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FEMALE VIRTUE AND THE STATE IN CHINA*

People (to adapt a remark attributed to Napoleon) are in great measure governed by symbols of status and honour. To the extent that the state is able to confer prestige on some of its subjects and, by implication, to withhold it from others, it has a powerful means of influencing social and political behaviour. Conversely, it probably draws some of its own legitimacy from its association, through a system of such awards, with persons popularly regarded as of exemplary character.

This article is a preliminary exploration of the efforts of the traditional Chinese state to promote what may be loosely defined as "Confucian" virtues. These were in essence virtues that stabilized a society that was ordered according to a hierarchy of age, and divided into kin-groups based on male dominance and male descent-lines. They may be contrasted with meritorious Buddhist deeds, such as the monk's renunciation of his family, and with some of the norms found in historic times among certain non-Han peoples in what is now China and among Han Chinese influenced by them. (An example of such a norm was the remarriage of a widow to another member of her late husband's family, of the same or even of a different generation.) The Confucian virtues most typically honoured were (i) filial behaviour towards parents and grandparents, (ii) the harmonious

* In addition to the four colleagues mentioned specifically in the notes, I should like to express my warmest thanks to the many critics who have discussed earlier versions of this article at seminars at the Research School of Pacific Studies of the Australian National University (1978), the School of Oriental and African Studies, London (1980), the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris (1983), and at the conference on the state in China organized at Royaumont by the European Science Foundation (1980). Special thanks are due to Professor Piet van der Loon for his kindness in providing Lu Kun's Guifan from which the six woodcut illustrations have been taken.


2 For the clash between Buddhism and Confucian familial and socio-political virtues, see E. Zürcher, The Buddhist Conquest of China (Leiden, 1959). For the role of Buddhist doctrine in legitimating Empress Wu (A.D. 690-703), the only female sovereign in Chinese history, see Kazuo Enoiki, "Confucian Women in Theory and Reality", in L. Lanciotti (ed.), La donna nella Cina imperiale e nella Cina repubblicana (Florence, 1980), p. 15.

3 Zhang Jacun, Zhongguo shoujihun shi shi de yanjiu [Researches on Successor Marriage in Chinese History] (Guangzhou, 1950). For this and other non-Han sexual institutions repugnant to Chinese morality, see also H. Franke, "Women under the Dynasties of Conquest", in Lanciotti (ed.), Donna nella Cina.
cohabitation of many generations within a kin-group without any division of property, (iii) the fidelity of widows towards their deceased husbands, (iv) the safeguarding of sexual purity by a woman, through self-mutilation or suicide if necessary, and lastly (v) longevity, which was conceptually assimilated to virtue in many respects, but about which nothing further will be said here. These were not the only virtues honoured, and the emphasis placed on particular virtues also varied from time to time. Thus the themes of revenge and of “the learned instructress” seem to have died out before the Song dynasty (960-1279), whereas the cult of widows’ fidelity grew during and after Song times, reaching its apogee in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

These virtues also defined themselves in contrast to a world of robust popular practicality and sensuality. The edifying tales quoted in the pages that follow give a one-sided picture of Chinese society. An entirely different attitude to life may be glimpsed in such works as the Rough Ditties collected in the later sixteenth century by the Suzhou scholar Feng Menglong from fishermen and boat-people:

“Turns you on, she does — really turns you on —
Giving us that cool once-over from her doorway”.
“TI’m like wooden clogs from Hangzhou that fit any man’s feet;
My lovers restaurant regulars — no need for pretty salestalk”.

Or another example, away from the world of prostitution:

Across the way, and next door, all the other girls have lovers.
My own heart, why untouched?
I’ve seen every sort of peach-blossom, on this side and on that.
Myself, why still green?

It was this same area (Wu or the lower Yangzi valley) where, as we shall show, there was an unusually high number of cases of recorded female virtue, that was also notorious for mothers who reared their daughters in the arts of seduction in order to sell them to the highest bidder. Here are three stanzas from a poem by Shao Changhong denouncing the practice:

In Wu they think that a girl is important,
But they don’t look forward to her running a house.
They bathe the darling’s face in peach-flower water
And pray her every movement will make men lust.

At eleven she dabs on the make-up and powder.
At twelve from the lute-strings she plucks a song.
At fourteen she lets her hair tumble down on her shoulders.
Her arched eyebrows bewitch, like antennae on a moth.


* Shange (Rough Ditties), ed. Feng Menglong (Beijing, 1962), juan 1, pp. 32-44.

German translation in C. Töpelmann, Shang-ko von Feng Meng-Lung: Ein Volkslieder-
sammlung aus der Ming-Zeit (Wiesbaden, 1973), pp. 90, 93. I am grateful to Professor Herbert Franke for drawing this latter work to my attention.
The visitor's ecstatic. He says to her mother,
"How could a thousand be too much!"
Tonight, it is agreed, shall be the night of love.
Golden anklets and brooches pile heavily up . . .

These two contrasting conceptions, the Confucian esteem for fidelity and chastity, and the celebration of the satisfaction of physical passion, can also be found — but not together — in plays of the Yuan (or Mongol) dynasty (1279-1367), even in different pieces from the brush of the same author.⁷ Unlike the early modern west, there seems never to have been any open dialogue between "virtue" and "vice".⁸

The present article focuses on the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1644-1912) and on the virtues that orthodox opinion found desirable in women. It is prefaced, however, by a survey of the creation of a state system of awards for virtue between the Han dynasty (late third century B.C. to second century A.D.) and the Song (tenth to thirteenth centuries A.D.). An outline follows of the official conception of virtue under the Song, to serve as a base-line for evaluating subsequent changes; and evidence is presented for a hitherto neglected phenomenon, the belief in Confucian miracles. The third section describes the changing definition of various virtues (some of them new) by Chinese imperial governments since the Yuan dynasty, the movement towards a "democratization" of virtue (originally deemed the speciality of the upper classes) and a somewhat more equal treatment of the sexes, and the interaction of the throne with popular piety, which it encouraged or restrained as it thought appropriate. The fourth part treats of the bureaucratic procedures used to process applications for awards, and shows the growing quantitative extent of officially recognized virtuous behaviour in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The fifth section examines the motives, both political and personal, that made the system work. The sixth establishes the existence of a hitherto unrecognized phenomenon in China, namely virtuous disobedience to parents and/or parents-in-law. It also analyses some internal contradictions in the Chinese conception of desirable behaviour. The final section shows how publicly supported values interacted with the individual's sense of personal identity, using for this purpose an analysis of common patterns of honoured

⁷ A. K. Leung, "L'amour en Chine aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles: étude sur les changements d'attitude vis-à-vis du culte confucéen de la femme vertueuse" (forthcoming in Archives de sociologie des religions).
⁸ For Italy and France in the sixteenth century, see for example the texts in Le miroir des femmes, ed. J. P. and L. Guillerm et al. (Lille, 1983), esp. pt. 2, "La philosophie de l'amour et les arts d'aimer". Shao's poem quoted above is an illustration of the characteristic division in Chinese attitudes. After seven stanzas of disillusion (clearly relished by the author), it turns respectable at the end, deploiting the heartless commercialization of family relationships.
suicide. No systematic attempt is made to relate the changes in the state's patronage of virtue to long-term changes in Chinese society and ideas. This would be both difficult and a little premature, especially as the sources opened up here, mainly official and private hagiography, provide valuable material, the surface of which has barely been scratched as yet, for a re-evaluation of certain accepted ideas in these domains, particularly as regards kinship structures and women's control of wealth and property.

