THE DAUGHTER, THE SINGING-GIRL, 
AND THE SEDUCTION OF SUICIDE

BY

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Abstract

This paper examines how the suicides of singing-girls and young gentry women were commemorated by the poets Kang Hai (1475-1541) and Wang Jiusi (1468-1551) whose devotion to wine, women, and song were, and still are, legendary. Witnessing the suicides of mutually-related female family members as well as a concubine of a mutual friend, these two poets valorized these deaths in terms of qing (passion). The girls of good family defy their elders in order to consummate their suicides, and Wang’s songs for the concubine singing-girl are filled with evocations of sensual satisfaction. Thus, in the writings of Kang and Wang we see how the norms of the chastity cult were made not restrictive but alluring; the author suggests that this helped the poets to conquer the imagination of the governing class, with the ultimate results that they were able to diffuse these images throughout the whole of society.

The poets Kang Hai (1475-1541) and Wang Jiusi (1468-1551) are legendary for their celebrated friendship and for their devotion to wine, women, and song. The chroniclers of Ming literati life have kept the memory of that friendship alive, but less well-known are the ties of fidelity and family tragedy that bound the two men. They betrothed their children (Kang’s son and Wang’s daughter) in 1508, at the high tide of their brief careers at court,1 but two decades later, Kang and Wang were both exiled from government, Wang’s daughter had died, and the death of Kang’s son was followed not only by the virtuous suicide of his second wife, but by the death of the second wife’s brother, and the suicide of his wife. At Kang Hai’s request, Wang Jiusi wrote funerary essays for all of these young people.

At the very beginning of this cascade of misfortune, the two men

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1 Strictly speaking, the children were promised in 1508 when they were born, but betrothed formally only in 1516, when both men were back home. See Wang’s epitaph for his daughter, cited below.
had been using the rhetoric of fidelity to praise a very different sort of heroine. In 1526, the year that Wang lost his daughter, their friend Zhang Yupeng 無予鵬 died at the secluded retreat he had chosen after leaving government. Zhang was married, but had taken a singing-girl, Wang Lanqing 王蘭卿, as a concubine. Some months after Zhang’s death, Wang Lanqing committed suicide. Wang Jiusi, deeply moved, wrote a suite of songs in the Southern style that he and Kang were helping to bring into fashion. Kang Hai then wrote a zaju 歌劇 play about Wang Lanqing, showcasing Wang Jiusi’s suite of songs as the dominant arias of the fourth act.

What links can we see between the songs, drama, and essays that Kang and Wang wrote for all these young women? Why do the links matter for the study of suicide? The answer is that the cult of fidelity, of which suicide was a canonical expression, soon became less a matter of rules than of emotions. The court’s criteria for awards were based on age and length of widowhood, but a note of pathos dominated the standard petitions by the earliest years of the Ming. This emphasis on the feelings blurred the difference between a singing-girl and a girl of good family and, in a sort of feedback loop, made the fidelity cult ever more attractive to literati men as the value of qing 情 or affection took root in literati culture.

We must recognize the importance of women’s chastity to elite men’s culture if we are to understand why the reporting (and doubtful the actual cases) of women’s virtuous suicide surged during the Ming dynasty. Fidelity-suicides (to avoid remarriage, to avoid rape, or—in a motif newly honored in the Ming—to follow a husband in death) account for roughly a third of the women recorded in Ming local histories, virtually all of which devote a chapter to lienü 列女 (notable women). By contrast, most extant Song and Yuan dynasty gazetteers record no women’s names at all, and accounts of fidelity ordeals are found in only a small fraction of those that do. What

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3 Enthusiasm for qing is conventionally considered a late-Ming phenomenon, but Kang and Wang are already, in 1519, using the language that would be standard in late Ming discourse on qing. They justify qu poetry, understood as poetry about the passions, in terms of qing, considered as fundamental to human nature and all nature. See Han Jiegen 賀階根, Kang Hai nianpu 堪海年譜 (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 1993), 155.

4 For the one-third figure, see Carlitz, “Shrines,” pp. 613, 636.

5 Based on gazetteers collected in the set Song Yuan difangzhi congkan 宋元方志叢刊.
changed? Any answer must be complex, involving a fusion of new philosophical trends and bureaucratic structures in the late Yuan and early Ming, the spread of examination orthodoxy that equated women’s chastity with men’s loyalty, and social changes that put this examination culture in reach of more and more families. But what we must remember is that the chastity cult originated in male culture. Neo-Confucian thinkers of the Song dynasty took China’s profoundly gendered philosophical heritage and made women’s chastity and fidelity the feminine expression of the dao wu gou 道無垢 (the “Dao without flaw”), and the value of chastity, as Patricia Ebrey shows, was already gaining ground among the elite of the late Song.

Beverly Bossler demonstrates that Yuan literati, in new genres of “exemplar texts” that celebrated both virtuous men and women, accorded unprecedented prominence to wifely fidelity. By Ming times, when the cult of fidelity took root in society at large, it was male writing in the public sphere—memorials, biography, epitaphs—that crystallized the conventions later used by both sexes to describe suicide for fidelity.

Why did literati men commit themselves to the ideal of women’s chastity? I will be looking here at the early sixteenth century, when it cannot be argued that men were simply responding to the dictates of state policy vigorously pursued. The Ming founder had established procedures for awards to chaste widows and their families, but

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(Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990). In this set, one quarter of the gazetteers include a section devoted to lienü 列女 and zhenfu 臣婦, but most of the exemplars are companions to famous mythological males and have nothing to do with ru 录 norms of fidelity. Ten percent of the gazetteers contain a significant number of cases with a recognizably ru tone. They are the 1192 Wujun zhi 倬軍志 (thirteen cases), the 1201 Huiji zhi 惠濟志 (seven cases), the 1268 Lin’an zhi 隆安志 (eleven cases), and the 1344 Jinling xin zhi 金陵新志 (sixteen cases). This does not reflect the full extent of literate society’s commitment to fidelity ideals; gazetteers, which typically compressed essays by notable literati, inevitably lag a bit behind. See citation to Beverly Bossler below.

This was not solely a matter of Chinese ideological purity. As Bettine Birge shows, the spread of the fidelity cult during the Yuan was due in part to a fortuitous convergence of Mongol and Neo-Confucian ideals. See “Levirate Marriage and the Rise of Widow Chastity in Yuan China,” Asia Major, 3rd Series, 8.2 (1995): 107-46.

