

“The Story of Miss Li” by *Po Hsing-chien*

Found in **Anthology of Chinese Literature: Volume I, From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century**, ed. Cyril Birch, Grove Press, NY, 1965.

Summary: A young prostitute takes advantage of a young nobleman, leading to his ruin. Later, she regrets her betrayal and seizes the opportunity to reinstate him to his full social standing, sacrificing her own interests in the process.

A basic conundrum of the story is why two young people who have behaved very badly should win out in the end. Miss Li is a prostitute who has taken serious advantage of someone, never felt a glimmer of remorse about it or tried to do anything to rectify it until she sees her own victim and is worried that either fate or his powerful friends or both will come to get her, and at long last tries to fix everything, but still relies heavily and consistently on her prostitution to set the young man up in style again. The young nobleman is essentially a party animal who forgets his station, takes up with some disreputable types, loses everything, and never feels a moment of remorse (well, maybe just one, but it's debatable), but instead indulges in a narrative full of self-pity as he withers away in most Victorian fashion. He never seems to do anything thereafter except exactly what he is told and seems to bear no redeeming value or make any effort on his own behalf. Neither he, nor she, seems to deserve the happy ending they both get together. Miss Li, however, once she has realized that she has displaced the Confucian order of things by displacing the son from his father's good graces, does everything in her power to restore the son to that celebrated order. Her success on that front is the success of the story and why she becomes a revered woman worth telling the tale of.

Analysis: This story can be a confusing read for the western reader largely due to its value structure, which may not fulfill what a western reader expects in a morality tale (one certainly doesn't expect a rowdy nobleman who takes up with a prostitute and blows all his fortune disreputably to end up winning everything in the end and coming out on top; one further doesn't expect the evil temptress who recants merely out of nervousness that fate will get her to end up reveling in glory either: the western reader expects them both to end up where they started—miserable—not where they finish—in glory!). This seeming moral ambiguity provides an excellent opportunity for students both **1)** to delve into the idea of morality itself and **2)** to consider the relevance of such a term in light of its possible non-uniformity.

Goals:

For each student to enlarge his or her sense of the terms moral, value, virtue, morality, ethic, etc.

(part 1 below)

For each student to read a classic, well-regarded tale of traditional Chinese literature (part 2)

For each student to gain some knowledge of the historical origins of Confucius (part 3)

For each student to gain a rudimentary understanding of Confucian values, one of the most significant, widely held, and continuously embraced moral philosophies in the history of humanity (part 4)

For each student to consider how writers can work to imply values through their fiction and how those efforts can and can not be successful, and for students to consider this in terms of their own writing (part 5)

[For each student to make an early foray into comparative literature by looking at the morality tale of one culture next to one of a different culture]* (part 6)

Lastly, for each student to fully embrace the challenge of creating a successful morality tale by attempting to write one that illustrates the morality of our culture (part 7)

*Optional add-on activity

Materials:

Ideally, Internet access for each of your students or pairs of students to be working on simultaneously.

Copies of the story

Copies of or access to selections from Confucius's **Analects** (our course pack included Chapter Two of **Sources of Chinese Tradition**, Eds. Be Bary et al., Columbia University Press, NY, 1960)

Procedure:

Part 1. First, go ahead and set the stage that the students will be reading a bit of a morality tale. It's okay to give it away here, because the focus of the unit is not to determine that fact, but to analyze its implications.

Break the students into small groups of 3-5 students. Give them the five terms listed above (moral, morality, value, virtue, and ethic) and give them a brief stretch of time to discuss the terms and try to come up with a clear definition for each one. This should be very hard to accomplish because these are such common catchwords thrown around like confetti these days. Obviously, they could spend all day just working out one; get them to define all five in no more than fifteen minutes total. While they are discussing, you should write the five terms across your

chalkboard (dry erase board? digital imaging screen? what have you...) so that you can build columns of text below each term.

At the end of the fifteen minutes, have one member of each group quickly present the group's definitions to the class orally and then transfer those findings to the board while the next group begins to present. The student should write his or her group's definition of "moral" under where you wrote the word "moral," with each group doing the same, so that at the end you should have a board with five clear vertical columns. After each group has presented, you should have heard a wide variety of definitions and should have a board full of them to visually drive it home.