I

EXEMPLARS AND ACTS OF GRACE: STATE SPONSORSHIP OF VIRTUE FROM HAN TO SONG TIMES

Perhaps the earliest doctrine of awards for virtue is that in “The Mandate Given to Prince Bi”, a chapter in The Book of Documents that is almost certainly a forgery of post-Han times:

If approval is not shown of that which is admirable in them, the people will lack the means by which they may be encouraged... Award insignia to the virtuous, and set apart the vicious. Give honorific emblems to their houses and villages, so making illustrious the good and imposing affliction upon the evil. Establish the influence and reputation [of the good]. Place apart the wells and boundaries of those who do neither as they have been taught nor as the laws command them, so that they may be fearful and desire to conform.10

Scholars of a later era tended to see in these practices something similar to what Cai Chen (thirteenth century) called “subsequent generations placing insignia of virtue on the doors of houses and the gates of villages”.11 The programme for inculcating virtue in the common people set forth in The Rituals of Zhou (second half of the first millennium B.C.) also specified exempting “the worthy and the capable” from labour service.12 In the inaugural year of Wudi (140 B.C.), out of respect for “the way of the ancients” in assisting the elderly, the sons of those eighty-nine years of age and above were exempted from labour service.13 Under the Later Han (A.D. 25-220) the local worthies called Thrice Venerable were made responsible for “educating and transforming the people”, and a system of honours was introduced:


In order to promote good behaviour, honorific tablets shall be placed at the doors of all filial sons, obedient grandsons, chaste women, righteous wives, and those who cancel debts owing to them or provide relief in times of disaster.14

Only non-systematic gifts of insignia and exemption from labour services in recognition of filiality and fidelity can be found, however, under the Three Kingdoms (A.D. 221-277), Jin (265-419) and Liu Song (420-478).15 A system was re-created towards the end of the Northern Wei (386-534). In 515 it was decreed that “insignia shall be placed on the dwellings of filial sons, obedient grandsons, righteous heads of families (yifu) and faithful widows in order to make manifest their excellence”, while the elderly poor who had no relatives were to be given grain and silk.16 A decree seven years later shows that the imperial recognition of virtue was seen as a semi-magical means of remedying the unpropitious political situation and the dwindling charisma of the dynasty. After expressing anguish about uncanny astrological portents and unseasonable weather, and acknowledging that “the principles of government have lacked harmony”, the emperor in his “shame” commanded that cases of filiality and fidelity, exceptional scholarly ability, and elderly people living on their own should be reported to the throne. He would examine each case personally, and an honorary tablet would be awarded.17

The term yifu (which is mistranslated by the dictionaries) indicated the senior member(s) of families many of whose generations had lived together and were together still.18 The clearest proof of this is the definition given in a decree of 695:

Righteousness of this sort requires that cumulated generations should live together, the entire household being on harmonious terms with each other, and a proper hierarchy observed between seniors and juniors. There should be no private ownership of wealth or food. People far and near should treat them with respect, and their village commend their excellence.19

Qiu Jun asserted in the fifteenth century that this virtue was rewarded in Han times,20 but so far I know of no contemporary text that substantiates this.

17 Ibid., p. 235.
19 Inoue Mitsusada et al. (ed.), Nihon shiso taikei [An Outline of Japanese Thought], 3, Rituryō [Ancient Laws] (Tokyo, 1976), fuuki ryō 17, note on p. 589 referring to p. 255. I am grateful to Dr. James McMullen for this reference.
20 Qiu Jun, Dazuo yanyu lu, 25, juan 53, p. 19b. In juan 52, p. 30, he says that this virtue was not much found in his time.
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The laws of the Sui dynasty (589-618) provided that "persons of rank and title, together with filial sons, obedient grandsons, righteous heads of families, and faithful widows shall all be exempted from labour service". The Tang system was almost identical. The decree promulgating it also ruled that "all those who share the same fiscal registration as the virtuous person] shall be exempted from labour service".

Under the Sui and Tang the bestowal of tablets on the virtuous commonly accompanied acts of grace. These were issued on occasions like an accession to the throne, the start of a new reign-period, a high-level investiture such as that of a crown prince, important sacrifices, or the pacification of a rebellion. Acts of grace were general amnesties for crimes, except for the most heinous misdeeds like the killing of a father by a son or a master by a serf. Decorating the virtuous was part of the moral self-renewal meant to characterize these auspicious moments. Local officials were supposed to visit the homes of possible virtuous persons to make enquiries and to go again in person to give the awards.

The Song continued the Tang system. They were, however, faced with the problem of cheating, in part because of the exemption from labour services conceded to households one of whose members had been awarded an honorific tablet, and in part because of the other rewards offered. In 1109 Wang Shao, provisional prefect of Yanzhou, memorialized:

According to the provisions of the decree of the 1st day of the 2nd moon, 1106, persons who from this time forth cut up their own livers [to make medicine] for [sick] grandparents shall be given five lengths of silk, a picul of rice, a picul of wheat and two gallon-measures of wine. I would observe that in the sub-prefectures of this prefecture reports are repeatedly being made that all sorts of persons have cut up their livers [for this purpose]. When the officials investigate, it is frequently found that there is a slight scar on their ribs. If they had really damaged their internal organs it would not be in the nature of things for the healing to be so complete. The people in their ignorance wish to profit from the imperial gifts, and injure themselves without justification. I would request the court to consider the abolition of the above provision.

It was abolished. The arrangements for cross-checking claims elaborated:

22 Li Linfu et al., Da Tang huadian [Sixfold Statutes of the Great Tang] (eighth century A.D.; edn. of Uchida Tomo, Kashiwa, 1973), juan 3, lubu, p. 59. After the accession of Yangdi of Sui, in contrast to earlier times, women were personally free of labour-service obligations, so the exemption presumably applied to the families of virtuous women after this date. See Sogabe, "Ni-Tō no shōchoku ni mieru seppu no seisō", pp. 111, 113-14.
25 ibid., decree dated 1020.
26 ibid., p. 1696.
ated under later dynasties grew out of the need to stop this sort of malpractice.

In 1129 the Southern Song (1127-1279) affirmed the continuation of the system of awards for virtue in an act of grace and in a decree ritually defining the musical pitches after the pacification of the empire. 27 In 1140 the emperor approved a request from certain officials that “the senior local sub-officials should make a scrupulous investigation of, and report upon, any exceptional cases of filial conduct under their jurisdiction and approved of by the masses”. Scholars were to be found government employment, and commoners given tablets and gifts. 28 This emphasis on community approval was a frequently recurring theme.

II

THE CONCEPTION OF VIRTUE UNDER THE SONG DYNASTY

The conception of virtue in Song times differed slightly from that held in later periods. It is useful to consider some characteristic examples as a preliminary to charting the changes that took place under the Ming and Qing.

All virtues could “touch Heaven”, but filial piety was the commonest source of Confucian miracles. The following events were reported to have happened 29 in Chuzhou in 1139:

When Mei Zhongshan . . . died his grandson Yuanmei was six years old. He wept without ceasing and slept every night with the coffin clasped in his arms. Nor did he eat meat. When the time came to bury his grandfather, Yuanmei cried inconsolably and threw himself into the outer coffin, to the astonishment of the mourners. When the burial had been completed, and the relatives and guests had gone their various ways, Yuanmei lay prostrate on the ground and did not go home. At midnight a flock of magpies burst into joyous chirruping and an auspicious radiance suddenly appeared, shining over all the graveyard. Because of the exceptional character of this boy’s filial actions we request that he be given an honorific tablet and award. 30

Plants and insects also respected filial piety, as may be seen from the official report on Wu Runming, decorated in 1211:

Runming’s [family] have lived for many generations without dividing. They are compassionate, filial and friendly. When his mother was ill he cut his thigh [to make her medicine] and she was completely cured. Auspicious mushrooms have appeared at the side of the house where he lives. When locusts devastated the area they did not devour his family’s harvest; and he used it to relieve the famine, so saving many lives. Strange trees grow together at his gateway. People call them “trees of righteousness”. 31

Early in the fourteenth century a wind, rising in response to the force of filiality, saved a certain Mrs. Chen of Ningbo, who had

27 Ibid., pp. 1691-2.
28 Ibid., p. 1692.
29 As with the miracula in the chronicles of the medieval Christian west, the reader must make up his or her own mind how much to believe of these tales.
30 Song huoyao jige, ed. Xu Song, 2, juan 61, p. 1691.
31 Ibid.
earlier parted with her dowry to prevent her parents-in-law and husband from starving, from being burnt to death together with her husband when they refused to abandon his parents’ encoffined bodies during a fire.\textsuperscript{32}

The truly filial could become young again. White hair returned to its original black; lost teeth grew anew.\textsuperscript{33} Children who piously abstained from wine and strong-tasting food could prolong a mother’s life.\textsuperscript{34} It was praiseworthy for a daughter-in-law to mourn after the manner of a son, in a hut built at her mother-in-law’s graveside; and for a man mourning by a parent’s grave it was praiseworthy to refuse even to see his wife or children.\textsuperscript{35}

Miracles of filiality, with their theme of growth and renewal, persisted into Ming times. We learn of a Jiuxing girl who had virtually stayed unmarried to serve her mother that:

In the front of their courtyard grew a xianguan tree that had long been withered. Her mother sighed and said: “My sickness is like that of the withered tree. How can I ever live again?” When her daughter heard these words, she offered her prayers in silence to the tree, morning and evening. Before two months had passed, it suddenly put forth sprouts and grew leaves. Not long afterwards her mother’s illness actually healed. Everyone marvelled.\textsuperscript{36}

In another case two devout lay Buddhist girls were able to support their widowed mother by weaving and selling garlands of flowers from bushes that had suddenly appeared in their courtyard and which died shortly after their death, causing everyone to attribute their existence to “the influence of the girls’ filial feelings”.\textsuperscript{37}

Max Weber maintained that Chinese philosophy “transformed the magic garden into a world of ideas” through which “wild and unmotivated dei ex machina swarm[ed]”, and where “the ethical rationality of the miracle [was] out of the question”.\textsuperscript{38} It should be evident from the foregoing that many Chinese miracles were eminently ethically rational. The popular belief in the magical powers of filial piety seems to have weakened in Qing times, when it is mostly credited only with routine feats like curing a parent’s illness.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{32} Ningbo fushi [Ningbo Prefectural Gazetteer], ed. Cao Bingren and Wan Jing (1731; repr. of 1846 edn. in Zhonghua congshu, Shunfeng congshu congkan, Taipei, 1957), juan 29, p. 2232.

