
Numerous studies on women in imperial China in the past two decades or so have discovered the silent agency of Chinese women in the intertwined facets of their seemingly powerless and cloistered lives. Not only did Chinese women in imperial times begin to gain a voice in our recent scholarship, but their personal decisions, social activities, and the significant impact of their well-being on their families and society at large have also revealed themselves in increasing complexities. To someone who is familiar with late imperial Chinese history, the helpless image of the faithful maiden (*zhennü* 貞女) who would sacrifice her adolescent life to honor her deceased husband or fiancé is perhaps a standard fixture. For a long time, the faithful maiden was regarded as the passive victim of arranged marriage in what was considered the Confucian culture of patriarchal repression. However, while this gendered view of Chinese history became virtual consensus among modern scholars and laity alike, its ideological advantages seem to have outweighed its historical ones. From passive victim to active agent, the transformation concerns not so much the historical identity of the faithful maiden as the revision of our own historical consciousness in the academia today. Professor Weijing Lu’s new book on the faithful maiden cult is a product of this mature consciousness and it brings to a new level our understanding of women as agents of societal changes and historical development in late imperial China. We are indebted to her for advancing our knowledge of Chinese women’s history.

*True to Her Word* is divided in three parts. Collectively, they show that the faithful maiden cult and the faithful maidens themselves were entities that were not only passively molded by societal norms, intellectual shifts, and political exigencies in the late imperial period, but also actively changed in response to them. Indeed, the popularity of the cult betrays the power of the young women in shaping a contemporary intellectual debate on the role of women in late imperial Chinese society.

Part One details the history of the faithful maiden cult. It examines the social, cultural, and political contexts in which the faithful maiden cult emerged and acquired its historic significance, and how changes in these contexts as well as Confucian definitions of morality and virtue affected the persistence of the cult. Also, the development of the cult itself is explored in great detail, allowing Professor Lu to assert that the cult was something that grew and changed in response to shifting societal circumstances and moral discourse. The interactions between the cult and the political, cultural, and intellectual shifts of the late imperial period are carefully analyzed and give the reader a finely nuanced view of the dynamics involved. For example, Lu in part attributes the sudden increase in instances of women attaining the faithful maiden status to the later development of faithful maidens being made a symbol of political loyalty. Thus, the act of
achieving faithful maidenhood appealed to young women in a politically shaky society that had just recently changed command from Ming to Manchu. Similarly, Lu argues that the increase in faithful maiden suicides is due to society’s newfound fascination with the dramatic and the morbid. This would have given the act of attaining faithful maidenhood a romantic tinge of glory, which, when coupled with the societal admiration and officially bestowed accolades like jingbiao (imperial testimonials), would have made the act personally besides morally appealing. Moreover, these suicides were glorified as examples of virtue, which would have spurred the expansion of the cult. It is particularly noteworthy that Lu is meticulous enough to trace the antecedents of faithful maiden sacrifices back to early China, and to document how the faithful maiden cult went out of fashion in the twentieth century when its socio-cultural and political underpinnings were completely dismantled in a new China.

The approach of painstakingly scrutinizing both the faithful maiden cult as well as its purported causes allows Professor Lu to strengthen her argument by portraying both society and its effects as fluid, changing entities. The appearance and rise of the faithful maiden cult is more believable in such a context than a static, rigid one. Her focus on the changing definitions of morality and virtue helps the reader understand how they were in part responsible for the appearance and persistence of the cult, as well as how overwhelmingly important and all-consuming they were in the late imperial era. The breadth of evidence for her contextual argument, spanning cultural, political, and social fields, is matched only by the depth of that same evidence.

In Part Two, Lu shifts focus from the contexts in which the faithful maiden cult arose to the households in which the faithful maiden cases occurred. She analyzes the conflicts between a faithful maiden, her natal family, and her in-law family; the psyches of the faithful maidens who committed suicide; and the life stories of the faithful maidens who chose not to commit suicide. Lu argues that faithful maidens cannot be constricted to a blanket view—for example, as victims of the indoctrination of Confucian ideology—rather, they are complex agents in their own lives, every bit as multi-faceted as the more studied and prominent figures in Chinese history, and should not be consigned to a simplistic description because of their youth or sex.

Part Three focuses on what Lu calls “ideology.” The extraordinary sacrifice of the faithful maidens ignited a heated debate in the Qing period, which centered on the question of ritual propriety concerning marriage. The impassioned exchange took place not only in the academic circle of evidential scholars of Confucian learning but reached a broader community of educated elites. And most important, as the disputations were inspired by the faithful maiden cult, they took on a heart-rending realistic relevance. The lofty Confucian ideals of filial piety and legitimate marriage were no longer abstract; they literally went through a poignant reconfiguration in the actions of the faithful maidens. That many debaters themselves had vested interests, as their daughters or relatives happened to be the very subjects of the controversy, made it all the more agonizing.