Now let the class ease into a full group discussion with the following questions as jumping off points: *Was it easy or difficult to come to agreement within your group on these definitions? What is challenging about pinning down a specific definition of them? Can you give a specific example of a situation that illustrates one of these terms?*

If needed, hand out the following definitions* of the terms and use them as a basis for further discussion. Focus on how these terms rely on a common acceptance among the members of society. The logical next question then is of whether what is accepted in one society is accepted in all societies (is society global/human or merely a regionalized acceptance of local common ground?). It's the standard debate of moral relativism. Is morality universal, and if it's not, then what is its purpose? The textbook example illustrating this paradox is the old one of murder: if everyone in the world doesn't agree that killing is wrong, then can we actually say that it is morally wrong?

While this debate is a great one and always fun with students, as they begin to work out the world's idiosyncrasies, but it also has a direct relevance to "The Story of Miss Li," because

that story presents a morality representing a set of values that many (if not all) of the students, after having read the story, may not feel represents their own sense of morality.

**Definitions: Taken from the Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus, American Edition, 1996*

1. Moral: *adj.*: concerned with goodness or badness of human character or behavior, or with the distinction between right and wrong; concern with accepted rules and standards of human behavior. Conforming to accepted standards of general conduct; capable of moral action. Founded on moral law. *n.*: a moral lesson (esp. at the end) of a fable, story, event, etc.; a moral maxim or principle.
2. Morality: *n.*: the degree of conformity of an idea, practice, etc., to moral principles. Right moral conduct. A lesson in morals. The science of morals. A particular system of morals. Moral principles; points of ethics.
3. Value: *n.*: the worth, desirability, or utility of a thing, or the qualities on which these things depend. One's principles or standards; one's judgment of what is valuable or important in life.
4. Virtue: *n.*: moral excellence; uprightness; goodness. A particular form of this. A good quality.
5. Ethic: *n.*: a set of moral principles.

The goal of part 1, again, is for each student to enlarge his or her sense of the terms moral, value, virtue, morality, and ethic, mostly to help set the stage for the overall analysis of this short story, so any focused discussion will be useful.

Part 2. A. Introduce and give context for “The Story of Miss Li.” It is a story from the Tang Dynastic period (618-907) written by Po Hsing-chien. If you are working this into a unit on Chinese literature (or East Asian literature), you can fit the Tang into the historical framework you have already built in your coursework. If not, what an excellent time for some research! It would be very useful, particularly for later work in this unit, to create a timeline of Chinese and world history somewhere in your room that you might leave up during the unit. Many exciting websites exist on Chinese history, from the incredibly but a bit cumbersome *Britannica.com* (where you should type in “China, a history of” at the prompt for a search) to the more accessible timeline and history site www-chaos.umd.edu/history/welcome.html. Some basic dates to hit are the early archeological records from the first and second millennium BCE, the first unification as empire under the Qin in the 200s BCE (show the movie “The Emperor and the Assassin,” if you have the time—a great depiction of the consolidation of the empire by Qin Shi Huang Di, the first emperor), the Han Dynasty (206 BCE to 220 AD), about two thousand more years of history, and the fall of the last emperor in the first years of the 20th century. You get the idea. There’s so much to cover and learn about. It might be most useful to break students up into groups again and have each group research and report back on a different dynastic period. How much time you spend on this depends on your curriculum and needs. It is amazing, however, how much students can learn and share in just a day or two of work.

Already, from the work of part 1, students should be expecting “The Story of Miss Li” to be a moralistic tale of some sort, and you should encourage them to consider that framework as they read the story.

B. Students should read “The Story of Miss Li” at this point. (a point that may be useful for the students now or right after they read the story is that Miss Li’s “mother” is not her biological mother; the term is used euphemistically for the madam of the brothel for whom Miss Li works.

C. After you have them read the story, you may find it useful to have them complete the feedback sheet (see attached), which has some general comprehension questions, and some questions more specifically directed to this unit’s focus.

D. Discuss the story. Fit the discussion into the format you are used to discussing literature with your students in. But whatever you cover, and wherever you head, you will want to end up focusing on the paragraphs near the end of the story where Miss Li says,

Our conduct has indeed been inhuman! We have ruined his career *and robbed him even of his place in the category human relationships. For the love of father and son is implanted by Heaven;* yet we have hardened his father’s heart, so that he beat him and left him on the ground.

Everyone in the land knows that it is I who have reduced him to his present light. The Court is full of his kinsmen. Some day one of them will come into power. Then an inquiry will be set on foot, and disaster will overtake us. *And since we have flouted Heaven and the laws of humanity, neither spirits nor divinities will be on our side.* Let us not wantonly incur a further retribution!

