

2018

The Tragedy of Widows in Traditional China

Xiaohui Sun
xsun245@uwo.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/lajur>

Recommended Citation

Sun, Xiaohui (2018) "The Tragedy of Widows in Traditional China," *Liberated Arts: a journal for undergraduate research*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/lajur/vol4/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Huron University College at Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Liberated Arts: a journal for undergraduate research* by an authorized editor of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact tadam@uwo.ca, wlsadmin@uwo.ca.

The Tragedy of Widows in Traditional China

Xiaohui Sun, Huron University College

Abstract:

Within traditional China, there are many stories of widows committing suicide at a young age, especially after the Song Dynasty (960-1279). This prompts the question: Why were so many young widows committing suicide? What could explain this apparently prolific phenomenon? Within the study of women and gender relationships, an understanding of women's social status and living conditions are of paramount importance. Ming Dynasty China (1368-1644) is no exception. The order of this exploration will proceed as follows: First, the reader will briefly be provided with historical context, a focal article illustrating the phenomenon of widows who choose to remain widows until death, and finally a set of potential explanations for why so many of these widows would choose to engage in an act as extreme as suicide.

Keywords: widow suicide; financial conditions; family pressure; internalization of Neo-Confucianism; government encouragement; fear and shamefulness of rape

Historical context

It should be noted that in traditional China, a woman could become a widow without ever having actually been married. To understand how this might be the case, it is necessary to recognize that for young girls, marriage was sometimes decided on their behalf by their parents. Thus, a man and woman could be assigned to marriage before having even met. Consequently, if the husband-to-be was to die before meeting his designated wife, the woman would thereby be considered a widow. Therefore, different from today's definition of widow, as long as the woman was engaged and her husband (or husband-to-be) died, no matter whether she had already met the man, she would be a widow.

It is also important to understand that during this time period, a woman's loyalty to her husband (i.e., her chastity) was regarded to be of particularly high value. This notion was a component of the cultural norms of the time. Thus, in order to defend this chastity, many widows would often refuse to remarry, either electing to take care of their husband's parents for the rest of their lives or committing suicide.

Widows loyal unto death

In "Widows Loyal unto Death" (Ebrey 253), the reader is presented with ten cases wherein widows choose either suicide or a life consigned to taking care of her deceased husband's parents. That is, they would never remarry, effectively making them widows until their own death. It should be noted that this document comes from the local history of Fujian province, suggesting that these widows were exemplary women during that time (Ebrey 253).

An examination of these 10 widows reveals that the time spent together as husband and wife was sometimes short-lived. Indeed, most of the widows who chose suicide, as it was recorded by this document, only lived with their husbands for a short amount of time. In the case of three widows, their husbands died before they even met. Within this category are Zhang Zhongyu and Huang Yijie (Ebrey 254). Both of them became widows before any official marriage ceremony and chose suicide to defend their chastity. As for the remaining seven cases, two of them lived with their husbands for a year or less. In the case of Sun Yinxiao, she had only lived with her husband for a mere two months. Why would these women choose to engage in such an extreme act (i.e., suicide) for men they barely even knew? Why would they consign themselves to widow status for men with whom they barely had any meaningful interaction?

It is argued that the reasons behind these widows' suicide are worthy of investigation because they may illuminate poorly understood truths about what it meant to be a woman during this time period. In the following paragraphs, the reader is challenged to consider economic pressures, familial pressures, government encouragement, and the proliferation of Neo-Confucianism theory as potential explanations for such radical behaviour.

Before continuing, it should be noted that "Widows Loyal unto Death" was a document of local history from a certain province (Fujian) and dynasty (Ming) of traditional China. Consequently, it cannot represent the whole traditional Chinese history. To further explore the more general cases of these aspects in traditional China, other secondary sources are also considered.

Potential explanations for widows' suicidal behaviour

The economic condition faced by widows is the first reason worthy of consideration. Perhaps one intuitive expectation might be that widows commit suicide owing to financial hardship. However, this does not seem to be an adequate explanation. In the study of widows' suicide in Fujian Province, as long as the financial conditions of widows was mentioned, the widows were able to at least make a living on their own. For example, consider the case of Fu Xiaojie: In spite of the fact that her husband was kidnapped, she could still support herself by making clothes. However, after hearing that her husband was killed, she committed suicide without hesitation (Ebrey 253). Evidently, her motivation was not based on money. We also observe this behavior in wealthy women. Some widows had the advantage of coming from wealthy families. In spite of this, they still committed suicide as a means of maintaining their chastity to their deceased husband. For example, in the Fujian study, Wang Yingjie's family was rich and she had received a particularly abundant dowry to support her for the rest of her life (Ebrey 254). Moreover, her mother took good care of her. When Wang Yingjie refused food, her mother would strongly encourage her to eat and drink. Regardless, Wang Yingjie committed suicide when her mother was not around to stop it (Ebrey 254). We can notice that (at least in Ming Dynasty Fujian Province), economic pressure could not adequately explain why these widows chose suicide. However, as will be made evident shortly, many widows may have truly felt economically pressured to suicide. Indeed, the case of wealthy widows from Ming Dynasty Fujian province may have represented a unique case.

