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## Yingying's Vow

### The Evolution of Female Chastity in the Stories of Feng Menglong

*Jackson Keys*

Romantic fiction of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) often contains a scene that reads as such: Two lovers, usually a young scholar and a beautiful young woman, cast their fate towards heaven as they decide to make vows of devotion, promising each other that they will marry none but the other. This couple will then go through challenges and setbacks, and although it seems there is no possible way for them to be together, their devotion to one another allows them to ultimately overcome all obstacles and live happily together. This structure, with roots dating back to the Tang (618–907) *chuanqi* 傳奇 (classical language tales), is found in countless vernacular fiction stories written by the prominent late Ming writer Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646). Despite Feng's own assertion that vernacular short stories can be more educationally and morally powerful than even the *Analects* (Yang and Yang 2005, xiv), many of these romance stories include positive depictions of female characters who have sex before they are married—which should therefore make them void of the virtue of female chastity so prominent during the Ming.

Feng Menglong's stories often contain seemingly contradictory messages about the role of women in society. Some of Feng's stories include editor's comments where he praises a female character on account of her devotion to chastity, but other stories either allow characters to fornicate without punishment or will criticize a female character for being too strict about her chastity observance (Yang 1998, 73). In trying to understand the role of female chastity within Feng's work, one of his stories, titled "Zhang Hao Meets Li Yingying at Lingering Fragrance Pavilion" 宿香亭張浩遇鶯鶯,

is helpful—particularly because it is a retelling of the Tang classical story, *The Story of Yingying* 鶯鶯傳 and Western Chamber dramas. *The Story of Yingying* mentions a vow made between lovers but does so to depict the negative results of excessive desire. Retellings of *The Story of Yingying*, particularly the dramas of the Western Chamber tradition, generally depict Yingying positively and find ways to condone her romantic relationship—a trend that has been studied extensively by scholars, such as Lorainne Dong. Feng’s “Lingering Fragrance Pavilion” builds off these centuries of tradition but deviates from any other Yingying story in significant ways.

Perhaps due to the fact that Feng’s retelling is vernacular fiction rather than drama, it has received little scholarly attention besides mention of its scholar-beauty story structure as well as vernacular stories’ connection to earlier *chuanqi*. I argue that a closer examination of this retelling is useful for two reasons. Firstly, it builds upon the development of Yingying as a cross-genre character, primarily by relying on internal justification methods to permit Yingying’s sexual encounter with Zhang as opposed to more common external justifications. Secondly, Feng’s Yingying makes a promise to her lover that she will marry no one else but him—an act that I have termed a ‘vow of fidelity.’ This vow, which is included within many of Feng’s vernacular stories, exemplifies how late Ming writers displayed the moral qualities of *qing* 情 (passion) through narratives of chaste women. But by doing so, fiction writers like Feng did more than depict chastity as a means of promoting *qing*; they created a new type of chastity that allowed female characters greater sexual freedom and emphasized devotion to a chosen lover as opposed to the often-violent acts of chastity protection that were prevalent in Ming society.

### Cui Yingying’s Vow of Desire

Feng Menglong’s “Lingering Fragrance Pavilion” builds upon centuries of literary tradition that began with Yuan Zhen’s 元稹 (779–831) *The Story of Yingying*. While in Feng’s story, the vow of fidelity made between lovers (which will be discussed in greater detail below) is depicted as a positive display of virtue, its origins as a narrative device can be traced to the original Yingying text itself. But Yuan Zhen’s depiction of such vows contrasts with Feng’s: the vow in *The Story of Yingying* is used to frame Yingying as a *yowwu* 尤物 (creatures of extraordinary beauty) and describe a perceived threat that *qing*, or more specifically *yu* 欲 (desire), has on individuals and society at large.

Yuan Zhen’s story centers around a young scholar named Zhang who falls in love with his cousin, Cui Yingying, the moment he sees her. She rejects his initial advances, conveyed in suggestive poetry, but after a few nights presents herself at his door. The two begin an illicit sexual

relationship, one that must ultimately come to an end when Zhang leaves to take the civil service examinations. At this point, Yingying is deeply invested in their relationship. She takes the news that he is to depart to Chang'an with grace, but before long she is unable to control her emotions and leaves for her mother's house with tears streaming down her face (Yuan 2000, 178).

Yingying's last spoken words to Zhang before he leaves for the examinations reveal that, at least to her, their relationship went beyond simple lust. She justifies Zhang's need to depart by saying, "It is inevitable that having seduced me, you would end it—all this by your grace," but her inner-most desires are revealed when she continues, "and with this, our lifelong vows are indeed ended" (Yuan 2000, 177). While the author never describes the two characters making a "lifelong vow," Yingying mentions this vow again in a letter she sends Zhang a year later. In it, Yingying continues to claim that she understands why Zhang decided to leave, but this time she displays greater sorrow and resentment towards his decision. She writes, "But, perchance, the successful scholar holds love to be but of little account and sets it aside as a lesser thing in order to pursue things of greater importance, his having taken enforced vows as something one may well betray" (Yuan 2000, 179). What another translation refers to as a "solemn vow" (Mair 2000, 513) certainly meant a lot to Yingying, who mentions it multiple times, but perhaps significantly less to Zhang.