\textsuperscript{33} See for example Song huixiao jige, ed. Xu Song, 2, juan 61, p. 1689.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 1688.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., pp. 1688, 1691.

\textsuperscript{36} Jiuxing fushi [Jiuxing Prefectural Gazetteer], ed. Xu Yangguan and Wu Yangxian (1879; repr. in Shangwu guanlan series, Zhongguo fangzi congshu, Huazhong section, 53, Zhejiang province, Taipei, 1970), juan 64, p. 1942.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. 1953.


\textsuperscript{39} See for example Ningbo fushi, juan 29, p. 2225. It would seem that accepted miracles of all kinds diminished in frequency under the Qing, but they did not disappear. One faithful widow in Fujian, who had cut off her ears to prove her sincerity, was able to regrow them: Qing shidiu, ed. Zhang Yingchong, p. 711. Another widow quelled a storm: Guiyang fushi [Guiyang Prefectural Gazetteer], ed. Zhou Zuoji et al. (1850), juan 84, p. 18a.
Laudatory accounts of faithful widows in Song times present two contrasting aspects. Some describe an involvement in the affairs of the world of men, where the widow in effect replaced her dead husband. Others depict a total, eremitic withdrawal. An example of the first type comes from an official report from Tangzhou in 1092:

The daughter of the late Wu Fen, Executive Inspector of Jiangning prefecture, married the commoner Wang Ling when she was twenty-three years old. Before a year had passed, Ling died. She had only one son. Her elder brother wanted to marry her off, but she wept and would not consent. She has returned to her own family to spend the rest of her life. She is now thirty-one years of age and . . . every year, in the slack season for farming, she leads several thousand farm labourers in person to repair the dykes. The benefits from the irrigated fields profit the entire area. The local people follow her instructions and commands. We wish to beg that a special honorific tablet be bestowed upon her.\(^{40}\)

The second type appears in a case from 1122. It concerns a lady who was widowed at the age of twenty-one, with a three-year-old son:

Her father and mother pressed her to marry again, but she cut off her hair and vowed fidelity. The neighbours were unacquainted with her face. Her faithfulness and righteousness were exceptional.\(^{41}\)

This theme of retirement into a living death became more pronounced in Ming times. A few would confine themselves in a room, presumably attended by a maid, and not take a step outside down to the day of their death.\(^{42}\)

The last major category of virtue rewarded by the Song emperors was the harmonious cohabitation of many generations in a large family. In 1005 the Fangs of Qingyan in Chizhou were decorated for having seven hundred members spanning eight generations, all of whom allegedly ate together, assembling at the sound of a drum.\(^{43}\) In another family, headed by the metropolitan graduate Peng Jing of Anfu in Jizhou, where "generation after generation had dwelt in filiality and righteousness":

For every meal, a pot was placed in the hall. When all of them had assembled, they ate. If not everyone was there, no one would venture to begin. They had only incense-burners in their personal rooms. They did not even have jugs and jars. The young people all had the habit of walking slowly behind their elders . . . Discipline was very thorough. They said and did nothing that was not loyal, trustworthy, filial and younger-brotherly.\(^{44}\)

By early Song times Chen Jing’s "righteous household" had lived together in amity in Jiangzhou for nine generations, comprised seven hundred persons, and "kept neither male nor female serfs". Not only did its human members take their meals together in a spacious hall, even its dogs, of whom there were more than a hundred, fed in the same enclosure and "if one dog had not arrived, none of the

\(^{40}\) Song huyao jige, ed. Xu Song, 2, juan 61, p. 1688.
\(^{41}\) Ibid., p. 1691.
\(^{42}\) Qing shiduo, ed. Zhang Yingchang, p. 719, tells of a widow who did not come downstairs for fifteen years. Common phrases indicating a milder degree of seclusion were "she had no relations with her kinsfolk" and "she did not leave the house".
\(^{43}\) Song huyao jige, ed. Xu Song, 2, juan 61, p. 1688.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., pp. 1963-4.
Liu, wife of Han Taichu, formerly an official under the Mongols. She is cutting her finger to mix the blood with the medicinal soup (being heated by the servant in the foreground) for her sick mother-in-law. Her other filial acts included biting to death the parasites infesting the bedclothes. From &quot;Guofan [Exemplars for Those in the Women's Apartments],&quot; comp. Lü Kun (1590; 2nd edn. Huizhou, circa 1615, photolithogr. repr. 1927), juan 3, p. 26a.
others would eat". Some righteous households, which might cover as much as an entire village, judged and punished offenders by what amounted to an internal system of justice.

Some of these enormous households survived as institutions for several hundreds of years. Wang Yun, writing in the Southern Song, thought that the entry of members into the official bureaucracy imperilled their stability:

If some of the members suddenly rise to high honours and outstanding distinction, there will be persons whom the head of the family cannot subject to his commands . . . Those of high and low status take different paths, just as hot and cold have contrary tendencies . . . The righteous will become unrighteous.

On the other hand it is possible to find cases where the acknowledged virtue of a large cohabiting household led to imperial gifts in times of poverty and appointments to minor bureaucratic office. Staying in a large kin-group of this sort had many practical advantages, not the least being subsidized schooling for the able children, and one modern scholar has suggested that the new bureaucracy of Song times used kinship organizations "to shore up its social position . . . and insure against the hazards of the competitive examination system".

Self-restraint and indoctrination were placed by the upper classes first and foremost upon themselves. Morality was not a means of suppressing or controlling the lower classes. It was an internal economy of the emotions designed to heighten the collective family strength and welfare of the better-off. "Because of this filiality and righteousness", said the official report on the Zhaos of Zichuan, "the family's wealth was multiplied several times over". It was not expected of the lower classes at this time that they would show exceptional virtue. Testimony to this is the story told by Xu Ji early in the twelfth century about the beautiful widow of an itinerant trader who drowned herself and her baby when faced with the sexual advances of a rich merchant who had paid for her husband's funeral expenses. Xu Ji comments:

The virtuous women of antiquity depended on the meritorious behaviour that had accumulated for generations in their families, after which they were able to act as they did, having been steeped in the fountain-head of virtue. The origins of their

45 Or so we are assured by Feng Qi, Zhong leibian [Items Collected by Category Relating to Practical Matters] (Ming; Chengwen edn., Taipei, 1968), juan 82, p. 32 (p. 9217).
46 Wang Yun, Yangyi yinou [The Swallow's Wings Record for the Transmission of Institutions] (late Southern Song; repr. in Xueji laoyuan [The Search for the Sources of the Stream of Learning], ed. Zhang Haiheng, Yushan, 1805), juan 5, pp. 65-78.
47 Ibid.
48 Qiu Jun, Daxue yangyi bu, juan 83, p. 9b.
51 Song huiyao jigao, ed. Xu Song, 2, juan 61, p. 1690.
In Ming and Qing times, however, virtue was recorded in the wives and daughters of beggars, fishermen, migrant labourers, domestic servants, brokers, weavers, sub-bureaucrats, gamblers and even a spirit-medium’s apprentice, without causing such class-conscious comment. It thus seems likely that the virtues of the élite, and especially the fidelity of widows, gradually became “democratized”.