An examination of widows' lives during Song Dynasty China suggests that that economic pressure did contribute to their pursuit of suicide following their husband's death. In "Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Dynasty", Ebrey argues that if a widow refused to remarry she can stay in her husband's residence (Ebrey 188). Essentially, this means that remarriage would result in the forfeiture of her previous husband's property. Thus, there is incentive for her to avoid remarriage. Similar evidence can be found in the journal "Male Honour and Female Chastity in Early China." Upon the death of her husband, a widow inherits his property (land and money). However, this is confiscated from her if she fails to remain loyal to him – for example, by being courted by another man (Hinsch 169). Thus, in the interest of keeping shelter and property, many widows refused to remarry.

In addition, the life of widowhood involved great suffering. Even if widows came into legal possession of material wealth, they were still relegated to low social status. They often were victimized and had little recourse from those who would covet their property. Sometimes, local men would try to take what the widows had under the pretense that a man deserved the property more. Ebrey (188) provides an illustrative example of one particular widow who was forced to vacate her own home due to a man who had previously sought to purchase her home. Once the woman's husband died, the man again tried to purchase the property. The widow refused, however, and this man resorted to assaulting her house with rocks. Indeed, Ebrey (188) suggested that there was ample evidence in another historical document (Judicial Decisions) to suggest that widows with young sons were frequently the targets of local tyrants. Thus, the combination of widows' low social status and property ownership made them vulnerable targets. It is evident from this study of widow life in the Song Dynasty that the economic pressure on widows contributed to their suicide. In the next session, it will be demonstrated that that widows also experienced hardship from within their own family as they were often harassed by members of their husbands' family.

A widow in traditional China could usually expect support from her own immediate family. Indeed, it was often the case that a widow's family would oppose the pursuit of suicide or the self-imposed refusal to remarry. For example, consider the case of Huang Yijie (Ebrey 254) as mentioned in "Widows Loyal unto Death." Her husband died before they actually met, consigning her to widow status. Her family subsequently tried to arrange a new engagement for her without her awareness. Thus, it is suggested that the suicide of widows in Fujian cannot be adequately explained by encouragement on the part of their immediate family. However, it should be noted that Ebrey only wrote about widows' suicide behaviour within Fujian Province during the Ming Dynasty.

Contrary to what is suggested by Ebrey, family pressure might actually have contributed to widows' choice of suicide during different historical periods of traditional China. Details of widows' life situation can be reflected by the Ebrey's monograph study from her book, "The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Dynasty". Widows actually experienced tremendous pressure from her deceased husband's relatives (in particular, his brothers). When a married man died in traditional China, it was common practice for his property to be distributed amongst his parents, brothers, wife, and sons. The specific rules by which this distribution occurs is complex and goes beyond the scope of this present article. The relevant point, however, was that the deceased husband's brothers would often attempt to take advantage of the widow -

attempting to take their money and capitalizing on the fact that the widow's son would be too young and naive to provide any meaningful resistance (Ebrey 188). Ebrey also noted that in addition to wresting the properties of widows, the brothers of the deceased husband would often not welcome the widow and in fact encouraged the widow to remarry in order to reduce her burden on the husband's family (Ebrey 188).

In the case of Fujian province, widows committed suicide in spite of their families' attempts to prevent this. If familial pressure cannot explain this phenomenon, other explanations must be considered. One possible explanation might be the internalization of female chastity. During the Song Dynasty of traditional China, scholars of Neo-Confucianism claimed that chastity was the most noble pursuit for a woman. In "The Book of Cheng Brothers", Cheng Yi was asked whether a widow should remarry if she was poor and had nobody to care for her. He responded that starvation it would be preferable for a woman to starve than to lose her chastity via remarriage. (Cheng and Cheng) Furthermore, we find evidence in Liu et al.'s, "The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Text in Transnational Theory" that ancient scholars of Neo-Confucianism agreed Cheng Yi's assertion. Ancient scholars such as He Xiu also supported the notion that if a woman kept her chastity, she would achieve the rites of her life (Liu et al 133).

