

ARTICLE

Friendship beyond death: Narratives from ancient China

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Abstract

Friendship occupies the last place in the five social relations in the Confucian tradition, yet it plays an important role in Confucian writings. In this article, I discuss the notion of friendship that lasts beyond death from ancient China. I examine how the friendship between Bo Ya and Zhong Ziqi finds its continuation in that of Fan Shi and Zhang Shao, insofar as one of the two friends dies in both cases. These friendly bonds are tinged with a tragic tone and have fueled the imagination of the Chinese who sublimate or amplify them in all kinds of literary genres – poetry, theater, and novel – dating back to the pre-imperial period and to the Han Dynasty. All the authors underscore the faithfulness of these characters, which they consider to be the characters' virtue. They also emphasize the spiritual link that transcends life and death. Based on the translation of these well-known and celebrated narratives, I intend to show how the exemplary nature of friendship is enhanced or mythologized, and how intertextuality has shaped the Chinese vocabulary itself in this regard.

Keywords: Friendship; Death; Ancient China

Friendship is not a major topic in the discourse of Chinese philosophy, but a predominant part of the lives of both Chinese scholars and, more generally, Chinese society since antiquity. As on many other subjects, Confucius does not propose a theorization of friendship. He says in the *Analects* (論語 *Lunyu*): 'When friends come from afar, is it not a source of joy?' (*Lunyu* I.1, in Ruan Yuan 1998: 2457). 'Friend' here is the translation of the term *peng* 朋 which means, according to Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200), a great commentator on the Classics of the later Han period, 'those who study with the same master'. It is distinct, according to the same exegete, from the term *you* 友, 'those who have the same aspiration' (*zhi* 志) (ibid.). Compared with *peng*, which can sometimes have a negative meaning, particularly in its association with *dang* 黨, faction, clan, *you* has a more positive connotation. Today, we tend to forget the difference between the two terms *peng* and *you*, using them almost interchangeably as synonyms for their combination *pengyou* 朋友, which also means 'friend' or 'friends'. Moreover, *pengyou*

appears as early as the first chapter of the *Analects* in the voices of Zengzi and Zixia, both direct disciples of Confucius. The Master and his disciples insist on the honesty and best intentions of words exchanged between friends, on their mutual trust (*xin* 信). Mencius, Confucius' spiritual heir, proposes the following five social relationships: that between father and son, that between sovereign and vassals, that between husband and wife, that between elder and younger brother, and finally that between friends. These five social relationships must be governed respectively, and in the order mentioned, by filial piety, a sense of duty, difference, brotherly love and, finally, mutual trust. Although friendship occupies last place in this hierarchy of five social relationships, it is omnipresent in all types of textual sources, where we find the most touching pages. It was Mencius again who said that 'the way of friendship consists in exhorting to good' (Mencius 4B-30, in Ruan Yuan 1998: 2731) and evoked the possibility of establishing friendship with our elders by reading their works and trying to understand them without having known them. In other words, there may be a purely spiritual dimension to friendship that transcends time and space. It is this spiritual dimension, understood in a broad sense and transcending the boundary between life and death, that is the subject of my study, which is essentially based on the translation of several texts, some of which are well-known, constantly rewritten, and extensively commented on.

Knowing the sound of the heart (zhiyin 知音)

In addition to *peng*, *you* and *pengyou*, which are commonly used to mean friend or friendship, there is another word belonging to a more sustained register: *zhiyin* 知音, the literal meaning of which is 'knowing the tones'. This term, which appears in the 'Record on Music' 樂記 chapter of the *Book of Rites* (禮記 *Liji*), one of the Classics of Confucianism canonized in the Han period, is now linked to the following anecdote:

Po Ya was a good lute-player, and Chung Tzu-ch'i was a good listener. Po Ya strummed his lute, with his mind on climbing high mountains; and Chung Tzii-ch'i said;

'Good! Lofty, like Mount Tai!'

When his mind was on flowing waters, Chung Tzu-ch'i said: 'Good! Boundless like the Yellow River and the Yangtse!'