III

THE DEFINITIONS OF VIRTUE USED BY THE STATE UNDER THE YUAN, MING AND QING DYNASTIES

As the popular appeal of the honours system spread, the political authorities found it necessary to formulate more precise definitions of virtue. The creation of the Ming “Regulations for Awards for Filial Piety” was prompted by the case of a man in Shandong who had tried to heal his sick mother by feeding her pieces of his own flesh. When this had failed, he killed his two-year-old son as a sacrifice to Mount Tai, which effected the cure. The local authorities had commended the man for his filiality, but Emperor Taizu was furious. He ordered him to be given a hundred lashes and sent in military exile to Hainan Island. Grand Secretary Ren Hengtai observed of this excess of devotion:

Nothing is more unfilial than breaking the line of descent and cutting off the sacrifices. Your Majesty ought to issue a severe admonitory decree that if benighted and ignorant folk do this sort of thing again it will not fall within the scope of the “Regulations for Awards”.

Formal specification of the criteria of age and social status for virtuous widows began in 1304 under the Yuan dynasty. The Ministry of Rituals proposed that honorific insignia should be given to widows who had been bereaved before thirty Chinese years of age and had attained at least fifty.

55 Ming huyao [Digest of Ming Statutes], ed. Long Wenbin (1897; repr. Beijing, 1956), juan 14, p. 242.
56 Du Yuan shenghang guochao dianzhang [Dynastic Statutes of the Sacred Governance of the Great Yuan] (commissioned 1303; Wenhui repr. of Xiulin falu guan edn., Taibei, 1964), juan 83, pp. 472-3. Sui, or Chinese years of age, equal the number of New Year’s Days, plus 1, through which a person has lived. Assuming a stationary population, no seasonal variation in the frequency of births, and ignoring differential age-specific mortality, the mean age of persons aged $n$ sui is $n - 1$ western years of age.
It was the popular view that a woman had lost her appeal to men by thirty, as is shown by some lines from the *Rough Ditties*:

Twenty years are gone now, the twenty-first is starting—
Not to have a lover is not so smart.
Once thirty years have passed you, the blossoms will be falling,
And he won’t be coming to you, though you stretch forth both your hands.\(^56\)

The fiftieth year was probably chosen as the other critical age as it marked the approximate end of the child-bearing period.

These qualifying criteria were maintained until 1723. After this year it was only necessary to have maintained fidelity for fifteen years and to have attained at least forty. Some time later, probably early in the nineteenth century, the limit was further reduced to ten years. In 1871 all deceased widows who had, while alive, maintained fidelity for a minimum of six years were entitled to awards.\(^57\) Thus the emphasis was shifted away from endurance and towards intention.

In 1368 eligibility was restricted to “the wives and daughters of registered commoners, clothed in hemp and living in the byways”. After 1394 soldiers’ wives were also admitted. In 1518 the throne reaffirmed the ban on “the wives of civil and military officials, metropolitan and provincial graduates, first-degree-holders and petty officials”. Five years later it was relaxed for the last two groups. In 1563 wives of officials were again declared ineligible, which suggests that the earlier bans had not been entirely effective. The Qing at first forbade only pluralism: a wife who had already received some other token of imperial honour could not also have one for fidelity in bereavement. In 1667 the restriction to “the wives of commoners” was restored. In 1735, however, virtuous widows whose sons had subsequently become officials were exempted from this rule.\(^58\)

Had the social élite really been debarred from awards for fidelity? If we look at the listing of virtuous women in the local gazetteers, another form of award but one under the control of the local authorities and the gentry, we find that they approximately followed the imperial criteria for ages,\(^59\) but flouted the rules regarding status. Thus, to take but one example, the Jiaxing prefectural gazetteer lists 277 faithful widows from Jiaxing county who died during the Ming

\(^{56}\) *Shange*, ed. Feng Menglong, juan 1, pp. 3b-4a; Töpelmann, *Shan-ko von Feng Meng-Lung*, p. 94.

\(^{57}\) *Da Ming huidian* [Collected Statutes of the Great Ming], ed. Li Dongyang et al. [preface 1587, revised by Shen Shouing et al.; Wenhai edn., Taipei, 1964], juan 79, p. 1254; *Qinding lühu zeli* [Imperially Sanctioned Regulations for the Ministry of Ritual] (authorized 1845; Chengwen edn., Taipei, 1956), juan 403, p. 307; *Qinding Da Qing huidian zeli* [Imperially Sanctioned Collected Statutes and Regulations of the Great Qing] (preface 1748), juan 71, pp. 52-79; *Qinding Da Qing huidian shilii* [Imperially Sanctioned Collected Statutes and Precedents of the Great Qing] (Shangwu repr. of 1899 Waijianbo edn., Shanghai, 1928), juan 404, p. 6b.

\(^{58}\) *Da Ming huidian*, ed. Li Dongyang et al., juan 79, pp. 1254-6; *Ming huiyao*, ed. Long Wembin, juan 14, p. 21b; *Qinding Da Qing huidian zeli*, juan 71, p. 52.

\(^{59}\) Many women widowed aged 30 su were also included.
The widow of Qi Liang, a high officer of state in Qi during the sixth century B.C. She is about to drown herself after her tears, wept over her husband's corpse for ten days, have caused the city wall to collapse on it and so give it burial. Qi Liang died during an attack on an enemy state continued for reasons of personal honour but against the orders of the duke, who had to be psychologically pressured by the widow into exonerating him. From Guifan, juan 3, p. 30b.
dynasty, and of these 27 came from official families and 65 from
degree-holder families.50

The most dramatic change in the award system under the Ming
was the almost total disappearance of honours for multi-generational
cohabitation.61 Qiu Jun (fifteenth century), who regarded the practice
as the foundation of familial prosperity and national stability, rightly
approved of by rulers since antiquity, attributed the discontinuation
of awards to the detestation felt by the founder of the dynasty towards
the large-scale engrossing of landed property by powerful families.62
Official recognition of this virtue reappeared later, in the eighteenth
century under the Yongzheng Emperor, but in the most low-key
fashion.63

Meanwhile the term yifu was changing its meaning. Although it
could always take the general sense of a "righteous person", its
technical significance in the award system had been, as has been
shown, the head or members of a family where many generations
lived together without division of property. In the Yuan regulations
the term is found with a combination of the general and the technical
senses:

Those who are recommended as "righteous persons” are to be such as have
influenced their families with their spirit of kinship and the sharing of misfortunes,
or have benevolently succoured their communities by the distribution of wealth or
the burning of [debtors'] bonds, or who give up their share of property in the spirit
of brotherliness exemplified by Xie Bao of the Han,64 or who have clothes in
common and eat together as did [the kinsmen of] Yang Bo of the Wei.65

The term occurs quite often in Ming texts, but I have yet to find a
definition.66 Under the Qing it takes on the entirely new meaning of
the male counterpart of a faithful widow. To merit an award a
widower had to be bereaved before thirty Chinese years of age,
have a son to continue the family line, neither remarry nor take a
concubine, be of exemplary character and survive until sixty.67 An
illustration of this trend towards a more equal treatment of the sexes,

61 Jiuxing fushi, juan 67, pp. 2033-6, juan 70, pp. 2109-10, juan 72, pp. 2179-83,
62 Da Ming huidian, ed. Li Dongyang et al., juan 79, p. 1255, gives an instance of
one such award in 1457.
63 Qiu Jun, Daxue yangi bu, juan 83, pp. 9b-11a.
64 Qinling Da Qing huidian zhi li (1818 edn.), libu, juan 333, pp. 384-48a.
65 Xie refused to leave home when persecuted by his stepmother, took the worst
share when his brothers divided their inheritance, and then rescued them when they
had become bankrupt: Zhongguo renming da zidian [Large Chinese Biographical
Dictionary] (Hong Kong, 1931), p. 1664.
66 Da Yuan shengzheng guochao dianzhang, juan 83, pp. 472-3.
67 For example, it is not defined (as one might expect) in Da Ming huidian, ed. Li
Dongyang et al., juan 79, pp. 1254-6, or in Huang Ming zhi shu [Documents on the
Administrative Systems of the Great Ming] (a composite of three originals in Japanese
libraries, published by Kotoen kenkyukai, Toky, 1966), shang, huling, p. 11.
68 Qinling liu zhi, juan 48, p. 308. See also E-tu Zen Sun, Ch'ing Administrative
although not strictly falling under the new category of *yifu*, appears in a report of 1777:

Cheng Chongyuan holds the degree of Scholar of the Imperial Academy, and comes from Shanyang county in Iliuian prefecture in Jiangsu. When he was two years old he was married to the daughter of Liu Deyong of Pinhu county in Zhili [the metropolitan area around Beijing]. Later, Cheng returned to the south and Liu Deyong died, the members of his family migrating to live in Tianjin. The girl was left alone with no one to support her, and neither she nor her husband had any means of communicating with each other. For more than fifty years they both kept to their original vows and never went back on their resolution. Subsequently Cheng Chongyuan served as a teacher on a grain transport boat, and came north with it to Tianjin. He heard some locals say that there was a chaste daughter of the Liu family living in seclusion in a Buddhist nunnery. After detailed enquiries he learnt that this was none other than the wife to whom he had originally been betrothed . . . 68

The authorities, moved by their fidelity, gave them a tablet bearing the words “Chaste and Righteous” to be put above their door, money for a ceremonial arch, and travelling expenses for the journey south.

