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These Hoes Ain't Loyal: Severance and Sin in Chinese Mythology

The binary opposition of vice and virtue has occupied a central role in Chinese mythology for thousands of years. One prevailing myth that addresses this concept is Great Yu Controls the Waters, or 大禹治水 (*DaYu Zhi Shui*). Upon examination of two multiforms of the myth, namely the original version present in the Book of Documents and the 2006 Chinese film *Still Life*, it becomes clear that the main characters' varying degrees of success in familial affairs is dependent on whether or not they properly uphold a set of classical Confucian virtues. Both versions of the story feature a common theme of a wife who leaves her husband, but the husband's life after this event is largely shaped by how virtuous he is.

The first multiform addressed here also happens to be the oldest extant version, which can be found in the Book of Documents (Shujing) compiled by Confucius in the 4th century BC. There are many parts to this story, but the primary focus of this paper is on the small section addressing Yu's relationship with his wife. In the story, China gets hit by a flood of biblical proportions, displacing or killing thousands of people. Yu is tasked with mitigating the disaster, something he works on with absolute dedication. One day he transforms into a bear to help his team dig through a mountain, but then his wife shows up while he's still in bear form. She freaks out and begins "praying to the gods for deliverance [...] and was transformed into a rock"

(Shujing 22). Realizing she was pregnant, Yu waits before the rock for nine months, until it splits open and his child emerges.

The second multiform is the Chinese film *Still Life*, which looks at the stories of two people struggling to reconnect with their estranged spouses in the town of Fengjie, which will no longer exist within the year due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. When stage three of the dam's construction is completed, the water level will rise 156.3 meters and completely submerge the town. This film, while not immediately recognizable as the Gun-Yu myth, reinterprets the same familial issues in two different ways within the same broader context of an imminent flood. One character, Shen Hong, is searching for her husband, whom she hasn't seen in two years since he left to work on the dam. Upon finding him, she informs him that she's in love with someone else and would like a divorce. The other character, Han Sanming, is looking for his ex-wife and child who left him ten years prior. Upon finding her, the two vow to get back together, but her brother is ¥30k in debt, so she has to stay and work that off. On top of that, their child left years ago, so Sanming has no choice but to leave town with nothing. The three main characters of the stories all experience varying degrees of success in their endeavors: Yu gets to raise his kid and shortly becomes the first emperor of the Xia dynasty, Shen Hong goes to live with who she loves, and Han Sanming, who had already lost his wife, ends the story with nothing. These different outcomes correlate with the characters' respective levels of dedication and virtue throughout the stories.

The sections of the Shujing containing the Canon of Yu make their stance on morality explicitly clear many times over, saying that "It is virtue which moves Heaven; there is no distance to which it does not reach" (290). Here, the term virtue refers to the set of virtues in

Confucianism, generally defined as benevolence (*ren*), doing one's best (*zhong*), reciprocity (*shu*), politeness (*li*), and faithfulness (*xin*), among others (Wong 2.1). It is only by upholding all of these values that one can lead a healthy and harmonious life, which Yu certainly manages to accomplish. Throughout the story, he is consistently depicted as the paragon of ethics and good behavior. In fact, even "the gods of Heaven approved of his humility, in marked contrast to that of his father" (Shujing 23). He was so dedicated to his work that he didn't return home at all until it was complete, even passing by his house on three separate occasions without entering. In addition to this, he showed extreme faithfulness by waiting next to the rock that used to be his wife for nine months. Of course, he almost certainly knew that a child would emerge, as the rock continuously increased in size over nine months. Still though, he didn't leave the rock's side once for the entire nine months, not even to attend to pressing matters of flood prevention - now that's what I call loyalty. As a result of his humility, loyalty, and dedication, Yu is rewarded with everything he could ever want (besides a wife). He manages to stop the flood that ravaged China for generations and becomes Emperor of the first true Chinese dynasty.