This tendency to place pronounced value on a woman's chastity was reinforced by government officials and figures of authority in general within Fujian province. In "Widows Loyal unto Death," Zhang Zhongyu exemplifies this loyalty following the death of her husband (Ebrey 254). As a widow, she cut her hair and lead a secluded life dedicated to guarding her husband's coffin. At one point, there was a disastrous fire that threatened her life. Even so, she refused to leave his side and chose to stay with the inanimate lifeless coffin that symbolized her late husband. Fortunately for Zhang Zhongyu, the wind steered the burning fire away from her house, allowing her to survive (Ebrey 254). Her behaviour was lauded by the local officials since it represented a commitment to chastity. In return, they awarded her a banner and tablet. Some time later, an army invaded the village. When soldiers forced their way into her home, she showed them the banner she had received earlier and surprisingly, the soldiers actually ceased their vandalism. Another example is evident in the case of the widow Sun Yinxiao: Local officials offered her a sacrifice when they discovered that she had pursued suicide. Thus, both Zhang Zhongyu and Sun Yinxiao illustrate how authority figures and the governments with power within traditional China had a tendency to reward the women who pursued the ideals of chastity.

In fact, the notion that the government would encourage widows to defend their chastity had a long history in traditional China. There is an abundance of historical materials that illustrate how policies glorified widows' chastity. Since the Warring States Period, the government often spoke highly of women who committed suicide as a means of maintaining their chastity. Officially praising widows who refused to remarry started from the Han dynasty. The praising became a custom after the popularization of Neo-Confucianism in Song Dynasty, called the study of "Li". In the Sui Dynasty, there were stipulations that filial sons, submissive grandchildren, loyal husbands, and chaste women were free of 'scot', which was a concept similar to contemporary taxation. They also received preferential treatment with regards to forced labor that during that period, citizens have the obligation to make some physical labor contribution. In addition, there was a comprehensive system selecting these people by local officials. In During the Song

dynasty, the freedom of scot and forced labor, there were material rewards for chaste widows. Moreover, these rewards were extended to the widow's entire family. The widows would be given the status of nobility and officials made temples for them. Furthermore, these temples attracted worshipers even throughout the entire village. Furthermore, the governments of Yuan and Ming Dynasty encourage widows to die in defence of their chastity by more supportive policies which brought benefits to the widows' reputation and their family members.

One explanation for these governmental policies may have to do with the protection of male honour. Officials, scholars, and other people in high-status positions were mostly male during traditional China. Therefore, it stands to reason that they would inevitably make decisions and claims on behalf of male interests. In the journal "Male Honour and Female Chastity in Early China", Bret Hinsch (172) argued that there was a more sinister motivation behind this pressure for female chastity. On the surface, this preoccupation with female chastity was ostensibly done to protect their purity. However, it was also motivated by a desire to reinforce a man's dominance. That is, the submission of women was a pervasive norm (Hinsch 172). As a result, men gave restrictions to women in the name of "virtue" (called "Zhenjie") when really it might be argued that this pursuit had more to do with defending their own masculinity. The chastity of widows, as mentioned in the journal, also benefitted the widow's in-laws in a tangible way because it prevented the woman from taking their property to a new family upon remarriage (Hinsch 172). In addition, males tended to place considerable emphasis on their honour and public reputation (Hinsch 183). The public perception of a man's success was heavily influenced by the obedience of his family (Hinsch 173) - especially his wife (Hinsch 201). Indeed, it was thought to be shameful for female kin to be rebellious. Furthermore, another reason for the restrictively strict norms may have to do with the brittleness and sensitivity of male honour. Even a small thing could bring them shame (Hinsch 192). With the deepening of chastity thoughts over time, the purpose that moralists regarded chastity as the most ideal state for women was to guard their own honour, even though the process sacrificed the benefits of female, such as the refusal of remarriage even with the cost of starvation.