Another virtuous act that first achieved recognition in the Ming and Qing was the suicide of a wife or a fiancée on the death of her husband or betrothed. The purpose of this was, to use popular parlance, “to follow him beneath the ground”. Female and even male servants sometimes committed suicide on the death of a master’s wife. 69 The motive of posthumous service (though in this case filial) emerges clearly from the citation for an award of 1836. The Fifth Sister of the Zhou family, who were merchants in Guiyang, prayed to Heaven to take her in her sick mother’s place; then, as the illness grew worse, she told her father and brothers: “If misfortune befalls mother, I wish to follow her and serve her beneath the ground, so that she is not alone. You, my father, will still have my brothers to serve you respectfully. There will be no need to grieve for me”. When her mother died, she hanged herself. She was seventeen. 70

Another new category was that of filial wives, first formally recognized in 1727. In 1742 recognition was also given to child-fiancées reared virilocally who died resisting rape by their husbands-designate. 71

Granting honours to the families of faithful women who committed suicide raised the question of the extent to which the government should encourage such self-destruction. In 1688 the basic position was adopted that a wife who killed herself when her husband died — if there was no other reason for her to do so, such as the threat of a

68 Qinding liwu zei, juan, p. 302.
69 See for example Jiaxing fushi, juan 65, pp. 1923, 2001; Shangyu xianzhi, juan 14, p. 286. The official term for this act was “to follow in death”, as in Qinding Da Qing huidian zei, juan 71, pp. 5b-6a.
70 Guiyang fushi, juan 86, p. 6b. For another example, see Qing shiduo, ed. Zhang Yingchao, p. 723.
71 For filial wives, see Qinding Da Qing huidian shi, juan 103, p. 4b. For child-fiancées, see Qinding Da Qing huidian zei, juan 71, p. 15b.
forced remarriage — was "treating life lightly". This was disapproved of. A decree of this year expressed concern at the number of suicides of this type, and added: "If we continue to give them honorable recognition, it is to be feared that an increasing number of lives will be cut off". Widows who were desperately anxious to do away with themselves were told to apply to the Ministry of Rituals first.

Ways were found round the ban on "treating life lightly". A fiancée who mourned for three years beside the grave of her husband-to-have-been before she killed herself was given an award. In 1713 bereaved fiancées who starved themselves to death were declared eligible for honours.

The conflicting pressures that worked upon the throne may be seen from a decree of 1728. The Yongzheng Emperor felt obliged to explain why he was breaking the dynastic rules and reversing a negative recommendation by his officials in order to honour a Fujianese girl who had died after curing her sick mother with soup made from her own liver. "Although", he said, "her action was not justified by Scripture, so urgent a desire to save one's mother is not often found, and deserves deep commiseration". After quoting the philosophers Han Yu and Zhu Xi against filial self-mutilation, he berated his officials for having failed to give the people moral enlightenment. But, he went on, "since these things do happen, it is to be feared that if we do not bestow awards there will be no way of conferring recognition on their grief-stricken resolution and consoling their souls in the darkness". Exceptions had to be made, but he did not approve of acts "outside the norms of everyday morality". He concluded:

There is a distinction between the "faithful widow" and the "heroic widow". The heroic widow follows her husband in death in the manner of a feudal subordinate, going after him below the earth with a generous resolution... It is difficult to be a heroic widow, but harder yet to be a faithful one. This is because to follow a husband in death requires only the resolve of a moment. To preserve chastity requires a perpetual regard for the husband. She who follows her husband in death gives her life, and the matter is then done with. She who preserves her purity must be prepared to taste its difficulties... After a husband's death there are still many wifely duties to be fulfilled. She must take the place of a son in serving her father and mother-in-law. She must take the place of a father in teaching and rearing her descendants... How can death put an end to her obligations? The reason that awards for faithful widows are in the statutes, and that heroic widows are not covered by these rules, is that a heroic wife throws life away, like misguidedly

72 Qinding Da Qing huidian zehi, juan 71, pp. 5b-5a.
73 Ibid., p. 5a.
74 Ibid., p. 6b.
75 Qinding Da Qing huidian shili (1818 edn.), juan 323, pp. 9b-12b. Short version in Da Qing lichao shili [Veritable Records of the Successive Reigns of the Great Qing] (Manzhou Guowu yuan edn., 1937), "Da Qing Shizong Xianhuangdi shili", 2, juan 67, Yongzheng 6, moon 2, renzi, pp. 1b-4b.
76 In fact imperial awards were being given to widows who committed suicide at this time: ibid., juan 66, Yongzheng 6, moon 2, wuxu, p. 17ab.
FEMALE VIRTUE AND THE STATE IN CHINA

Filial persons who cut their livers and thighs. If many were to follow their example, then many would do injury to life, a prospect that We cannot bear to contemplate.

In 1851 the Xianfeng Emperor reversed this ruling in a decree that showed an enduring belief in a relationship between personal virtue, political institutions and the meteorological response of Heaven:

Since last year’s winter solstice there has been little moisture from the melting snows. The weather has been very dry and parched. Since the beginning of spring, cold and hot have come in unreasonable fashion. Yesterday we passed the vernal equinox with dense sleet and freezing cold. . . . We are acutely aware that the people depend upon Us, and have constantly examined Our conscience, being deeply fearful that Our institutions may not yet be appropriate, and that We are not able to induce a harmonious response from Heaven above. . . . Pitiful widows who have committed suicide when their husbands have died have not been permitted to have an award, in the absence of such circumstances as a forced remarriage obliging them to safeguard their fidelity with a swift death . . . but the suicides of these heroic wives and fiancées on the deaths of their husbands . . . are not something easily found among humankind, and the cases reported . . . each year . . . have not exceeded twenty or thirty in number — which certainly does not imply unloosing a flood of disregard for human life. If We honour them, this will . . . sharpen respect for moral norms.??

The position of the emperor was thus somewhat like that of the pope. He was in a perpetual interaction with a popular piety that he sometimes sought to restrain and sometimes to encourage.

IV

THE PROCESSING OF VIRTUE BY THE BUREAUCRACY

With the popularization of honours for virtue, it became essential to institutionalize the procedures for submitting information to the throne and verifying it. The procedures used varied between the Yuan and the Qing, but at all times consisted of two main stages: firstly, those holding social and/or political power in the area where the candidate lived drew up a statement of the facts regarding his or her life and offered a guarantee that they were correct; secondly, certain of the authorities from county up to provincial level investigated the claims made and then submitted the case to the Ministry of Ritual, who passed it on to the emperor for approval or for the adjudication of any ideological difficulty. The process may be considered in more detail as follows.

(i) The Individual

It was usual, suicides obviously excepted, to start proceedings while the candidate was still alive; and it must be assumed that he or she normally welcomed this. The common motivation is summed up in the words of cheer with which a relative of a widow in Shangyu county urged her to persevere in her faithfulness to her late husband's memory:

?? Qinding Da Qing huidian shili (1899 edn.), juan 404, pp. 16b-17b.
If you can reach old age without loss of constancy, so that both your reputation and the reality are worthy of confidence, then you may achieve the public recognition of a banner at your door, and the private recognition of your name being commemorated in our genealogy.\textsuperscript{78}

Some, however, clearly objected to the high cost of canonization. One local official in Jiaxing even wrote the lady concerned a eulogy by way of compensation.\textsuperscript{79} A virtuous widow of Guiyang told her relatives and friends that the “profitless expenses” required for an award should be used to buy food for charitable relief, rather than for “empty fame”.\textsuperscript{80}

Retrospective canonization only became common during the first half of the nineteenth century, when enthusiasm for awards was at its height. The 1844 rules of the Ministry of Rituals provided that “even if no report has been made because of the remoteness of the time and the obscuring of the years, so long as there are facts in a prefectural or county gazetteer to depend on, sons and grandsons may make a supplementary request for an award”.\textsuperscript{81} In 1839, 338 deceased virtuous women from the Tongzhou area in Jiangsu, recorded in two gazetteers relating to the salt administration, were retrospectively canonized \textit{en masse}.\textsuperscript{82}

(ii) The Family

It was usual for the family of the candidate to take the initiative. In Huang Liuhong’s seventeenth-century handbook for local magistrates he states that:

