Her Hide for Barter: Xi Langxian's Model of Self-Sacrifice in *The Rocks Nod Their Heads* (*Shi dian tou*)

Yenna Wu

ABSTRACT

One of the most startling stories in the history of Chinese fiction is "In Jiangdu, A Filial Daughter-in-Law Offers Her Body To Be Butchered," written by the late-Ming writer Xi Langxian. This paper compares Langxian's story of martyrdom with its earlier sources, showing his successful revisions. Langxian endows his characters with complicated desires, intentions, and motivations, highlights the "embodiment" of the heroine, and incorporates into his story the socio-economic, historical, political, and supernatural dimensions. I contend that because it involves a complete denial of human dignity, the sense of the grotesque—enhanced by the underlying structure of money and exchange—is by no means "carnivalesque" and positive, as is the Bakhtinian grotesque. I also argue against the contention that the story contains subversive elements and there is a disjuncture between the heroic and the comic subversions. Placed in its proper historical and hermeneutic contexts, Langxian's story does not undercut the protagonist's heroism, nor does it fail artistically because of its comic elements. In fact, the complexities of the story are evidence not of artistic failure, but of authorial control of several levels of meaning and patterns which work to reinforce the poignancy of the heroine's tragedy and evoke complex reader responses. The story serves the functions of didacticism, "entertainment," and expressing admiration for a paragon of virtue as well as the anxieties of the male elite. It surpasses many other moral tales

because it brings the issue of gender sharply into focus and enhances the readers' cognitive understanding of human nature.

KEY WORDS

Shi dian tou
Qingshi leilüe
martyrdom
filial duty
Ershisi xiao
agency
transaction
the grotesque
transformation
Xin Tangshu
qing "love, emotion, sentiment"
consanguinity
Lienü zhuan
Xiao jing
Gujin xiaoshuo
survival cannibalism
Dou'e yuan
Shakespeare

In his preamble, the narrator of "In Jiangdu, A Filial Daughter-in-Law Offers Her Body To Be Butchered" ("Jiangdu shi xiaofu tushen" 江都市孝婦屠身), story 11 of *The Rocks Nod Their Heads* (*Shi dian tou* 石點頭, hereafter *The Rocks*), calls it "a fantastic story for all time" (*qiangu qiwen* 千古奇聞): "If this story is told,/A man of stone will shed tears on hearing it,/A man of iron will be heart-broken on knowing it" (281).[1] While obviously serving the purpose of profit-oriented advertising, such a description clearly indicates that the author, possibly Xi Langxian (席浪仙), writing this story under the pseudonym Tianran Chisou (天然癡叟) in the late 1620s, intended it to be sensational and moving.[2]

The story tells of a brave woman who, when trapped in a besieged city, offers her body to be sold for food so that her husband can travel back home to take care of his aged mother. Langxian not only did not feel that the story was too cruel and grim to be included in *The Rocks*, his collection of fourteen stories, he was even touting its shock value. Although we do not know how the majority of Langxian's contemporary readers reacted, at least a close associate of his, Feng Menglong (馮夢龍, 1574-1646), who wrote a preface and comments for *The Rocks*, expressed admiration for the heroine's calmness and courage as well as the author's power of imagination.[3] However, some modern readers do not share Langxian's enthusiasm for this sensational story. Most modern editions of *The Rocks* published after 1935 have deliberately omitted it either because it is "so shocking to the modern sensibility," as Patrick Hanan suggests (Hanan 1981, 136), or because it praises extreme "feudalistic" ideologies and is politically unwholesome, as some mainland editors have found.[4]

Langxian did not invent the story's plot. Its earliest source is an anecdote written in classical Chinese in juan 205, the *New Tang History* (*Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 5831), and cited in juan 270 of the *Taiping Miscellany* (*Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 2117-2118), the tenth-century compendium of classical tales. *The Anatomy of Love* (*Qingshi leilüe* 情史類略), compiled by Zhanzhan Waishi (詹詹外史, a pseudonym, possibly Feng Menglong) sometime between 1626 and 1631, also includes this anecdote.[5] Although shocking enough on its own account, the anecdote as it appears in the *New Tang History* and *The Anatomy of Love* is so laconic and matter-of-fact that it bears little resemblance to Langxian's affecting version.

Summary of Langxian's Changes and Major Themes in his Version of the Story

In this paper I will first compare Langxian's story with its earlier sources. What is new in Langxian's revision? What beliefs and value judgments are revealed in Langxian's treatment of the story, and how has he revised the earlier sources into a story that can touch the reader's heart? After an extended analysis of the story, I will discuss the issue of aesthetics and critical approaches. My reading of the story and my view of Langxian's intentions and artistic control differ from those offered by Ellen Widmer in "Tragedy or Travesty? Perspectives on Langxian's 'The Siege of Yangzhou'" (Widmer 1994, 167-198).[6] I will argue that, placed in its proper historical and hermeneutic contexts, Langxian's story does not undercut the protagonist's heroism, nor does it fail artistically because of its comic elements.

Langxian greatly revised and expanded the anecdote into a fairly long story (Widmer 1991, 64), though he also judiciously eliminated some characters and scenes to bring the couple's tragedy into sharper focus. Compared with the anecdote, his revised story is much more varied. It includes personal, socio-economic, historical, political, natural, and supernatural dimensions. The most apparent innovations made by Langxian are the particularization of setting and the individual identities and histories he created for the main characters.

Langxian provides details of the couple's personal and economic circumstances and specific geographical, historical, and political contexts for their situation, creating a "realistic" effect, underscoring the couple's poignant plight as "aliens," and emphasizing the wife's elevated stature, as contrasted not only with the behavior of other ordinary people during times of crisis but also with that of the political and military leaders.

The theme of monetary exchange provides a backdrop and contrast as well. The reader perceives a disjuncture between the values of the market—emphasized by the language of exchange and the treatment of human bodies as commodities during the famine—and the values embodied in Zong Erniang's (宗二娘) heroic actions. Dramatic irony is also created by this contrast, highlighting the inhumanity of cannibalism and also of the trading of women's bodies as commodities. Black humor occasionally results from this disjuncture, complicating further the audience's responses and heightening the reader's perception of Zong's heroism.

While Langxian presents several points of view and sometimes reveals the thoughts of even "low," minor characters—all in appropriate diction and on several levels of language—the narrator's endorsement of Zong's actions and her own self-presentation in noble and elevated language help shape the reader's view of events. In addition to promoting audience identification with Zong's and the narrator's points of view, Langxian emphasizes Zong's transformation by introducing supernatural intervention and correlating natural and cosmic events to the personal tragedy in the story, adding yet another dimension to the story. Thus, through the specific political and cosmic contexts, the particularization and development of the major characters, the use of irony and mixture of the comic and the tragic, Langxian creates a sensational and moving story which, however, is far more complex than mere melodrama and bears a strong resemblance to Western tragedies, especially those presented in Greek and English Renaissance drama.

Indeed, Langxian's most important accomplishment is in presenting complex character development, creating "the inner lives" of

characters, exploring conflicts within major characters as well as those among characters. Langxian both evokes and undermines stereotypes, both relies upon and subverts readers' expectations. For example, the conventional antagonism between the daughter-in-law and the husband's mother is overturned by Langxian's presenting this relationship as harmonious and loving, even as representing an extension of filial piety beyond the traditional consanguine relationship and illustrating that moral actions spring from the inner convictions of the heart and involve more than a mechanical performance of duties or external obedience to rules. Zong's gestures embody abstract principles of filial piety, but they are born of love, not a sense of duty alone.

The conjugal relationship is also complicated but not sentimentalized; Langxian evokes, but also complicates and subverts, the stereotypes of the henpecked husband and shrewish wife. But Zhou Di (周迪) is not quite the stereotypical henpecked husband, nor is he the brave, resourceful husband of previous versions who consciously consents to his wife's heroism; his pattern of spiraling downward, having fewer resources and less and less command over and comprehension of situations, is contrasted with Zong's ascendancy, even as she too loses physical resources, but gains in power, agency, and conscious control of her life and death. Zong, for her part, is more than a one-dimensional model of virtue or the stereotypical shrewish wife. Langxian creates a complex character who consciously develops into an active agent in constructing and intercepting her own life and death; she is no mere unthinking model, manipulated by the author or the mechanics of the plot.

Langxian's most remarkable achievement is surely this "embodiment" of the heroine, especially as she is portrayed during the scene of her death and immediately preceding these moments. In revising earlier versions of the story, Langxian edited out redundancies and omitted extraneous scenes and characters (such as the gatekeeper), so that the entire structure, while complex, focuses on Zong and emphasizes these crucial scenes, thus drawing the reader into her drama and eliciting our sympathy.

While Langxian's story is entertaining and expressive, perhaps exhibiting the anxieties of the elite male class, it is primarily an evocation of complex audience responses; this artistic shaping of the story and manipulation of audience reaction is very skillfully done—actions arise out of character and from plausible psychological motivation instead of functioning only as contrived plot mechanisms. Many of Langxian's changes—deepening character, specific contexts—greatly enhance the affective dimension of the story, illustrating consciousness of audience responses and authorial control, not carelessness. Langxian in particular targeted the women in his audience as potential readers for whom Zong would provide a model of virtue—but not just a simplistic example, a bloodless paragon of abstract and impossible virtue, mindlessly obeying codes. Contrary to Ellen Widmer's argument, the complexities of the story are evidence not of artistic failure, but of authorial control of several levels of meaning and patterns which work to reinforce the poignancy of the heroine's tragedy and evoke complex reader responses.

Precursors and Sources for Langxian

All of these issues will be explored later. First, a look at the anecdote in the *New Tang History* is in order. The basic structural elements in the plot include the journey, the rebellion and famine, the wife's sale of her body, the city gate keeper's witnessing of her butchered body, and her husband's returning home with her remains:

> There was a woman of a certain family who became the wife of Zhou Di. Zhou Di was good at trading and had been traveling in the Guangling (廣陵) area (in Jiangsu 江蘇 province). It so happened that Zhou Di and his wife encountered the rebellion of Bi Shiduo (畢師鐸), during which time people seized and sold one another for food. Zhou Di was so famished that he almost died. His wife said, "Although we wish to return home now, we cannot both do so. Since your parent(s) are still alive, we must not die to-

> gether. I beg that I be sold in order to help you in your trip home." Zhou Di could not bear to do so. Insisting on her plan, his wife went with him to a butcher shop, where she sold her body for several thousand cash and offered him the money. When Zhou Di reached the city gate, the gate keeper asked who he was. Suspecting that he might be lying, the gate keeper went with him to the butcher shop to look for evidence. There they saw the head of Zhou Di's wife already hung up on a roof beam. Zhou Di wrapped up the remains of his wife's body and took them home to bury. (5831)

Zhanzhan Waishi's later anecdote in juan 14 of *The Anatomy of Love* resembles this one, except that it adds more witnesses to the wife's butchered body, registering the bystanders' responses and contributions to finance Zhou Di's trip home. Such additions of detail reveal Zhanzhan Waishi's faith in the human ability to sympathize and empathize with other people's suffering, although it strikes us as unrealistic that famished people still have "gold and silk" to donate:

> A native of Yuzhang (豫章) (of Hongzhou 洪州 prefecture in Jiangxi 江西 province) named Zhou Di was trading goods in the Guangling area (in Jiangsu province), accompanied by his wife. Then the couple came upon the rebellion of Bi Shiduo and could not return home. At that time, the people in the city had started to eat one another. Zhou Di was so famished that he almost died. His wife said: "The ravages of war are such that we definitely will not both be preserved. Because your parent(s) are old and our home is far away, you must not die with me. I beg you—sell me to a butcher so that you may be aided in your trip home." Zhou Di compelled himself to follow her request. Then, in order to be permitted to leave, he tried to bribe the city gate keeper with half of the proceeds [from selling his wife]. Interrogated by the gate keeper, Zhou Di proclaimed

> that he had told the truth. Unable to believe him, the gate keeper went with him to the butcher shop to verify his story. When they reached the shop, they saw his wife's head already lying on the chopping board. All of those who had gathered to watch marveled at such an extraordinary event and vied with one another to give Zhou Di gifts of gold and silk. Zhou Di gathered his wife's remains and carried them back home. (453)

By including it in *The Anatomy of Love*, Zhanzhan Waishi shows his interpretation of this anecdote as a tale of love, emphasizing its conjugal nature. Regarding the rebellion as an obstacle to the couple's affection, he places the anecdote in the chapter "Qingchou" (情仇, "enemies of, or obstacles to, love"), appending a comment interpreting the couple's motive in traveling together as romantic attachment as if to justify the inclusion of this anecdote. He also explains that the wife's violent death results from the couple's desire to help each other accomplish virtue—in this case, filial piety:

> Comments: The man's wife insisted on accompanying him when he went trading for profit because the couple could not bear to part from one another. How could they have anticipated that they would eventually be separated forever? It is not that the wife was callous enough to have her body butchered, but that she valued even more assisting her husband in returning home. It is not that Zhou Di was callous enough to let his wife die, but that he valued even more assisting her in achieving virtue. (453)

Langxian's Changes from Sources

Langxian particularizes the characters, time, and space. Referred to only as "a woman of a certain family who became the wife of Zhou Di" in the earlier source, the previously anonymous heroine is given a name, an identity, a personal history, and a class background

in Langxian's story.

Langxian calls her Zong Erniang (Second Daughter of the Zong Family). Although not from a high-class background, she is "the daughter of a Confucian family and has studied classics and known propriety since childhood." (281). At sixteen, she marries Zhou Di, a seventeen-year-old who later takes up his father's profession as a traveling merchant. When the story begins, she has been living in the Zhou household for twenty years. While the earlier source neither particularizes Zhou Di's parent(s) nor mentions his conjugal relationship, Langxian's story relates Zhou's early loss of his father, the harmonious relationship between husband and wife, Zong's close relationship to her mother-in-law, Madame Yue (樂), and the couple's mutual efforts to serve her.

Realism

Langxian enhances the realistic effect by including not only details of the couple's economic circumstances but also geographic and historic specificity. He sets the story squarely in a specific historical context during the reign of Emperor Xizong of the Tang (唐僖宗, 874-888), a period described as torn by political strife and devastated by famines in the aftermath of the An Lushan Rebellion (安祿山之亂, 755-762).

Moreover, Langxian makes the story more poignant by describing the development of the couple's personalities and their conjugal relationship, as well as their status as "foreigners." The earlier anecdote simply tells us about the couple's encounter with the rebellion in the Jiangsu area. By contrast, Langxian emphasizes that the couple are natives of Hongzhou prefecture (in Jiangxi) who are actually reluctant to take the trip to Xiangyang (襄陽, in Hubei 湖北 province) during chaotic times and are trapped in the alien city of Yangzhou (揚州, in Jiangsu province) by accident: because his capital is stolen, Zhou Di takes a job offered by a rich salt merchant and follows him to Yangzhou, which is later besieged. Langxian's change makes more plausible and realistic the circumstances which ensnare

the couple in their desperate situation; his elaboration of their status as unfortunate travelers, uprooted and feeling alienated and alone, enhances the affective power of the story.

Some of Langxian's other plot changes also have their specific purposes. The husband in the earlier anecdote is tough and noble in his own way; he agrees to his wife's sale, goes with her to the butcher shop, receives the money from her, and travels home on his own. By contrast, Langxian's Zhou Di is passive and lachrymose: he is neither brave and self-sacrificing nor does he "assist" Zong Erniang by consciously consenting to her virtuous action. When he receives the money, Zhou Di and his wife have not yet come to an agreement about whom to sell; unaware that the money is the price paid for his wife's flesh, he is terrified that he himself may die.

Through these changes, Langxian complicates plot, characterization, and the readers' responses, and also imbues the story with black humor. We read this part of narrative as *the heroine's* story: we identify with her, adopting her point of view, sharing the secret knowledge of her bargain with the butcher, feeling distant from and superior to Zhou Di, who lacks both courage and knowledge. Our greater comprehension creates dramatic irony: seeing Zhou Di as both cowardly and ignorant, we can laugh, grimly, at his fear, just as his wife does.

Another of Langxian's changes from the earlier anecdote is his omission of the plot detail about the city gate keeper. In Langxian's version, Zhou Di leaves Yangzhou when the siege has already been lifted; there is no need to bribe the gate keeper. In terms of plot mechanics, it is redundant to have the gate keeper serve as an additional witness because Langxian has related the killing of Zong Erniang and had Zhou Di and the passers-by witness her butchered body. This change, however, is also important in terms of the affective dimension. It allows the author to elaborate on Zhou Di's shock and suffering upon discovering his wife's gruesome death, thereby eliciting from the readers some sympathy for the unwitting husband.

Omitted, too, is Zhou Di's wrapping up his wife's remains and taking them home to bury—a detail in the earlier anecdote that

reflects the Chinese belief in the importance of proper burial of the body so the deceased's ghost can rest in peace. The Zhou Di in Langxian's version not only fails to do this but also has to rely on divine aid in order to return home. By replacing this relatively prosaic ending of the earlier source with several manifestations of divine justice and reward, Langxian draws the readers' attention to the transformation of Zong Erniang's body: because her "utmost sincerity" has moved Heaven, Zong Erniang is apotheosized, thereby transcending the limitations of the body as well as the ordinary human need to be buried.

Langxian's interest in presenting some of the characters' inner views reflects the influence of the cult of love (*qing* 情, also "emotion, sentiment"), an important conceptual and discursive locus in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Chinese fiction. And yet, in constructing the story, Langxian departs from Zhanzhan Waishi, one of his contemporaries, by shifting the emphasis from conjugal love to filial piety. The poem that prefaces Langxian's story begins: "Of the myriad virtues, filial piety comes first. / For women, chastity and reverence are cherished the most." (279). According to the narrator, filial piety is the most important of all ethical virtues and the basis of "governing a state and pacifying the world" (*zhiguo ping tianxia* 治國平天下, 279). Zong Erniang's motives, as interpreted by Langxian's narrator, are different from the wife's motives in Zhanzhan Waishi's tale: Zong Erniang does not travel with her husband out of conjugal love; she is actually reluctant to travel with her husband and would prefer to stay home to take care of her mother-in-law, illustrating filial attachments have priority.

Langxian further uses his story to demonstrate how filial piety is not so much a duty imposed on the individual as a spontaneous feeling that arises from love. In this respect, the story reflects the "late Ming attempt to accommodate qing to Confucian morality." (Hanan 1981, 79). Despite his preoccupation with human love, Langxian succeeds in constructing a touching story without becoming mired in melodramatic sentiments. Unlike Zhanzhan Waishi who tries to impress his reader with a perfect love story, presenting the couple's

motives as impeccably pure and noble, Langxian presents a cooler and more psychologically realistic picture, delineating the selfishness, inner conflicts, and craven fear an individual is likely to experience when caught in such a dreadful trap.

The most remarkable achievement in Langxian's version is his "embodiment" of the heroine, especially during the process of her martyrization. In the earlier source, the heroine appears emotionless. Her living, sentient body and her personal suffering during the murder are effaced. The violence done to her body is executed offstage; the husband, onlookers, and readers see only her remains. Langxian's version, by contrast, transforms the heroine into a person of flesh and blood and emotions. Langxian's conception of love, while connected with Confucian morality, intimately involves the physical body. Using Zong Erniang as an example, he demonstrates that the utmost expression of love is the willingness to sacrifice one's body for one's beloved. In his depiction, Zong Erniang sees herself as physically bound to her mother-in-law and repeatedly expresses the wish to die for her when necessary; moreover, Zong is a moral agent who takes control over her own body and acts according to her determination.

Zong's body and her activity constitute a text for the readers: appropriately, then, her final actions—preparing herself for and experiencing death and dismemberment—are described in detail. Instead of suppressing the scene of the butchery of Zong's body for the sake of decorum, Langxian positions it at center stage. Most importantly, in the process of "embodying" Zong, Langxian gives her a voice and makes her the author of her own script. When she writes and delivers a prayer for her own obsequies—her own funeral oration, commenting on her life and sacrifice—she is not only author of her own life but also critic and interpreter, telling both onlookers and readers how to "read" and understand her life and her sacrificial death.

From Affinity to Consanguinity

At the time Langxian wrote his story, the subject matter of a

young woman sacrificing herself for her parent(s)-in-law was by no means new. It was a clichéd topic repeated again and again in the biographical sections on virtuous women in both official histories and local gazetteers. To accomplish his goal in writing a fantastic story about a female martyr, Langxian also faced the challenge of creating a heroine who would surpass the numerous famous models of self-sacrifice in such earlier works as Liu Xiang's (劉向, c. 77-6 B.C.) *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (*Lienü zhuan* 列女傳). Specifically, Langxian had to compete with the late Ming editions of *Biographies of Exemplary Women* which, as Katherine Carlitz notes, contained dramatic illustrations and were beautifully printed (117-118).

And yet, instead of suffering under the "anxiety of influence," Langxian cleverly used two former models as background to highlight the uniqueness of his heroine: her transcending the role of an affined daughter-in-law and embracing the consanguine bond with her husband's family.

In the preamble, the narrator cites an example of a truly filial daughter from the *History of the Later Han* (*Hou Han shu* 後漢書): Cao E (曹娥, d. 108), a young girl, sacrifices her life by throwing herself into a river so that her father's drowned body can be retrieved.[7] Langxian's narrator then argues that while we can find women who are filial to their own parents, we rarely see any who are filial in their non-consanguineous relationship with their parents-in-law. An exception to the rule is Mrs. Cui (崔), an exemplary woman in the well-known *Twenty-Four Examples of Filial Conduct* (*Ershisi xiao* 二十四孝), who suckles her old mother-in-law back to health. Exceptional though Mrs. Cui is, argues the narrator, she is still not truly extraordinary. She has, after all, kept her body in order to suckle her mother-in-law. By contrast, the filial heroine in Langxian's story, Zong Erniang, will have her body minced on the chopping block so that her husband can go home to support his mother (280-281).