(Italics mine)

As you focus on this section, direct students into analyzing Miss Li's statement with some of the following questions:

- What do you think Miss Li means by "place in the category of human relationships"?
- What do you think the "laws of humanity" might be?
- What kind of social structure is Miss Li referring to or conceiving? Try to guess, based on the story, as much of what that structure is as you possibly can.
- Do you believe "the love of father and son is implanted by Heaven"? What about the law of a mother for her son? Father for daughter? Mother for daughter? Do you believe these last three relationships are considered by the author to be as important as the first one? Why or why not?
- What is it specifically that gets Miss Li to regret her earlier behavior and decide to take action to right her earlier betrayal of the young man? Does she feel that she did wrong, or is she instead only worried that somehow she will be repaid in kind for her previous cruelty? Is there a difference?

Don't worry if the students don't come up with specific, clear, or correct answers. They shouldn't! What you hopefully have directed them to is that this story clearly relies on some particular belief system that most American students will not have had specific, first hand access to. They should be able to discern a belief system in the story (such as in the obvious passages above), but they should also find it (pardon the term) foreign.

Part 3. Having embraced the paradox of the story for the western reader, the students are now ready to begin to do the work necessary to decipher it. They need now to learn about Confucius and Confucianism and to read some of **The Analects of Confucius**. Confucius, born in the Sixth Century BCE, was the initiator of perhaps the longest and largest continuous philosophical (/religious) tradition in human history. His **Analects** are sayings and stories attributed to him and some of his followers and are broken down into chapters and verses.

The Question: What philosophical tradition underlies the writing of “The Story of Miss Li”?

Answer: Po was particularly interested, as were many of his contemporaries in the Tang Dynasty, in exploring and developing the intricacies of Confucist thought.

But who exactly was Confucius, and what were his basic philosophical precepts? In the most basic, trimmed down terms, Confucius believed in a divine order of things in their place, much based on a family structure model. The closer one adhered to this order, the better one’s life and the state of society would be. The more distantly one strayed from it, the more social chaos would result. Confucius focused on individual responsibility in achieving these goals. Okay, that’s my ridiculously watered-down version. To get a more detailed and accurate understanding and introduction to Confucius and his philosophy, I recommend you and your students explore the following resources:

For historical background:

East Asia: A New History, Rhoads Murphey, Longman Press (Addison Wesley Educational Publishers), New York, 2001, pp. 40-46.

For actual readings of Confucius's **Analects**:

Chapter Two of **Sources of Chinese Tradition**, Eds. Be Bary et al., Columbia University Press, NY, 1960

<http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/texts/analects.html>

<http://www.human.toyogakuen-u.ac.jp/~acmuller/contao/analects.htm>

<http://eawc.evansville.edu/anthology/analects.htm>

<http://www.confucius.org>

>full text of the **Lun Yu (Analects)**: <http://www.confucius.org/english/lange.htm>

>detailed historical biography of Confucius: <http://www.confucius.org/ebio.htm>

Cumbersome to download, but loaded with info on Confucius and his Chinese philosophical contemporaries: <http://library.thinkquest.org/19053/main/heavy.html>

Approach this material however best suits your style: have students simply explore this material on their own, or have them research and share, or read excerpts from the **Analects** that they find compelling out loud and let the class discuss them. It would be useful to differentiate between Confucianism and Taoism and Buddhism, as these are all quite different, although not unrelated, traditions.

Part 4. A professor at our conference on East Asian Literature, Prof. Yingjin Zhang, Indiana University, introduced Confucian approaches to Traditional Chinese Family Structure and Confucian Values through the outlines on the following two pages. Use these sheets in tandem with their reading of the **Analects** to help the students get a clearer grasp of what Confucianism means and how it might be manifested in short stories.

A possible activity: Role Play on Confucian values: break the class into five groups and assign each group one of the 5 key Relationships listed on the Confucian Values sheet. The students then have about ten minutes to create a brief skit demonstrating an example of that relationship that somehow expresses the Appropriate Virtue associated with that relationship. All five groups perform their simple skits, which then leads into a class discussion about how it is to try to come up with a story that represents the Confucian Values. This can then lead into a discussion about story writing with a purpose, which, as you see below, leads directly into this unit's final project.

