action, eating. (The adulterers are as greedy for food as for sex and words, and their early-morning desire for sesame cakes after a late-night feast is what opens the door to their murder (YY, 681)). As the verses tell us: “The mouth leads to disasters/ the tongue is the sword that kills./ Shut your mouth and hide your tongue,/ And live in peace wherever you are” (YY, 674). “Remember that words are hooks and lines/ That draw up nothing but trouble” (YY, 679). In particular, Ren Gui’s inability to communicate with his father is contrasted with an excessive concern about what other people are saying. It is the fear of talk in Shengjin’s neighborhood that makes the marriage in the first place; her parents could not risk marrying in a son-in-law, since all the neighbors knew about her pre-marital affair (YY, 670). When Ren Gui finally challenges his wife, she demands, “Who’s been tongue-wagging?” But this is not just a general concern in the story, it is specifically what motivates Ren Gui and stimulates his fiery nature.

Filiality is about a very specific personal relationship. But it is not this relation that prods Ren Gui to action. Rather, his chief concern is with his image in the eyes of the crowd — people who do not even know him personally. When Shengjin accuses his father, his first response is “Don’t be so loud! If the neighbors hear this, we won’t look too good” (YY, 676). (In fact, his neighborhood is in any case almost deserted, we have been told (YY, 672), even though “Virtue is never solitary; it always has neighbors” (*Analects*, 4.25).) It is the gossip of anonymous strangers and their judgment that he is not a “real man” (hao Han 好漢) that lashes him into such a fury that he abandons his usual fixed itinerary, buying a knife and wandering the streets aimlessly. This point is even clearer in the original than in the Yang and Yang translation, where the phrase “hao Han” is translated in different ways instead of just repeated: “That man is no hero, all right,” mock the crowd before the gate (YY, 679; GJXS, 580) and “What a man!” exclaim the neighbors Ren calls in to witness his violence (YY, 683; GJXS, 581), having decided that fleeing the scene would hardly be “heroic” (hao Han) (YY, 682; GJXS, 582). Once he is imprisoned, his morning and evening meals 早晚飯食 (GJXS, 584) are provided (just as he provided them to his father) because he “won general respect for his character” (YY, 684), literally “the crowd saw him as a real man” (眾人見他是個好男子) (GJXS, 584), and the official and officer in charge agreed that he was a “a man of real character” (YY, 684) or literally “a real man with a fiery disposition” 烈性好漢 (GJXS, 584). His supposed filiality does not even enter into it. This approbation is bought at the cost of giving his father the grief of having lost a child — far from the ideal of giving parents nothing to worry about except illness (*Analects*, 2.6).

Although the truly good man “cleaves to virtue in even in times of urgency or distress” (*Analects*, 4.5), Ren Gui, spurred by the contempt of the crowd, departs from virtue without a backward glance, anxious to prove himself a real man. Far from obeying parents and superiors as a filial son will naturally do (*Analects*, 1.2), Ren Gui ignores his father’s admonitions to take matters slowly (YY, 673) and to throw the wife out without worrying about vengeance (YY, 680); and ignores his father-like employer Squire Zhang’s counsel to avoid killing or at least to decide nothing in the heat of that night’s anger (YY, 681). Instead, he decides to “stir up confusion” (*Analects*, 1.2), and all for the good opinion of strangers. He certainly is not one who is indifferent to the opinion of others, pursuing good for its own sake, and able to judge others’ characters accurately (*Analects*, 1.16).

And it is ultimately his relations with these strangers that make him a god. The urban crowd are impressed, first by the five murders, then by his care not to get them involved in the crime, then by his willing his death, and then by his making people sick and possessing a boy to demand sacrifices. His anger is righteous, and the massacre has divine approval, sealed by his report to the local god and sacrifice of a divinatory cock. But it is the crowd’s talk that drives him to act. The problem posed by the title of the story’s labeling Ren Gui with two attributes is solved: although he claims that the Jade Emperor thinks him filial, that is very clearly *not* what makes him a god. It is, rather, his fierce if morally justified violence, and his blackmailing

and quid-pro-quo relations with the strangers whose good opinion of him means more to him than does his own father.

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