The examples of Cao E and Mrs. Cui are important not only as foils to the morally superior Zong Erniang; their tales also serve as precursors to Langxian's story of filial love, physical sacrifice, and

retributive justice. Cao E literally exchanges her own live, youthful body for her father's corpse, while Mrs. Cui, nurturing her mother-in-law with her breast milk, pumps her vital bodily fluid into her mother-in-law's debilitated body, metaphorically replacing the old body with her youthful one. These two examples become the precursors to Zong Erniang who will *literally* exchange her body for the living bodies of her husband and mother-in-law. Instead of having her breast milk drunk, she will have her body smashed to pieces (*fenshen suigu* 粉身碎骨), literally, "the body is powdered and the bones smashed to pieces," 281, 283) and metaphorically consumed by her loved ones, thereby commingling with their blood, flesh, and bone. Moreover, the narrator retells the stories of Cao E and Mrs. Cui by adding details of divine justice, stating how Heaven and Earth are moved by such exemplary acts of sincere love. Because Zong Erniang's sacrifice is greater than those of her two precursors, her story ends with greater retributive justice and miracles.

The motives of Zhou Di's wife in the earlier source, whether a sense of moral duty or love for her parent(s)-in-law, are not specified. Zong Erniang's intentions, however, are explicitly articulated in Langxian's version. Langxian includes a great many details about the interaction among Zhou Di, his mother Madame Yue, and his wife, and clearly constructs a mutually loving relationship between Zong Erniang and her mother-in-law. This bond develops over twenty years during which Zong serves Madame Yue attentively, while Zhou Di is often away from home; Zong and Yue are shown to have a rapport, affection, and respect for one another.

In showing Zong Erniang and Madame Yue as considerate of each other's needs, Langxian's story radically differs from many other vernacular stories that focus on the stereotypical perennial conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Langxian portrays an exemplary scenario in which two women, of different ages, families, and potentially opposing interests, can develop a strong bond. Rather than regarding her daughter-in-law as an intruder and potential rival for her son, Madame Yue accepts Zong and is concerned about her well-being. On her part, Zong Erniang does not

regard her mother-in-law as an obstacle to her bond with her husband or to her assumption of domestic power, but labors selflessly on the Zhou family's behalf. Because they share the same allegiance, they are free from suspicion and conflict and can develop a long-lasting intimacy.

However, Langxian shows how the mutual affection between Zong Erniang and Madame Yue can be complicated by their occasional misperception of each other's needs. Since Zhou Di has exhausted all his capital—partly because of the war but also partly because of his ineptness as a merchant—he has been staying home for some years. Seeing how the family savings have dwindled to almost nothing, Madame Yue urges her son to go to Xiangyang to collect debts and do a little trading; she offers fifty taels of silver, the nest egg saved to cover her funeral expenses, for her son's traveling expenses and capital. As a dutiful daughter-in-law, Zong Erniang seconds Madame Yue's proposal and promises her husband that "if hardships become insurmountable, I'm willing to have my body smashed to pieces in order to support Mother."(283). Not knowing when he will return, Zhou Di asks Zong Erniang to take as good care of Mother as a son would (in place of him) and to entertain her as grandchildren would.

The mention of grandchildren reminds Madame Yue that the couple has not yet had a son to continue the family line. She wants Zong Erniang to travel with Zhou Di in order to look after the luggage and goods and to have the chance to become pregnant, insisting that she herself can have a widowed relative move in to keep her company. Because she loves her son and her daughter-in-law, whom she perceives to be a "loving" (*you en you ai* 有恩有愛) (284) couple, Madame Yue wants them to enjoy conjugal love and is therefore willing to part with her primary caregiver—her daughter-in-law. In fact, Zong Erniang feels a stronger bond with Yue than with her husband and would rather stay with Yue. Furthermore, Madame Yue regards having a son as the couple's unspoken desire, while the couple actually only wishes to take care of her.

A further complication develops when Zong Erniang, with good

humor, tries to dissuade Madame Yue from this decision. Informing Yue that parting with both son and daughter-in-law is extremely risky, Zong Erniang suggests that her husband go out alone, and if business is good, take a concubine and try to have a son. When Madame Yue makes a self-sacrificing gesture, offering to give up Zong Erniang's company, Zong reciprocates this kindness by insisting she herself should give up her husband's company. Moreover, because Zong misinterprets Madame Yue's decision as prompted primarily by a pressing desire for a grandson, Zong offers to let her husband take a concubine elsewhere.

Langxian then shows how mutual considerateness, though born of a sense of consanguinity, can ironically have negative consequences. Madame Yue refuses to accept Zong Erniang's self-effacing offer, arguing that Zong has endured much hardship during the difficult years and that it would be unfair for Zhou Di to take a concubine. To demonstrate her unswerving determination, Yue threatens to kill herself with a kitchen knife if the couple disobeys her. Grateful for her mother-in-law's love, Zong Erniang cannot bear to part with her, nor can she offend her. With mixed feelings, Zong Erniang is thus forced to embark on the trip that will prove to be her doom.

Through a careful handling of the characters' conversation in this particular episode, Langxian reveals how Zong Erniang embraces consanguinity with her husband's family and how she is determined to reciprocate her mother-in-law's kindness toward her. It is perhaps not fortuitous that Langxian provides her with the last name Zong, which means "ancestor or clan," suggesting her devotion to preserving her husband's family. He portrays her as deferential and sincere toward her mother-in-law, behaving according to the guidelines set down in chapter 10 of *The Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiao jing* 孝經) for a filial *son*: "In serving his parents a filial son renders utmost reverence to them while at home; he supports them with joy; he gives them tender care in sickness . . ." (23). Forced to leave home, Zong Erniang nevertheless hides her tears and pretends to be cheerful when bidding her mother-in-law adieu.

Langxian creates an atmosphere of dread, anticipation, and foreboding. Madame Yue's threat to kill herself with a kitchen knife foreshadows the way Zong Erniang will die, while Zong expresses her readiness to shed her blood for someone she feels is a blood relative. The narrative's hints of doom emphasize Zong Erniang's desire to sacrifice herself for her mother-in-law. Full of foreboding, she mutters to herself, "Mother-in-law, you gave up your daughter-in-law for the sake of your son. I'm afraid your daughter-in-law will have to give up her husband for your sake." (285). These words show her to be so prescient that she foresees what she will have to do to ensure the survival of her husband and mother-in-law. Furthermore, narratorial comments underscore Zong's inseparable bond with her mother-in-law: when foretelling the future, the narrator describes Zong Erniang as "able to leave her husband behind but unable to part with her mother-in-law" (285).

Zong Erniang's transcendence of her role as a daughter of the Zong family and self-identification as a member of the Zhou family are crucial to her later choice of sacrifice. Had she seen herself primarily as a daughter of the Zongs and only an outsider affined to the Zhous, she would have found it disloyal to her own parents to have her body butchered. According to chapter 1 of *The Classic of Filial Piety*, "Seeing that our body, with hair and skin, is derived from our parents, we should not allow it to be injured in any way. This is the beginning of filiality" (3). But because her filial piety for Madame Yue comes naturally from love, not just from a sense of duty, she becomes a filial daughter—or son—to her, not just a daughter-in-law.

In addition to playing the roles of daughter and of wife, Zong Erniang assumes the role of "mother" to both her mother-in-law and her husband—a most important role in the web of consanguinity. While the couple is away, Madame Yue has a dream in which Zong Erniang appears and delivers a cryptic message:

> Mother-in-law, I'm back. Your son has taken a concubine (*pianfang* 偏房) who is neither tall nor short, neither fat nor thin, and whose body has been smashed to pieces; she

> is but his original chamber-wife (*zishe* 子舍). Your son has fathered a child who is both big and small, both real and false, who has dishevelled hair and a grimy face; he is no different from the Young Zhou of a former day." (302)

Stating that Zhou Di "has taken a concubine" and "fathered" a son, this message echoes an earlier dialogue in which Madame Yue reveals the desire for a grandson and Zong Erniang expresses the wish for her husband to take a concubine (*pianfang*). In fact, Zhou Di has not taken a concubine, nor has he fathered a son. Thoughtful of Madame Yue even *after* her own death, Zong Erniang's ghost presents this riddle not to hurtfully deceive her beloved mother-in-law but to soften the blow and reduce the shock of the cruel news she will eventually receive.

Widmer interprets the intention of Zong Erniang's ghost delivering a message to Madame Yue as "partly to blame the mother-in-law for her incorrect decisions or simply to give vent to her own distress at what she has been through." (Widmer 1994, 189). But the tone and the message itself express neither rancor nor blame. Like other vernacular story writers, Langxian frequently employed the technique of supernatural dreams in which the ghost of the deceased character reports his/her death to a beloved relative or friend, or a divine being delivers a conundrum-like, predictive messages to a mortal. Madame Yue's dream contains both report and prediction.

Throughout the story, Zong Erniang has not blamed her mother-in-law for sending her on the ill-fated trip and has accepted her destiny. After all, according to Langxian's plot design, her mother-in-law is not the only "culprit." In addition to Madame Yue's miscalculations, Zhou Di's loss of capital and Zong Erniang's urging him to take the merchant Wang's offer also lead them to entrapment in Yangzhou. The tone of Zong's message in the dream is thus consistent with that of her oration, in which she *laments* her fate, but does not *blame* anyone. Zong thus exhibits in the dream maternal attributes in her attempts to console her mother-in-law for her loss.

There is also a metaphorical truth in the black humor. Enigmatic

though Zong Erniang's message is, it is not a lie or a literal statement, but a parable, revealing that Zong Erniang has died and predicting Zhou Di's return. For it is through Zong Erniang's death that Zhou Di is given a new lease on life; Madame Yue regains her son and her own survival is insured. Thus, Zong Erniang serves as a surrogate mother: by submitting to death and dismemberment to preserve those she loves, trading her life and her body for the wholeness of the bodies of her husband and mother-in-law, she metaphorically gives birth to them both. Zong Erniang's assumption of the maternal role is further underscored after her apotheosis: she protects her mother-in-law and her husband, blessing them with longevity.

From Passivity to Agency

Caroline Bynum, when applying Victor Turner's social drama approach to her research on the Middle Ages, discovers that Turner's ideas of climax, conversion, reintegration and triumph, and liminality of reversal describe the stories of male saints better than those of women, which are comparatively less processual. Women's images and symbols continue or enhance their ordinary experience (32-33). In constructing a social drama, Langxian's story follows Turner's model to a certain extent: in addition to climax, reintegration and triumph, it includes inversion, showing Zong Erniang as superior to, and more "masculine" than, her husband. However, the inversion does not arise suddenly but results from a continuing process and development of Zong's inherent characteristics. Rather than divorcing her sharply from her various roles as a woman, Zong's martyrdom and adoption of "masculine" courage are shown to be a natural continuation of those ordinary feminine experiences.

The story details how, just as Zong Erniang moves from the role of a daughter-in-law and wife to that of a daughter or son and finally to that of a mother, she also proceeds from dependence upon her husband to mutual dependence with him and finally to independence in her decision making. In the beginning, she is a housewife, financially dependent upon her husband. But even at home, she

exhibits the management skills of a capable homemaker. When her husband no longer brings in money and has to take the fifty taels from his mother, Zong Erniang even adopts the role of a surrogate mother in enjoining him to be careful about the money and try hard to earn some profit from it. On the whole, however, her existence at home is relatively passive. It is during their journey that she begins to display more fully her intelligence, astuteness, and bravery.