Zhang's decision to leave Yingying is praised by his fellow scholars after he shows them the letter. Peter Bol suggests that this is due to the didactic nature of the text. He writes that "what the story explores is the fact that when 'things' gain the ability to stir us, they rouse passions (*qing*). Passions create conflicts of perspective, because two agencies have come into play and there is no longer a self-centered hierarchy of authority" (Bol 2000, 200). This "lifetime" or "solemn" vow made between Zhang and Yingying was certainly made in response to passion. This negative view of passion, or *qing*, was by no means uncommon during the Tang. This particular usage and understanding of *qing* is closely related to the concept of *yu*, often relating to desires that are sexual in nature. Martin Huang explains that within classical texts, *yu* is a concept contained within the broader definition of *qing* (Huang 1998, 157). As *qing* became separated from the more consistent negative use of *yu* among Ming writers, it is helpful to separate the concepts when reading Yuan Zhen while recognizing that the author likely saw little difference between the two words.

As such, I categorize this vow made between Zhang and Yingying as a "vow of desire." The concept of desire is accurate in describing at least part of the reason the vow was made; Manling Luo suggests that Zhang's motivation for making this enforced or solemn vow was likely to continue

receiving Yingying's sexual favors, rather than his genuine intention of keeping it (Luo 2005, 55). Viewing this vow in terms of desire helps draw attention to the vow's place within the narrative, especially the negative connotation that surrounds it. Desire is juxtaposed with social duty; were Zhang to keep his end of the vow in response to his sexual desire, he could have never taken the civil service examinations and achieved an official post to serve the state. Yingying, on the other hand, appears to have more genuine reasons for making the vow that extended beyond simple desire. She expresses in her last letter to Zhang a fleeting hope that they can be reunited, and she asserts that her "glowing faith (in her love for Zhang) will not perish" (Yuan 2000, 179). Other such language suggests a much deeper level of sincerity in Yingying's love for Zhang. But within the narrative, her pure motivation is not recognized, at least not by the narrator who depicts her as a *youwu*. Whether or not her "glowing faith" perished or not, she marries another a year later.

After both characters have married others, Zhang attempts to visit Yingying while passing through the area she lives. She refuses to see him but secretly composes a poem that sheds light to the reader on her tragic state. She writes how "the glow of [her] face has gone," and that she has "grown haggard on [Zhang's] account" (Yuan 2000, 182). At some point between her last letter to Zhang and composing this poem, she chose to fulfill her duty as a daughter and marry into what we can assume to be a prosperous home. She comes to terms with this fate, and while clearly not pleased with it, encourages Zhang in one final poem to "take what [he] felt in times gone by and love the person before [his] eyes (his wife)" (Yuan 2000, 182). He takes her advice, leading him to become known as one "who knew how to amend his errors" (Yuan 2000, 182). The vow they made was clearly an error, at least according to the narrator, and Zhang's happy ending—becoming a prominent official—comes as direct consequence of his choice to break it.

Interestingly, *The Story of Yingying* is not the only Tang *chuanqi* to include a broken vow between lovers. *The Story of Hou Xiaoyu* 霍小玉傳, written by Jiang Fang 蔣防 (792–835), tells the story of a scholar named Li Yi who, after sleeping with the courtesan Hou Xiaoyu, is persuaded to make a vow to never leave her. To the courtesan, he says, "I pledge not to leave you even though my bones be ground to powder and my body be smashed to pieces," and then writes his oath in the form of a poem on a piece of white silk (Jiang 2010, 244). After two years, however, Li Yi passes the civil service examinations and is then arranged to be betrothed to another woman by his mother. While the text implies that he did not desire to break his vow, he followed his mother's wishes anyway and avoided Xiaoyu. This betrayal sends Xiaoyu into a terrible state of illness, and

when she encounters Li Yi shortly before his marriage, she proclaims that she will haunt Li Yi as a ghost and make sure he is never able to maintain a happy marriage. She dies immediately after, and true to her word, Li Yi becomes a jealous and controlling wretch who divorces wife after wife (Jiang 2010, 259).

Unlike Yingying, Xiaoyu never accepts the irreconcilability of her passion and her society's social norms. She was too naïve to realize that she was “merely a plaything of men” and that her desire to remain with Li Yi had no way to be fulfilled (Nienhauser, 266). This places the narrator's sympathy more heavily on Xiaoyu and depicts her unfaithful man in a more negative light. But as both characters were genuinely determined to fulfill their lifelong vow at one point, the vow does not fit entirely into the same category as *The Story of Yingying's* vow of desire. The impossibility of fulfilling the vow, though, essentially conveys the same social truth of Yingying's unfulfilled vow: social duty and passion are mutually exclusive paths.