In addition to upholding the purported virtues of chastity, the pursuit of suicide might also be explained by a consideration of the shameful of adultery and rape. In "Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China", it is stated that during late imperial China (including Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasty), the laws in place for punishing rape were tempting for male rapists (Sommer 171). Sommer noted that the distinctions of punishments to "consummate (Cheng)" and "not consummated (Weicheng)" were considerable in the law of late traditional China (Sommer 77). Moreover, the attitudes of women being raped also affected the punishment given to rapist. If the rape was interrupted for any reason or if the women were proven to be compliant at all during the process, then the punishment would be made much less severe (Sommer 67). It is universally known that sex was a private act traditionally so it was difficult to determine the specifics during the act of a rape. Moreover, widows were a comparatively weaker social group and lacked the ability to argue with men. Therefore, the law was lax for rapists to some extent. As we mentioned before, in traditional China, the importance of chastity to women was deep-rooted and it was considered the most important virtue for women in late imperial China. Losing chastity was the biggest shame for a woman's life. Thus, it is made evident that the fear of rape (and the shame that it would impart) likely

contributed to widows' motivation for suicide as a means of guaranteeing their status as chaste widows.

Finally, it should be noted that "Widows Loyal unto Death" was a local history. In traditional China, someone could be recorded in history only if he or she did something that was extraordinary. For example, in the ancient document of Fujian local history in Ming Dynasty which was of same location and period of "Widows Loyal unto Death", there was a heroic figure by the name of Zheng Chenggong. Zheng Chenggong led an army to resist the invasion of the Manchu enemy and achieved great exploits (Wikipedia). However, for women, especially after the Song Dynasty, the only way to be recorded in history was to preserve their own chastity. Consider the book *Exemplary Women of Early China: The Lienüzhuan of Liu Xiang* translated and edited by Anne Kinney. This is a biography containing 125 different categories of women, including intelligent, articular, moral, and evil women during the Han Dynasty. Only a few cases of them were recorded because of defending chastity by suicide (Anne 67). The "Biographies of Women" suggested that there were more virtues than chastity during Liu Xiang's era. In spite of this, the ideals of Neo-Confucianism combined with pressure from the imperial court pushed chastity as the predominant standard of what it meant to be an exemplary woman. Thus, with the high praise afforded to preserving chastity and encouragement from the influences discussed previously, the number of widows committing suicide increased sharply. In "Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China", the author highlighted that in Yuan Dynasty, because there were too many widows committing suicide, governments had to impose more strict standards to decide who to reward. The "Board of Rite" stipulated that the widows being awarded must become widow before thirty years old and stay in widowhood for at least twenty years (Sommer 169). In addition, her chastity must be recognized by everyone in the town. Furthermore, during the Ming and Qing Dynasty, the requirements became even more strict (Sommer 169). In sum, many widows were immortalized in history owing to their choice to commit suicide and it is likely that this means of achieving social respect/glory was a motivating factor behind widows' suicide.

In summary, an analysis of "Widows Loyal unto Death" suggests that there were many social and cultural reasons that could explain why widows chose suicide following the death of their husbands. These reasons largely had to do with a pervading norm at the time that prioritized and glorified a woman's chastity. Within the present article, various alternative explanations have been provided including family pressure, economic incentives, government encouragement, the internalization of Neo-Confucianism ideals, the threat of sexual harassment, and the defence of male honour. An important limitation should, however, be noted with respect to the primary article of analysis (i.e., *Widows Loyal unto Death*). Since this is a historical document from Fujian province during the Ming Dynasty, one must recognize the possibility that its truths contained therein are constrained by time and place. It would be worthy to investigate whether the same trends might be observed in different places and periods within traditional China.

Bibliography

- Bret, Hinsch. "Male Honour and Female Chastity in Early China." *Nan Nu: Men, Women, and Gender in Early and Imperial China*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2011, pp. 169-204.
- Cheng, Yi and Cheng, Hao. "Erchengyishu (二程遗书)" *The Book of Cheng Brothers*. Shanghaiuji Publishing Press, 2000.
- He, Xiu. "Explications of Commentary of Gongyang." *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Text in Transnational Theory*. Edited by Lydia H., Rebecca, et al. Columbia University Press, 2013, pp.105-169.
- Kinney, Anne. *Exemplary Women of Early China: the Lienvzhuan of Liu Xiang*. Columbia University Press, 2014.
- Patricia B., Ebrey, and Bonnie, Smith. *Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in Sung Dynasty*. University of California Press, 1993
- Sommer, Matthew Harvey. *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*. Stanford University Press, 1961.
- "Widows Loyal unto Death." *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*. Edited by Patricia B. Ebrey. New York: The Free Press, 1993, pp. 253-255.
- Wikipedia: *The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 25 February 2018.

XIAOHUI SUN, third year student from Western University, enrolled in Social Science, Psychology Program. In terms of interest related with this article, the author is recently learning women and gender relationship in traditional Chinese Literature in Huron College, Western University.