See Patricia Buckley Ebrey, The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Family prestige was a factor, since the new attitudes toward chastity were associated with the examination culture that gained social power over the course of the Song.

after the Hongwu and Yongle eras, the court itself made very little coherent effort to regulate morals. No Ming emperor took women’s chastity as seriously as did the Qing dynasty Yongzheng emperor, whose measures are described by Janet Theiss in this volume. Local officials and gentry in the late fifteenth century were very active in establishing ru or “Confucian” shrines to men and women, but they did not do so in response to directives from the court. Rather, the localities took the initiative and used state-sanctioned rhetoric to aggrandize themselves.9

Similarly, individual men who wrote about chastity did so because such writing satisfied their own needs and desires. In another paper I discussed evidence showing that literary fame, career advancement, and community self-advertisement could serve as reasons men wrote about women’s ordeals of chastity, once the state had established a channel whereby they could achieve recognition for doing so.10 It was men who produced the enormous preponderance of the literature of fidelity, and they did so because such writing could fit perfectly into the ideal life pattern of elite men, namely the continuum from the personal to the public. Men could vie for public recognition by adopting state-sanctioned rhetoric and establishing shrines to faithful women, and at the same time, they could and did forge personal ties to other men, by writing epitaphs or poems for their friends’ mothers, wives, daughters, and concubines. The evocation of passion, including the passion-driven gesture of suicide, was a signal to other men of one’s capacity for friendship. (Men might, upon request from friends, write eloquent poetry about women they had never seen and barely heard of.)11

Sensuality of various kinds was part of the appeal of these stories of purity. Tales of singing-girls, whose fidelity to elite norms triumphed over their supposedly depraved milieu, can be found in Song dynasty sources dating from the earliest stirrings of the chastity cult.12 Ming law attempted to keep these jian (debased) women in

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10 Carlitz, “Shrines.” In “Faithful Wives,” Beverly Bossler demonstrates that Yuan literati who celebrated virtuous women had similarly complex motives.

11 An outstanding case is the long poem that Secretary Lu Shidao (1511-74) of the Ministry of Rites wrote to defend the reputation of a young woman suicide Zhang 薄 who was being championed by the essayist Gui Youguang (1507-71). See “Dao Zhang zhenfu,” in the1605 Jiading xianzhi, 21.48a-52a.

12 See for example two tales in the Song dynasty compendium Yijian zhi (debased) women in
a separate sphere from those of respectable commoner (liang) status, but the fact that Kang Hai and Wang Jiusi could move so fluently between their liang and jian heroines suggests that the singing-girl, with her explicit appeal to the passions, has a great deal to tell us about the actual content of the liang ideal.

By mid-Qing times, as Janet Theiss has demonstrated from extant court records, the chastity cult was woven into the texture of social life at every level. Women had assimilated the ideal of chastity and fidelity to the point of using suicide aggressively, to embarrass men who tainted them.¹³ We have no such trove of Ming dynasty court materials, which would give us women’s voices at many social levels.¹⁴ Poems, letters, and diaries of elite women afford our best opportunity to hear Ming women’s voices, but references to suicide—whether approving or disapproving—are rare in these sources. Women wrote exemplary texts given to girls, but these texts emphasized fidelity and propriety far more than they talked about suicide.¹⁵ Women did not write the biographies, the petitions for state awards, the epitaphs that established the conventions for writing about suicide in the public record, namely the local histories in which pathetic accounts of ordeals of fidelity were a standard feature from early Ming times on. Unlike footbinding, conventionally thought to have been imposed on women by men but now shown to have originated and continued as one of the mysteries of the women’s quarters,¹⁶ the spread of the chastity ideal apparently got its start in the way literati men talked to each other, holding their heroines up as models or as objects of passionate concern.

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¹⁴ Sparse legal materials from the very late Ming suggest the same aggressive use of suicide by women. See the cases of Xu Dui 許遂, 190, and Liu Shijun 刘士俊, 671, in the 1634 casebook Xunci 景尋 by Zhang Kentang 張肯堂 (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1969 [facsimile reprint]).
Kang Hai and Wang Jiusi

Kang Hai and Wang Jiusi were born into high-gentry, office-holding families in Shaanxi province, Kang Hai in Wugong county and Wang in nearby Hu county. Both passed the jinshi examination in their twenties, Wang in 1496 and Kang Hai as the top graduate of 1502. Both were assigned to the Hanlin Academy, and their participation in the group of essayists who would come to be known as the Seven Early Masters of classical style assured them fame that far outlasted their time at court. Their good fortune must have seemed complete when both their wives became pregnant: if one child was a boy and one a girl, they agreed, the babies would be betrothed. But the fall of their notorious fellow-provincial, the eunuch Liu Jin, meant the end of their careers at the heavily factionalized court. Neither was willing to entertain later requests to serve, and they lived out their lives as private gentlemen, though their repeated poems and letters about the dangers of holding office suggest underlying disappointment at the demise of the brilliant careers they must have expected.

The “Seven Early Masters” was actually a fairly fleeting association, and it was during the long years after the fall that Kang and Wang deepened their personal ties. Like most elite men of their era, they traveled continually to visit friends, and, with those friends, went on pilgrimages to famous sites. (We know of these travels from the endless literary exchanges they produced, since no visit could be considered complete without a poem or essay to commemorate it.) Kang and Wang were already united by their shared history at court and the planned marriage of their children; they deepened their friendship with poems on rhymes they borrowed from each other and with prefaces to each other’s work.

And just as they had been masters of the essay at court, in retirement they became literary pioneers of song-poetry or qu, helping to create the national fashion for Southern melodies, and writing zaju plays in the new style that mixed Northern and Southern tunes. This put them at the center of another modus of Ming

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17 Wang already had an eight-year-old son by his deceased first wife. Wang and his first wife had been betrothed because of the friendship of their fathers, and Wang would choose his second wife because of his friendship with her father’s younger brother. See the epitaph for his wives, cited below.
19 Tilemann Grimm makes this point in his biographical sketch of Wang Jiusi. See Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1367.
friendship, the realm of banquets and singing-girls, since the performance of drama and song was central to the culture of literati visiting. Qu were performed at banquets or at the temples or lakes where romantic gatherings were convened, and these banquets and gatherings were then further commemorated in qu.