Confucian Values

5 Key Relationships

Appropriate Virtues

ruler-subject

loyalty

father-son

filial piety

elder brother-younger brother

brotherliness

husband-wife

love and obedience

friend-friend

faithfulness

-- Prof. Yingjin Zhang, Indiana University

Traditional Chinese Family Structure

**Patriarch (Matriarch)
Grandparent(s)**

(Paternal) Uncle(s)

**Father
(Mother)**

(Paternal) Aunt(s)

Father's concubine(s)

Elder Brother

**Self
(wife)**

Younger Brother

(concubine)

Daughter(s)

Elder Son

Other son(s)

Notes:

- every member's position (and responsibility) fixed before birth
- the human self basically a male concept
- the elder son's enormous responsibility
- a male's influence varies according to his official status
- the marginal position of woman versus her central role in reproduction
(good mother, virtuous wife, filial daughter)

--Prof. Yingjin Zhang, Indiana University

Part 5. Discussion:

Where in Miss Li can we see some of this structure, some of the Confucian Values being tested and reinforced?

What then is the author's point in writing the story?

Does the author completely support Confucian Values or are there any places where the author is critical of them? Which parts in the story contradict Confucian values?

Revisit the excerpted paragraphs from the end of "The Story of Miss Li" highlighted above in part 2, but now explore and interpret those passages in light of your work on Confucian thought. Do these passages now take on new meaning? How so?

Can we now consider Miss Li to be, from our new point of view, a true hero, or do we not buy that possibility yet? Why or why not?

Part 6. *A Brief Foray into Comparative Literature.

Given the approach we've taken to the philosophical and moral conundrum exhibited in "The Story of Miss Li," we can then use the same inquisitiveness and tools to approach another text from another culture that bears a similar moral paradox.

Medea is the classic tale of a woman scorned. Euripides' classic play from the early centuries BCE details the legend of the sorceress who helped Jason (of the Argonauts and Golden Fleece fame) escape an island he was trapped on so that he could get back to his Grecian home. Along the way, Medea has married Jason, bore him two children, and dispatched a few of her family members permanently to achieve her and her new groom's escape. Alas, when the new family returns to Corinth, Jason ditches Medea for a new bride, a political marriage that will install him and his sons officially into the Greek royalty. Not to be one-upped, Medea secures

safe-harbor for herself in a nearby kingdom and proceeds to kill her two sons (as well as doing in Jason's new bride-to-be and father-in-law-to-be). The story ends swiftly and suddenly with Jason begging to see the bodies of his sons and Medea refusing.

So? you ask. **Medea** presents a moral conundrum in that Medea herself seems to get off without a scratch, while Jason loses everything except what every good revenge demands (his death). Is Medea justified in her actions? Does Jason get what he deserves? What are we supposed to make of Euripides' intentions? What lesson are we supposed to learn from his play? How are we supposed to deal with the fact that the woman for whom we have great sympathy in this play and who has become our heroine *takes the life of her children*? It's an unconscionable act, particularly when it's precipitated by such dubious (and perhaps merely self-interested) motives.

If you choose to take the time to do **Medea** in connection with "The Story of Miss Li," I highly recommend that you have your students read it out loud in class and act it out. This fun and engaging approach to the literature of theatre works especially well with this play, because there are several named roles as well as a *Chorus* that can (and traditionally would) include several students reading in unison (or breaking up the long speeches of the Chorus into individual reading parts, rapping them, singing them, etc.). I recommend you use the Dover Thrift Editions version of **Medea**. It's cheap at only a dollar a pop, and the Jeffers translation is the most respected and least diluted or enhanced.

Obviously, it would make the most sense to approach **Medea** with the same focus we did with "The Story of Miss Li": setting the stage a bit with historical study and reference to Ancient Greece and the philosophical traditions that set the stage for and directly influenced Euripides. One interesting point that brings me to want to focus on this piece of literature and its

moral difficulty is that we spend so very much time in our schools teaching children about how much influence the ancient Greeks and their philosophy have had on us as a culture. If that premise is true, if it's so important for every ninth grader to read Homer and every college sophomore to read **The Republic**, then what are we supposed to do with **Medea**?

Discussion/Writing Questions:

What is the message of **Medea**? That is, what do you think Euripides wants you to get from his play?

Why do you think that Euripides ends a play that has such a confusing moral message so suddenly and seemingly without resolution (at least no moralistic resolution)?

