

## SHAPESHIFTING MAGIC: MALE SOCIAL HIERARCHY AND FEMALE POWER IN “REN’S STORY”

SYLVI STEIN

*B.A. Candidate in Art History, Creative Writing  
Columbia University, Class of 2025*

In the male-centric frame of “Ren’s Story,” a premodern Chinese tale written by and narrated to men, a man named Zheng falls in love with a beautiful fox spirit named Ren, and he persuades her to marry him. After she evades sexual advances from Zheng’s cousin, Wei Yin, she is married to Zheng, and uses her influence to make him rich and powerful. Within the tale, Ren’s female power is presented through the intrinsic lens of a male hierarchy. Part of her strength lies in her ability to propel Zheng (a man) to a higher social status, which she is able to do thanks to her beauty, with which she confers a higher status upon men through the assertion of their ability to obtain a “desirable woman” and thus emphasize their masculinity; and her intelligence, which she uses to help Zheng improve his financial status, allowing him to move up in social class. Ren’s power to comprehend and manipulate male social hierarchies also allows her to maintain her own sexual agency, as seen by the way she is able to talk her way out of potential rape by appealing to her assailant’s social status. In addition, Ren’s ability to bond with the main male characters is another aspect of her power that demonstrates the influence of her ability to maneuver within male hierarchies. Ren’s tale is ultimately framed as an example of an abnormality, which demonstrates to the reader that, in the world of this story, the only way for females to obtain power that leads to agency is by understanding and utilizing male hierarchies.

In the story, women are indicated to naturally have power only as beautiful objects—men flaunt their beautiful women in front of other men, and thus use them to assert their own masculinity. The power that females are acknowledged to have is, therefore, a useful power only to the extent that it can elevate a man’s social status. Zheng’s description of Ren, a woman who sleeps with him, demonstrates how beauty is a desirable aspect for a man to have in the woman he is with. Wei Yin, his nephew and friend, responds with scorn to the description because Zheng is established to be a man who is dependent on his wife’s family, and therefore of low status: “Zheng said, ‘I have just gotten myself a beautiful woman...’ Wei Yin laughed. ‘...you must surely have gotten yourself a spectacularly ugly woman. How could you possibly get a perfect beauty?’”<sup>1</sup> Ren’s beauty is the first thing mentioned about her, which shows that is the first thing that Zheng considers when he thinks of her; he also uses the language of ownership in discussing her, saying he has “gotten” her. Wei Yin emphasizes that

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<sup>1</sup> Ji-ji, “Ren’s Story,” 520-521.

Ren's beauty must correspond with the status of the man she is with, emphasizing that "[Zheng]" could not "possibly get a perfect beauty." Later, upon learning of how beautiful Ren truly appears, the power of beauty is further showcased by the astonishment that Wei Yin expresses. The beauty of a woman is shown to reflect the status of the man she is with; within this story, beauty makes women into objects that men display to other men, thus commodifying women.

Despite the masculine objectification that Ren must undergo, her power does not only stem from her beauty; she is able to accomplish a similar goal, i.e. asserting Zheng's masculinity and improving his social status, by using her intelligence to augment his finances. Towards the beginning of the story, Zheng is "...poor and without family of his own, he lived as a dependent of his wife's family."<sup>2</sup> As a "dependent," Zheng is unable to define himself without his reliance on a woman. However, when he is continuing his relationship in secret with Ren, she offers to help him make money: "I have a scheme to make you a profit."<sup>3</sup> The word "scheme" demonstrates that it is a clever idea, and Ren is careful to attribute this idea to herself—she asserts her agency by saying "I have," indicating her ownership of the idea. However, she says that she is going to make "you" a profit in reference to Zheng, and her plan relies on him to carry it out. This allows the "profit" to be attributed to Zheng and Zheng alone; she relinquishes her part in it the way her language excludes herself from the end benefit of the idea. Therefore, Zheng is permitted to reap the benefits of the money that Ren has led him to, but he doesn't need to link himself to a woman—this promotes both his social status and his masculinity. Ren's intelligence enables him to obtain financial security, independence, and thus a higher status both socially and economically; therefore, her intelligence has power because it allows her access to understanding and manipulating male social status.

Ren's power comes from her intelligence as well as her beauty, but while her beauty gives her some worth through the lens of the male social hierarchy, it also puts her in danger; her intelligence is ultimately what allows her to maintain her autonomy in the way a man can. When Wei Yin first sees Ren, he loses control because of how beautiful she is: "Wei Yin wanted her so much that he behaved like a madman."<sup>4</sup> The cause of his behavior is that he "wanted" her so much, indicating that her desirability is due to her looks; after all, he has only seen her for a moment, and he has not even spoken to her. The word "madman" indicates that Ren's beauty has driven Wei Yin beyond the rationale of normal behavior, but the fact that the word "madman" includes "man" indicates that there is male precedence for his behavior, that beauty can have power over a man's rational state. Ren fights back against Wei Yin, but is ultimately overtaken; however, she is able to escape from assault using her intelligence to play into flattery: "You, sir... have had many beautiful women... Yet Zheng, who

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<sup>2</sup> Ji-ji, "Ren's Story," 518.

<sup>3</sup> Ji-ji, "Ren's Story," 523.