Two very different personalities emerge from Kang’s and Wang’s writing, even their writing for each other. Kang’s literary persona is reserved and scholarly. A zhuangyuan or top graduate, he had been much in demand as writer of prefaces for Shaanxi county gazetteers, and he produced a celebrated gazetteer of his own Wugong county. Wang always refers to him as “The Historian.” Kang’s essay on the nature of friendship has no hint of the lively banquets he and his friends organized; rather, it presents the orthodox view of friendship as a means of moral development. Wang Jiusi is the expressive member of the pair, writing numerous playful poems to singing-girls of his acquaintance (he uses Kang’s rhymes for some of these), and in his suites of songs for the birthdays of everyone from respectable dowagers to himself, he paints every feast as the equal of those in the Daoist paradise. The difference in their temperaments is clear in the epitaphs they wrote for their wives: Kang Hai, while apparently deeply moved, is nevertheless laconic, emphasizing his wife’s sternness, competence, and rectitude (“The household women all feared and respected her.”) Wang’s epitaph, by contrast, overflows with details of his own career, his children’s careers, and the affecting details of his two wives’ deaths. Like Kang Hai, Wang makes sure we know how competent his wives were (both “personally prepared all the food for my parents”), but his emphasis is on the losses suffered not only by himself and his sons but by the wives themselves, who lost children while alive and did not live to see the achievements of their surviving children.

Kang Hai’s preface to Wang’s collected essays praises Wang in the highest terms of Kang’s repertoire (he compares Wang to Sima
Qian 司馬遷), but this sober praise pales in comparison to Wang’s outpouring of poems for Kang Hai, who seems to have been the brightest star in Wang’s emotional firmament. There are poems to Kang Hai from every decade of their friendship: poems about scenery and singing-girls, composed while they were drinking together; a poem for Kang’s sixty-first birthday; in which he laments that their early glory vanished “like a dream;” a poem teasing Kang Hai for his shyness:

In your youth, no thoughts of love
But once the silk cords bound you fast,
You’d fall into gloom when you couldn’t see her,
And lose your voice whenever you did!^28

Wang wrote poems for numerous other friends as well (“Teasing Zhang Haozhou” suggests that Zhang had none of Kang Hai’s inhibitions), but no one else was singled out for the repeated effusions he bestowed on Kang Hai. When Wang matches a “ladies’ lament” (gui yuan 鬧怨) of Kang Hai’s, writing, as was the fashion, in the voice of a woman longing for her lover, it is tempting to read the note of longing as having at least something to do with the depth of his feeling for Kang Hai.\(^{30}\)

The most searing evocation of that friendship is Wang’s epitaph for his own daughter, who had been married to Kang Hai’s son in 1523, when both were seventeen sui. Wang was clearly very proud of his daughter: he writes that she was a favorite of Kang’s wife, and as Kang’s wife died before the wedding took place, Wang’s daughter “dreamed of restoring the household to what it had been under her mother-in-law,” discussing with her new husband “all the details of food offerings and sacrifices, of spinning and weaving, of what to feed the pigs and chickens. Vegetables, fruits, pickles and sauces—with none of these was she unconcerned.” Wang and his wife were in anguish over her death in childbirth, and apparently the heavens concurred; Wang writes that “a strange fragrance pervaded the room and lasted for more than ten days.” And in Wang’s view, his

\(^{25}\) “Meipo xiansheng ji xu 美頥先生墓序,” Duishan ji, 3.3a-4b.
\(^{26}\) “Ci Duishan yin zhong zhi zuo 次對山欵中之作” Bishan yuefu, 1178-79.
\(^{27}\) “He Duishan xiansheng liushi yi shou 恒對山先生六十一韻” Bishan yuefu, 1228-33.
\(^{28}\) “Xi Duishan zi 次對山子” Bishan yuefu, 1325-26.
\(^{29}\) “Xi Zhang Haozhou 次張濠州” Bishan yuefu, 1325.
\(^{30}\) “Ci Duishan sishi gui yuan 次對山四時鬱怨” Bishan yuefu, 1328-30.
daughter had died because she felt as strongly about Kang Hai as he did:

In the summer of the third year of [my daughter’s] marriage, namely the fourth month of the bing xu 丙戌 year [1526], my mother died. My daughter came home to Hu county to mourn with us. Since she was pregnant, she remained in Hu county. On the eighth day of the ninth month, she gave birth to a boy. But the infant uttered not a sound, and we were unable to revive him. At this time, the Historian was fifty-two years old, and had only one son. Day and night he longed for a grandson—and now this. My daughter wept in angry despair, and after three days the pains of regret and remorse attacked her stomach. She took medicine but her condition only worsened. On the seventeenth day of the month she died; we were unable to save her. She was just nineteen sui. Oh, how painful!

Wang had written a congratulatory poem when Kang Hai’s son was born; the poem promised Kang a long line of illustrious descendants, and now, Wang seems to have felt, his daughter had blighted Kang’s hopes, and died of the resultant despair.

Wang Lanqing

After passing the juren 舉人 examination, Kang’s and Wang’s friend Zhang Yupeng was appointed tuiguan 推官 in the Shandong prefecture of Qingzhou 青州, a position he left to mourn his father’s death in 1519. Kang Hai’s play suggests that Zhang retired permanently, to escape a vendetta being prepared against him by opportunist colleagues. Whatever the reason, he does seem to have retired to the Zhouzhi 周至 county village of Nuan quan 暖泉 (Warm Springs) in 1519. Kang Hai and his friend Lü Nan 呂楠 visited him there that year. Poems show us that Kang Hai and Wang Jiusi had a circle of friends in Zhouzhi county, and it was doubtless those friends who sent word of Zhang Yupeng’s death and Wang Lanqing’s suicide. She is listed in the Lienü (virtuous women) chapter of the Qing dynasty Qianlong 乾隆-era Zhouzhi county gazetteer as follows:

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31 The baby was premature; by Chinese reckoning pregnancy lasted ten months.
32 Wang, by this time, had two sons, and at least one of his two grandsons may already have been born. See the epitaph for his wives, cited above.
34 “He Duishan de zi 平討山德子,” Bishan yuefu, 1245-47.
35 Han Jiegen, Kang Hai nianpu, 153. Tuiguan was a judicial position at the prefectural level.
36 See for example Wang’s poems in Bishan yuefu, 1333, 1351, and 1356.
Wang, named Lanqing, was originally a singing-girl. She was taken as a concubine by the tuiguan of Qingzhou prefecture, Zhang Fu’ao [Yupeng]. Fu’ao died of an illness, and Wang sacrificed herself by taking poison.

This grand gesture on the part of a singing-girl clearly impressed the Zhouzhi county historians more than did the suicides of ordinary women. (Zhang Yupeng’s brother’s concubine, for example, also followed her husband in death, but the gazetteer gives her only a laconic entry stating her name and his). Wang Jiusi was similarly impressed. He had a fixed idea of what drew a man to a singing-girl:

A poem for my friend to give to the singing-girl Meilian
Lively as can be, with her sweet tongue and her clever ideas—
Ready for love in a thousand coquettish ways.
Dreams of her, warm and yielding, will land you in the abyss of affection—
With everything she’s ready to give you, it’s hard to stay upright!
The red lotus is the best flower of them all,
And she’s even better than that.