Whether or not the authors of works such as *The Story of Yingying* or *The Story of Hou Xiaoyu* support the societal institutions that render long-term passionate relationships achievable, they both present a world that has no room for such relationships. Instead of staying with a woman who loves him, a man's ideal role is to fulfill his social duty of serving as a government official. The woman's ideal role, then, is completely passive. Active women, like Yingying or Hou Xiaoyu, who respond to their *qing* by making vows with men, are never given enough agency to fulfill the vow. Interestingly, both women are presented sympathetically in their stories and are by far the characters with the most emotional depth. The goals of the authors can be, and has been, discussed in depth by other scholars. But as historical sources, they reveal the dominant gender paradigm of their time of composition. Even during the early Tang—an era known for relatively open gender norms—women playing a passive role in relationships that allowed men to fulfill their social duties was, if not a predominant ideal among literati, then an unchangeable fact of life.

### Justifying Yingying's Passion

Yuan Zhen's *The Story of Yingying* gave life to Yingying and her general narrative arc. Feng Menglong's retelling is not necessarily based on the original Tang text. Separating the two works are centuries of dramas that greatly expanded Zhang and Yingying's story beyond the small scope of the original. A detailed summary of this development is not the purpose of this research, but a brief overview of other scholars' work, particularly Dong's, will help fill in major gaps between the original Yingying and Feng's version. Dong points to the drama *Dong's West Chamber* 西廂記諸

宮調, composed during the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234), as beginning a major shift in Yingying's portrayal (Dong 1978, 84). This drama altered the theme of the original story; instead of a cautionary tale warning against excessive *yu*, *Dong's Western Chamber* celebrates the romance of Zhang and Yingying and gives them a happy ending where the two are married. With this precedent set, every Western Chamber drama created in the following centuries follows suit and grants Yingying her happy ending.

In allowing Zhang and Yingying to marry, *Dong's West Chamber* is faced with a conundrum it must solve. How can the two obtain their happy ending after Yingying loses her chastity before they are married? Simply changing Yuan Zhen's original ending would in essence promote immorality. To solve this problem, *Dong's West Chamber* places great emphasis on the fact that Zhang (named Zhang Gong in this version) saved Yingying and her family from bandits, a detail mentioned only briefly in the original. As Yingying's savior, she owes Zhang a debt of gratitude and is morally bound to him. After Yingying rejects Zhang's invitation to sleep with him, the scholar's grief causes him to become gravely ill for ten days and he even attempts to hang himself. Upon hearing this, Yingying chooses to go have sex with him, thus fulfilling her debt of gratitude and saving her savior. Thus, Yingying's fornication is presented as the lesser of two evils, a necessary choice if she is to save Zhang (Dong 1978, 85).

Many other Western Chamber narratives would contain this justification. Other writers and editors, such as Jing Shengtan 金聖歎 (1610?–1661), would further emphasize that Yingying was shy and silent while making love to Zhang in order to maintain her status as a virtuous woman (Dong 1978, 90–91). Interestingly, in order to give Yingying a happy ending where she remains with Zhang, these writers took the *qing* out of Yingying. Rather than a woman who followed her heart and chose to enter a relationship she knew was taboo, these Yingyings chose to begin sexual relationships out of duty devoid of passion. Only later does she come to love him as an outcome of her virtuous decision.

Despite the prevalence of this version of Yingying, other Western Chamber narratives—namely the Yuan-Ming drama *Northern West Chamber* 北西箱, also known as *Romance of the Western Chamber* 西箱記—present an alternate Yingying, one that Dong calls the “passionate Yingying” (Dong 1978, 87). This Yingying begins as a woman who is impatiently waiting for love, and when Zhang comes to rescue her and her family, her target is set and her mind is determined. In *Romance of the Western Chamber*, Yingying suggests to her mother that whoever is able to defeat the bandits be allowed to marry her (Dong 1978, 87). This suggestion, made with the hope that Zhang will indeed be the one to save them, is just one example of how the passionate Yingying plays an active role in her romantic relationship

with Zhang. Important to note, though, is how Yingying's mother did not keep her promise to let Zhang and Yingying marry and instead betrothed her to another man. This acts as justification to permit the couple's sexual encounter. While Yingying's character is more active in her initial quest for love, the narrative relies on her mother breaking the promise to allow Yingying the sexual freedom to sleep with Zhang (Dong 1978, 87).

Whether or not Yingying desires to have sex with Zhang or not, by relying on circumstances outside of Yingying's control to justify her decision, even the Western Chamber stories that depict a more passionate and independent Yingying confine that independence. Dong argues that due to these restrictions, "all . . . West Chamber stories reveal a male-oriented society that might be able to understand a person's desire for independence and freedom to love, but still is unable to cope with a woman's sexuality on its own grounds" (Dong 1978, 98). Dong, or any other scholar who has traced Yingying's development as a character for that matter, does not include Feng Menglong's retelling, possibly due to the fact that Feng's is vernacular fiction while most Yingying stories are dramas. Feng's Yingying is an interesting case in the development of her character, as she does not rely on external justification like previous Yingyings, but rather her personal sentiment and devotion justifies her sexual relationship with Zhang. As such, a closer look at Feng's Yingying will help display Yingying's breadth as a cross-genre character.