Langxian designs various stages of hardships to show how the dependent wife gradually becomes the one to be relied upon. At first the couple stays at a former middleman's house. The middleman has been dead for five years and both his wife and his son, a gambler, deny any knowledge of Zhou Di's old accounts. Unsuccessful at collecting debts and eager to use his capital for trading, Zhou Di naively asks the middleman's wife what goods he can buy. Zong Erniang immediately interrupts the conversation, claiming that they have come specifically to collect debts and have no extra money for buying goods. Then, when they are alone, she whispers a reprimand to her husband for being so careless. This incident is the first indication that Zong Erniang, the unworldly housewife, is ironically more "street-smart" than her husband, the trader. Despite her caution, the middleman's gambler son has already overheard Zhou Di's words and, at midnight, while the couple is sleeping, he steals their money (287).

Shrewder in financial and worldly matters, Zong Erniang is also far more resilient than her husband in recovering from setbacks. Penniless, Zhou Di jumps to the conclusion that they will both die. Zong Erniang, however, encourages him to concentrate on surviving long enough to escape:

> As the old saying goes, "Heaven never seals off all the exits." For the time being, let's take one day at a time. We'll be lucky if we can go home. But even though we may be at the end of our rope, there are two of us: if you die, there's still me left, or if I die, there's still you left. One way or another, one of us should be able to return home to support Mother. (287)

When a rich merchant surnamed Wang takes pity on Zhou Di and offers him a position, it is Zong who helps Zhou Di make the decision: correctly judging Wang to be an "honest, kind elder," Zong advises Zhou Di to be "flexible enough to accept opportunities" and take the offer (289).

The gradual process of role inversion is shown in Zhou Di's panicking and weeping whenever disaster strikes, contrasted with Zong Erniang's ability to face crises squarely and think of alternatives. When Yangzhou is under attack and civilians are fleeing for their lives, the merchant Wang gives the couple twenty taels of silver as a parting gift before he leaves. By the time the couple reaches the city gate, however, it is locked and no one is allowed to leave the town. Zhou Di sees this as another dead end, but Zong Erniang instructs him: "In all situations, there are canonical measures but there are also expedient ones. Only when you adapt yourself to changes and try to survive amidst death can you be regarded as a hail, manly fellow" (292). Reminding him that crying is useless, Zong suggests that they temporarily find a safe place for lodging and live frugally on the money given them by Wang, waiting for a chance to go home when they can. Though cautiously optimistic, Zong is sensible and experienced enough to realize that the siege might last a long time. She prepares for the worst, purchasing and storing several months' worth of provisions with the money given them by Wang. Because of her foresight, the couple can survive for a longer period of time than some other people even when the city eventually runs out of food.

Zong Erniang's assumption of the role of a disciplining parent—reprimanding her husband and taking her mother-in-law's side—marks her increasing agency. When the couple's capital is stolen and Zhou Di blames his mother for sending them out, forcing them to die in a strange place, Zong Erniang rebukes him: "This was due to your own carelessness! How can you blame Mother? It is unfilial of you to do so." (287). Again, when they have exhausted their food supplies, Zhou Di wails:

"Mother had hoped that after you and I were trading on the road for one or two years, we would earn some profit and have a son. How could we have expected to die here? Isn't it Mother who got us snared in this death-trap?"

Zong Erniang grinned with bitterness: "Even if you cry from today until tomorrow, or from tomorrow until the day after tomorrow, we cannot both return home. I recall the example of Zuo Botao (左伯桃) and Yang Jiao'ai (羊角哀). When they suffered from extreme cold and hunger, one of them died so that the other could be saved. Now, people are being butchered and their flesh sold in the market. Whether good or bad, a person's flesh is worth at least two strings of cash. Either you sell me and use the money for traveling expenses to go home and support Mother, or I sell you and use the money for traveling expenses to go home and support Mother. This alone is a solution for the long term. It's up to you to decide." (295)

The allusion to Zuo Botao and Yang Jiao'ai signals the couple's move toward mutual dependency, showing that Zong Erniang not only internalizes such moral examples but regards herself as her husband's equal. A historical model of selfless masculine friendship, Zuo Botao and Yang Jiao'ai were natives of the state of Yan in the Zhou dynasty. On their way to the state of Chu, they encountered heavy rain and snowfall. Because their provisions were scarce, Zuo Botao gave his own clothes and food to Yang Jiao'ai and asked him to continue his trip while Zuo Botao stayed behind, finally dying from starvation and the cold. Yang Jiao'ai eventually reached Chu where he became a great official. He then prepared sacrificial items and gave Zuo Botao a proper burial.

Langxian is obviously influenced by story 7 in *Stories Old and New* (*Gujin xiaoshuo* 古今小說, 1620), Feng Menglong's forty-piece collection of stories. Entitled "Yang Jiao'ai she ming quan jiao" (羊角哀捨命全交) (114-120), this story is a revised version of the earlier anecdote, emphasizing poetic justice and adding supernatural events

of heavenly requital. Though celebrating male friendship, this anecdote contains elements paralleling the couple's, such as their journey and their desperate predicament. Zong Erniang's allusion to this anecdote and comparison of their predicament with that of the two worthies reveal her moral aspirations, which transcend conventional gender distinctions.

The narrator, however, deliberately hides Zong's intention at this point. What readers see is merely her expression of hope that, as a couple, like two bosom friends or even two brothers, either would sacrifice his or her own life so that the other could achieve merit by returning home and fulfilling filial duties. Instead of volunteering then and there to be the one to sacrifice herself, she leaves this decision to her husband, thereby "testing" his moral courage and love. In fact, this is not a real test at all, since, with her intimate knowledge of her husband, she knows he will fail it. The following grim scene, in which the couple discusses the sale of their bodies, illustrates the remarkable contrast between Zhou Di's fear and Zong Erniang's sangfroid:

> When Zhou Di heard of people having their bodies slaughtered for sale, all the flesh in his body started to quiver. Shaking his head, he said, "No, this won't do."
>
> Zong Erniang grinned, "If you're not willing, I'm afraid we will both starve to death and will become food to fill up other people's bellies for free. We might as well sell one of us so we can get two strings of cash and one of us can then go home."
>
> Unable to make up his mind, Zhou Di did not reply.
>
> Seeing how afraid of death he was, Zong Erniang urged him: "Either you take a long or a short view, hurry and make a decision!"
>
> "I'm utterly helpless."
>
> "In that case, what about leaving me here and going back by yourself?"
>
> "How can you stay here?"
>
> "How can you leave?"

> "All right, I'll die," said he. However, although his body seemed to want to move, it did not budge. After all, he was still reluctant to part with his life.
>
> Seeing him like this, Zong Erniang grabbed his sleeves and said, "Stay here and pack our luggage. I'll go to the market to make a good bargain." Immediately after saying this, she left. (295-296).

The narratorial remark at this point underscores how Zong Erniang's courage reverses the traditional, stereotypical conception of woman:

> Look, dear reader, when Zhou Di mentions death, he is all terror, but when Zong Erniang talks about having the body butchered, she is self-possessed. You can see that a woman of heroic character (*liexing nüzi* 烈性女子) is superior to a weak man. (296).

Langxian, however, does not emphasize an inversion of gender roles. Although Zong Erniang is depicted as confronting emergencies calmly, rationally, and resourcefully, she still retains her womanly characteristics and plays women's roles.

Upon Zhou Di's failure to pass the "test" of courage, Zong Erniang's relationship with him turns from mutual dependence to independence. She will be the leader, completely in charge, taking actions even without his knowledge and agreement, while he will be passively waiting for her and following her instructions. Far from being maudlin and sentimental, she is unusually dispassionate; she shows her love by action, rather than empty promises. Knowing full well that her husband would never voluntarily offer to be butchered, she takes the initiative to negotiate the deal requiring *her* death, takes the cash to her husband, and insures that he receive her instructions urging him to go home. She is cautious enough to withhold the information of the completed sale of her body from her husband so that he will not, because of his fear of death and love for her, deter her

from selling herself. With the considerateness typically associated with women, she also carefully arranges to spare her husband the sight of her violent death.

Indeed, it is because Zhou Di has relinquished agency that Zong Erniang cannot but assume it. One may wonder if Zhou Di's misapprehension of his wife's intentions was genuine. Having lived with her for twenty years, can he still know her so little that he cannot comprehend what her plan is? Of course, it is possible that he has neither understanding of business nor understanding of human nature, not even of his wife of twenty years. An even more plausible interpretation might be that, prompted by a survival instinct, he refuses to confront the truth which will hurt him badly. His assumption of total passivity also results from a sense of self-protection; handing control over to his ever-resourceful wife, he perhaps secretly wishes that she will again come up with a scheme for their rescue.

The most important moments which display Zong Erniang's agency are in the scenes of her choosing death, her composing and reading of a funerary oration for herself, and her facing death bravely and alone. Of course, she is driven to death by war and famine, but her choosing to die in the butcher's stall over dying of starvation with her husband at the inn bespeaks her control of her body. Indeed, she has a warrior's attitude. Aware that we all must eventually face death, the important question being *how* we do this, she chooses to die bravely and for a good cause, rather than in a cowardly and futile fashion.[8] Further, by writing about her own life, predicament, and hopes, she attempts to take control of the "reading" of her life:

> [After she finished washing in the rear of the shop,] she walked out to the [front of the] shop and asked for a sheet of white paper. She took the worn-out brush used for account-keeping from the shop counter and wrote a funeral oration for herself. When she finished writing, she walked out to the street, made four obeisances in the direction of Hongzhou, knelt on the ground, and unrolled the sheet of

paper to read the oration. The butcher's neighbors as well as the passers-by crowded there to watch her. Unhurriedly and calmly, Zong Erniang recited the oration in a loud voice:

"Pitiless is Heaven to have me born under an unlucky star. Early on I married into the Zhou family and served my husband. Since my father-in-law died early, I have only had my mother-in-law to attend to. Much ashamed of [failing to] perform the duties of a daughter-in-law, I exerted myself from morning till dark. Unexpectedly the world fell into disorder and weapons made trouble day by day. In the public domain, the country suffered ruin; in the private domain, families suffered destruction. Mother-in-law ordered us to travel and engage in trade, but the profit was smaller than a snail or a fly. We were sojourning here in Yangzhou when bandits besieged the city. One battle has succeeded another so that grain and millet have not been harvested. [We had to] catch sparrows and dig for rats; firewood is now as dear as cassia and rice as dear as pearls. In no time, my life will come to an end anyway—why should I begrudge the sacrifice of my body now? By this, I can obtain travel funds for my husband so that he can travel hundreds of miles to find his mother. When he sees his mother, I will be able to rest in peace. I only entreat Heaven for protection. May the Glorious One watch over us. May my mother-in-law enjoy longevity and my husband enjoy prosperity to the full. May he marry again so that he can be blessed with a son. Alas, such is my life! Yet I have neither fear nor resentment. May Heaven inspect my heart. May weapons be put away and peace return. May all those who die in this chaotic time transcend

the cycle of transmigration with me!"

Having finished reciting, she again made four obeisances before getting up from the ground. Because she had recited the oration in the Jiangxi dialect, none of the bystanders understood what she was reading or why she was doing this.

Zong Erniang went inside the shop and handed the paper to the butcher. "My husband will surely come here to ask for me. May I trouble you to give this to him and tell him to return home speedily and not worry about me?"

"I'll do that," said the butcher, taking the paper and putting it aside.