And he had a fixed idea of how singing-girls suffered when their men were absent:

My soul is sick with missing him—
Before he dies in that distant land, my own grief will carry me off.
It’s the fragrant springtime, but my slippers are covered with dust,
and my silk kerchief’s stiff with sweat.
As long as I wait for him, my eyes will swim with tears.

In many another Yuan and Ming author’s hands, these poems of longing (which were set-pieces that both men and women wrote) shaded over into resentment, but Wang Jiusi was sure that Wang Lanqing had willingly given her all, and his response was to imagine the lively singing-girl of his typical poems reserving all of her passion for his friend. He responded to the news with a set of songs striking in their open talk of love and their sensuous presentation of death, as we can see from the second and fourth songs in the suite:

(No. 2, to the tune “Liangzhou xu 琅州序”)
She’s studied Meng Guangnü 母光女, who held the tray at eyebrow-height,
She’s better than Liu Panchun 劉盼春, whose perfume bag withstood the fire.

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37 Fu’ao is his ming 名. Yupeng his zi 子. In Kang Hai’s play he is referred to as Zhang Yupeng.
38 1749 Zhouzhi xianzhi 周直縣志. The existence of Kang’s play may have caused Lanqing’s prominence in the gazetteer.
40 “Diao Xianyang ji 代姚娘伎,” Bishan yuefu, 1185.
41 Meng Guangnü was a Han dynasty paragon of wifely obedience, famous for holding dishes before her eyes so as not to gaze too familiarly upon her husband.
Who says it’s all just lies with ladies of the night?
And you don’t need to swear those vows on the mountains or the seas
You don’t need to cut your hair off, or set incense-sticks alight—
Just a pinch of poison fills your mouth like sugar, sweetening your throat
Swallow it down, and you’ll soon drift off to dreamland,
Where you’ll be spirits, hand in hand in the moon’s light,
Or tall trees in the mist at evening, with your roots and branches intertwined,
Or a pair of butterflies in springtime, touching wings as you take flight.
Think of it
Consider it
Isn’t indiscriminate love a moral blight?
I’m not descending to empty praise here,
But isn’t she just like the loyal men of war and state
Her virtue pure as snow and ice?

(No. 4, to the tune “Gan huang en 感皇恩”)
Alas—
I want to maintain my single state
But they’ll buzz around me just like bees and butterflies.
Better to leave springtime behind,
Return to the green wilds, be buried in a yellow mound
And keep company with the clean breeze and the moon’s light.
That’s the way to fulfill our eternal ties.
Because, because I met my gentleman
I think, I think he loved me
I long, I long to follow him and die.\(^{42}\)

The effect is to infuse the ideal of fidelity with the aura of longing, presenting death in a way that has nothing to do with the Five Relationships of official orthodoxy.

The evocation of sensuality is central to Kang Hai’s play also, but here it carries a very different charge. Wang Jiusi’s is a sentimental heroine, but Kang Hai’s is a sentimental heroine with a backbone of steel. Wang Jiusi writes about love; Kang Hai makes Wang Lanqing a sharer of her husband’s literati ideals. Kang Hai does not, however, alter Wang Jiusi’s lyrics.

The opening scene of Wang Lanqing introduces the singing-girl Lanqing, who has just pledged herself to Zhang Yupeng, and her mother, who respects her decision and is not forcing her to take customers. In the first act of the play, Zhang Yupeng’s mother sends gifts and a matchmaker to welcome Lanqing as a secondary wife for her son. Lanqing’s maid is incredulous that her mistress would give

\(^{42}\) “Ge’er Wang Lanqing shi Nuanquan Zhang zi Zhang zi si nai yi yin yao si yu wen er yi zhi ci ci chuan yan 汝王南郡仲卿養子養子死乃亦飲哀引準備而晨之為此桐傳” Bishan yuefu, 1242-44.
up a life of luxury to marry into an “empty chamber.” (Yupeng has gone off to his post in Qingzhou). Lanqing replies that becoming a Three Bonds wife is infinitely superior to the moral “stink” of the brothel. She waves the matchmaker away (“Yupeng and I are beyond all that”), since she and he are destined spouses, intimates, and old friends. “Never cease,” she calls out to him in song, “your efforts to solve the emperor’s problems!”

In the second act, Zhang Yupeng’s father dies, and Yupeng returns to arrange his funeral. He tells Lanqing that opportunistic colleagues are frustrating his initiatives and working to have him fired. The two plan an idyllic life in the country (he farming, she weaving). But by the third act, when they have lived in Warm Springs for several years, Yupeng has become ill. Lanqing sings that he is wasting away (“Where are the laughter and sweet pleasures we shared? Where is my handsome husband?”). When Zhang Yupeng injures her feelings by suggesting she remarry, she asks, in canonical fashion, how he could think that she would take a “second Heaven?” And when he does die, she takes complete charge of the family. There will be no “superstitious” funeral (no Buddhists, no Daoists, no “sevens”); rather, the wife (whom we meet for the first time) must bring the boys up to be a credit to their father. When a rich neighbor conceives designs on Lanqing and plies both her own mother and Yupeng’s mother with gifts, she realizes that only suicide will enable her to remain faithful. Calmly, she arranges a feast for Yupeng’s wife and mother, talks again about how important it is that the children be brought up properly, and retires to the next room to take poison. When she is discovered she asks that no one try to save her. Again, she admonishes the women to bring the children up properly and tells her mother-in-law to take care of her health. She is going to a place where she and Yupeng will be happy.

The final act of the play is built around Wang Jiusi’s songs. The spirit of Mt. Tai (Tai bai shan ren 太白山人) vows to learn what the people of Warm Springs are saying about Lanqing, and when he finds that local officials are neglecting her because her family is poor, he lectures the local students in song about her nobility in leaving behind the “clouds and rain” to live in a scholar’s hut. (Here

43 In Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China (University of California Press, 1997), Francesca Bray points out that in Ming and Qing China, “farming and weaving” functioned as an orthodox formula for gender distinction. Thus Yupeng and Lanqing are characterizing themselves as exemplars of Confucian virtue.
Kang Hai is inserting himself into the play, as “Tai bai shan ren” was one of his courtesy-names.) He says he has heard that a Scholar Wang has written a suite of commemorative songs, and he has Wang Jiusi’s songs performed by singing-girls and musicians. He then causes the transfigured Yupeng and Lanqing to appear to the students, which awes and enlightens them.