Whatever came into Po Ya's thoughts, Chung Tzu-ch'i always grasped it.

Po Ya was roaming on the North side of Mount T'ai; he was caught in a sudden storm of rain, and took shelter under a cliff. Feeling sad, he took up his lute and strummed it; first he composed an air about the persistent rain, then he improvised the sound of crashing mountains. Whatever melody he played, Chung Tzu-ch'i never missed the direction of his thought. Then Po Ya put away his lute and sighed:

'Good! Good! How well you listen! What you imagine is just what is in my mind. Is there nowhere for my notes to flee to?' (Liez 1999: 5.594; cf. Liezi 1990: 109-110).

This extract from the *Liezi*, of which an annotated edition by Zhang Zhan (c. 327-397) has come down to us, will become paradigmatic for addressing friendship, a theme that

the Taoist current text links to music. The song 'High Mountain and Flowing Water' is part of the Chinese music repertoire and it is still played today. The friend is therefore the one who is able to 'know the sound' (*zhiyin* 知音) of our heart. There is a shorter and slightly different version of this tale from the *Liezi* in the *Annals of Master Lü* (呂氏春秋 *Lüshi Chunqiu*), compiled by the clients of Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (292 BC–235 BC), famous merchant and prime minister of the King of Qin who would become China's first emperor in 221 BC. In the chapter 'Fundamental Tastes' (14.2), the story of the friendship between Boya and Zhong Ziqi ends more precisely:

When Zhong Ziqi died, Boya smashed the qin and cut its strings. To the end of his life, he never played the qin again because he felt that there was no one in the world worth playing for (Lü Buwei 2000: 308).

This denouement differs slightly from what is recounted in the Biography of Yang Xiong, in the *Book of Han* (漢書 *Han shu*), compiled by Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE) and completed by his sister Ban Zhao 班昭 (ca. 49–ca. 120): 'When Ziqi died, Boya cut the strings and tore his lute apart, refusing to play for the crowd' (Ban Gu 1968: 87.13). Here we see that the friendship between Boya and Zhong Ziqi is exclusive. It is a unique relationship that cannot be shared. Zhong Ziqi's death, the actual circumstances of which are unknown, leads to the death of Boya's career as a musician. In other words, the outcome of the friendship between Boya and Zhong Ziqi is a double death. Needless to say, Boya's death is to be understood in a symbolic sense. The expression 'to know the sound [of the heart]' and the very names of Boya and Ziqi, which continue to nourish Chinese literature and poetry, symbolically designate friends or a deep friendship.

The famous late Ming writer Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) devotes the first book (or *juan* in Chinese) of his vernacular collection *Stories to Caution the World* (警世通言 *Jingshi tongyan*) to this story, which he entitles 'Yu Boya Smashes His Zither in Gratitude to an Appreciative Friend' (俞伯牙摔琴謝知音). In this fictionalized account, Yu Boya, instead of Boya, is a native of the state of Chu and a high dignitary in the state of Jin during the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States period, while Zhong Ziqi is a woodcutter from Chu. They meet on Boya's return to his homeland through an exchange about Boya's zither playing, which Ziqi happens to listen to. They arrange to meet again the following year on the same riverbank where they first met. The following year Boya returns, but cannot find his friend. He learns from an elderly passerby, who is none other than Ziqi's father, that Ziqi had passed away. Heartbroken, Boya goes with father Zhong to Ziqi's grave, where he cuts the strings of his zither and smashes it against the stone altar. He tells Zhong that he would retire from the court of Jin and return to the village to look after him and his wife: 'I am Ziqi, and Ziqi is me' (Feng Menglong 2005: 20). The last phrase echoes Montaigne's about his deceased friend Etienne de la Boétie: '*Par ce que c'étoit lui; par ce que c'étoit moy*' (Montaigne 1962: 187). Boya thus replaces Ziqi in the role of the son.