Hearing this conversation, the bystanders turned to one another, saying, "So she was sold to the butcher by her husband." Then they left. (297).

The last detail is significant: Because the bystanders *assume* that a woman's body is the object of an exchange between men, they leave without feeling surprised. The crowd's assumption suggests that, in order to survive, men apparently have been selling their wives as table meat. And yet, although Zhou Di, as the possessor of his wife's body, has the power to do the same, he instead allows her to have control over her own body. Weak and pathetic, he is not, however, abusive; lacking the courage and the skills to protect his wife, he still loves and respects her. The bystanders' misinterpretation of the event indirectly makes Zhou Di look a little more worth dying for.

Moreover, the bystanders' incomprehension of Zong Erniang's recitation and their misunderstanding of her situation are ironic reminders of her "alienness" that also sharpen the poignancy of her lonely state and enhance the sense of her extraordinary initiative and independence. Surrounded by strangers, Zong Erniang confronts their apathy and, obtaining no emotional support, she finally faces her death alone. In this and other ways, she resembles Aristotle's tragic hero as described in the *Poetics*, who becomes increasingly isolated:

> Zong Erniang immediately took off her clothes and made ready to be killed; her face did not change color. Although at first the butcher could not bear to kill her, he had already paid four strings of cash for her body and could not possibly afford to be scrupulous. Suppressing his feelings and hardening his heart, he seized and killed her. He slit open her chest and cut out her innards. Then he dragged her over and hacked her body apart, as though he were carving up a pig or a sheep. In no time he had chopped up the filial and heroic Zong Erniang on the butcher's block. (297-298).

Langxian further underscores Zong Erniang's courage and agency by delineating, in contrast, her husband's passivity and his fear upon discovering her death:

> When his wife did not return, Zhou Di, who had been waiting for her, locked the door of his room, and went out to look for her from the door of the inn.
>
> "Why isn't she back yet?" he muttered to himself.
>
> Seeing him at the door, the innkeeper asked, "Who are you looking for?"
>
> "My wife."
>
> "Aya! Your wife told me she was willing to sell her body to a butcher so you would have enough money to return home. She asked me to go with her to a butcher. After she and the butcher agreed upon a price, she brought the money back, gave it to you, and then went back to be killed. Didn't you receive those four strings of cash?"
>
> When Zhou Di heard this, he was so frightened that his face turned ashen and his body shook uncontrollably.
>
> "No, no, no. I don't believe it."
>
> "Do you think I'm lying to you? If you don't believe me, just go to the market and ask at the butcher shop num-

ber so-and-so."

Half staggering, Zhou Di went to the market as fast as he could. He went from door to door, counting the shops, until he reached the very butcher shop the innkeeper had described. There he opened his eyes wide and took a good look—verily Zong Erniang was already chopped up on the meat counter. Her eyes and mouth were wide open and her face did not change color.

"Oh, how miserable!" Zhou Di cried, falling to the ground. His teeth clattered like those of an old stork and his body trembled like a wintry crow trying to shake off the snow.

He cried his heart out. "My dear wife, why didn't you make it clear to me? Why did you do this so rashly?"

Hearing his sobs, the butcher took out Zong Erniang's funeral oration and gave it to him: "Your wife left this for you. She said you should go home quickly and not worry about her." (298-299)

Langxian emphasizes that, while living, Zong Erniang is not incorporated into the social body; only through her violent death is she joined with it. Although her final utterances are incomprehensible to bystanders and her action and circumstances are misinterpreted, Zong Erniang is vindicated and receives sympathy and honors after her death. When her husband reads her oration and weepingly informs the curious passers-by of her sacrifice, some of the literate ones read the oration and praise Zong Erniang as a "filial and heroic woman" (*xiaolie niüniang* 孝烈女娘) who "dies to achieve virtue" (*shashen chengren* 殺身成仁, a phrase commonly used to describe male martyrs, 299). Blaming the butcher for killing her, they sympathetically urge Zhou Di to heed her dying words and go home. Then miracles begin occurring as a reward for Zong Erniang's martyrdom. Thus, the narrative emphasizes Zong Erniang's mastery of her own body; in death, she exerts control over her reputation as well as her relationships with other individuals and with Heaven.

The description of Zong Erniang's martyrdom offers a good comparison with the representations of martyrs in Western texts. In the West, it is the state or the church that has control over the woman martyr's body; the woman has no control over her body (save perhaps for her voice) and has to overcome bodily pain and keep her courage.[9] In this story, Zong Erniang has complete control over her body. Rather than being driven to death passively, Zong Erniang decides to take death into her own hands so that she can provide for her husband's survival.

Frances E. Dolan has noted the contrast between the Catholic tradition of glorifying and displaying the suffering female body and the Protestant aesthetic which represents martyred women as disembodied (167-168). In Langxian's story, Zong Erniang's body is displayed, though in an entirely sexless manner. Her body is compared to that of a slaughtered beast to underscore the cruelty of the act, emphasizing her human nobility in contrast and presenting her as a willing, not helpless, sacrificial offering.

Like some women martyrs in the West who wrote their own autobiographies (Anne Askew and Perpetua of Carthage) or whose last words are recorded (Dolan, 159-177), Zong is far from silent when facing death. In staging her suffering, Langxian gives her a distinct and clear voice, allowing her to tell and interpret her own story.

Finally, while martyrs in the West are often presented as being tortured for their adherence to their beliefs, choosing to die painfully rather than to verbally renounce their faith and their principles, Zong Erniang dies for a very different reason. Even though some bystanders praise her for dying for a just cause, her accomplishment is not the attainment of some abstract or metaphysical goal but the fulfillment of a tangible and earthly objective: ensuring the survival of those she loves. The scope of her cause is small and personal: she suffers pain and death so that her husband's family can benefit immediately from it. While she appears to be incidentally upholding the "abstract" principle of filial piety (which is in fact very "concrete" to her), her *motives* are love of and concern for the lives and welfare of other

human beings, not achieving redemption of her own immaterial soul or maintaining faith in and devotion to an intangible supernatural being. Hers is therefore a different kind of martyrdom.

From Transaction to Transformation

The underlying structure of money and exchange greatly enhances the sense of the grotesque in this story of martyrdom. Zhou Di is a trader by profession, in possession of capital, while Zong Erniang has only her own body. That Zong Erniang's body is her only resource can also be seen in her vow to preserve her mother-in-law at the expense of "having my body smashed to pieces." It is Madame Yue's worry over the family's financial condition that leads to the couple's leaving their hometown. Although she yields to the wishes of her naively optimistic mother-in-law, Zong Erniang is more familiar with the world of exchange and, knowing that there is little profit to be made during wartime, worries in advance that she or her husband may face death on the trip. The theft of Zhou Di's capital dashes all hope for profit. When the couple becomes penniless and "equal"—Zhou Di also has only his body left—Zong Erniang is the one who will eventually consider selling her body in exchange for the welfare of her husband's family.

The personal drama of transaction is played out in a larger, public context of exchange. The private sufferings of ordinary civilians result from military maneuvers in which various commanders clamor for power and position. Langxian gives a detailed account of the exchange of power: Lü Yongzhi (呂用之), a villainous aide to Gao Pian (高駢), the military commissioner of Yangzhou, wants to usurp Gao Pian's position; afraid of Commander Bi Shiduo, Lü summons Bi to Yangzhou so as to kill him first. Bi, however, takes preemptive measures and leads his troops to attack Yangzhou. Lü summons Commander Yang Xingmi (楊行密) to come to his rescue. When Bi defeats Gao Pian's troops, Gao surrenders, while Lü escapes to Yang. Yang's army lays siege to Yangzhou for over eight months. Thus, earth-shaking decisions are made by treacherous, ignoble

generals.

The public dimension exerts a direct influence on the private. As warfare continues to wreak havoc, ordinary people begin to imitate the soldiers in their senseless slaughter. During the siege, the soldiers in Yangzhou at first kill and eat horses, then they feed on dead people, and finally the stronger survivors kill other wounded soldiers for food. By the time the siege is lifted by Yang Xingmi, people have become inured to cruelty:

> Although the warfare had come to a stop, the field had been deserted for so long that not one single grain could be harvested. People still lacked food. Not only had they exhausted all such means as catching sparrows and digging for rats but they had also ripped up all the grass roots and stripped off all the tree bark.
>
> Starved in the extreme, the poor, in order to save their skin, had no other choice but to seize the children deserted on the road by their parents and cook them. Some of the poor folk stole other people's children for food. When rich people knew about it, they secretly bought these abducted children to allay their own hunger. At first, such conduct was still looked upon as bizarre. But in a few days' time, however, people began to openly kill other humans for food. Even when father and son, brothers, and husband and wife began to sell one another, no one objected. Even Yang Xingmi's troops, when provisions and funds were lacking, would feed on human flesh. Therefore, they could not restrain commoners from eating human flesh.
>
> At that time, some people opened a market; whoever wanted to sell themselves would be put on the market. Some shopkeepers bought these humans, slaughtered them, and sold the flesh by pieces as if the humans were pigs and sheep. Depending upon whether they were old or young, fat or thin, these humans were sold for various prices and had different nicknames. Old folks were called "Shao ba

> huo" (燒把火, "fit only for stoking a fire"); children were called "Huo gu lan" (和骨爛, "cook until the bones are so soft they can be chewed along with the meat"); the white and skinny ones were supposed to taste bitter and were named "Dan cai" (淡菜, literally, "tasteless dish," also a term for "mussel"); while the dark and stout ones were thought to taste sweet and were called "Gaoyang" (羔羊, "Lamb"). The top quality ones were worth three or four strings of cash, while the low grade ones would sell for only a thousand cash.
>
> Half of the people in town were eventually killed for food. The one to be killed only had to suffer one blow; after he was dead, even if his flesh were boiled, steamed, sautéd, or stir-fried, he would feel no pain. By contrast, the ones not yet sold were constantly feeling sad and miserable because they worried that their turn would come soon. (294)

All the graphic details of selection, price, and methods of cooking enhance the sense of the grotesque; people are assessed as though they were livestock, raised to be slaughtered, carved up, and sold as table meat. Involving a complete denial of human dignity, this sense of the grotesque is by no means "carnivalesque" and positive, as is the Bakhtinian grotesque.[10]

It is in this context of "human flesh as marketable" that Zong Erniang plays both the roles of agent and of commodity. Unlike Zuo Botao and Yang Jiao'ai, the fabled models of exemplary behavior in Zong's allusion, who still jointly possess enough clothes and food for one of them to survive, the couple has only their own bodies. In the context of the human flesh market, Zong Erniang can calmly suggest the frightful option of selling one of their bodies as food. Zong replaces her husband as the trader, skillfully arranging the sale of her own body. In order to obtain a good price, she asks the innkeeper to serve as middleman. He takes her to a butcher with whom he is familiar. The butcher offers three strings of cash, but Zong Erniang

haggles with him and succeeds in getting four strings of cash. In addition to negotiating for a better price in the sale, Zong Erniang persuades the butcher into letting her take the money back to her husband first before submitting to the slaughter.