<sup>4</sup> Ji-ji, "Ren's Story," 521.

is poor and of a humble background, has only myself... I feel sorry... that he is unable to stand on his own.”<sup>5</sup> Ren weaponizes her intelligence, using her acute understanding of male social hierarchies to manipulate the patriarchal system and remove herself from danger. Part of Ren’s power came from her autonomy in choosing her sexual partners, a power that only men such as Wei Yin are expected to exercise in her society; by flattering Wei Yin through her discussion of his social status, Ren is able to maintain that autonomy because Wei Yin ultimately leaves her alone. Wei Yin’s desire for her was rooted in her beauty, but it also stemmed from the fact that Zheng had access to Ren and he did not—his shock from hearing that his lower-class uncle had somehow managed to “[have]” a beautiful woman was what goaded him into seeking Ren out in the first place. Ren realized that his desire for her was due not just to her beauty, but to the fact that he wanted to assert his masculinity over his uncle; thus, by flattering Wei Yin, she is able to confirm his belief that he has a higher social status. She emphasizes that Zheng is “unable to stand on his own,” referencing how he is dependent on his wife’s family, and “poor,” showing how finances are important to one’s social status. She also demonstrates her understanding of beauty as a social signifier by saying she “feel[s] sorry for him,” indicating that it is an anomaly that she, a beautiful woman, is sleeping with him (implying she is doing so only out of pity). After hearing Ren’s reassurance, Wei Yin decides he does not need to assert his social status over Zheng by engaging with her sexually. Thus, by manipulating Wei Yin’s ego in order to force his behavior to align with her interests, Ren is shown to have a complex understanding of male social hierarchy. However, although Ren’s beauty has sway in that it can influence a man’s social status, it ultimately puts Ren in danger because the very person who was impressed by it (Wei Yin) was the one who tried to assault her. Ren’s feminine beauty is a power that passively acts on her, while her intelligence is a power that she can harness to her own ends because it allows her to engage with and manipulate the world of male social hierarchy.

Aside from beauty, Ren has access to another form of power—intelligence, which allows her to move through the male social world. However, unlike her beauty (which is a trait that is associated with her femininity), Ren’s intelligence allows her to bond with the men in the story in a way that is nonsexual. This form of bonding is portrayed as a masculine trait within the world of the story: at the end of the tale, the narrator explains how Ren’s story itself was passed on to him when he was speaking with his companions while traveling, an act that helped him befriend these men. The narrator’s companions find the story of Ren to be extraordinary even though their own ways of forming friendships mimic hers, implying that the unusual aspect of this story is that a woman is able to perform the same actions as them. The male-male relationships depicted in this framing narrative mirror the ways in which Wei Yin’s friendship with Ren is developed during travel. “Wei Yin would go about [traveling] with [Ren] every day... the two grew very familiar and intimate with one another, and

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<sup>5</sup> Ji-ji, “Ren’s Story,” 521-522.

there were no barriers between them, except for sexual intimacy. Wei Yin came to love her and honor her.”<sup>6</sup> The phrase “came to... honor her” indicates that Wei Yin did not honor Ren when he first met her (and tried to make a sexual advance towards her). The fact that the passage explicitly mentions that “sexual intimacy” was a “barrier” between them demonstrates how the absence of sex in their relationship permits Wei Yin to respect Ren in a way he could not have if they had a sexual relationship. As discussed by the narrator towards the end of the story, traveling is depicted as a common way of developing platonic male friendship: “In the journey... we all followed the same route, both land and water... By day we would feast and at night tell stories, with each of us presenting strange tales. When these gentlemen heard of the events... they asked me to transmit it as an account of strange things.”<sup>7</sup> Within the world of the story, men bond in much the same way that Ren and Wei Yin did—those two traveled together and “grew familiar” to the point that Wei Yin “honor[ed]” Ren. The man recounting the tale “followed the same route” as the other men, and he refers to them as “gentlemen,” demonstrating that he has the same respect and honor for them as Wei Yin did for Ren after their relationship transcended sexual encounters. Wei Yin and Ren’s relationship is therefore depicted as a masculine friendship. However, the men telling the tale see the story as “an account of strange things,” despite the parallels to their lives. The reader can take the framing device as a locative view of friendship and therefore can realize that Ren is the anomaly that makes her masculine friendship “strange” because she is a woman.

“Ren’s Story” is intrinsically a male-centric narrative: it is about men, told by men. Thus, the values exemplified in the story demonstrate an inherently male conception of female power. It is only Ren’s ability to understand the masculine social hierarchy that allows her to have any active power in this story. Her beauty, which is intertwined with her femininity, forces her to become an object of power rather than an actor with agency; her intelligence is useful only inasmuch as she can use it to bolster a man’s financial and social reputation; and her ability to bond with men in a homosocial platonic friendship is what cements her as an anomaly. At the end of the story, Ren submits to Zheng’s pleas for her to travel with him, despite her conviction (proven to be correct) that she will die if she does so. Despite her attempts to use her power for her own autonomy, Ren is ultimately unable to defy male authority. The story ends with both her death and a framing narrative that invalidates her subversion of male hierarchies by rendering her abilities unnatural. Tales of fox spirits were common in pre-modern Chinese literature, but Ren’s tale is unusual in that she is able to assert her own agency over both her abilities and the men in her life. However, the way that the narrator asserts that Ren’s life was strange for a woman enforces the idea that women cannot embody male power to the degree that it will enable them to have any sort of permanent agency. Ren’s Story is the tale of an anomaly not because it is a

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<sup>6</sup> Ji-ji, “Ren’s Story,” 522.

<sup>7</sup> Ji-ji, “Ren’s Story,” 526.

story about a magical fox spirit, but because it features a female character who tries—and for a brief moment, succeeds—at holding power within a male world.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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