What we can learn from Feng Menglong's rewriting is that filial piety prolongs the friendship that links Boya and Ziqi. This continuity was even announced at the start of the story, when the friendship between Boya and Ziqi was set side by side with that between Bao Shu 鮑叔 and Guan Zhong 管仲, who helped Duke Huan of Qi become preeminent during the Spring and Autumn period (7th c. BC). Guan Zhong says of Bao

Shu, who recommended him to the prince: 'My parents gave birth to me, but the one who knows me best is Bao Shu' (Sima Qian 1982: 'Biographies of Guan and Yan')¹.

Friends in life and death

Death and tragedy, which we have highlighted in the story of Boya and Zhong Ziqi, are often inherent in the friendship of Chinese scholars. This aspect is even more evident in the 'Biography of Fan Shi', found in juan 81, 'Biographies of Loners', of the *Book of the Later Han* (後漢書 *Hou Han shu*) by Fan Ye 范曄 (398-445):

Fan Shi 范式, whose courtesy name (*zi*) is Juqing 巨卿, was a native of Jinxiang, in the Shanyang commandery. He was sometimes called Si 汜². When he was young, he attended the Imperial College as a student. He became friends with Zhang Shao 張劭, whose *zi* is Yuanbo 元伯, from Runan. When both had to return home, Fan Shi told Yuanbo: 'In two years, when I return, I'll drop by your home to respectfully greet your parents and see your young son'. So they set a date. As the date approached, Yuanbo told his mother to prepare a good meal in anticipation of his friend. His mother said, 'It has been two years since you parted, and regardless of your promise you are a thousand leagues apart. Why do you believe it so firmly?' Yuanbo replied: 'Juqing is a constant gentleman. He certainly will not break his word'. The mother replied, 'If such is the case, I shall brew some wine for you'. Eventually Juqing did arrive on the set day. He walked into the reception hall, paid respect to the mother, and toasted with his friend. Cheerful, he left.

Fan Shi became a training officer in a commandery. Later on, Yuanbo fell seriously ill and had to be bedridden. Zhi Junzhang 鄧君章 and Yin Zizheng 殷子徵, from the same commandery, came to visit him morning and evening. When he was close to dying, Yuanbo sighed: 'I feel sorrow not seeing my friend in life and death (*siyou* 死友)!' Zizheng said, 'Junzhang and I are wholeheartedly devoted to you. If we are not your friends in life and death, who would be worthy of being your friend?' Yuanbo said, 'You are my friends in this world (*shengyou* 生友). Fan Juqing from Shanyang is what I call my friend in life and death.' At these words, he breathed his last. Fan Shi, suddenly, dreamt of Yuanbo in a black cap with a falling ribbon and hastily putting on his shoes, who was calling out to him: 'Juqing, I died on such day and will be buried at such-and-such hour, when I will return to the Yellow Springs. You did not cease to remember me, but how could we meet?' Fan Shi abruptly woke up and understood. He shed the warmest tears and told everything to his prefect, asking for permission to go attend the funeral. The prefect did not believe it, but he could hardly withstand Fan's feelings and gave him permission. So, dressed in mourning clothes, he left in all haste the

¹Bao Shu is also known as Bao Shuya 鮑叔牙.

²In the edition I use, the character 汜 *fan* could be a simplified form of his surname; I follow some commentators who consider that 汜 *fan* is a typo for 汜 *si*.

³Junzhang is the courtesy name (*zi*) of Zhi Yun 鄧暉, an opponent of Wang Mang 王莽, who ruled during the 9-23 CE interregnum. He became prefect of Changsha under Emperor Guangwu (25-57) at the onset of the Later Han dynasty. His biography can be found in the *Book of the Later Han*, 59.

day before his friend's funeral. He had not arrived yet, when the funeral escort set off. Once transported to the cemetery and ready to be buried, the coffin did not move any further. Yuanbo's mother laid her hands on it and asked, 'Yuanbo, are you expecting someone?' Hence, the coffin was laid down. A sobbing man appeared in a white chariot harnessed to a white horse. The mother saw him from afar: 'It must be Fan Juqing'. Once there, Juqing offered his condolences and said, 'You can go, Yuanbo. Life and death are two different paths. Here we part forever'. The thousand people attending the funeral had tears in their eyes. Fan Shi took the ropes to lead the coffin, which finally moved forward. He stayed around the grave for several days, and planted several trees before leaving. (Fan Ye 1968, juan 111, vol. 6, 8-9; see Crespigny 2007: 203-204.)