Around her husband, however, Zong Erniang pretends to act only as the trader, leading him into thinking that he is the commodity that has been sold. By thus lying to him, she keeps him from wanting to back out of the sale and spares him the terror of witnessing her death. Her lie also serves as the second litmus "test" of her husband's moral courage:

> Taking the four strings of cash back to the inn, Zong Erniang put them on the table, pointed at them, and said, "This is the money from your *laoniang*'s (老娘, "mother" or "wife") sale of [her] son. One way or another, you should go to the market. Then I will use the money for traveling expenses and go home to visit my mother-in-law."
>
> Zhou Di was so frightened that his soul seemed to have left his body. His face turned ashen. Although he would have liked to reply, his throat felt stifled. After stretching his neck a few times, he still could not utter a word. Teardrops as big as soybeans flowed down his cheeks.
>
> Seeing this, Zong Erniang grinned, "Since this sale cannot be completed, I'll go back to tell him [i.e., the butcher]."
>
> She turned and hurriedly went back to the butcher's. (296)

This scene of the couple's final farewell is superbly executed: The reader is aware that Zong Erniang knows of the coming terror, while her husband does not. She may strike some readers as cold and unfeeling here, leaving her husband in such an "incredibly" unsentimental and businesslike manner, in contrast to her affectionate farewell to her mother-in-law. However, rather than simply being

chilly by nature, she may be building up resolve to carry through her plan. She acts emotionlessly, perhaps afraid of giving in to sentiment or even breaking down.

Together with her previous "test" of her husband and her reading of the oration, this last trip to her husband possibly also represents a gesture in hope of rescue. On one level of consciousness, she may know very well that neither her husband nor the bystanders will comprehend her plan or stop her, yet she still may be making the very human gesture of asking for a last-minute reprieve. Langxian's presentation of her nobility as complicated and tinged by human weakness makes the character of Zong Erniang more credible.

Zong Erniang's death takes place in the context of a business transaction, heightening our sense of the grotesque as she is both trader and means of exchange. Langxian transforms her killing into a martyrdom by presenting the rituals accompanying the butchery and the divine manifestations after her death. Before being killed, she performs the ritual of cleansing her body:

> Zong Erniang said to the butcher: "I will be killed in a moment. But before I die under the knife, I would like to ask for some water to wash my body a little and to thank the kindness of my parents in raising me and of my parents-in-law in matching me with my husband."
>
> Finding her words high-sounding and impractical, the butcher burst out laughing, "What a fastidious item for sale she is!"
>
> Then the butcher led her inside to the rear of the shop. There she drew up a tub of clean water, washed herself, and then put her clothes back on. (296-297)

Although the butcher thinks in terms of commodities, he is not oblivious to Zong Erniang's sense of decorum and nobility. He complies with her request to wash before dying and later hesitates before killing her. But, in the end, it is neither religious beliefs nor ethics which determine his actions: the desire for money compels him

to act as a murderer.

Langxian shows how Zong Erniang stands above the structure of money and exchange because she insists on proper behavior even during chaotic times. The degradation of others provides chiaroscuro, a darkness highlighting her exemplary conduct. Zong Erniang purifies herself not only to prepare for death but, more importantly, to show respect for her parents and parents-in-law, whom she will thank, and for Heaven, which she will invoke. As detailed in the passage translated above, she then composes a funeral oration and recites it after making obeisance in the direction of her hometown. Although recited to passers-by and strangers, this oration in truth reaches beyond the ostensible audience to address Heaven.

Indeed, Zong Erniang's invocation to the divine recalls the passionate plea made by Dou'e, the heroine in Guan Hanqing's (關漢卿) famous thirteenth-century play *The Injustice Done to Dou'e* (*Dou'e yuan* 竇娥冤), just before her execution. In comparison, Dou'e's final utterances on the execution ground are bitter and resentful; pleading her innocence, she castigates Heaven and Earth for failing to uphold justice (28). She also requests that Heaven prove her innocence by granting three wishes, one of them a wish for three years of drought in her native district (30-32). Though Zong Erniang's invocation expresses her anguish, it does not blame Heaven as much as Dou'e's. In a restrained tone, Zong goes beyond lamenting her fate and ends invoking not disaster but Heaven's blessings for her family as well as those who die in the war. Although Zong Erniang makes no predictions about future miracles, Heaven responds to her invocation with various divine manifestations.

To show how pitiful Zong's death is, Langxian contrasts the high and low images and styles of diction in these scenes. A great gulf lies between Zong Erniang's genteel values and those of the butcher. By delineating her proper behavior and speech before death, Langxian emphasizes how highly educated and well-bred Zong Erniang is. She speaks in polite language, is grateful to her parents' and parents-in-law's kindness (*en* 恩), and her oration is written and "recorded" in elegant classical Chinese. Yet in the market she is regarded as mere

property without independent agency, needing a man to serve as an intermediary in the sale.

Langxian elucidates the vulgarity of the mercantile world by repeating the word *huo* (貨, "commodity, goods, stock"); for example, the butcher is eager to buy Zong because he has just sold all the human flesh he has on his stall and is "out of stock" (*quehuo* 缺貨). As if buying livestock, he appraises Zong's body and finds that "although she was not plump, she was not thin, either." (296). Mistrustful, he is at first unwilling to let Zong go back to give her husband the money; he acquiesces only after the innkeeper promises to serve as a guarantor. In the context of an exchange between men, Zong Erniang's moral qualities are not the issue, because the butcher will only entrust another man with making sure his "property" is guarded and will be returned.

Calling her "an item for sale" ("hanghuozi" 行貨子, "a piece of goods/commodity"), the butcher ridicules Zong's request for self-cleansing and her wish to express gratitude. Perhaps a slight superstition leads the butcher, who is vaguely aware of Zong's finer feelings, to allow her final prayers; in his world of vulgar transactions and hardened feelings, the butcher cannot fully appreciate Zong Erniang's refined and learned ways. Langxian evokes readers' sympathy for her death, situating Zong Erniang in the ruthless market of human flesh and having her slaughtered by a butcher. This highly educated and virtuous woman has paid a steep "price" indeed, to exchange her precious body for the mere sum of four strings of cash!

The representation of violence in Zong Erniang's slaughter is also essential to the transformation of a business transaction into a martyrdom. Zong's willingness to sacrifice herself, especially her composure and courage in facing the imminent violence, moves even the butcher. Moreover, this violence gives her the opportunity to display the extreme extent of her filiality. As a result, her butchered body becomes a sacrificial offering, not merely flesh cut up for consumption.

Ellen Widmer has argued that this story contains a number of "hints of hidden subtexts," especially in the scenes of Zong's

bargaining with the butcher and preparing for her death, which make a reader consider the "outlandish possibility that the story was intended as a comic inversion of the values for which it seems to stand." Widmer points out characteristics which suggest comic stereotypes and "come close to invoking the paradigm of the shrew and her henpecked husband." (Widmer 1994, 188-189). According to Widmer, several scenes are especially significant in revealing tensions between Langxian's "manifest purposes" to present Zong as heroic in a formal rhetorical style and the presentation of her as a comic "shrew" and imperceptive "pedant." Although neither Zong nor the narrator perceive the sexual implications of Zong's negotiating with the butcher and preparing to die—suggested by the butcher's gaze and knife as well as the wording of Zong Erniang's remark "I am willing to sell myself on the market" (*wo qingyuan maishen shishang* 我情願賣身市上) (296)—Widmer points out that "the close analogy between selling flesh as meat and in prostitution threatens to rise to the surface, though it never overtly crosses the narrator's or the heroine's mind." Widmer further argues that "[t]he heroine's utter unawareness of this possibility contributes to her heroic stature, but in doing so it raises yet another interpretative problem, that her learning may have made her pedantic rather than heroic." (Widmer 1994, 171-72, 186, 189-91).

While Widmer may be correct that readers can find associations in any "selling of bodies" with the specifically sexual dealing of prostitution (male or female), we must not confuse *logical* categories: prostitution is one kind of a larger category (selling of bodies); all selling of bodies is not prostitution.

I would also argue that the language would not have suggested the possibility of "prostitution" to Langxian's contemporaries. The term "maishen" is not necessarily a sexual reference, since the term had traditionally been used in the case of either a man or a woman to mean *simply* "to sell oneself." In story 3 of *The Rocks*, Langxian uses the term "maishen" many times in the case of a filial daughter who wants to sell herself to pay back her father's debt; it is understood that she will sell herself as a maidservant, a concubine, or even a wife. In

the case of Zong Erniang, neither the language nor the situation has overtones of a sexual subtext. There is no ambiguity in her sentence when it is read in the context; she has mentioned the selling of human flesh on the market and suggested to her husband that either he sell her or she sell him; later, when the innkeeper repeats her sentence to Zhou Di, he only means that she sells her body as table meat. There are no overtones of a sexual bargain in these dialogues.

Although it is suggestiveness that is the issue here, I am constructing a literal reading and making an argument based on economics. Since Zong Erniang is not portrayed as particularly beautiful, and since the event takes place during a time of desperate famine when the desire for food far outweighs the desire for sex, it is also questionable whether prostitution is a likely alternative for earning more than four strings of cash or earning anything at all, in fact.

Turning to Widmer's argument that readers view Zong as "pedantic," I find the issue of point of view crucial in judging if such an overtone exists. I think it is highly unlikely that upper class male and female readers of Langxian's time would have adopted the butcher's view of Zong as "pedantic," or at all absurd in her ablutions and prayers. Of course, some bitterly ironic moments do occur: seeing the butcher's and the cannibal's point of view, the reader can appreciate the grim irony of Zong's sacrifice and the assessment of humans in terms appropriate only to farm animals. While there may be black comic moments to some readers in the description of types and values of human flesh, or in the butcher's view of Zong, neither women nor upper class men would identify with those "low" characters or adopt their perspective as privileged. After all, perceiving the irony is not the same as agreeing with the "low" acters' attitudes and point of view, thus seeing the heroine as silly and less noble. Their point of view is thoroughly discredited by their moral degeneracy. Widmer in fact concedes that Zong Erniang's oration "anchors the narrative on its heroic side." (Widmer 1994, 191)

To further emphasize how Zong's sacrifice should be viewed and to glorify her martyrdom, Langxian illustrates how it moves

Heaven and Earth and affects other people and nature. A flashback in the narrative tells the reader that even before Yang Xingmi's army arrived in Yangzhou, an immortal had already inscribed a poem on the city gate warning people not to eat the flesh of "the woman of Hongzhou." Unheeded, the warning's predictions come true:

> When Zong Erniang sold her body and was butchered, heaven and earth were shaken by thunderbolts and lightning. Violent wind raged and howled, and rivers and seas roared and gushed. All those who had purchased and eaten Zong Erniang's flesh died with their seven orifices oozing blood. All the trees and grass inside and outside Yangzhou withered and died. (298).[11]

Heaven thus responds to the violence done to Zong Erniang by having nature rise in just wrath: storms rage and plants die in empathy. Even more significantly, Heaven responds to her display of virtue with retributive justice, punishing those who have eaten her flesh. While in anecdotal and fictional accounts, it is not uncommon for cannibals to die from eating human flesh, Langxian's story does not use this to condemn survival cannibalism per se. In having only those who eat Zong's flesh punished, Langxian indicates that, transformed by her virtue, Zong Erniang's body has become sacred.