Kang Hai’s aims will be even clearer to us if we catch an allusion that he surely intended. The second of Wang Jiusi’s songs compares Lanqing to Liu Panchun, whom lovers of zaju would have recognized as the heroine of Zhu Youdun’s 朱有燜 early fifteenth-century play Xiang nang yuan 香囊怨 (The perfumed sachet). The plot of Sachet has the same overall structure as Wang Lanqing. In Sachet, the singing-girl Liu Panchun, hounded by her mother to take customers, instead vows fidelity to a young man of good family. When the boy’s father keeps them apart, she supports her family by singing at banquets but takes no other lovers. When the pressure to take a wealthy lover becomes unbearable, she hangs herself. When she is cremated, onlookers are astounded to see that a small sachet containing her lover’s poem remains unburnt. Her young man appears and takes her bones away to await joint burial with his own. (He vows lifelong fidelity.)

The Perfumed Sachet is in fact a far better play than Wang Lanqing, with just enough comedy to make Panchun’s tragedy truly moving. But Kang Hai wanted to take this standard reformed-courtesan plot in a slightly different direction. Sachet’s young man is a bit of a cipher, whereas Zhang Yupeng is clearly a frustrated official, through sharing whose aims Lanqing can ennoble herself. Sachet is a play about theater itself (Panchun rattles off a list of zaju titles when she is asked to perform), whereas the whole idea of skill in drama performance would valorize Lanqing’s original milieu and is thus alien to the way Lanqing talks about herself. And while Panchun’s gift of her virginity to her lover is the supreme sign of their union (a feast celebrates this shu long 杯酌, a standard ritual in the courtesans’ quarters), Wang Lanqing is more than willing to forego or postpone sex in the service of higher aims. (She marries into an “empty chamber”; she urges her husband on at his distant post.)

Nevertheless she brings her own sensuality with her. The conventional justification of a virtuous singing-girl simply emphasized her

44 This play is summarized and analyzed in W. L. Idema, The Dramatic Oeuvre of Chu Yu-tun (1379–1439) (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1985), 164-71.
repudiation of her world, but a valid reading of such a plot, I think, is that the singing-girl fascinated the literatus precisely because of the sensuous aura of her origins. In *Wang Lanqing* we are never allowed to forget the delicate food, the fine clothing, the music, ornaments, and wealth Lanqing has left behind. (People keep asking her about them.) But these hints of her sensual experience are not the whole of Lanqing’s attraction for Kang Hai. There is another kind of sensuality involved, namely freedom from convention. In Kang Hai’s play as in many a poem or suite of songs, the courtesan is the woman who can truly comprehend a man’s aspirations and offer companionship free of constraint. The note of cool competence in Kang’s depiction of Wang Lanqing may recall the way he wrote about his wife, but a wife, for men like Kang Hai and Wang Jiusi, was someone who freed her husband by taking care of household matters: clothing, pickles, pigs. Their famed associate Li Mengyang 李夢陽 (1473-1529) lamented that he never really knew his wife until she died, and the animals were going unfed and his clothing unmended.45 (A few decades later, the essayist Gui Youguang 郭有光 was so governed by these conventions that he wrote contradictory epitaphs for the father and mother of his friend Pan Shiying 番士英. Gui’s epitaph for the father states that he was an outstanding household manager, maximizing the family’s wealth and expanding their dwelling. But in his epitaph for Pan’s wife, Gui claimed that it was she who used her dowry to build them a fine house and free her son for study, while Pan “enjoyed wine and paid no attention to the family finances.”)46

This is the rhetoric of separate spheres for the two sexes, central to Ming ideas of ritual propriety. But however much Lanqing may have wanted to be a Three Bonds wife, her attraction was that she was not locked away in a separate sphere but was free to share Yupeng’s life in a way that a wife, precisely in order to be esteemed, was not.47 Lanqing—the competent administrator of funerals and

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47 Over the last decade work by Ellen Widmer, Dorothy Ko, Susan Mann, and others makes it clear that gentry women could have an extremely lively and expressive lives within their walls. But this does not alter the fact that gentry norms made it unconventional at best for a wife to be idealized in the same free-and-easy terms as the courtesan.
education, denied recognition by corrupt officials—mirrors Zhang Yupeng to such an extent that the two almost fuse, and she thus frees him from constraint by embodying freedom herself. By inserting both himself and Wang Jiusi into the finale of Wang Lanqing, Kang Hai made a gift of her freedom and sensuous appeal not only to the departed Zhang Yupeng but to Wang as well. By presiding over Lanqing’s death and transfiguration, he evoked a realm where the desire for a truly sensuous self-realization (poison “filling your mouth like sugar”) could be satisfied. And the structure of this final scene reminds us that heroines of fidelity were not simply exemplars held up by men to women. Wang Lanqing ends with a male spirit edifying the next generation of male literati.

Daughters and Daughters-in-law

After the death of Wang Jiusi’s daughter, Kang Hai betrothed his son in 1527 to the daughter of Yang Shu’an, a high-ranking official from Lingbao county. The marriage was celebrated in 1528. (This was also the year that Kang published Wang Lanqing.) In 1529, Kang’s son contracted a respiratory illness and died. The young widow struggled against his family and her own family and finally managed to follow him in death. But before we look at the epitaph that Wang Jiusi wrote for her, we need to examine the way experience was packaged in the standard Ming genres for writing about women.

Neither Kang Hai nor Wang Jiusi was a prolific writer on women’s virtue, but like many literati for whom this was one of many conventional topics, each of them has a piece about a chaste widow who lived on instead of committing suicide. Wang Jiusi wrote an epitaph for an aged lineage aunt who had been widowed when young and had resisted her father-in-law’s concubine’s pressure to remarry and leave. The widow’s husband’s brothers took her side against the concubine and settled her on enough land that she could support herself. Wang’s father urged the young Wang Jiusi to take the steps to have the aunt’s fidelity officially recognized, but only when Wang entered the Hanlin academy (by this time his aunt had

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48 Epitaphs suggest that the Kang and Yang lineages had a pattern of intermarriage. Thus Kang Hai’s betrothal of his daughter to Wang Jiusi’s son must be seen as a sign of a particularly strong friendship, since it broke the pattern.

49 Han Jiegen, Kang Hai nianpu, 204.

50 “Zu gu Zhu jielu muzhiming 祖姑朱結女慕之名,” Meipo ji, 793-96.
been widowed for forty years) did he have enough influence to make the magistrate notify the court. The Wugong county widow Li, whom Kang Hai eulogized in a ballad and accompanying essay, was forced out of her home by her husband’s parents and brothers when her father-in-law was posted elsewhere and decided to sell the family’s holdings. Ever conscious of his vocation as a historian, Kang was exercised at the way another Wugong county chronicler had described her as the modern equivalent of the Warring States exemplar Shuji of Jin. Kang pointed out that Shuji, the wife of a ruler, had been able to live out her days under the protection of her dead husband’s family, while the Wugong county widow, a commoner whose family had scattered after the famine of 1484, had no place to go except for the space grudgingly rented to her by an uncle.