Fan Shi's biography in the *Book of the Later Han* is almost identical to the account Gan Bao 干寶 (286-336) provides in his *Search of the Spirits* (搜神記 *Sou shen ji*), an emblematic work of the genre 'notes on strange phenomena' (*zhiguai* 志怪). In the version that has come down to us, it is composed of over 460 imaginary short stories. As the *Search of the Spirits* was reassembled during the Ming Dynasty, it is hard to prove that Fan Ye borrowed Fan Shi's story from it – with the only exception of Fan Shi's request for permission to go to his friend's funeral, a detail that does not appear in Gan Bao's work. In addition, Fan Ye's biography of Fan Shi seems close to Xie Cheng's 謝承, a scholar active between the late Han and the Three Kingdoms who authored a now lost *Book of the Later Han*, fragments of which are nonetheless preserved in Song anthologies (Zhou Tianyou 1986: 171-173). Concerning Fan Shi's biography, 'one hypothesis is that Fan Ye passively borrowed material either directly from Xie Cheng or from other historians influenced by the latter' (Zufferey 2016: 831).

Zhang Shao considers Fan Shi to be his friend in life and death (*siyou* 死友), as opposed to his friends in this world (*shengyou* 生友), Zhi Junzhang and Yin Zizheng. *Siyou* is a singular term, while *shengyou* can be plural. Although life and death represent 'two different paths', as Fan Shi himself says to his deceased friend, this does not prevent their heart-mind (*xin* 心) to connect via a dream. This is stated in the brief introduction to the 'Biographies of Loners' of the *Book of the Later Han* (juan 81): 'they share the same spirit in the world of the living as in the world of the dead'. In other words, the bond between the *siyou* lasts beyond life. The appearance of Zhang, who has just died, in Fan's dream, and the movement of his coffin when his friend arrives, are testimony to this. These premonitory and/or fantastical processes are commonplace and part of the realities, or at least common beliefs, of the time. Stories and tales of strangeness knew no boundaries. Moreover, they drew inspiration from each other until recent times. Let us read on into Fan Shi's biography:

Later, he went to the capital to continue studying at the Imperial College. At the time, Chen Pingzi 陳平子 from Changsha was a student there. He had never met Fan Shi. Pingzi, being ill and about to die, told his wife, 'I heard that Fan Juqing of Shanyang is a gentleman of great virtue to whom one can entrust the affairs of death. May you, after my death, bury my body in front of Juqing's house'. Suddenly, he cut a piece of silk and wrote a letter to Juqing. When he died, his wife acted in accordance to what he said. Fan Shi was then returning from a trip. He read the silk letter and saw the [temporary] tomb. He was saddened and

moved. Facing the grave, he paid respect to the deceased by putting his hands together and wept. He held him as his friend in life and death (*siyou* 死友). He then escorted Pingzi's wife and child to take the coffin back to Linxiang. Four or five leagues before they reached there, Juqing left the letter on the coffin and left weeping. Having heard this, Pingzi's brothers went out and looked for him, but could not come upon him. When the deputy accountant of Changsha went to the capital to present the remittance to the throne, he wrote a memorandum praising Fan Shi's behavior. The Three Lords wanted to give him an office, but Fan Shi declined. He was named outstanding talent of the prefecture and became governor of Jingzhou following four promotions.

