PASSIONATE WOMEN: FEMALE SUICIDE IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA—INTRODUCTION

BY

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“To starve to death is a minor thing; to lose one’s chastity is a great thing.”
Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107)

“She died well! She died well!”
Licentiate Wang Yuhui 王玉輝 on his daughter’s suicide in Rulin waishi 儒林外史 by Wu Jingzi 吳敬梓 (1701-1754)

“If men want to make loyalty and righteousness their own responsibility, that is fine, but how does the virtue and chastity of women reflect any glory on men?”
Yu Zhengxie 番正燮 (1775-1840)

“These women [chaste widows] are to be pitied. Trapped for no good reason by tradition and numbers, they are sacrificed to no purpose.”
Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936)

Despite mountains of historical records, and hundreds of twentieth-century commentaries and studies, we are still in the formative stages of trying to forge a scholarly consensus about the causes, the meanings, and the significance of female suicides in Ming and Qing China. In some ways, the lack of consensus has been a constant ever since Ming-Qing times which witnessed intense scholarly and official debates on female suicide, the rights and duties of widows including “betrothed widows,” and the sometimes conflicting demands of filiality, wifely duties, motherly responsibilities, family harmony, and in-
dividual integrity. Arguments over female suicide intensified in the early twentieth century, particularly in China’s May Fourth Movement, and in many ways they have continued ever since. The essays in this issue of Nan Nü mark an effort to build on earlier scholarship, to recapture some of the voices of individual men and women from the Ming and Qing periods, and to demonstrate the wide range of sources available today for the study of this important topic.

My goal in this introduction is to place these essays in the wider context of the evolution of English-language scholarship on women and gender relations in late imperial China. I do not have the space or the expertise to cover the voluminous Chinese language scholarship on these issues. However, to enhance the value of this collection for other scholars, we include in this issue a selected bibliography of relevant and important Chinese and Western works that relate to female suicide in late imperial China.

Twentieth-century views of female suicide in the Ming and Qing have been powerfully shaped by the intellectual outlook of the May Fourth Movement and its anti-Confucian critique of Chinese culture. The leaders of the May Fourth “New Culture Movement” were all confident that the problem was the oppression of women by the patriarchal family system, particularly as inspired and reinforced by the puritanical Neo-Confucianism of the Cheng-Zhu 程朱 school. No fewer than nine of the first publications by Mao Zedong 毛泽东 were on the suicide of Miss Zhao Wuzhen 趙五貞, who killed herself in Changsha in her bridal chair on November 14, 1919, to resist marriage to a man she detested.1 The young Mao blamed Miss Zhao’s suicide on the outmoded and superstitious feudal values and customs of arranged marriages which oppressed young people, and especially women, and forced them into hopeless and self-defeating violence against their own persons.

From that time on, many intellectuals echoed Mao, and surpassed him in eloquence, in attacking the old family system and its mistreatment of women, and almost universally, these critics saw female suicide as one of the main results of the oppression of women in Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism and in late imperial Chinese society. In the 1920s and 1930s, in the writings of Lu Xun and the novels of Ba Jin 巴金 (1904-), and in Zhongguo funü shenghuo shi 中國婦女生活史

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1 Three of Mao’s essays on Miss Zhao are now available in English, in Hua R. Lan and Vanessa L. Fong, eds., Women in Republican China: A Sourcebook (Armonk, N.Y., and London: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), 79-83, 85-88.