Shen Hong exhibits similar values throughout the film. Her story inverts the trope present in the original myth, as it's the female perspective of the same story. When she goes to investigate her husband Bin's business, the Dam Demolition Crew in charge of destroying buildings in preparation for the flood, a member of the crew stumbles inside bloodied and beaten. Everybody else in the building bustles out to beat back against the baddies, abandoning the badly bruised boy sans bandages (55:13). Luckily, Shen Hong is there to care for him, showing her *ren* and making a friend in the process. The very fact that she traveled across the entire country to tell her husband she wanted a divorce in person exemplifies her virtue

(1:05:00). By divorcing the head of the Dam Demolition Crew, she's actually fighting the flood in her own unique way. She takes her commitments seriously, and things work out for her accordingly. By the end of the movie, she has accomplished everything she set out to do, and has a bright future ahead of her.

Han Sanming, on the other hand, ends the movie even more downtrodden and sad than he began. At the beginning of the film, he had hope that he would get his wife and kid back, but by the end even that is gone. He decides to return to the coal mine he used to work at in an attempt to save enough money to pay off his love's debt, but that's realistically unlikely to ever happen and he knows it. He's lost everything, even the town of Fengjie he spent the last six months living in. By getting a job on Bin's demolition crew, he actually helps to destroy the town, just like he inadvertently contributes to the destruction of many other things in his life. Putting it simply, Han Sanming has not led a virtuous life. The movie places quite a bit of weight on his various vices. At various points in the film, title cards appear on screen with the characters for "Smoking," "Drinking," and "Toffee" to highlight the temptations which he falls victim to (15:11, 25:04, 1:15:20). There are notably very few scenes in the entire movie in which someone is not smoking tobacco, and practically none that feature Han Sanming. This establishes Sanming as someone who is unable to resist temptation, which is decidedly against the ideals of *zhong*. This alone would've been enough to disqualify him from being a good Confucian boy, but there's so much more to unpack. Halfway through the movie, you learn that Sanming actually bought his wife (36:00). The practice isn't uncommon in China, but is definitely not virtuous. In addition to the shady origins of his romantic life, Sanming is not very polite. He doesn't seem to know how to carry a conversation in the slightest, opting instead to simply stare

at the person speaking to him. The movie actually opens like this, with a performer using sleight of hand to “change” paper into RMB. The performer repeatedly asks Sanming “Do you see? Do you see?” but gets no response, so he just smacks him on the head with the money and walks away (5:49). This is most certainly not fulfilling the virtues of politeness or reciprocity.

Sanming’s most egregious vice, however, is his indolence.

Industriousness, which is the opposite of indolence, doesn’t hold as high of a place in Confucian virtues as things such as benevolence or reciprocity, but falls somewhere under the broader term of *Yi*, loosely translated to uprightness, effort, or something like the golden rule. This particular value is extolled numerous times in the Shujing multiform, and Emperor Shu explicitly tells Yu this when he passes him the throne: “You, eschewing all indolence, must take the leadership of my people” (287). Han Sanming, in contrast, is the very definition of indolent. His wife left him and he waited ten whole years before trying to find her! His extended wait draws parallels to the Shujing multiform, where Yu waited by the his wife-rock for nine months. However, at the end of Yu’s wait he received his child, while Sanming did not. This is because Yu attentively waited with his metamorphic spouse, while Sanming simply let her leave and didn’t think about her for the next ten years. By the time he bothered to look, his only child (whom he has never seen) had already left to find a job in a bigger city. The moment in the film where he finally sees his wife again is absolutely heartbreaking. They sit down together and sit in awkward silence, until she asks “Why has it taken you ten years to look for me?” (1:34:20). Sanming, unable to face reality, doesn’t say anything and instead simply lights up a cigarette. The reason Sanming came looking for her was to see his child, who is already nearing adulthood. His actions were motivated by his own desires, not out of wanting to help his family - if they

were, he would have come years ago. Sanming fails to uphold these tenets of Confucianism and suffers accordingly.

In all fairness to Sanming, many of the circumstances of his life were not exactly within his control. Much of his unfortunate status can be chocked up to his terrible preexisting conditions: He's a dirt-poor manual laborer that works lethal jobs for very little pay, and spends his days actively accelerating the eminent destruction of the town he's living in. No amount of proper behavior is going to change the fact that he's not upper class. However, he could have made some things quite a bit better for himself, and certainly could have gotten his wife back if he looked for her sooner. At the end of the day, Han Sanming is a mortal living in a world of mortals, so is unable to benefit from the same otherworldly assistance that Yu does within the Shujing multiform. It truly goes to show that there are no gods in Communist China.

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