### Feng Menglong and Female Chastity

Like many fiction writers of the late Ming, Feng Menglong was a *shengyuan* 生员: a scholar who passed the civil service examination on the lowest level but never passed the imperial examination. Despite his many attempts pass the examinations and gain government employment, he never held an official position until his fifties. These personal setbacks gave him plenty time to write. His vernacular fiction heavily influenced the emerging fiction market and paved ways for new genres to emerge. He is known for his dedication to the concept of *qing*, which is famously made manifest in the introduction to his *History of Love* 情史, where he writes:

Ever since I was a young man, I have prided myself on being a *qing* fanatic. Among my friends I always bare my soul, sharing with them in times both good and bad... Whenever I meet a person rich in emotion [*youqing ren*], I always want to show my respects to him and whenever I see a person who lacks emotion [*wuqing ren*] and whose views do not agree with mine, I always try to patiently guide him with *qing*. (Feng, 7.1–2; Mowry 1983, 12–14)



While *qing* is an important concept in Feng Menglong's writing, it must be remembered that he is by no means proposing an overhaul of Confucian morality. Patrick Hana articulates that while he certainly did challenge aspects of Confucian social relations, he still wrote within the Confucian mainstream (Hana 1981, 80). Hana also argues that while morals are important to Feng's stories, he was not a philosopher. His proposed morality was not consistent from work to work and changed as he wrote in different genres. Rather than getting caught up in philosophical debates on morality, he more readily engaged in ethical issues of his time (Hana 1981, 78).

Feng's writing exists within a world of literature published during the late-Ming that heavily emphasized the importance of *qing*. These late-Ming writers commonly utilized stories about female chastity to demonstrate *qing*'s effectiveness as a moral motivator. The playwright Meng Chengshun 孟稱舜 (1600–1655), wrote that “to praise and promote an act of female virtue and improve social morals are the feelings [*qing*] shared by many people. This is not something that could be accomplished by one person like me. This is all due to [many people's] moral nature [*xing*], which is absolutely good” (Huang 1998, 172). As female chastity was one of the most valued and practiced aspects of feminine virtue during the Ming, it was understandably used by many writers within the cult of *qing* to help solidify their moral position.

A trend of scholarship of late-imperial literature, including works by Martin Huang and Shuhui Yang, has argued that besides using chaste women as a case-in-point for *qing*'s moral effectiveness, *qing* writers engaged in a form of “self-representation” or “ventriloquism through women characters,” to use Huang's and Yang's terms respectively (Huang 1998 and Yang 1998). This scholarship elaborates on the idea that women within Ming fiction are representative of the marginalized literati, such as Feng, who wrote them. In describing this phenomenon, Yang relates feminist theory to the concept of *yin/yang*—*yin* being the passive, female form that extends far beyond a traditional Chinese understanding of the world and can represent the subordinate side of any social relationship. In Feng's stories, the *yin* character, often a woman, is often depicted as intellectually and morally superior to the oppressive *yang* characters. Yang explains that “by making his [Feng Menglong's] characters morally and/or intellectually superior, the author vicariously assumes a superior position himself. In effect, this is not a male identifying with a female so much as one *yin* identifying with another, or a sympathy between underdogs” (Yang 1998, 134). Considering Feng's *shengyuan* status and frustration with the examination system that all but barred him from a prominent government career, his positive and sympathetic views towards women are less surprising.

Building upon this scholarship, Hsu Pi-Ching argues that chaste courtesans—a high-level prostitute who devoted herself to one man and remained chaste to him—are one of Feng's most utilized ways to create “mirror images of [his] idealized self” (Hsu 2000, 44). Courtesans are clear *yin* characters who are disenfranchised due to their low social standing, but as they embody chastity, they are able to rise above their disenfranchised station. It should be noted, though, that the chaste courtesan is a female type that extends beyond late-Ming fiction. In a history of social justice's role within the cult of chastity, Fei Siyen connects the new prominence of *qing* to the rise in accounts of chaste courtesans. She shows multiple examples of chaste courtesans whose stories were collected in local gazetteers, although notes that their inclusion was controversial as they did not fit in standard definitions of chastity (Hsu 2000, 44).

In describing these chaste courtesans' place within fiction, Bret Hinsch writes, “Although she [the courtesan] cannot possibly marry [her lover], she remains steadfastly faithful to her beloved. In fact, that couple's inability to marry elevates their relationship. Whereas the classical rites bind spouses together, love unites the courtesan and her lover. This sort of story demonstrated how emotion could even give rise to fidelity” (Hinsch 2021, 96–97). Feng's narratives of chaste courtesans certainly give examples of how *qing* can give rise to chastity, but they also reveal Feng's unconventional views towards chastity. Many of Feng's narratives about chaste courtesans can be found in the first chapter of his *History of Love*, which is entirely focused on chaste women. To argue that these chaste courtesans' self-sacrifice for chastity's sake is equal to that of an espoused wife, Feng writes in this chapter's commentary:

The ancients consider a woman espoused by betrothal a wife, and a woman espoused without betrothal a concubine. Those who marry without betrothal are doing so for the sake of *qing*. Now, are we to say that to marry without betrothal is for the sake of *qing*, and to die defending chastity is not for the sake of *qing*? Are we to say that women of lowly status are like roadside peach and willow trees, and therefore we could not expect them also to bear up under the cold of winter [like the cypress]? (Hsu 2000, 73)

By emphasizing that *qing* is the primary factor behind these courtesans' decision to remain chaste, which he argues allows them to be virtuous despite their low status, Feng also downplays the value of female chastity devoid of *qing*. In this way, Feng's views towards chastity differ from many mainstream thinkers. Yang Shuhui suggests that Feng's marginal comment in the story “Li Xiuqing Marries With Honor the Virgin Huang” 李秀卿義結黃貞女, in which Feng sarcastically mocks a woman who refuses

to marry due to her close—though non-sexual—association with a male friend, is but one demonstration of how Feng refutes some strict chastity practices, especially in cases where the women are acting out of a sense of morality devoid of any *qing* (Yang 1998, 73). Chastity, then, becomes more than just an example of *qing*'s moral effectiveness. Feng effectively argues that chastity without *qing* is meaningless, or even counterproductive.

By depicting female chastity produced directly by genuine *qing*, Feng's courtesan characters are allowed greater sexual freedom than most Ming women. These women who “marry without betrothal” do so out of their own free will as a response to their *qing* and are given the choice of whom they will devote themselves to and how to proceed in the relationship. This amount of agency far exceeds the passive agency of the female martyr who has no choice in who they are betrothed to. It should be noted, though, that these martyrs were not puppets controlled by the patriarchy; scholars such as Grace Fong have argued that while chaste martyr's acts of self-sacrifice arise out of ideology that subordinated women, “we should recognize and make visible the agency of these women in constructing a sense of self and identity” (Fong 2001, 141). These women were using the agency they had to influence the legacy they would be remembered by, but a chaste courtesan is afforded a great deal more agency by being allowed to choose whom they wish to devote themselves to, and, if needs be, sacrifice themselves for.

Feng Menglong's Yingying, as depicted in “Lingering Fragrance Pavilion,” is not a courtesan, but her portrayal mirrors that of Feng's chaste courtesans in a few ways. As Yingying is an elite woman, and in particular an elite woman who in her original story was ultimately not faithful to her lover, Feng's new depiction of her as a faithful lover reveals the scope that his relationship ethics extend. As will be seen, the expanded sexual freedom awarded to courtesans is also extended to Yingying. An analysis of “Lingering Fragrance Pavilion” will also be useful because as the story is based on older, extant texts, the places where his narrative differs from those texts are textual ‘fingerprints’ that display Feng's deliberate choices to make the story more his own. The ways that Feng's Yingying differs from previous versions will display Feng's own ideals of what makes an ideal woman.

One prominent fingerprint of Feng's is the inclusion of a vow made between Yingying and Zhang, but unlike the vow of desire discussed in *The Story of Yingying*, Feng's vow is one essential marker of his modified, *qing*-influenced chastity. To reflect the difference between a standard vow of chastity—ones that have no connection to *qing*, I will use the term “vow of fidelity” to describe the commitment a female character makes to be faithful to a man of her choice. This vow of fidelity is different than the vow made by Yingying in Yuan Zhen's *chuanqi*, as while there is no evidence to suggest that Yingying made the vow for any reason besides *qing*, Zhang

abused the vow in order to satisfy his desires, and Yingying ultimately broke it. But while Zhang's actions seem selfish to most modern-day readers, they are celebrated by the narrator as it was his breaking of the vow that led to him fulfilling his social duty. Whereas the term 'desire' reflects the negative view of the feelings that led both Zhang and Yingying to supposedly make a lifelong vow, the term 'fidelity' reflects a positive view of similar feelings. Feng's Zhang and Yingying are able to achieve their happy ending and justify their sexual encounter precisely because they act upon and stay firm to their mutual feelings or *qing*.

### Li Yingying's Vow of Fidelity

"Lingering Fragrance Pavilion," is the 29th story in Feng Menglong's 1624 vernacular fiction collection, *Stories to Caution the World* 警世通言. To mark his retelling as different from *The Story of Yingying* or any of the Western Chamber dramas, he gives the two lead characters slightly different names—Zhang is given the personal name Hao 浩, and Yingying is given the surname Li 李. The story begins with Zhang Hao, a good-looking and brilliant scholar who just turned twenty. From the moment he is described, Feng makes it clear that his story is operating within a significantly different moral framework than earlier versions; when asked why he is not married yet, Zhang Hao replies, "A lifelong marriage must be a flawless one . . . I may not be a talented scholar, but I am an admirer of beauty. If I can't have a wife of ravishing beauty, I'd rather be a bachelor all my life" (Feng 2005, 506). Feng gives no scathing rebuke to Zhang's priorities like Yuan Zhen certainly would have; instead, in an editorial comment he agrees, writing "valid point" (Feng 2005, 506). Feng's narrative world is a *qing*-centered one, and he is content without jumping through the philosophical loops required to pitch this to the Neo-Confucians.