The local authorities ought to tell the canton elders [conscript administrators in charge of the smallest units of local government] to make enquiries every year among those who live in hardship and in out-of-the-way places. If there are any faithful widows, heroic girls, filial sons or obedient grandsons of exceptional conduct, they should set forth the facts and lead their families and communities in recommending them in a jointly signed report.\textsuperscript{83}

A regulation of 1688 speaks of a bond being drawn up by a widow’s relatives and officials.\textsuperscript{84} A decree of 1735 urged that families should be encouraged to submit reports, and that the truth of their contents be vouched for by “local leaders and heads of families”.\textsuperscript{85} A decree of 1749 likewise described the “old practices” as being to “entrust these matters to neighbours and families to report”.\textsuperscript{86} Another, from 1762, said that “the family of the person concerned should draw up

\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Shangwu xianzhi}, juan 14, p. 287.
\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Jiaxing fushi}, juan 67, p. 2036.
\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Guiyang fushi}, juan 84, p. 10a. For the costs of canonization and some ways of avoiding them, see also De Groot, \textit{Religious System of China}, ii, p. 753.
\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Qingding liu zeli}, juan 48, p. 309.
\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Qingding \textit{Da Qing} huidian shili}, juan 404, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{83} Huang Liuhong, \textit{Fuhai guanshu} [Complete Documentation for Fortune and Favour] (1684); repr. of Japanese edn. of 1850 by Obata Shizan, Tokyo, 1973, p. 288 (my italics).
\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Qingding \textit{Da Qing} huidian zeli}, juan 71, p. 5b.
\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Ibid.}, juan 71, p. 14a.
\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 16ab.
The Southern Song transport commissioner Zhao Huai was captured by the Mongols and then killed for refusing to call on a colleague to surrender a city. His widow was permitted by the Mongol commander to go with some of his soldiers to recover the corpse. She burned it by the riverbank, put the ashes in a jar, took them on a boat into the middle of the stream and leapt in. She can be seen here about to drown.

From *Gufan*, juan 3, p. 44b.
a statement of the facts, and the neighbours and the head of the family should deliver truthful guarantees".\(^87\) The rules of 1864 for reporting virtue among persons displaced by the Taiping rebellion show that the family continued to play the central role in the first stage of reporting.\(^88\)

Although this is what one would have expected in the Chinese social context, there is a problem. Many of the detailed citations reveal a far from edifying picture of struggle within families, which those concerned might well have wished to keep quiet. The story of a woman surnamed Lü from Ningbo is an example:

She married Wang Shouzhong, but was widowed at twenty-five. Her (late) husband’s elder brother had three sons. Since he could thereby profit from her dowry,\(^89\) he wanted to marry her off to someone else. Lü said: "I have refrained from death and not followed my husband below the earth simply because I am three months pregnant. If I give birth to a son and the sacrifices are thereby perpetuated, I shall die without regrets. How could I dare to have a second husband?". She did in fact bear a son. This was a source of chagrin to her brother-in-law Shouheng, who constantly wished to kill him. Lü hid the orphan, and did not let him appear until he was five years old. She warned him: "If your uncle gives you anything to eat, you must show it to me". One day Shouheng gave him some fruit, which he clutched to his breast and took to show his mother. She made a trial of it by giving it to a dog, which died. Lü was exceedingly startled, but she bowed before Shouheng and said to him: "You did this in order to profit from our property... Let us divide the property left by my late husband into four parts, and give one to your three boys, so that from now on he may be without anxiety".\(^90\)

Presumably such reports were not submitted until long after the events described.

The social standing of a family had an effect on the reception of its application. In 1304 the throne observed, in the context of a decree criticizing the Office of Scrutiny for its lack of impartiality, that "those who have in recent years been designated in each locality as widows keeping fidelity after the death of their husbands have often not displayed any exceptional behaviour and are mostly from rich and powerful families".\(^91\) In 1467 Peng Xu complained in a memorial that only those with influence could get awards and that officials were treating ordinary applicants with disdain and even brutality. "Those who seek a means of preserving their honour," he said, "obtain on the contrary a source of disgrace". He asked that "wives who have maintained fidelity past the age of sixty and are without blemish" should not be "vexed" by the authorities and an

\(^{87}\) Qinding Da Qing huidian shili, juan 403, p. 7a.
\(^{88}\) Ibid., juan 404, p. 5b.
\(^{89}\) Later this property puzzlingly reappears as her husband’s legacy. What is clear is that remarriage would have deprived her of control of it. Dowries are discussed in Section 61 on "The Ambiguities of Virtue", pp. 138-49 below.
\(^{90}\) Ningbo fushu, juan 29, p. 2103.
\(^{91}\) Da Yuan zhengcheng guochao dianzheng, juan 33, pp. 472-3.
application for an award and an allowance of grain be made on their behalf forthwith.\textsuperscript{92}

As the eagerness to hunt out unrecognized cases of virtue gathered strength in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the government became concerned about the lack of social visibility of the virtuous poor. In a decree of 1723 the Yongzheng Emperor commented:

Wealthy families... are well able to make contact with the government, but the poverty-stricken villagers are mostly lost to sight... Let the governors-general and governors, educational officials, and [local] authorities make investigations everywhere... All persons showing the fidelity proper to widows and the righteousness proper to widowers who have previously been unable to make contact with the authorities because of poverty are to report to the governors-general... \textsuperscript{93}

A decree of 1749 drew attention to the omission of "the lonely and the deserted", and hoped to remedy this by urging the scholar-gentry\textsuperscript{94} to make enquiries of "public opinion".\textsuperscript{95} These exhortations eventually bore fruit in the nineteenth-century local campaigns to discover deserving women who had been overlooked. Thus between 1820 and 1827 the gentry of Wujin and Yanghuo counties collected a total of 3,018 filial, faithful and heroic ladies; and in 1834 two campaigns in Baoying county produced 590 successful candidates.\textsuperscript{96}

(iii) Conscript Administrators, Scholar-Gentry, Clerks and Runners

Under the Yuan, the low-level conscript administrators called the "Leaders of the Neighbourhoods and the Heads of the Community Groups" were responsible for "reporting the actual facts and giving a solemn and willing pledge" as to their accuracy.\textsuperscript{97} The Ming used the analogous "Canton Elders" to furnish the initial statement. After 1388 one copy of this went to the court. The other copy went to the local officials in the hope that this would oblige them to take action on it. In 1465 punishment was decreed for Elders who put their guarantee to statements giving false ages.\textsuperscript{98}

Conscript administration was dismantled in the seventeenth century, and the Elders therefore do not appear in the Qing documents.\textsuperscript{99} Their role of reporting and recommending the virtuous seems to have been taken over by scholar-gentry holding the first degree.\textsuperscript{100} Presumably they both drew on and to some extent were responsible

\textsuperscript{92} Huang Ming tiaofo shilei xuan [Compilation by Categories of the Legal Regulations of the August Ming Dynasty], comp. Dai Jin (mid-Ming; repr. of MS. in Japanese Imperial Library, Tokyo, 1966), Shang, p. 575.
\textsuperscript{93} Qiding Da Qing huidian zeli, juan 71, p. 79.
\textsuperscript{94} Literally, "the schools".
\textsuperscript{95} Qiding Da Qing huidian zeli, juan 71, p. 16ab.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., juan 48, p. 302.
\textsuperscript{97} Da Yuan shengzheng guochao dianzhang, juan 33, p. 473.
\textsuperscript{98} Da Ming huidian, ed. Li Dongyang et al., juan 79, pp. 1254-5.
\textsuperscript{99} For the changes in basic-level administration, see M. Elvin, "Market Towns and Waterways: The County of Shang-hai from 1480 to 1910", in G. W. Skinner (ed.), The City in Late Imperial China (Stanford, 1977), esp. pp. 449-57, 461-7.
\textsuperscript{100} Qiding Da Qing huidian zeli, juan 71, p. 144.
for the extensive chronicling of virtuous behaviour that went on at the local level. We know that the officials kept County Registers, Registers of Honorific Awards, and Registers of Enquiries for this purpose, and private sources included entries in lineage genealogies, special literary collections devoted to virtuous women, biographies of the virtuous, funerary inscriptions and commemorative poems. The Xi'an gazetteer of 1811 also mentions "publicly submitted facts".

The clerks and runners of the local sub-bureaucracies also occasionally appear, with the job of re-examining applications; and in the nineteenth century there were complaints that cases were sometimes not submitted because of the extortion they practiced.