Drawing on the classical tradition, as presented in "The Biography of Yu Dingguo" ("Yu Dingguo zhuan" 于定國傳) from *History of the Han* (*Han shu* 漢書), the source of *The Injustice Done to Dou'e*, Langxian shows how supernatural events take place when a filial daughter-in-law dies from injustice. Such a portrayal follows exactly the belief espoused in "Evocation and Response" (*yinggan* 應感), chapter 16 of *The Classic of Filial Piety*: "When his filiality and fraternity reached perfection, he had free commerce with the spirit world."(35). Heaven responds by fulfilling the martyr's wishes as well as sending down calamity as retribution for the people's ignoring warnings. In the case of Dou'e, Heaven vindicates her by granting three wishes after her death. Three years of drought occur, not only to

prove her innocence but also to let the community bear the collective guilt for her unjust execution. Like Dou'e, Zong Erniang's spirit can communicate with the divine because of her utmost expression of filiality. But Zong is no "human sacrifice" for communal sharing. Unlike the venerated and magical relics of Western martyrs which were thought, for example, to cure the sick, Zong's body becomes "poison" to the sacrilegious ones who partake of it.

Moreover, Zong Erniang's death assumes a political dimension. Divine spirits aid Zhou Di on his way home; staying at an ancient temple for the night, he finds a hermit who, touched by the story of his wife's self-sacrifice, offers him a horse. Riding on this magic horse, Zhou Di reaches home in a few hours. He finds out that the hermit was the manifestation of the idol in the temple—Qu Yuan (屈原, 338-278 B.C.), the loyal court official of the Warring States period (403-221 B.C.)—and the horse was the temple's clay horse which had come alive. The appearance of Qu Yuan broadens the political significance of Zong's death: Zong dies for her husband and her husband's family just as Qu Yuan dies for his ruler and his country.

Zong Erniang's wishes to help her family are also granted, since Heaven compensates her after her death, as it does Dou'e. As a filial daughter-in-law, even after her own death Zong continues to care about and protect her mother-in-law. Becoming divine, Zong renders more help to her family, which has already benefitted from the butchery of her body. Granted the title and power of a goddess, Zong can further protect both Madame Yue and Zhou Di and bring her family glory. Grateful for her mother-in-law's kindness, she makes Madame Yue live to 130 years of age and Zhou Di to 110. When they die, auspicious clouds fill the room and an extraordinary fragrance wafts through the city of Hongzhou. Interpreting this as a reward for Zong Erniang's profound sincerity, all the people praise her (304).

Furthermore, Heaven makes Zong Erniang the Golden Goddess of Supreme Virtue, giving her the special mission of investigating cases involving daughters-in-law on earth. She is empowered to reward the filial ones and punish the obstinate and undutiful ones. Administering justice for the populace, she thus extends her care and

protection from the personal to the universal level.

The Multiplicity of Interpretation: Questions of Genre Expectations and Reading in Historical Contexts

Calling it a story of moral heroism, Patrick Hanan pointed out that it is "only a degree more gruesome than many other stories of filial sacrifice and martyrdom, which tend to applaud the extreme action, in which the moral will is seen at its strongest."(Hanan 1981, 136). Probably because it is "a degree more gruesome," the story defeats an easy and straightforward interpretation. The author's unusual rendering of the conjugal relationship also invites varied but intriguing readings. Ellen Widmer's analysis of this tale in the context of Langxian's other writings and the reading of women during the late Ming period adds to this perception of complicity in the story; her reading also creates an argument that there is a disjuncture between the heroic (Zong's heroism as conveyed through formal rhetoric) and the comic subversions (especially Zong's shrewishness and Zong's and the narrator's blindness to sexual innuendo). (Widmer 1994, 171). If her contentions about subversive elements in the text are correct, then the questions become whether or not Langxian intended these and what that may suggest. Furthermore, interpretation multiplies because of the perceptual and conceptual gap between Langxian's time and our own.

Placing Langxian in his historical context, we find that Langxian was typical of many other male writers of his time and his stories expressed similar concerns. It has been noted that scholars who failed the examinations and worried about moral decline were motivated to write morality books (Rawski 8-9, 15). The Confucian reformer Lü Kun (呂坤, 1536-1618), for example, wrote didactic works in colloquial language for women and children in order to educate them (Handlin 143-149). Feng Menglong, the prolific late-Ming writer, used vernacular fiction to instruct the populace in moral issues (Hanan 1981, 77-78). The revelation of the male elite's anxiety and

the blurring of the boundaries between fiction and strict morality works are also evidenced in Langxian's stories.

Like Lü Kun who worried about the decline of female education and its consequences (Handlin 147-148), Langxian voiced concern for women's lack of proper instruction. When discoursing on the importance of filial piety, the narrator generally expresses a low estimation of women and specifically judges them to be far inferior to men in performing filial deeds:

> Even those men who do not study, as long as they are somewhat sensible, imitate good examples of filial piety. Women alone are both biased and inexperienced; staying home all the time, they are also ignorant. Ordinarily they do nothing better than engage in chitchat with their sisters and female in-laws: what kind of clothes you have made, what sort of jewelry I have purchased, where you go to visit in-laws or relatives, and where I go to burn incense or fulfill a vow. Even the most virtuous and sensible among them chat about nothing but such domestic trivia as firewood, rice, oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar, and tea.[12] How can they ever learn of the girl, Tiying (緹縈), who rescued her father, or the woman, Zhao Wuniang (趙五娘), who performed filial deeds toward her parents-in-law?"[13] (279)

This paragraph presents an overall assessment of women as ignorant, superficial, and silly. Seen from this perspective, Langxian's focus on Zong Erniang's exceptional behavior actually reveals his adherence to the prevailing assumption that most ordinary women are not especially virtuous.

No one can deny, however, that in this story Zong Erniang commands much respect. Langxian employs an intriguing, single example who contrasts with the run-of-the-mill women described above: well-educated, Zong aspires to emulate the moral examples from the past, examples other women are not even aware of. Ellen Widmer has pointed out that Langxian's work reflects a conviction

that female learning does not conflict with female duties and is "the source from which those duties are realized in the extreme." (Widmer 1991, 65). She suggests in "Tragedy or Travesty?", however, that there is only a peculiar relationship between the heroine's reading and her heroic deeds (Widmer 1994, 186-187). I would argue, nonetheless, that Zong Erniang is shown to be exceptionally virtuous precisely *because* she is a woman of learning. For such women who are intelligent, experienced, resourceful, responsible, courageous, and selfless, Langxian is full of admiration. In addition to praising Zong Erniang, Langxian uses her as a moral exemplar to instruct his female audience.

It is usual for an author of Langxian's generation to praise a woman because she fulfills Confucian moral duty and aids in the perpetuation of the patriarchal family line. From a modern perspective, however, it is demeaning, not elevating, for women to sacrifice themselves to maintain the patriarchal system. As read by a contemporary of Langxian's, Zong Erniang's self-sacrifice could be motivated by her desire to help her husband obtain a son; Langxian's contemporaries might venerate Zong for her self-sacrifice, praising her as a useful instrument which assists the family in its important aim of maintaining the patriarchal line. Readers in the twentieth century, however, might perceive her act as diminishing her inherent value as a person and reinforcing her inferior status as a woman, important primarily because she is useful to the males in her family.

Significantly, the goal of maintaining the Zhou family line through a son is never achieved in Langxian's story. Rather than having Zhou Di remarry to obtain sons after his wife's death, Langxian specifically mentions that he "attended upon his mother wholeheartedly and did not remarry." (304). Had the author intended to use Zong as a model of one who sacrifices herself to perpetuate the patriarchal line, he would have staged a second marriage and the successful continuation of Zhou Di's lineage in order to make Zong's sacrifice "worthwhile." Although Widmer argues that Zhou Di's decision to remarry has much to do with his "horror" at his wife's

death (Widmer 1994, 186), I would suggest that Zhou Di and his mother have motives different from this. In the story, Langxian portrays Zhou Di and his mother as being so full of gratitude and respect for Zong Erniang that they willingly forgo their desire to continue the family line. Therefore, the representation of Zong's sacrifice does not reinforce women's inferior status in the clichéd style common to many such stories.

Throughout the story we find Zong Erniang portrayed as a survivor, unlike her weak and helpless husband. She gradually assumes agency, chipping away at her husband's authority. Indeed, she could even conceivably abandon her husband and guarantee her own safety. Why then should she be the one to sacrifice herself? Langxian's portrayal of Zong gives us clues as to her various motives.

Zong Erniang sacrifices herself because of her affection for and gratitude to her mother-in-law and the vow to support her, because of her dedication to the self-effacing and selfless role as a daughter-in-law, and because of her desire to emulate moral exemplars from former times. Rather than sacrificing herself on impulse or only out of a sense of duty, Zong makes a rational decision with a calculated objective. After testing her husband, she realizes that he will not have his body sold, and unless she sells herself, they will both starve to death.

Although the author illustrates that her heroic act transcends simple patriarchal family values, Zong's biological and family concerns may have influenced her decision, since she could not continue the Zhou family line without her husband, but her husband could do so without her. Furthermore, it would be a great deal harder for her to travel all the way back home than for her husband, since she would be more vulnerable to predatory bandits. Earlier in the story, Langxian provides a clue about a physical restriction that is a matter of concern for Zong: the couple fails to escape from Yangzhou in time because Zong cannot walk fast enough with bound feet.

While obviously glorifying an exceptional woman like Zong Erniang, does the story show contempt for a man like Zhou Di? Does Langxian truly believe that some women are superior to men in both

intelligence and virtue? Zhou Di is portrayed as inept, passive, ineffectual, and fearful on many occasions, serving as a foil to his extraordinarily capable wife. He is inferior in intelligence and ethical virtue. However, although on the whole he appears weak and even ridiculous, he is not completely contemptible. Langxian shows that his faults, his selfishness, and his fear of death are but human, and he does have some redeeming virtues: he is a filial son and a relatively loving, if not entirely selfless, husband. He does not desert his wife, even though her bound feet make her escaping from the besieged city difficult or impossible. The fact that Zhou Di does not remarry not only marks his love for her but also suggests that her death and sacrifice somehow bring him more knowledge and more comprehension about life. Despite Zhou Di's lower moral caliber, Langxian gives him a happy ending: Zhou Di returns home safely and lives till a ripe old age, as is his wife's wish.

Langxian portrays a conjugal relationship that is far from simple. The couple may be described as loving, but we find no scenes of their embracing each other or weeping together. It is almost always Zhou Di who weeps, while Zong Erniang remains calm or grins bitterly. From the couple's dialogue we can also gather that Zong must be somewhat disappointed by her husband. However, aware that he is only a fallible and weak person, she does not speak ill of him to other people, but pities, protects, and cares for him as a mother would her child. Because she is a woman of integrity, she chooses to die for her family rather than desert her husband altogether or take up a passive role by begging her husband to make the sacrifice. It is important to keep in mind that although Langxian portrays Zong as superior to her husband and adopting male roles at times, he still shows her as primarily identified with womenfolk and assuming women's roles. Thus, while Zhou Di is inferior to Zong, this does not mean that the glorification of Zong necessarily leads to total contempt for Zhou Di.

Although Langxian does not draw the conclusion that women are in general superior, he does demonstrate that a small group of extraordinary women can be superior to most men. In several passages of the story, Langxian has certainly expressed contempt for

reckless, irresponsible males and may well have felt some anxiety about the male elite and some frustration with his times. When citing the story of Cao E, the filial daughter, Langxian departs from the original legend in which her shaman father dies in the river while performing a ritual, portraying him instead as a flippant and reckless man who drowns while having fun "surfing" in the river when the tidal bores arise.