When Zhang Hao spots Li Yingying wandering in his garden, he immediately falls in love with her and decides that he must marry her. When he begins talking with her, it quickly appears that she has similar feelings; in fact, it is revealed that the two were childhood playmates and Li Yingying came to the garden with the intent of seeing him. She quickly takes over the conversation and reveals that she has admired his "fine qualities" since childhood and suggests that they should be married (Feng 2005, 509). When Zhang Hao replies that he would love nothing more, Li Yingying says, "If both hearts are set firmly on the other, that means a predestined bond does exist" (Feng 2005, 509). On one hand, this statement may be a justification of their relationship (which will soon become more intimate) despite the fact that they are not married by rite yet. On the other hand, it may be an outgrowth of what Hsu Pi-Ching calls a "heightened interest in

the exploration of ‘companionate’ sexual relationships, which emphasized the two parties’ spiritual . . . compatibility” (Feng 2005, 70). Hsu uses this to describe the desexualization of courtesans in many of Feng’s stories, but the same principle applies to “Lingering Fragrance” as Li Yingying is presented as having this predestined spiritual connection to Zhang Hao.

Wanting to receive a token of Zhang Hao’s commitment, Li Yingying asks him to write a poem on her scarf. After Zhang Hao writes her a poem comparing her to a prized flower, Li Yingying takes her leave (Feng 2005, 509). At this point, a conceptual vow of fidelity has been made, although not yet clearly articulated in words. The clear articulation comes over a year later after the couple has been unable to see each other. Li Yingying sends Zhang Hao a letter with the help of the nun Huiji 惠寂 in which she writes, “My only wish is that you will not forget me. As for me, I shall never fail you! If I can’t marry you, I vow never to marry” (Feng 2005, 511). Li Yingying’s commitment to never marry if she cannot marry Zhang Hao builds upon and substantially changes the implied vow in *The Story of Yingying*. While Zhang and Yingying vowed to stay with each other, and it appears that Yingying hoped to maintain that vow for a time, it does not take long until both are married to one another. In Li Yingying’s letter, though, she adds a layer of chastity to her commitment. In her mind, she already belongs to Zhang Hao: the two are essentially betrothed. Even though this betrothal is not yet official, Li Yingying, like other chaste women who swear to never marry again after their betrothed husband dies, is committed to maintaining her chastity despite the worst-case scenario.

Her situation may be quite different from general stories of women who don’t remarry after their betrothed husband dies, and many of those stories make no mention of any romantic connection between the betrothed parties. This is the case in another of Feng Menglong’s stories, “Censor Chen Ingeniously Solves the Case of the Gold Hairpins and Brooches” 陳御史巧勘金釵鈿 in *Stories Old and New* 古今小说. A young woman named Axiu 阿秀 was betrothed to a commissioner’s son, but when that commissioner died and left the son penniless, Axiu’s father began to consider ending the betrothal and finding a new husband for her. In response, Axiu contends, “A virtuous woman serves only one man until her death. To be only concerned over money in a marriage is nothing less than barbarous” (Feng 2000, 52). In this instance, her dedication to her betrothed is almost completely void of *qing*—she has never even seen her husband at the time she makes the statement. (Yang 1998, 69). Li Yingying, on the other hand, makes a vow not just of chastity, but of emotional and spiritual fidelity to Zhang Hao. The vow elevates her commitment to chastity as well as to Zhang Hao, but essentially derives from her *qing*, rather than a dedication to chaste propriety, as in Axiu’s case.

The letter in which Li Yingying articulates her vow to Zhang Hao also includes an explanation of how her parents are not yet comfortable with the idea of her being married to Zhang Hao as they feel she is still too young. This does not stop the couple from finding a chance to see each other, and soon Li Yingying writes to Zhang Hao again and informs him of a time when her family will be out of the house, allowing them to meet in person again. On the designated day, Zhang Hao arrives at the wall by her house and waits for her. While Western Chamber dramas usually depicted Zhang climbing over the wall to find her at this point, Feng reverses the readers' expectations by having Li Yingying climb the wall herself (Feng 2005, 514). This reversal of roles not only puts a twist on an old story retold countless times, but it also follows a consistent theme of making Li Yingying, the *yin* or underdog character, more active than any other character in the story, even more than Zhang Hao.

By the story's climax, Zhang Hao becomes a powerless (or perhaps spineless) victim that Li Yingying is required to save. A while after the couple consummates their relationship under the Lingering Fragrance Pavilion, Zhang Hao receives news from Huiji that Yingying's father has been transferred to another city. Two "miserable years" went by for Zhang Hao, when his uncle tells him that he wants to make a match for him and have him marry a daughter of the Sun family. Zhang Hao does not desire to marry anyone besides Li Yingying, but he fears his uncle's temper and goes along with the betrothal (Feng 2005, 515).