(iv) The Officials
Under the Yuan and Ming the families of canonized women were excused labour service. Under the early Qing each virtuous widow's family was given thirty ounces of silver to pay for a ceremonial arch. After her death her name was inscribed at a shrine, and sacrifices were offered every spring and autumn to her memory. The critical verification of claims was clearly necessary.

The Yuan rulers first entrusted official verification solely to the Office of Scrutiny; later, dissatisfied with the results, they made the dossiers pass through the hands of the county magistrates, "the superior authorities of the area", the Secretariat, the Ministry of Ritual and the investigating censors as well. The Ming likewise began with a simple system, entrusting checking to the Guardians of Customs and Laws (a generic term for investigating censors and provincial surveillance officials). County, prefectural and provincial levels of scrutiny were, however, soon added. Perhaps because this was too cumbersome, in 1518 the Guardians were returned to being the sole superior verifying authority.

103 References to all of these may be found in Shengyu xianzhi, juan 14, pp. 281-2, 284, 287, 291-3, 295, 299, 306, juan 15, pp. 311, 313.
104 Xi'an xianzhi [Xi'an County Gazetteer], ed. Yao Baokui and Fan Chongkai (1811; repr. in Chengwen gazetteer ser., Zhongguo fangshi congshu, Huizhong section, 66, Zhejiang province, Taibei, 1970), juan 42, p. 142.
105 Qinding Da Qing huidian zili, juan 71, p. 16ab.
106 Qinding Da Qing huidian shili (1899 edn.), juan 404, p. 16a; and (1908 edn.), juan 404, p. 8ab.
107 Da Yuan shengsheng guochao dianzhang, juan 33, p. 472; Da Ming huidian, ed. Li Dongyang et al., juan 79, p. 1254. I do not know whether or not this exemption ended with the award-holder's death.
108 Da Yuan shengsheng guochao dianzhang, juan 33, pp. 472-3.
109 Ming huyao, ed. Long Wenbin, juan 14, p. 241; Da Ming huidian, ed. Li Dongyang et al., juan 79, p. 1254. It is clear from a decree of 1531 that county and departmental magistrates were still responsible for examining the cases first. ibid., pp. 1254-6. For the Guardians, see T. Grimm, "Ming Education Intendants", in C. O. Hucker (ed.), Chinese Government in Ming Times (New York, 1969), p. 131.
The original Qing system involved a chain of inspection from local officials through prefects to circuit intendants and regional censors. In 1655, however, this was simplified to a checking by the county magistrate and an annual investigation every twelfth lunar month by the provincial authorities of all the cases submitted to them. A consolidated recommendation was then sent to the Ministry of Ritual.109 After 1723 the provincial education authorities were brought in to keep an eye on the county magistrates, who were accused in a decree of 1762 of being “arbitrary and negligent”.110

During the eighteenth century the flow of candidates steadily increased. In 1749 Jiangsu province alone provided over two hundred virtuous women.111 The mounting cost led to the ending of individual arches except for those who had distinguished themselves in some way; the others had to be content with a share in a collective arch. After 1845 a single collective arch was built for each annual intake of faithful widows from each province.112 The system had become an assembly line.

V
IMPERIAL OBJECTIVES AND HUMAN REALITY

Under the later Han, awards for virtue were given “to promote good actions”. Under the Northern Wei it was “to make known the excellence” of the recipients; and under the Tang “to make them known to their communities [as examples]”.113 Under the Song the object of awards was “to show encouragement”, “to show respect for morality” and “to consolidate moral relationships”.114 According to the Yuan statutes, it was “to give a stimulus to [the reform of] defective customs so as to consolidate morality”.115 For Huang Liuhong in the Ming the aim was “respect and encouragement for moral norms”.116 The Qing statutes speak of “the education of the [moral] atmosphere”, and “the transformation of the [moral] atmosphere”. Recipients were meant to be “exemplars” and “models to their communities”.117 It was the purported view of the Yongzheng Emperor that “nothing in the Way of Government transcends in importance the transformation of morals, and the fountainhead of moral transformation is faithful conduct. It is for this reason that the

109 Qinding Da Qing huidian zeli, juan 71, pp. 3a, 4b.
110 Ibid., p. 7a; Qinding Da Qing huidian shi, juan 404, p. 7a.
111 Ibid., juan 403, p. 5a.
112 Ibid., and juan 404, p. 5b.
113 Sogabe, “Ni-Tō no shōhoku ni mieru seppu no seishō”, pp. 106-7, 110.
114 Song huiyō jiga, ed. Xu Song, 2, juan 61, p. 1691.
115 Da Yuan shengzheng guoqiao dianzheng, juan 33, pp. 472-3.
116 Huang Liuhong, Fuhui quanshu, p. 288.
117 Qinding Da Qing huidian zeli, juan 71, pp. 1a, 2a, 16a.
excellent system of honorific awards has been revered by successive dynasties".  

Lü Zuqian, in the Southern Song, stressed that "men live and die, policies are put into effect and then fall into disuse, but where reputation reaches it can stimulate men more than a thousand years hence". That was why "honour and disgrace" had to be made explicit. Qiu Jun, in the Ming, emphasized the ruler's duty to provide moral guidelines:

If there is confusion, and no behaviour that is marked with awards for approval, or with the discrimination of disapproval, then those who perform good acts will not know what they are to do, and will become negligent, while those who perform ill deeds will not know what they must not do, and will daily grow more reckless.

Visible forms of praise and blame, he added, had a longer-lasting effect than mere words. Peng Xu, about the same time, used even stronger language:

Faithful purity and righteousness are indispensable to Heaven and Earth. If a dynasty lack them, it will no longer be Chinese, but barbarian. If a man lack them, he is a beast in cap and trousers. Such is the import of transforming the moral atmosphere.

Virtuous behaviour, then, was the inner source of all that was distinctively Chinese and, by implication, the secret of superiority.

For the human reality that corresponded to such sentiments we may turn to Doolittle's account of a widow's suicide in Fuzhou around the middle of the last century:

She appointed a certain time for its accomplishment. On the morning ... she visited a certain temple, erected to hold the tablets and perpetuate the memory of "virtuous and filial" widows ... She was borne to and fro through the streets, seated in a sedan carried by four men, dressed in gaudy clothing, and holding in her hand a bouquet of fresh flowers. After burning incense and candles before the tablets in this temple ... she returned home and in the afternoon took her life, in the presence of an immense crowd of spectators. On such occasions it is the practice to leave a platform erected in the house of the widow, or in the street before it ... She ascends the platform, and sprinkles some water around on the four sides of it. Then she scatters several kinds of grain around in different directions. These are done as omens of plenty and prosperity in her family ... She is generally approached by her own brothers and by her husband's brothers, who worship her ... When everything is ready ... she adjusts [the rope] about her own neck ... kicks the stool away from under her, and thus becomes her own murderer. Formerly certain officers of government ... used to sanction the self-destruction of widows, not only by their presence on the occasion, but also by their taking a part in the worship.

On other occasions, officials did their best to prevent such suicides. An example is that of Zeng Rulan who lived in Hangzhou prefecture early in the eighteenth century:

118 Qinding Da Qing huidian shili, juan 403, p. 40. For analogous reasons Qing law made it a crime for any widow already possessing an imperial honour to sully it by remarrying: De Groot, Religious System of China, ii, p. 767.
119 Qiu Jun, Dasue yangyi bu, 35, juan 83, p. 28.
120 Ibid., pp. 28-29.
121 Huáng Ming tianfa shílèi züan, comp. Dai Jin, shang, p. 575.
She had been married for twelve years, but had had no son, when her mother-in-law passed away and her husband died of grief. She had promised her husband to commit the suicide of a follower, and twice tried to hang herself. When her father-in-law bade her desist, she did not obey but reported what had occurred to the county magistrate as a case of [attempted] suicide for the sake of fidelity, and asked that it be placed on record. The magistrate replied that she should take her husband's place in fulfilling the obligations of filial duty, and swiftly adopt a successor for him. After her father-in-law had had such an heir adopted, she again submitted a petition to the county magistrate: "Though my husband is dead, his brothers are able to care for [their father]. An heir has been adopted, so he also has a son. I previously vowed to follow my husband by committing suicide, and I shall go willingly into the darkness. Were I to be unfaithful to my earlier words, how could I look my husband in the face when I go below the ground? I beseech you [to grant me permission] as an especial kindness"). The magistrate again replied that she should bring up her orphan until he came to man's estate, and care for her father-in-law through his declining years till he died. If she were then to carry out her vow she would have fulfilled a really great achievement. The deceased man's adopted son was to be permitted to take the personal name "Light of Fidelity". The magistrate further commanded that she be given an allowance of ten pieces of silver, and he wrote for her the inscription "Filial and Faithful" to be displayed upon her doorway. Three years later her father-in-law died. Once the funeral had been completed she told her sisters-in-law: "Now I may carry out my promise". She forthwith stopped eating, washed herself and put on a change of clothes. She prostrated herself in farewell before Heaven, Earth and the ancestors. Then she took out a pellet of gold that she had had moulded for her, and placed it in her mouth. Sitting with her garments faultlessly arrayed, she wrote a poem on white paper... Then she flung away the brush, tipped back her throat, and died. 123

This case illustrates both virtuous disobedience towards parents-in-law and the interaction between state power and individuals over matters that we would tend to think of as touching only on religion or private morality.