Does Jason get what he deserves for having betrayed his wife and children? Is Medea justified in her actions? Does she have a right, as the mother of her children, to do with those children as she sees fit? If she does not bare that maternal right, who does have the right to govern their children's existence? Does anyone?

What do you think Euripides might have to say to Po Hsing-chien regarding one's "place in the category human relationships...the love of father and son...implanted by Heaven" or "Heaven and the laws of humanity"?

How might you compare the dedication of Miss Li to Medea? Both were women who, up until the conclusion of their tales, had sacrificed all of themselves and their family structures in order to support the success of their respective men (remember that Medea killed members of her own family to secure Jason's escape from her homeland).

Why is it that Medea is sent to her death (exiled in a foreign land with no friends or means for survival is essentially a guilt-free death sentence) while Miss Li is rewarded for her sacrifice?

Who took the more appropriate course of action? Why? Do you resent or disapprove of Medea's actions? If so, are you suggesting that you agree with Miss Li completely and that she was completely right to reinstate a young man who had done everything in his power to bring (and keep) himself down?

Imagine a conversation between Miss Li and Medea. What advice might they give each other? Can you write a dialogue for that conversation?

You get the idea. This could obviously be developed extensively and be both an opportunity to compare these two great pieces of literature and to do some great study of these two philosophical traditions. The *coup de grace*, however, is if you finish it off with part 7 below.

Part 7. Now that we've explored morality tales from two great philosophical traditions, it's time to take a look at our own culture and its unique philosophy. It's been very easy to be critical of other cultures and their seemingly confusing philosophical approaches to living through the literature that tries to explicate them. *But let's just see how easy (or difficult) of a task it is!*

Here's the assignment: write a short work of fiction, 3-15 pages in length (1000-5000 words). In this work of fiction, you must deliver a message of morality or values, *but* there is a catch. Your morality tale must accurately interpret and represent the moral philosophy of our culture. Sounds easy? Well, first you must establish what the moral reality of our culture is (tricky). Then you must deliver it in a tale that is believable; notice that both of the stories we've

studied are not, nor designed to be, completely outrageous. They may have exceptional elements (Miss Li finding such success in rehabilitating her nobleman, Medea actually bloodying her hand with her children's blood rather than just threatening it), but nothing that pushes them into the realms of mythology, fantasy, or Hollywood. So too your story must keep within the world of possibility, so as not to distract from the potency of the moral delivery.

This is a tricky task because we often in this culture confuse our ideals with our moral realities. Consider **The Great Gatsby**, among other things a criticism of the American Dream. The ideal of the dream is the self-made man, an individual who through hard work rises above the limitations of his or her circumstances. That's the ideal. The moral reality Fitzgerald represents is that there is nothing self-made, but rather that success in our culture is based on connection, conniving, and the willingness to break and steal and take to achieve success. A morality far from the ideal. The purple dinosaur Barney suggests an ideal moral culture where all children tell each other that they love each other and then hug each other on an hourly basis; we of course have to merge that image with the one of the first grader bringing a handgun to school and using it on his classmates. Miss Li is a prostitute. Medea takes revenge on her dead-beat dad of a husband. These are the narrative models to keep in mind as the other extreme end from the large plush purple dinosaur. Your story should perhaps lie somewhere in the middle.

Consider the discussions you had earlier about the authors' intentions in "The Story of Miss Li" and **Medea**. Use the authors' struggles to deal effectively with their own culturally-defined moral and ethical codes as models for your own work. Think about what they had to consider in delivering their messages while still writing an engaging narrative.

There's a great sharing opportunity here once the stories are completed and turned in. The students will most likely have some pretty different senses of what our culture's moral code

is and will express those differences often graphically in their fiction. The final discussion of the unit can end where it began, with the following question: is morality universal? Is there a single, basic, essential moral code or set of values that all people share? If so, what are the implications for our existence as a species? And if not, what perils and opportunities await us?

Feedback Sheet:

name _____

“The Story of Miss Li” by Po Hsing-chien

1. Summarize briefly, in a paragraph or two, the story:

2. List the main characters from the story and a few words describing their role:

_____ --

_____ --

_____ --

_____ --

3. What message do you think the author is trying to get across to the reader of the story?

4. Which passage(s) most powerfully demonstrate the author’s intention?

5. What else do you notice in the story that is compelling or interesting? What is striking to you from the story?

Uncommon Ground: Morality Tales Across Cultures

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