Not long before the wedding, Li Yingying's family returns and Zhang Hao sends a message to her telling her how the betrothal was against his wishes. Yingying replies that she will think of something to fix things. She immediately goes to her parents and says, "Your daughter has committed a sin and brought disgrace to the family name. . . . Having already lost my chastity, I cannot marry another man. Since this wish of mine is to be denied, I have to take my own life, and do it gladly too." Whether or not she would have this out, she uses this statement as more a means of making an ultimatum to her parents. She asks them to betroth her to Zhang Hao, and after they do, she assures them that she will think of a way to make everything work out (Feng 2005, 516).

She rushes to the local judge and submits an appeal in which she recognizes that while it is important to be married by the proper match-making procedures, there are exceptions to the rule. She uses the story of Zhou Wenjun and Sima Xiangru's elopement to justify her own unofficial betrothal to Zhang Hao (Feng 2005, 516). Then, to prove to the judge that she made a "secret agreement" with Zhang Hao, she produces the scarf that Zhang Hao wrote his first poem to her, as well as another poem he wrote after their first time having sex: two symbols of her vow of fidelity.

The judge then summons Zhang Hao and lashes out at him for planning on marrying another when he was already betrothed. He then proclaims that he is “not going to tear apart a talented young scholar and a beautiful maiden who are meant for each other by heaven’s will” (Feng 2005, 517). Finding their vows of fidelity (though not kept by Zhang Hao) and their spiritual connection as strong enough evidence, the judge allows them to marry. The couple lives happily ever after.

### **The Evolution of Female Chastity**

The fulfillment of Li Yingying’s vow of fidelity makes Feng Menglong’s Yingying a substantially different character from previous versions. Primarily, the vow allows Yingying an unprecedented amount of agency. In *The Story of Yingying*, Yuan Zheng’s Yingying is an agent only as far as deciding whether or not to offer her body to Zhang. Outside this initial choice she makes to begin the relationship, she has no control over its course or outcome. Whatever vow she made with Zhang can be seen as an attempt on her part to control the outcome of the relationship, but the narrator implies that the vow was made on account of desire rather than any substantial virtue that could earn Yingying the happy ending she wants, let alone justify her premarital sex. The “passionate Yingying,” as depicted in *Romance of the Western Chamber* acts upon her *qing* to bring about her happy ending, but she can only do so within the confines of her role as a daughter. She attempts to create a scenario where her mother will betroth her to Zhang, but the choice of whether or not they should be married ultimately falls under her mother. Feng’s Yingying, on the other hand, sets off the entire chain of events when she purposefully enters Zhang’s garden with the intent of devoting herself to him. This devotion, while outside the context of traditional rites, still allows her to choose the man she will be betrothed to and is finally legally validated by a judge.

What can account for this unprecedented agency? If Li Yingying is read as a “mirror [image] of [Feng’s] idealized self” (Hsu 2000, 44) then it makes sense for her character to be more independent and active as opposed to other retellings where the writers can connect more with the scholar, Zhang. This choice to push the reader to connect with Yingying more deeply than Zhang is hardly surprising considering the number of Feng’s stories that focus on *yin* characters. While Li Yingying’s agency may be unprecedented compared to previous Yingyings, she is simply one independent woman among many in Feng’s works. But along with Li Yingying’s independence comes the more liberal boundaries of chastity seen in Feng’s stories of chaste courtesans. Like a courtesan, Li Yingying has sex before she is betrothed and is allowed to do so because of her vow of fidelity.

Feng Menglong is not attempting to incite a 'love revolution' in which *qing* topples the importance of chastity and traditional betrothal rites. To reinstate Hana's previously mentioned claim, Feng stays far away from the philosophic debates that would be required for this. Instead, Yingying's vow of fidelity is used as an example of how a greater emphasis on *qing* can bring about moral action; in this case Yingying's commitment to chastity. Within Feng's narrative, *qing* essentially replaces traditional betrothal rites as a means of enforcing female chastity. This reimagining of betrothal highlights *qing*'s effectiveness in promoting morality rather than proposing a rehaul of traditional marriage practices. But, as Yang argued by evidence from Feng's story "Li Xiuqing Marries with Honor," Feng does not support the practice of female chastity when it comes in conflict with the promotion of an ideal male-female relationships. Allowing Li Yingying to justify her own sexual decisions becomes one example of Feng attempting to portray female chastity in a way that encourages and exemplifies genuine *qing*, rather than serving chastity for the sake of itself.

Examining Li Yingying's vow of fidelity as a result of Feng's unconventional views on female chastity may also be a way for the writer, consciously or not, to tie female chastity more firmly to its intended social function. The widespread publication of chastity narratives, both among fiction writers as well as gazetteers seeking social justice, turned female chastity into a largely performative virtue removed from the goal of ensuring that a man's child is his own. In Feng's "Gold Hairpins and Brooches," arguably a chastity satire, Axiu's determination to marry no one if she cannot marry her betrothed is an extreme case of commitment to chastity despite it providing no increase in wealth or posterity upon either family. Assuming that the origin of female chastity lies in the need to ensure that a woman's child belongs to her husband, then Axiu's, or any chaste martyr's decision to take her life rather than marry, does nothing to accomplish chastity's original purpose. Li Yingying, on the other hand, is committed to chastity in so far as its connection to her love for Zhang. Her vow of fidelity, more than extreme examples of chastity preservation, will presumably spare Zhang the trouble infidelity would bring to his family tree.