The outlines of the cases suggest that both of these widows were faced primarily with subsistence problems, surely brought on at least in part by the diminution of widows’ property rights under Ming law. The two accounts are essentially stories about women and land, not chastity—but both are packaged as stories about chastity. Wang’s essay reflects his efforts to have his aunt’s virtue recognized, which meant following a standard template showing her length of widowhood and her refusal to remarry. (The Wang family must have wanted the local prestige and the tax advantages that went with having an officially designated chaste widow, and Wang needed to fulfill his father’s request.) Kang’s essay moralizes explicitly about chastity: after complaining at length about the inappropriate historical parallel, he goes on to praise widow Li for being “one in spirit” with Shuji of Jin, and he finishes by stating that thus do women fulfill the Sages’ caveat that “the Dao is without flaw.” (Only in his song does he say that widow Li refused remarriage, but this seems implied in the essay as well, with its repeated references to her body’s being “without stain.”)

Neither man, however, is an uncompromising moralist in the Song dynasty mold. Far from exhorting their widows to suffer rather

51 “Li jiefu ge 李節符歌.” Duishan ji, 10.91-11b. Shuji of Jin, who appears earliest in the Zuozhuan 左傳 is one of the “humane and wise” exemplars included in Liu Xiang’s Lienü zhuan (c.79-78 BCE) classic Lienü zhuan. She is discussed by Lisa Raphals in Sharing the Light: Representations of Women and Virtue in Early China (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 43-44. The local gazetteer, cited in Han Jiegen, Kang Hai nianpu, 150-51, says that she raised and found a husband for her daughter, and then mother and daughter lived out their virtuous widowhood together.
than submit, they are in deep sympathy with the sufferings that their widows have already undergone. Wang Jiusi is aghast at the behavior of the evil concubine, and Kang Hai is indignant that the historical comparison diminishes what his own heroine has endured. The same sympathy is evident in the other two set-pieces that Kang and Wang wrote about virtuous women, Kang’s “Song for the Filial Daughter-in-law Nie” and Wang’s “Biography of a Filial Daughter.” The widowed daughter-in-law Nie shoulders the entire burden of her mother-in-law’s care and ignores her own exhaustion, and her dying mother-in-law weeps and praises her. Wang Jiusi’s paragon is the youngest and best-beloved daughter of Old Wu 舊, whom Wang had met while serving in Shouzhou 廣州 after his demotion. As Old Wu lay on his deathbed, his daughter revived him with soup made from the flesh of her arm. When Old Wu realized what she had done he wept, but she assured him that she had spilled no blood and felt no pain. Thereupon he burst into lamentation, crying out, “My child! How could I bear to consume your flesh?” Young and old in both these accounts experience transports of self-sacrifice and gratitude.

Kang and Wang were following the Ming conventions for writing about virtuous women, emphasizing the heroic endurance of ordeals and narrating these ordeals in tones of deep emotion. This bias in favor of the ordeal is evident in Ming local histories, whose chapters on women were almost exclusively devoted to widow-chastity and the filial piety of daughters-in-law. Typically, about two thirds of the women live on, but it was the suicides and those who disfigured themselves who were given shrines. Kang Hai was far from alone, in fact, in feeling that he had to describe ordeals and responsibilities so as to justify Widow Li’s decision not to commit suicide. (He points out in his essay and again in his song that while she may have wanted to commit suicide, her daughter was still a babe in arms.)

This glorification of suicide had multiple roots: the totalizing trend evident in the teaching that “the Dao is without flaw,” the Neo-Confucian emphasis on embodying the Dao in one’s own conduct, and the way the dynastic histories, starting in the late Yuan, exalted women who resisted rape by foreign invaders. Ming law, which took rape very seriously, was crafted to keep patrilineal descent lines clear

52 “Nie xiaofu ge 被李紨芳,” Duishan jì, 10.11b.
53 “Xiao nü zhuan 孝女傳,” Meipo jì, 634-37.
54 See Carlitz, “Shrines.”
and class hierarchies distinct, and Ming beliefs about death must have considered suicides dangerous to families and whole communities. But stories about rape, chastity, or the forced transfer of one’s body to a second husband kept those issues concealed behind a swirl of appeals to Dao, empire, and Chineseness itself. By the early fifteenth century, these resonances made suicide attractive enough that court and localities were willing to honor suicide in the absence of any ordeals at all. Ordeal stories were still ubiquitous, but now spontaneous suicide could also be thought of as an uncompromising commitment to fidelity, or as a sort of pre-emptive strike against the unchaste alternatives a widow might face if she lived on.

And suicide could also be represented as an attempt to rejoin one’s departed husband. Since Ming rú ideology discouraged romantic feelings between husbands and wives, this motivation never appears in official commendations. But a widow was a woman alone, and it was a quick step to fuse the icon of the widow with language of the “ladies’ laments” that were already an established genre in Tang and Song. This fusion was well underway by the time of the Yuan-Ming transition, as we can see in these lines from Wang Feng’s poem The Faithful Wife Xu of Jiading County:

A single goose is left without a mate
And pecks her lonely meals out in the wild.
Xu Miaozheng 徐妙正, that beauty, never leaves
Her solitude inside the ladies’ chambers.
Frosty moonlight passes through the curtains,
Her solitary cup holds chilly wine.
In sleep and dreams she finds her only pleasures,
But when she wakes, she cannot stop her tears.\(^5\)

The poem goes on to describe Xu Miaozheng teaching her children, feeding her mother-in-law, and generally putting duplicitous men to shame. Archetypally good women were still able, in this language, to long for their mates.

We will see below that Ming dynasty men were perfectly able to imagine, in fiction and drama, amorous girls of good family—coquettish girls with the same range of responses as Wang Jiusi’s courtesans. But in epitaphs, gazetteer entries, and petitions for official commendation, the essay forms in which suicide was most often described, women’s experience was packaged primarily as fidelity, filial piety, and wifely probity. With the rise of spontaneous suicide

\(^5\) 1673 Jiading xianzhi, 18.22a-b.
stories, however, fidelity trumps filial piety. Wang Jiusi’s young liang women, determined to follow their husbands, do everything in their power to evade the elders they are supposed to obey.