His friend Kong Song 孔嵩 from Nanyang came from a poor family. As his parents were aging, Kong took on a pseudonym and became a guard at Ali village in Xinye county. When Fan Shi came to inspect Xinye, the county chose Kong Song to drive his horse. Fan Shi recognized him and took him by the arm: 'Aren't you Kong Zhongshan?' Kong Song replied, 'I am'. Fan Shi sighed. Reminiscing about their lives, he said: 'Once, you and I, dragging our long robes, studied and rested at the imperial college. I got the favor of the state and have become governor of a prefecture. Yet, you who embrace the Way are forsaken among soldiers. Is that not unfortunate?' Kong Song said: 'Hou Ying 侯嬴⁴ held a humble position for a long time: morning and evening, he was content to open and close the Eastern Gate; Confucius wanted to live among the nine wild tribes without fearing their rusticity. When poverty suits a scholar, why should he find it vile?' Fan Shi ordered the deputy prefect to find a replacement for Kong Song. But Kong Song refused to leave his job, arguing that his term was not yet up. In Ali village, Kong Song was exemplary in his uprightness and behavior, and the local youth all submitted to his instruction. He was thus summoned by the administration. On his way to the capital, he spent the night under a pagoda; thieves stole his horse. Afterwards, they inquired about him and knew he was Kong Song. They regretted their deed and stepped back: 'Kong Zhongshan is an outstanding scholar. How can one decently steal from him?' So they apologized and returned the horse to Kong. Kong eventually became prefect of Nanhai. As for Fan Shi, he was transferred to the post of Prefect of Lujiang and still enjoyed a great reputation. He died in this position. (Fan Ye 1968, juan 111 vol. 6: 9-10)

Fan Shi's biography goes on to discuss his friendships with Chen Pingzi, whom he considers his friend in life and death, and Kong Song. Confucius says in the *Analects* that we take charge of friends' funerals when they no longer have relatives to rely on (X.19, in Ruan Yuan 1998: 2497). But Fan Shi's concern for Chen Pingzi goes further, for he never knew him alive. The mere fact that he was a student at the same Imperial College is enough for Fan to take care of his death, his widow, and his child. His act gives a new extension to the notion of *peng* 朋 mentioned above. It extends from 'those who

⁴Hou Ying was a hermit from Wei. A poor man, at the age of 70 he became a guard of the capital's Yi Gate. He then became a friend of Lord Xinling of Wei. See 'Life of the Lord Prince of Wei' in Sima Qian (1982: juan 77, 2378-2381).

study with the same master' to 'those who study in the same institution' and eventually to 'all those who study'. The letter of trust that Chen Pingzi left for Fan Shi also played a role. In fact, it is tantamount to a commitment or pact. While Zhang Shao's conception of friendship is exclusive, like the one between Boya and Zhong Ziqi, with *siyou* privileged over *shengyou*, Fan Shi visibly adopts a more open attitude. Indeed, we observe three successive alliances of friendship: with Zhang Shao, Chen Pingzi, and Kong Song. In other words, Fan can have several life-and-death friends in the course of a single existence. Although the friendship with Chen Pingzi is partly eclipsed in the exegetical tradition in favor of that between Fan Shi and Zhang Shao, it reveals that friendship is not formed solely between acquaintances and is part of what is known in Chinese as *shenjiao* 神交 – bond by spiritual power or spiritual bond. Examples abound throughout history. We can just mention the case of Wang Tingxiang 王廷相 (1474–1544), one of the greatest Ming thinkers and poets. In 1524, Wang was a deputy chief commissioner in Shandong. To go from Huguang, the province where he was stationed, to Shandong, he passed through Beijing, where he learned of the death of poet Zheng Shanfu 鄭善夫 (1485–1523), whose literary name was Shaogu 少谷 and public name Jizhi 繼之. He then composed the 'Songs for Shaogu' explaining how friendship bound them although they had never met:

