

## PREFACE

This study is an attempt to document the effects of moral, legal, religious, and other cultural determinants on the cult of female marital fidelity in its historical context by focussing in particular on their correlation with the sudden increase in suicide by widows and betrothed maidens in observance of this cult during the late Ming period (1567-1644).

Clinging to life is generally recognized as a fundamental human instinct, as manifested by the existence of universal moral precepts which praise arduous struggles for survival and hairbreadth escapes from great danger. Yet, this fact does not preclude the occurrence of situations where circumstantial considerations within the prevailing morality demand precisely the opposite action, that is, they mandate or advocate the act of self-destruction. Since suicidal behavior does run directly counter to simple instinctive reasoning, the aiding or abetting of an act of suicide must necessarily be vindicated, or "whitewashed," by appeal to some other conventional and accepted imperative.

The Hindu custom of suttee is often cited as an example. In this ritual suicide, a wife performs public self-immolation by cremating herself on her deceased husband's funeral pyre. But how prevalent the practice of suttee really was in India and what its interpretive explanation might have been is very difficult to know today due to insufficient historical statistics and other factual materials. On the other hand, a similar practice of this perverse phenomenon of institutionalized suicide also occurred in China, particularly during the Ming-Ch'ing period, 1368-1911. By examining the development of this inhumane institution in Chinese culture while keeping in mind its cross-cultural nature, we hope to clarify what is perhaps the most neglected subject in contemporary social behavioral research.<sup>1</sup>

Female suicide at the death of a husband or fiancé is in total contradiction to the Confucian dictum, "Do not do to others that which you do not wish to be done to yourself." This formulation in its application to actions governing relationships of loyalty was perhaps the result of a long history of political oppression and social turbulence which had a deep effect on Chinese culture. The duty to make sacrifices for the sake of

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<sup>1</sup> Gibbs, Jack P., *Suicide*, New York, 1968, p. 36. Gibbs, Jack P., "Suicide," in *Contemporary Social Problems*, edited by Robert K. Merton and Robert Nisbet, New York, 1971, p. 282.

one's superior, whether it be political sovereign or social master, is regarded as a special characteristic of Oriental societies. However, except for some cases at the end of the Ming Dynasty which might be attributed to the Reign of Terror of the Manchu conquerors, in fact, not many Chinese moral exponents really realized the ideals of personal sacrifice themselves. At the end of the Sung Dynasty (960-1127), when this code of ethics began to gain popular momentum, those preferring death to submission to conquest by the Mongols were exclusively "the military and commoners; not a single didactic scholar was included."<sup>2</sup> Even upon the downfall of Manchu rule in 1911, the mass of literary officials, Manchu and Han alike, voluntarily surrendered without resistance. Those devoted subjects who did die for their sovereign included a few women, too.<sup>3</sup> The actual commission of self-sacrifice for the sake of faithfulness or loyalty, as will be seen in this study, was a moral duty assigned only to females.

Evidence shows, though, that throughout the process during which a female elects to commit suicide, temporal and individual considerations play a far more important role than moral orientation. Morality cannot be regarded as an *a priori* imperative shepherding and channeling old and new customs through the process of change. Instead, the designation "moral" tacked onto a specific suicidal behavior is always arbitrary, assumed afterwards either by persons related to the perpetrator as personal justification for themselves, or by others to encourage ideal patterns of behavior which in fact occur only rarely, e.g, lifelong celibacy for widows, and loyalty for men. Moral sanction indeed may have an influence in inducing the persons involved to reach their decision, but it is not the fundamental factor prompting suicidal behavior. The important points involved in evaluating suicide and society from a moral standpoint are on the one hand, how society morally justifies suicide, and on the other hand, how suicide after having been morally justified affects society. It is with both of these broad questions that our inquiry is ultimately concerned.

More specifically, this study shows that a sudden increase in the number of females committing suicide in China during the Ming Dynasty, ostensibly in observance of marital fidelity, can be linked to contemporary moral, legal, religious and other cultural determinants, and varies directly in magnitude with the increase in number of male scholars experiencing the bitterness of repeated failure in the official

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<sup>2</sup> Mao Ch'i-ling, "Ch'ung-k'o yang chiao-shan chi hsü," in Hsi-ho wen-chi; Yüan Mei, "Tsai yü Chi-yüan shu," in Hsiao-ts'ang shang fan wen-chi, chüan 19.

<sup>3</sup> Wang Tsu-she, "Chang Shu-jen chuan," in Wen-chen wen-chi, chüan 10.

examinations. In this latter respect, female suicide is shown to be evidently related to male anxiety through a psychological mechanism of vicarious morality. By praising the suffering and tribulations of females who did faithfully submit to the prevailing code of values, males considered themselves as sharing in their fulfilment of moral duty, and in fact regarded this transfer of virtue to themselves as equally moral. Such a mechanism thus enabled them to enjoy the satisfaction of identifying with a traditional ethical value system while at the same time being free both from the obligation to strictly adhere to its more difficult demands, and from any frustration or anxiety caused by social or moral pressure to conform. No explanation can otherwise account for the distressing display where thousands of people watched with gratification and excitement while a female hanged herself. Male anxiety is thus related to female chastity.

This correlation can be amply substantiated and verified with historical statistics, case studies, and reference to long-standing regional cultural traits. Furthermore, a relationship has been empirically detected between the incidence of female suicide and the flourishing of folk beliefs in vindictive ghosts who roam the countryside punishing those with moral failings. These two correlations, though not themselves mutually or causally linked, may at least throw a different light on the circumstances surrounding this specific form of suicide which has traditionally been assumed to be morally induced.

The main sources used in this study are 166 local histories of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), supplemented by post-Ming local histories of all major regions of China for comparison. The imperfection of materials in the local histories, especially those after the Ming, is carefully treated. Exaggerated statements in the sources are, of course, difficult to evaluate, but in this work such exaggerations may be taken as markers indicating those features of female suicide which Ming contemporaries felt to be important and required formalization into standards of behavior. As we will show, the formalization is evident in striking fashion in the local histories of certain regions only and it is our intention to try to explain their regional variation.