Qu Yuan, the model loyal poet-official exiled by the king because of other officials' slander, is a favorite figure in literature and in vernacular stories, symbolizing scholars whose talents and loyalties go unrecognized. By having Qu Yuan appear as a gaunt hermit lodging in a half-ruined temple, Langxian's version of the story emphasizes the literati's sense that they are unappreciated by the government and feel frustrated. That Qu Yuan's manifestation has the power to help Zhou Di implies a wish for the restoration of the correct political order—a desire that those who are talented and loyal should be placed in power, while the incompetent and the corrupt should be demoted.

Langxian's anxiety about the government and politics also surfaces in his implicit criticisms of the male elite. The wars that lead to the couple's displacement and the wife's sacrifice are caused by male generals who lack integrity and wisdom. Gao Pian, for example, is arrogant, superstitious, and fond of flattery; deceived by Lü Yongzhi, he retires into a Taoist monastery and becomes completely derelict. In their struggle for power, these commanders fight with one another, totally disregarding ethics, personal loyalty, and the commoners' sufferings. Juxtaposed with such senseless public feuding is the private agony of a commoner-couple.

And yet, although Zong Erniang is a mere woman, far inferior to those commanders in status, she is able to achieve virtue while they fail miserably. According to chapter 10 of *The Classic of Filial Piety*, "He who really loves his parents will not be proud in high station; he will not be insubordinate in an inferior position; among his equals he will not be contentious. . . ."(23). Judged by these standards, many of the commanders are by no definition filial and are even more

contemptible than people of the lower classes. In contrast to the generals who seem to be losing control and whose troops are without order or authority, Zong Erniang is, as far as possible, in command of herself and the situation; her behavior, decorum, and nobility, are all orderly. Langxian's depiction of the supernatural events of retributive justice occurring after Zong's death is also important in showing that she is not just a victim but also a victor. These events reveal that while the commanders' fighting creates a chaotic, wild world, dictated by the laws of the jungle, Zong's self-sacrifice brings back order and culture.

Emphasizing that the heroine's class is "ordinary" but her character, extraordinary, the story serves to make the male elite feel shame and engage in self-reflection and cultivation. The extreme nature of the story also encourages women readers by underscoring the fact that even a woman can exhibit filial piety, sometimes even surpassing a man in fulfilling it. An extraordinary woman can attain moral and spiritual perfection just as a man can—or even more readily than a man. Such a woman may serve as a moral example for men as well as for other women.

Even Widmer, who finds subversive subtexts in the story, admits that the readers' overall impression, in part created by Zong Erniang's oration, is that her actions are admirable (Widmer 1994, 191). While fully agreeing with Widmer on the narrative's heroic theme, I question her suggestion of travesty. The "hints of hidden subtexts" that modern readers might detect are most likely not intended by the author nor perceived by his contemporaries. For modern readers, alternative interpretations abound. Could one read this as a cautionary tale against consuming human flesh? Since this story is closely connected with the practice of flesh slicing (*ge rou* 割肉; *ge gu* 割股) by which one severs a piece of one's own flesh from one's thigh and cooks it in broth to offer it as medicine to an ailing parent, husband, or master (Widmer 1994, 172-177), can it be construed as a comic subversion of the fleshly sacrifice as well as the patriarchal discourse this gruesome practice of filial piety supports? Should we see the story, some part of which are so grisly in detail, as inviting gallows

humor?

We all know that moderns can and do "misread"—not just because words change meaning but also because cultures have different values. Robert Darnton has demonstrated that the story of a riotous massacre of cats in Paris, taken as hilarious around 1740, "strikes the modern reader as unfunny, if not downright repulsive." "Our own inability to get the joke," remarks Darnton, "is an indication of the distance that separates us from the workers of preindustrial Europe."(77-78).[14] Conversely, the distance that separates us from Langxian is also great enough for us to see jokes and subversions in places where they are not intended.

The question, then, is what we do with possible modern "misreadings." Do we just dismiss them out of hand as ridiculous or permit any reading, as in reader response, in which case only the most "interesting," "provocative," or "strong" misreadings are the best (since anything is appropriate)? What I suggest is to test out the readings by placing them back in the narratives' historical and hermeneutic contexts. *Acceptable* criteria for judging Langxian's work will thus include thinking about how contemporaries of Langxian might interpret the work. It is unlikely, for example, that Langxian's contemporaries would see Zong's sacrifice as a comic subversion of the practice of *gegu*, or read Langxian's story, despite its occasional humor, as suggesting subversive scenarios that undercut the virtue of filial piety.

Widmer also contends that the mixture of comic with tragic elements shows either lack of artistic control on Langxian's part or his (unconscious?) "disquiet" at Zong's "formidable" qualities. She remarks that this story "does not succeed completely as a story" because "its rhetoric and elaboration work at cross-purposes, creating comic nuances which the author could not control, "and that many of Langxian's other stories also "fail to work out perfectly in artistic terms."(Widmer 1994, 192-193). I do not see the "threatening woman" view works here because Zong is so obviously a victim, even if through heroic choice.

As to the generic problem, as Mikhail Bakhtin has demonstrated,

the classical separation of tragedy and comedy was largely abandoned in the West during the Middle Ages, and the sacred mingled with the profane and the grotesque.[15] In fact, there have to be fixed or stable notions of genre before there can be a mixture of these. Widmer foregrounds the idea of genre in her title but does not really show that any such notions existed. A critical study of Chinese vernacular fiction will reveal that in terms of subject matter, there is no strict generic separation between tragedy and comedy and there is a frequent mingling of the sublime and the low and funny.[16] This aesthetic feature, however, is by no means an indication of failure "in artistic terms." If "pure" tragedy or comedy was not an issue in the literature, or part of reader expectations at the time, then any "mixture" of the element would not be jarring to the reader or show a "lack of authorial control."

Moreover, even in the West where a notion of "pure" genre did exist, Renaissance literature and Shakespeare in particular provide perfect examples of comic scenes and tragic plots going hand in hand, without necessarily "subverting" the stature of the tragic hero (who is flawed, after all). A perfect Western example of how literature can contain both elements is Shakespeare: the tragedies frequently have low comic scenes, like the porter scene in *MacBeth* and the grave diggers scene in *Hamlet*. Both swell on physicality and are carried out by "low" characters, but they certainly do not diminish the hero's stature or make either tragedy less tragic.

Evaluating Langxian's story in appropriate aesthetic terms, we find that it exhibits a successful mixture of the sublime and the comic, indicating moral and spiritual heightening but through sensationalism and extreme situations. The dramatic depiction of the conjugal relationship as well as the wife's sale and butchery "entertains" the readers also by its comic elements. For example. Zhou Di comes across as a comic figure and a henpecked husband. But instead of using the paradigm of shrewish wife/henpecked husband to undercut Zong Erniang's moral stature, as suggested by Widmer, Langxian uses it for comic relief and characterization. Consciously crafting Zong Erniang as a distinct type of heroine, Langxian makes sure that

her conjugal relationship differed from those of other heroines and their husband.[17] Moreover, the "subplots" actually enhance the effects instead of subverting the heroic theme. The story's drama and shock effect also serve to enhance the persuasiveness of moral instruction.

Langxian's story successfully delineates a heroic woman of exceptional moral virtue, who, as he intended, differs considerably from other female martyrs he has constructed in other stories. The story serves the functions of didacticism, "entertainment," and expressing admiration for a paragon of virtue as well as the anxieties of the male elite. More importantly, this story surpasses many other moral tales because it enhances the readers' cognitive understanding of human nature. Through the revision and expansion of the earlier anecdote, Langxian endows his characters with complicated desires, intentions, and motivations, bringing the issue of gender sharply into focus and providing the reader with insight into humankind.

NOTES

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[1] Unless otherwise noted, all page references are to *Shi dian tou* (Shanghai: Shanghai zazhi gongsi, 1935).

[2] For the discussion of the authorship of *Shi dian tou*, and Langxian's association with Feng Menglong, see Hanan 1981, 120-121, and 230-231, n.5 and n.6. See also Ye Dejun, 42. I am grateful to Patrick Hanan for giving me a copy of Ye Dejun's article.

[3] See the comments in the Ming blockprint edition of *Shi dian tou* in *Guben xiaoshuo jicheng* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe,

1990), 24b and 33a, for example.

[4] See the editors' criticism of the story as "ideologically cliché d" in *Shi dian tou* (1957; rpt. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 19 84), p. 1.

[5] See Patrick Hanan's discussion of Feng Menglong's connection to *Qingshi leilüe* in Hanan 1981, 95-97. Hua-yuan Li Mowry argues that Zhanzhan Waishi is a pseudonym of Feng Menglong and Feng is the sole compiler of Qingshi leilüe. See Mowry 24.

[6] After completing an earlier version of this paper, I heard Allan Barr mention an article by Ellen Widmer on this story. I am indebted to Allan Barr for referring me to Widmer's interesting article "Tragedy or Travesty? Perspectives on Langxian's 'The Siege of Yangzhou'" in Eva Hung, ed., *Paradoxes of Traditional Chinese Literature* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1994), pp. 167-198. Widmer's article has many strong points and will be discussed in detail later in my paper.

[7] According to juan 84 of the *Hou Han shu*, Cao E was only fourteen when her father was drowned. Because she could not find his body, she wept by the river for seventeen days and eventually threw herself into the river. Five days later, her body emerged, together with her father's.

[8] As Shakespeare's Julius Caesar said, "Cowards die many times before their deaths,/ The valiant never taste of death but once." (*Julius Caesar*, II, ii. 32). He could have been talking about Zhou Di and Zong Erniang.

[9] For an excellent recent discussion of the representation of women martyrs in the early Christian Church, their spiritual resistance, authoring of their own lives, and the flagrant display of their bodies by the Romans, see Brent Shaw, 3-46. See the autobiography of Anne Askew (1521-1546) in *Anne Askew*. (This work exists on microfilm; it was published in the 1670s). See also the discussion of the state's control of the body versus the personal freedom of the spirit in Maureen A. Tilley, 467-480.

[10] See the discussion of the popular carnivalesque tradition of early modern Europe in Mikhail Bakhtin (1968), 19-24. See also Lori

Schroeder Haslem, 438-439.

[11] The last sentence is inconsistent with the details previously given in the narrative. According to earlier narration of the famine, all the grass roots and tree barks in Yangzhou have been stripped off.

[12] These are the seven essentials of housekeeping.

[13] Tiying and Zhao Wuniang were historical figures and moral exemplars of filial piety.

[14] I am grateful to Paul Ropp for referring me to this book.

[15] This is a view expressed by Mikhail M. Bakhtin in his *Rabelais and His World* as well as his *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. See also Tzvetan Todorov 76-91.

[16] For example, Patrick Hanan notes that humor and comedy are common elements in Chinese didactic, serious literature. See Hanan 1988, vii.

[17] For example, Zong Erniang differs in looks, personality, and conjugal relationship from Qu Fengnu (瞿鳳奴) and Shentu Xiguang (申屠希光), who are also chaste women and martyrs, in stories 4 and 12 of *The Rocks*.

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