

Reading for the Moral: Exemplarity and the Confucian Moral Imagination in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Short Fiction. By Maria Franca Sibau. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2018. Pp. xii + 231. \$85.00.

Maria Sibau's *Reading for the Moral: Exemplarity and the Confucian Moral Imagination in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Short Fiction* takes a unique approach to fiction of the late Ming. She diverges from recent scholars' fascination with "subversion rather than order, with transgression rather than conformity" (p. 2), instead focusing on the fiction of moral exemplars. Instead of disinterest or even disdain for so-called conventional morality, she calls for a careful analysis, and she does so in a convincing and compelling way. Her two main sources—though in her erudition she brings in many more—are *Exemplary Words for the World* (*Xingshi yan* 醒世言, 1632) and *Bell in the Still Night* (*Qingye zhong* 清夜鐘, c. 1645). These are works that Patrick Hanan once labelled as the "fiction of moral duty," perhaps unintentionally dampening further interest, especially given the immediate cultural-historical background of him and other scholars who came of age in the radical years of the last century.

Exemplary Words for the World and *Bell in the Still Night* are both attributed to the Lu brothers, that is, Lu Renlong 陸人龍 (fl. first half of seventeenth century) and Lu Yunlong 陸雲龍 (1587–1666; though attribution is less certain in the case of *Bell in the Still Night*), both prominent in commercial publishing in the late Ming. Morality functions as an "organizing principle" in *Exemplary Words*—as it does in Sibau's study itself, with most of the chapters dealing with one of the Five Cardinal Relationships, father and son, ruler and subject, husband and wife, elder and younger brothers, and friends. Both texts highlight positive moral examples that appear in a world of moral failure and dilemma. What Sibau does is to prove "the complexity and range often occluded by the term 'didactic'" (p. 48). She does so by her lucid analysis of stories, but also by framing them in the context of late Ming literary and intellectual history, concluding that these works can be read as "traditionalist reaction[s]" against the radicalist thought of Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602) and others, as well as against some of the "daring" (p. 20) stories of earlier writers such as Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646). Sibau's stories feature scenarios in which virtue can be "its own reward" (p. 24), though not in a pat or pompously presented way.

The filial quest story is an example, a motif that was particularly popular in the late Ming and which, along with presenting it, Sibau also places in its historical context, noting how Ming thought to begin with redefined filial piety as being based on *qing* 情. A father disappears and a son later goes on a long journey to find him. Lu Renlong takes a story already told in previous story collections, but in his typical way expands upon it by delving into the motivations of the father who abandons his family

because of heavy corvée obligations. His journey becomes the focus rather than the son's. And as vernacular stories tend to do, *Exemplary Words* scrutinizes the father's character, explicitly problematizing it. In other words, the author distances himself from the textbook version of filial piety, in which parental authority is above scrutiny. The contingencies of *qing* are all-important. Other stories appeal to the late Ming taste for extremes, as exemplified in the case of female filiality, which inevitably focuses on the sacrifice of the woman's own body. A man can swap his wife to save his mother, but a woman can only sacrifice her own flesh. Sibau provides an in-depth account of the practice of "flesh slicing" (*gegu* 割股) in which a filial child cuts a piece of his or her own flesh to make a broth to heal an ailing parent. Taking the body as the "central locus of filial piety," she in turn calls *gegu* the "supreme manifestation" of this virtue (p. 71). But again in characteristic fashion, in its focus on exemplary acts Lu Renlong's story provides an explicit rendition of the act, even going further and introducing a comic interlude in which a neighbour intrudes on a woman in the act of flesh slicing and observes to herself how her own son would never reward her with such an act.

Along with the layered presentation of filial piety, these stories also carry an "ambivalent attitude toward the judicial system" (p. 81). As Sibau observes in her consistent and reliable reference to other fiction of the period, this is in contrast to Feng Menglong's stories of earlier decades of the late Ming. A story of brotherhood dramatizes the tensions between hierarchic bonds and the horizontal ties. In short, the dramatization of exemplarity does not mean straight-laced narrative. Moreover, the stories still pay homage to the *huaben*'s 話本 fondness of lurid detail. A tale of moral exemplarity still includes a lengthy episode about a widow becoming a woman "of easy virtue," here as elsewhere the Ming author betraying a deep interest in "analyzing motives" (pp. 112–13). I find particularly interesting Sibau's discussion of stories in which exemplarity has to deal with the absence of exemplarity in the normal objects of devotion and reverence. In the absence of a worthy family member to honour, the virtues of chastity and filial piety become "absolutized and decoupled from their object" (p. 117). We already saw such on a smaller, less centrally dramatized scale in *Jin Ping Mei*'s Han Aijie 韓愛姐, whose widow chastity was resolute and convincing, but it was for the worthless scoundrel Chen Jingji 陳敬濟. The stories analysed in this book dare to face such situations.

The stories in *Bell in the Still Night* are like no others in the more famous collections by Feng Menglong and Ling Mengchu 凌濛初 (1580–1644). They belong to the briefly passing but remarkable genre of fiction about recent historical events that appeared in the late Ming (called *shishi xiaoshuo* 時事小說), including a set of novels about the eunuch Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢 (1568–1627), one of which is attributed to Lu Yunlong. One such story in the collection deals with the desecration by

the Manchus of the Ming imperial tombs; another is about a strange episode of a contender to the Ming throne. Of particular interest is the first story in *Bell in the Still Night*, which is about a loyal minister of the Chongzhen 崇禎 period (1627–1644) who commits suicide at the fall of the dynasty. The author was clearly rocked by the desperate situation of the Ming collapse, which he puts into the form of an account in which the hero and his wife become, as Sibau writes, “stylized figures” possessed of “exemplary impulse,” but who stand amidst the “chaos of historical reality” (p. 102). The hero is the lone figure who sees what is happening, as the rest stand in festive dress getting ready to welcome the invaders. In contrast to more conventional stories, there is no clear villain except in the form of the generalized ineffectiveness of the collective whole of others. The loyalist hero is clear about what must be done, but no one can hear him. It is as if the ritual act of suicide is the only refuge from the chaos of the Ming collapse.

One of the most important observations Sibau makes is to contrast *Exemplary Words* and *Bell in the Still Night* with didactic novels that take the functions of karmic retribution and map them into the workings of the plot. The stories about the Five Cardinal Relationships cast an ambiguous light on the principle of *bao* 報, standing somewhere between the Mencian notion of “virtue as its own reward” (p. 160) and the logic of retribution. The stories portray characters put to extreme tests with no prospect of reward other than “the *aesthetic* celebration of their virtuous deeds” (p. 24, original emphasis). Sibau argues that this is a new direction in vernacular fiction. *Exemplary Words* and *Bell in the Still Night* repeatedly show the Five Cardinal virtues involved in untidy circumstances and untoward tensions. Yet in spite of the messiness and imperfection of such all-too-human situations, the stories consistently “show a firm faith in the power of *exemplarity*” (p. 161, original emphasis).

Reading for the Moral also includes an appendix on texts, editions, and authorship. Readers should note the 1987 rediscovery in Korea by Chan Hing-ho 陳慶浩 of an edition of *Exemplary Words*, which Chan dates to 1632. Modern scholars had placed this collection with later ones published during the Ming-Qing transition, but in fact it comes at roughly the same time as Feng Menglong and Ling Mengchu’s collections. Consisting of forty stories, it is comparable in size to Feng and Ling’s works, yet it fell into oblivion soon after the fall of the Ming, though many of its stories appeared in other anthologies. Sibau’s study fills an important gap, many of which still exist and await further attempts to weave a larger picture of the history of the fictional narrative of this period.

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