Wang Jiusi’s epitaph for Yang Shengrong, the young woman who was married to Kang Hai’s son after Wang’s daughter died, is if anything more dramatic than Kang Hai’s play. On his deathbed, Kang Li tells his wife to prepare three coffins: one for himself, one for his first wife, and one for herself. Weeping, she says that this is just what she intended to do. Kang Hai and his wife realize that she is planning her own suicide, and they try to prevent it. Nevertheless she manages to take some rat poison. The Kang parents revive her and send her home to her own family, in hopes that her mother and father can change her mind. Nothing works. Her parents send her back to the Kangs. As soon as she arrives, she embraces her husband’s coffin in her joy that he has not been buried without her. And this time she is cleverer, pretending to agree with whatever the Kang family wants:

The next day, Yang got along very well with everyone who was watching her. Whenever one of them left, she would say, “Please don’t go—I’ll be frightened!” This led the servants to think she needed less attention, but Madame Zhang [Kang Hai’s wife] knew otherwise, and she saw to it that Yang was watched even more strictly than before.

And indeed, a few days later, at the ji hai hour of dawn on the seventh day of the eleventh month, Yang arose, bathed, and deceived her guards by adding soup of pickled vegetables to the dinner order. She lay down in the inner chambers and drank the soup, but took two or three doses of arsenic with it. She went to the toilet, and when she got back she knew the poison was working and that no antidote would be effective. Again she deceived her guards, saying, “Just now when I went to the toilet, I was very slow to void.” Again she asked for soup of pickled vegetables, and drank three bowls in a row, saying that it made her feel a bit better.

Madame Zhang entered and was alarmed by Yang’s appearance. Her suspicions were aroused, and she felt Yang’s sleeve, where some arsenic remained. Madame Zhang cried out, and the rest of the household ran in to help with the rescue. But Yang said to them, “My reason for returning was to die and follow my husband beneath the ground. What I said was jewelry in my bag was actually arsenic. I worried that Mother-in-law would suspect me, so I spoke falsely, but now I have taken it all. People say that there is no antidote to arsenic taken with pickled vegetables, and I felt that any antidote would deter me from my purpose. That is why I did what I did. Do not try to save me—it will put you to a lot of trouble, and you won’t succeed. Just call my sister-in-law to make the final arrangements.”

The family does of course try mightily to save her:

Her brother and sister-in-law were called in, and they tried to give her an antidote. She refused it, and when they attempted to force her, she bit the cup and broke it. Again they tried to give her medicine, but she clenched her teeth and refused it all. They tried to open her teeth with an iron chopstick, but she bent the chopstick. They could not force her teeth apart.

These scenes of violence contrast with the sense of peace and fulfillment that attend her when she is allowed to die:

Her sister-in-law opened Yang’s clothing-chest and took out her garments, all of which she had just recently sewn. Every one of her burial garments had been exquisitely prepared. The family had no choice: they dressed her in the grave clothes, and as soon as they finished, she died. Her appearance was peaceful, with no sign of turmoil. Spirits apparently were with her and kept the poison from disturbing her countenance.

But this peaceful and principled death is motivated by her own sense of loss:

Alas! No sooner did Kang Li die than her heart was riven with grief, such that no one could prevent her death.

And the epitaph ends with an image of reunion:

Before his death, Kang Li requested that he and his wives be buried together, and his request has not been ignored. Those in the realm of darkness have no cause for regret.

Yang Shengrong’s death carried in its wake two others. Her brother contracted a respiratory illness from running back and forth between his home and Kang Hai’s, and when he died, his own wife (a girl from Kang Hai’s lineage) followed him in death, dismissing her parents-in-laws’ arguments out of hand:

Her parents-in-law were aware of her plans. Her father-in-law was the Provincial Administration Commissioner Yang Shu’an, and her mother-in-law was Lady Xu, daughter of the Minister of Ritual Xu Xiangyi 晉書·校勘記. Again and again they implored her not to die, but to remain with them and make a name for herself as a filial and faithful widow. “Wouldn’t that be admirable?” they said. “Why do you stubbornly insist on dying now, so as to become famous later? And aren’t you even thinking about your daughter?”

But Martyr Kang replied: “I know nothing of fame—I know only that I have a husband. When I die, do not grieve for me. And if not even I am to be pitied, how much less should you pity my daughter?”

Back and forth the words flew, but in the end Kang would not consent to live.

Despite the cultural preference for sons, the conventions of essays like these made it perfectly possible to valorize a daughter. The faithful widow Li for whom
The heroine’s mind is made up, and the rest of the story is much like Yang Shengrong’s. Once again we have the arsenic, the servants who let down their guard, the mother-in-law who tries but fails to protect the heroine from herself, the advance preparation of the grave clothes. Like Yang Shengrong, she dies at peace:

Ah, how heroically virtuous! She had prepared in advance her burial clothing and everything needed for her funeral, and she gave up parental love for the sake of righteousness. Her countenance was not at all perturbed or disorderly, but dignified and calm, as though the spirits attended her in death. She resembled Kang Li’s wife exactly.\(^{58}\)

In a variation on the usual story, Kang Li had demanded the suicide of his second wife. More typically, the dying husband offers his wife the freedom to remarry, which she emphatically refuses. Often the refusal invokes the Five Relationships (“Can a minister serve two rulers?”). But Yang Shengrong’s passion is quite typical of this genre—young women faint, or throw themselves onto coffins or into the ashes where money or incense are being burned. The way Kang and Wang write about all of these young women is genre-appropriate: songs and a play for the jian heroine who could have performed them and standard epitaph-essays for the girls from liang families. Nevertheless, the seduction of suicide spans these genres. In all of them, the heroines do remarkably similar things. All of them make big gestures of renunciation, and for all of them, death is sensuous fulfillment and union with the departed. For Wang Lanqing, arsenic is as sweet as sugar, and as for Yang Shengrong, her husband summons her from her coffin; her grave-clothes—like bridal clothes—are exquisitely prepared, and he waits to be buried with her. For Yang Shengrong as much as for Wang Lanqing, death is a passionate gesture.

**Conclusion: The Problem of Passion**

Wang Jiusi may have been grateful for the conventions of the fidelity cult when he wrote these epitaphs for Yang Shengrong and her sister-in-law. He had watched his daughter die in his own house, and he could imagine what the Kang and Yang households had suffered. The first lines of his epitaph for Yang Shengrong show us that his own feelings were still raw:

\(^{58}\) “Yang liefu zhuan,” Meipo ji, 647-49.
My son-in-law was the student Kang Li (courtesy-name Zikuan 子騫) of Wugong county. When he was buried, I composed his epitaph. Now his second wife Yang has taken poison to sacrifice herself for him. Kang Li’s father, the historian Kang Hai, sent a messenger rushing to tell me, saying, “The pain of her death penetrates my very heart and bones; how can I bear to speak of it? But she cannot go without an epitaph, so I dare to trouble you once again.” When I heard this I could not restrain my tears. Can it really be that another young woman has died, just like my own daughter?