Zheng Jizhi (Shanfu), a scholar from Min (Fujian), was an outstanding poet. I had heard of him but never met him. I happened to read his posthumous work and found a poem about me: 'The whole empire speaks of the poetry of Wang Ziheng (Tingxiang); the spring wind will influence the scholars of Lu (Shandong)⁵. Your name was once known to me through Xue Libu⁶; from the city of Luoyang, I bid you farewell from afar'. Alas! How attached he was to me! When he was alive, I was unable to meet him; when he died, I read his text. I regret Jizhi's death all the more because he had dedicated poems to me. But what is the point of regret? So I composed these *Songs for Shaogu*. On the fringes of Yan state⁷, I set fire to these drafts and, facing the sea, said my prayers. Shaogu's spirit, if it existed, would certainly sense my intention. [I do this to] commemorate our spiritual bond and comfort my late friend ('Shaoguzi Ge' 少谷子, in Wang Tingxiang 1989: 12.177–178).

This spiritual friendship between the two poets was often praised by Ming and Qing scholars. Distance, the fact that they never met, and even death hardly diminish the power of their spiritual bond. If we return to Fan Shi's biography, he, Zhang Shao, Chen Pingzi and Kong Song all attended the Imperial College. What is critical here is that they share the same aspiration, hence the same virtue. This is the bedrock of their friendship. If there is a hierarchy in the word *pengyou*, it's *you* that ultimately prevails.

⁵This poem was likely composed in 1521, when Wang left for Shandong to serve as deputy commissioner of the provincial Censorate, in charge of school inspection. He remained there until 1523, when he was appointed to Huguang; he returned to Shandong in 1524, after Zheng's death.

⁶Xue Hui 薛蕙 (1489–1541), an officer and colleague of Zheng's at the Ministry of Personnel (*Libu* 吏部).

⁷Wang Tingxiang spent some time in Beijing, before returning to Shandong after finishing his term in Huguang.

Fan Shi and Zhang Shao in posterity: friendship and intertextuality

Much like the friendship of Boya and Zhong Ziqi, the one between Fan Shi and Zhang Shao never ceased to nourish Chinese literature, regardless of genre boundaries. A stele was erected in Fan Shi's memory around 235 (Zufferey 2016: 826), and was still intact at the end of the Southern Song. Then, his story moved into the realms of poetry, drama, and novel.

Several Tang poets allude to the friendly bond between Fan and Zhang. Wang Changling 王昌齡 (ca. 698-756) writes the following lines:

Zhang and Fan, excellent friends from beginning to end,
How could we not admire them? (Wang Changling 1981: 9)⁸

The poem's addressees, Feng the Sixth and Yuan the Second, seem to cultivate the art of retreat: one 'hides his wings' or ambitions and the other 'moves forward with small steps'. While he worries about the harshness of their lives, which Wang Changling himself experienced before passing the Imperial examinations and entering the public service, the poet expresses his admiration for his old friends by comparing them to Fan Shi and Zhang Shao. Around a century later, the poet Du Mu 杜牧 (803-852), when he was newly appointed prefect of Chizhou (in today's Anhui province), mourns his friend and colleague Li Fangxuan 李方玄 (802-845) – appointed to the prefecture of Chuzhou (in today's Zhejiang) – a few days after his death in Xuancheng. Du Mu writes:

At the site where Juqing [Fan Shi] was weeping, clouds parted from the sky
When Awu⁹ the concubine returned, the moon shun clear. (Du Mu 1440: 3.15)

The attachment to his predecessor leads the poet to allude to a double friendly alliance, that of Fan Shi and Zhang Shao, and that of Xun You 荀攸 (157-214) and Zhong Yao 鍾繇 (151-230). Awu 阿鵲 was indeed Xun You's concubine: after his death, Zhong Yao looked after his family affairs, making sure that Awu would get properly married¹⁰. It is not surprising that Tang poets praise Fan and Zhang's friendship, as the poets themselves befriend each other and engage in poetic exchanges or jousting.

During the Yuan Dynasty, the playwright Gong Tianting 宮天挺 (c. 1260-c. 1330) composed a four-act play entitled 'The life-and-death friendship of Fan and Zhang, and their chicken and millet meal' (死生交范張雞黍). The text borrows heavily from the *Book of the Later Han's* 'Biography of Fan Shi' but introduces several fictional elements. The term *jishu* 雞黍 (chicken and millet), a term found in Xie Cheng and in Tang poetry, indicates a good meal served with chicken and millet, but it has to do with a sense of deep friendship. In the fourth and final act, Kong Song appears next to a prime minister to whom Fan Shi recommends Kong Song, who like him will become an upright official.