The result of this evolved—or refocused—chastity, though, is an acceptance of Yingying and Zhang's premarital sexual encounters, which even Li Yingying admits is not proper as the formal match-making process. This was certainly not a hard pill for Feng to swallow; his famous romantic involvements with multiple prominent courtesans may reveal that he had no problem with his own lovers having past sexual encounters (Yang and Yang 2005, xiv). By taking the focus off the idea of female chastity as a thing one can retain or lose and shifting it to relationship devotion, the vow of fidelity not only displays the moral effectiveness of *qing*, but simultaneously



provides a new definition of chastity that allows fictional women, such as Li Yingying, the freedom to initiate, develop, and secure romantic relationships of their choice.

## Conclusion

The different vows made by Yingying, from her vow of desire in *The Story of Yingying* to her vow of fidelity in “Lingering Fragrance Pavilion,” display an evolution of thought relating to female chastity, *qing*, and social duty among the literati that wrote them. When Cui Yingying promised Zhang that she would never leave him and seemingly expected him to do the same, the narrator was displaying the fangs of a *youwu* and the danger her vow presented Zhang. But as Yingying’s letters that display her innermost feelings left many readers more emotionally connected to Yingying than Zhang, it is unsurprising that subsequent retellings would drop the idea of the *youwu* and present a more satisfying story where the two are able to remain together. But in doing so, each author had to find a way to justify Yingying’s choice to have sex with Zhang. Some, such as *Dong’s Western Chamber*, chose to present her with a moral conundrum in which losing her virginity was the only way for her to repay her savior. But in doing so, Yingying’s affection for Zhang only comes after the couple’s sexual encounter, rather than internal sentiment. Others, such as *Romance of the Western Chamber*, gave Yingying internal passion that led her to actively seek out a marriage with Zhang early on. But this retelling still relied on Madame Cui’s betrayal of her promise to betroth the two lovers as an external means to justify Yingying and Zhang’s sexual encounter.

Coming from a literati movement that championed *qing* to give voice to marginalized scholars, Feng Menglong’s retelling justifies Yingying and Zhang’s relationship through purely internal means. Li Yingying gets to first sleep with Zhang Hao and then get married to him because she made a vow of fidelity with him. Her promise to never marry anyone but Zhang Hao, represented by the poem he inscribed on her silk scarf, becomes a chastity practice that stems directly from her passionate feelings for Zhang. This vow becomes a case-in-point of how *qing* can lead to virtuous action, evidence supporting Mencius’ statement that “if you allow people to follow their feelings (*qing* 情), they will be able to do good” (Huang 1998, 154). Although Mencius’ archaic use of *qing* in this context more closely resembles usage of the word *xing* 性 (original nature), Feng’s narrative gives a clear example of how Ming literati interwove this reinterpretation of Mencius’ quote into their fiction.

More than simply advocating for *qing*, Feng’s depiction of female chastity in “Lingering Fragrance Pavilion” displays the author’s unconventional view of chastity that stems from his devotion to *qing*. This view, character-

ized by a disdain for chastity adherence that does not serve to strengthen a male/female romantic relationship, is highlighted by Li Yingying's vow of fidelity—her promise to marry no one besides Zhang Hao. As Yingying keeps her vow, she can be viewed as an emblem of female chastity despite her sexual encounter with Zhang, much in the same way that sexual freedom among Feng's chaste courtesans can be overlooked on account of their devotion to a single man.

There is still room for more research to be done on the usage of vows within retellings of *The Story of Yingying* and Ming fiction in general. Many late-Ming stories written by Feng and others included vows of fidelity; a closer examination of a wide array of these romance narratives would help reveal how influential this narrative trope was. While it can be assumed that many of Feng's other stories similarly implement vows of fidelity to display his unconventional chastity views, the same may not be true of other more conservative authors. In further tracing the development of this vow, an in-depth reading of *Dong's Western Chamber* and *Romance of the Western Chamber*, among other dramas—of which there is a daunting amount—could possibly reveal other developments that influenced Feng and his depiction of Yingying's vow of fidelity. A closer look at the classical and vernacular characters in these stories that have been translated as “vow” would also be insightful in tracing its origin.

Feng's Yingying, and by extension other female characters of Feng's stories who made vows of fidelity, is given much greater agency than most women of Feng's lifetime ever had. That being said, her agency ultimately revolved around her dedication to a man and her chastity. In the world of female representation in Chinese literature, though, Feng's Yingying can be seen as a step forward that would build towards later works such as *Dream of the Red Chamber* (c. 18th century). Feng's stories are helpful reminders to the modern-day Ming historian that despite the patriarchal values present in the growing cult of female chastity, elite views of women and their role in society were varied, complex, and constantly evolving.

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