By writing the epitaphs he did, he could valorize his friend’s relatives and ritualize their grief and his own. Here the ritualization is extreme: Wang presents the two deaths as nearly identical and creates preternaturally peaceful deathbed scenes to resolve the turmoil into which both girls threw their households.59

But of course it is the turmoil that is actually validated. Literati culture had eulogized political martyrs for centuries, and these young women were, after all, standing up for a canonical value, just like male martyrs to principle. Nevertheless, ambiguity hovers. These young women stand up to their families in the name of something that is perhaps principle and perhaps desire. And it is just this ambiguity that blurs the boundaries between liang and jian, licit and illicit. Wang’s young women follow their own feelings. His resolute heroines are typical of chastity-martyrs eulogized throughout the empire, but these chastity-martyrs, who use stealth and guile to find opportunities for suicide, are actually, in their turn, congruent with the heroines of love stories who arrange clandestine meetings. To a degree rarely discussed, Ming literati seem to have seen young women—including young women from liang families—as vessels of qing or passion (and thus in danger of overflowing!).60 We can see this

59 Popular funeral ritual in modern times assumes that the spirits of suicides are dangerous, and even though Wang Jiusi and Kang Hai were part of a ritually correct ideological wave that repudiated popular funeral customs (recall Lanqing’s strictures), and even though the girls died for a canonical value, it seems plausible that people in the household would have been more likely to fear these suicides than to admire them. Emily Martin makes this point in “Gender and Ideological Differences in Representations of Life and Death,” in James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski, eds., Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 177; and a similar point about Japanese war memorials is made by Klaus Antoni in “Yasukuni Jinja and Folk Religion,” in Mark R. Mullins, Shimazono Susumu, and Paul L. Swanson, eds., Religion and Society in Modern Japan (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1993), 121-34. The potential for pollution in these “virtuous” suicides is a topic that needs further exploration.

60 Women as well as men idealized the sensuality of young liang women. Dorothy Ko, in Teachers, 160-69, and Ellen Widmer, in “Xiaoqing’s Literary Legacy and the Place of the Woman Writer in Late Imperial China,” Late Imperial China
in the moralizing of a Lü Kun 呂坤 (1536-1618), ever-vigilant about keeping the sexes adequately separated from each other, and we can see it in the kinds of fiction and drama that were popular from the earliest years of the dynasty. Xixiang ji 西廬記 (The romance of the Western Chamber) stayed in the performing repertoire longer than any other Yuan 坐劇 and was rewritten as drama fashions changed. Jia Zhongming 賈仲明 (b.1343) wrote 坐劇 about singing-girls, but he also composed romantic dramas with liang heroines. Erotic novellas featured amorous young women: the Cantonese gentry heroine of the fifteenth-century Zhongqing liji 鍾情麗集 (An elegant compendium of sentiments conjoined) is as sexually forward as any young man. She and her lover read and discuss Xixiang ji and Jiao Hong ji 娘紅記 (The tale of Jiao and Hong)—whose own heroines are liang girls. And by the late Ming, the reading public swooned over the gentry heroine of Tang Xianzu’s 湯顯祖 Mudan ting 牡丹亭, who died of longing and was resurrected by love.

The heroines of these love stories evade their elders in order to have secret meetings; just so do Yang Shengrong and her sister-in-law evade their elders to seek death. Whether such death was “righteous” adherence to principle or motivated by attraction between the young couple was a point the tradition never resolved, and the ambiguity even hovers over the stories of bereaved fiancées, who might never have seen their intended husbands. A case in point is Miss Xu 徐 of Jiading county, who in 1527 hung herself in her bedroom because she was not allowed to remain faithful after the

13 (1992):111-55, have written at length about the general cultural enthusiasm for tragic, beautiful young women poets, and Ko (Teachers, 168) quotes a remarkable poem in which a seventeenth-century gentry mother recognizes the budding womanhood of her daughter.

62 The original Song dynasty tale of a young gentry woman who visits her lover at night was rewritten (with a happy ending) in the Jin dynasty as a zhugongdiao 佐古詞 or prose-verse medley; in the Yuan as a 坐劇 cycle, in the Ming as a chuanqi 传奇, and in the Qing as a staple of Peking and numerous other local opera styles.
63 See Idema, Dramatic Oeuvre of Chu Yu-lun, 220-33.
64 For a discussion of the amorous gentry heroine in texts as different as Xixiang ji and Zhongqing liji, see Katherine Carlitz, “On Tingying zhuàn, by Yuan Zhen,” in Pauline Yu, Peter Bol, Stephen Owen, and Willard Peterson, eds., Ways with Words: Writing about Reading Texts from Early China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 192-97.
death of her betrothed. Her father’s friend wrote an epitaph praising her action as dedication to the principles of the patriline (“I was betrothed to the Gan family, so now I am a Gan family wife”), but thirty years later, the compiler of the 1557 county gazetteer redirected Xu’s passion toward her husband, using some of the same imagery that Wang Jiusi had used for Wang Lanqing:

Certain am I that these heroic souls
Have since become a pair of noble trees
Their branches twined in mutual support
Leaves interwoven one upon the other.
And there, devoted pairs of nesting birds
Fly off each day, and every night return
To this their ever-verdant resting-place
As long as heaven lasts and earth endures.

Faithful courtesans stories, with their automatic associations of sensual attraction, may in fact have entered the stream of chastity-writing because they realized the latent sensual potential of the liang archetypes. And since liang men were married to liang wives, it was perhaps comforting to accord wives—otherwise idealized for probity and competence—this reserve of emotion.

But whether she acts from principle or desire, the young widow’s heroic fidelity automatically pits her against the older generation, who at worst are trying to remarry her and at the very least are trying to thwart her suicide. How did this formula for rebellion sweep the empire, whose explicit moral grammar was the Five Relationships? Part of the answer must lie in the story’s rich potential for vicarious experience. The male narrator can experience himself as the object of desire and simultaneously share the heroism of the heroine standing up to authority. For the narrator this was a perfectly safe sort of mental rebellion, since it was acted out by Others, and in fact the suicide story was boxed in by an equally powerful set of conventions extolling filial daughters-in-law, who sacrificed themselves for the very parents or parents-in-law whom they defied in the suicide stories. For literati men the standard suicide story doubtless functioned as a sort of repressive sublimation, to resurrect the Marcusian notion: a way to express dissatisfaction with the power structure, or with the confines of traditional social roles.

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permissible because it did not in fact pose any danger to the power structure. And the ideal of the courtesan, as men constructed her, offered a chance to step outside those roles altogether. Wang Jiusi and Kang Hai availed themselves of both ideals, the heroic widow and the devoted courtesan, though the satisfactions of the widow-suicide story must have been barely adequate to their sorrow.