⁸'Poem given to Feng the Sixth and Yuan the Second while hosted at Tao's official residence in Zheng County' (鄭縣宿陶太公館中贈馮六元二).

⁹See 'Life of Zhu Jianping 朱建平' in the 'Book of Wei' (魏書), in Chen Shou (1980: 29.8).

¹⁰'Eleven days after the former Chizhou's Prefect Li died, came his appointment to Chuzhou Prefecture. Poem written under the emotion of seeing his courtesan's return' (池州李使君沒後十一日處州新命始到後見歸妓感而成詩).

The text 'Fan Juqing shares a chicken and millet meal at his life-and-death friend's (范巨卿鸡黍死生交)' can also be found in Feng Menglong's compilation *Enlightening stories to edify the world* (喻世明言, 16)¹¹. Here I summarize the story reported in his anthology:

At an inn, Zhang Shao met Fan Shi, who was ill. Zhang helped him recover and missed the imperial examinations dates as a result. They became sworn brothers. When they parted, they agreed to meet at Zhang's home in a year's time on the 9th day of the 9th month to share a banquet of chicken and millet. On the day of the appointment, Zhang waited for Fan, who did not arrive for the day. His mother and brother were about to go to sleep when he saw Fan appear. He invited Fan to eat and drink, but he refused. Fan then told his friend that he was a ghost. For, busy with his business, he had forgotten the date until a neighbor arrived and reminded him that it was the 9th day of the 9th moon. But a thousand leagues away, it was impossible to reach Zhang's house on the same day. Having learned that a ghost could move faster, he had committed suicide by telling his wife not to bury him while he visited his friend Zhang. He told Zhang to go see his body afterwards, which Zhang did despite the initial incomprehension of his mother and brother, who nonetheless offered to accompany him to Jinxiang. But Zhang Shao urged his brother to take good care of his mother, from whom he took his leave, saying he had to go and see his friend for his loyalty to their friendship. When he arrived at Fan Shi's, he found the house locked. The neighbor told him that they had gone to the funeral two weeks ago and had not yet returned. He went to the cemetery, where Fan Shi's coffin was not moving. Zhang Shao told Fan's wife that he had enough money in his purse to buy a coffin. He asked her permission to bury it next to his friend. With that, he took his own life.

Feng Menglong reverses the roles historically assigned to Fan and Zhang. Here, Fan Shi commits suicide first in order to move at ghostly speed and keep his word to Zhang Shao. He then goes to his dead friend's house to have his coffin moved, and commits suicide in his turn. It is Zhang who is at the center of the story, for Fan even begins by forgetting about the appointment, an oversight that is remedied by his suicide. The story ends tragically with a double suicide. But the friendship, though romanticized, is embellished, even sublimated. By leaving his elderly mother and younger brother, Zhang Shao seems to be prioritizing friendship over filial piety and brotherly love.

Conclusion

The friendships between Boya and Zhong Ziqi and between Fan Shi and Zhang Shao have been praised and commented on many times. They represent the archetype of friendship in China, and have led to an important literary and cultural tradition. Their stories have shaped the Chinese lexicon of friendly alliances. By this I mean that the vocabulary of friendship in Chinese has been inspired by these individual yet exemplary stories. An undertaking such as Benveniste's *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*, which includes a fine chapter on *Philos* (Benveniste 2016: 273-288), could

¹¹The collection was first published as *Short Stories of Yesteryear and Today* (古今小說).

also be envisaged for China. But more than a linguistic purpose, my intention has been to show some specific features of the ideal and practice of friendship among scholars, particularly in its relationship with death, which, rather than interrupting the bond, strengthens it further. Isn't the most beautiful friendship experienced beyond life?

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