CHAPTER TWO

LAMENTING THE DEAD: WOMEN’S PERFORMANCE OF GRIEF IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

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Their literary minds run in four channels which can be summed up as: praise of things, laments of the inner chambers, sorrow at parting, and mourning death… This is for no other reason than that they were closed off, cut off from contact with the world. They had contact with no one except their female relatives nearby, so they could only see things close to their female relatives nearby…. Writers among the so-called virtuous wives of ancient times could write rhymes of many laments even without anything being wrong. (Kang Baiqing 康白情, 1918)

From the perspective of the forward-looking Chinese male of the early twentieth century, the writings of Chinese women were limited in content and style, an unfortunate consequence of their having long been sequestered from the outside world. Their expressions of grief were thus ultimately inauthentic and specious: “[they] could write rhymes of many laments even without anything being wrong.”

Mourning and lamentation are here highlighted as the key characteristics of the poetic style of cultivated women in former times. As we know, this summary statement of Kang Baiqing does not in any way do justice to the scope of women’s poetry, which encompassed a much broader range of themes than those suggested here. Further, poems of mourning and lament were also very prevalent in the writings of male literati over the centuries and were hardly unique to women


2 An indication of the scope of women’s poetry can be obtained from a glance at the table of contents in the compendium of Lidai funü shici jianshang cidian 歷代婦女詩詞鑒賞辭典, ed. Shen Lidong and Ge Rutong (Dictionary for the appreciation of women’s poetry through the ages) (Beijing: Zhongguo funü chubanshe, 1992).
writers. Nonetheless, there is an important sense in which lamentation and the expression of mourning for the deceased was part of “the emotional work” of women in Chinese society. I refer here to the oral traditions of Chinese women, who were known for the practice of elaborate bridal laments (kujia 哭嫁) and funeral laments (kusang 哭喪) from imperial times until the late twentieth century. Laments were a sophisticated genre of oral poetry, with their own “rules,” formulaic repertoire and regional particularities. Women learned how to lament from others in their communities and were judged, as in the case of other oral arts, by how well they performed. Further, laments were a medium for serious ritual purposes. Through carefully staged and choreographed funeral laments, a woman would carry out her ritual duty to deceased kin and assist souls in their passage to the afterlife. Bridal laments allowed for the exorcism of noxious elements and an alleviation of the dangers attendant on the bride leaving her natal home. Bridal and funeral laments were linked semiotically as performances involving weeping and wailing (ku 哭) and symbolically as a traumatic act of separation. Both lamentation forms allowed the lamenter to display her filial piety, one of the cardinal values of Chinese culture. In the case of wedding laments, the performing bride demonstrated her attachment to her natal home. In funeral laments, the married-out woman negotiated the contradictory pulls of filiality towards the patriline of the husband (pojia 婆家), her own “uterine family,” and her natal home (niangjia 娘家).

This study of literati women’s poems of mourning draws on my research into the performance culture of Chinese women, particularly the laments of the women of coastal Nanhui, formerly a region within the borders of Suzhou prefecture in prosperous Jiangnan.  

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3 For discussion of how emotional “labor” is divided between men and women in societies, and the prevalence of women in mourning rituals, see Tom Lutz, Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1999), 153–157.