VI

THE AMBIGUITIES OF VIRTUE

The conflict between fidelity and filiality shown in the last example was just one of many contradictions and inconsistencies in orthodox thought as to what was ethically admirable. These complications must be examined, if only because they could lead to conflict within families and cause the system of state awards, on occasion, to sanction disobedience to parents or parents-in-law.

Strict Song Neo-Confucian teaching on fidelity is summed up in the views of Cheng Mingdao and Cheng Yichuan: 124

123 Qing shiduo, ed. Zhang Yingchang, pp. 726-7 (my italics).
124 Er Cheng guan shu [Complete Writings of the Two Chengs], ed. Cheng Jan (1685), juan 23, xia, p. 44b, or, in a modern punctuated edition, Er Cheng ji [Collected Works of the Two Chengs], ed. Wang Xianyu (Beijing, 1981), i, p. 301. The main text was anthologized in the Jin ti lu [A Record of Reflections on Things Near at Hand], comp. Zhu Xi and Lu Zuqian (Lu's preface 1176). See for example the edition of Li Liuliang (early Qing), repr. in Zhongguo zhexue mingzhao jicheng [Annotated Collection of Famous Chinese Philosophical Studies], ed. Xiao Tianshi et al. (Taipei, 1978), 35, juan 6, p. 46b (pp. 539-40). Many editions of this widely read anthology omit this passage, for example the fiji ("collected explanations") edition of Zhang Boxing (Shanghai, 1937). Perhaps it was felt to be too savage. The two sentences in parentheses occur only in a Korean metal-type edition (and possibly other related editions not accessible to me) with a preface by Ye Cai dated 1248 (Australian National Univ., Menzies Library, Peiping Rare Books no. 1304), juan 6, p. 5a. See also (cont. on p. 110)
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Question: In principle it seems that one should not marry a widow. Is this the case?
Answer: Yes it is. One marries to acquire a mate for oneself. If one seeks to acquire a mate for oneself by marrying someone who has lost the virtue proper to her, then this action has already lost the virtue proper to it. (For a wife is one who follows a single person until her death. For her to remarry is to lose the virtue that is proper to her.)

Further question: If a widow is alone, impoverished, and with no one on whom she may depend, may she or may she not remarry?
Answer: This theory has arisen merely because in these latter days people are afraid of dying of hunger and cold. But dying of hunger is a trivial matter. Loss of the virtue that is proper to one is exceedingly serious.

The popular parallel to Neo-Confucian doctrine was the conviction, as expressed by a Ningbo girl, that since she had married into the Wo family, “I shall forever be a ghost of the Wo family”. Widows sometimes dug their own graves beside that of their dead husband, a symbolic way of showing their determination to remain faithful.

The emotions that supported the cult of fidelity were expressed in numerous poems, of which the following by Chen Hongchang in honour of a widow of Shangyu county may be taken as an example:

Under the cold lamp
She spins, serving
The sick mother of her departed husband.
Outside are the night, and rain.
Her mind — a dream
That sighs at a wayward world.
Soon she will come to death’s domain
Where the heart’s affairs are done with.
His spirit and hers will be as one,
Roaming at will
Throughout ultimate nothing.
With wings uplifted, the yellow crane
Has flown beyond Nature’s bounds.
Still in the clouds, the single goose
Calls with her plaintive voice.
No counterpart to her form,
No shadow beside her shadow,
Heart numb, untouched by outer awareness,
An effortless duty fulfilled,
An end pursued.

Verses on widows who committed suicide contain such phrases as “When the consort’s heart is already dead, how can she live?” “Death”, says one elegy, “is but self-completion”. Women were seen

(n. 124 cont.)

Reflections on Things at Hand, trans. W. T. Chan (New York, 1967), p. 177. The word rendered here as “virtue proper to” (jie) is normally translated “fidelity”, but this fails to reproduce in English the play on words in the original. The scriptural source for this doctrine was the Liji jijie [Book of Rites with Collected Explanations], annotated by Sun Xidan (Shanghai, n.d.), juan 7, juan 25 (jiao tesheng), p. 58.

125 Nüebo shuahi, juan 29, p. 2216. For another example, see Juxing shuahi, juan 64, p. 1992.

126 Ibid., juan 57, p. 2037.

127 Shangyu xianzhi, juan 15, p. 324.
as stronger than men in such matters, having “feelings immutable as iron or stone”. 128

Only under the most exceptional circumstances could a widow who remarried be conceived of as acting virtuously. Xu Ji, writing in the eleventh century and so before the real rise of the cult of fidelity, offers a rare example in the tale of the wife of a well-to-do Huaijin merchant. A fellow merchant, who lusted after her, killed her husband as they travelled together, but spared no expense on the funeral arrangements, falsely making out that his companion had been accidentally drowned. He unselfishly gave her all her husband’s wealth and so moved her to gratitude that after a short delay she married him. Long afterwards, when she had already borne him two sons, he laughingly confessed the murder to her. She at once denounced him to the authorities, and he was tried and executed. Reflecting that it had been her sexual charms that had led to her husband’s death, she drowned her sons in the Huai and threw herself in after them. Xu commented:

Some may think that, having served two husbands, she does not deserve the title of righteous. This is quite wrong. Her heart was moved by gratitude. I maintain that she showed true righteousness to her husband because having remarried, born two sons and had the happiness of the bedchamber take a firm hold on her feelings, none of this weighed on her in the least and she was able to take revenge, kill her sons and commit suicide. She wiped away the deep grievance of the departed. She shone like a bright sun blazing in the world of the dead. How can righteousness of this kind not be considered righteous? Strong men and resolute scholars have trembled on hearing her tale . . . Traitorous officials and rebellious factions may also loathe themselves a little on her account. 129

Perhaps significantly, no application for an official award was made in this case.

Usually the impropriety of a second marriage (in a sense, a contradiction in terms) was thought in itself to make any “righteous” action impossible. This taboo is easily understood in the context of a belief in an afterlife in which the souls of dead spouses were reunited, but there were other, parallel, traditions. The souls of the virtuous dead were sometimes thought to linger “forever between the Earth and Heaven”. 130 Alternatively they could inhabit or haunt particular places. 131 They could also acquire the power, like minor gods, to grant prayers made to them. Such was the case with a husband and wife who committed suicide together during a famine rather than survive at the cost of the wife’s sexual defilement and who subsequently had a shrine built to them. A memorial poem described the

129 Xu Ji, jieyao ji, juan 3, pp. 5b-7a. In Qing times, Xu’s judgement was regarded as not entirely reliable. See the comments of the editors of the edition referred to in n. 52 above.
130 Qing shiduo, ed. Zhang Yingchang, p. 720.
131 Ibid., p. 714.
landscape around their grave with terms normally used for imperial awards:

Insignia of your purity — the Qiantang’s streams,
Pines countless on the hills — emblems of your fidelity.132

Xu Ji’s hope that his tale would make traitors and rebels loathe
themselves also draws attention to the similarity in Chinese thinking
between a widow’s fidelity and that of an official of a fallen dynasty.
The commendations of those who did not take office under a later
political authority often used terms like “unsullied” that were
employed to praise women who had avoided being sexually defiled.133
Thus the ideology of female virtue coloured the perceptive evaluation
of some situations beyond its own domain.

It was the common belief that “Heaven pities the hardships of the
faithful and rewards them with abundant good fortune”,134 I know
of no clear evidence for a belief in the supernatural rewarding after
death of Confucian virtues.135 Local gazetteers usually simply note,
without comment, the afflictions of the virtuous, as when their sons
deserted them.136 Relatively uncommon is the kind of comment
made in one poem composed in praise of a faithful widow who had
lost son, grandson and daughter-in-law: “Who is it that determines
the chastisements of Heaven and the punishments of the spirits?
. . . What sin had she committed to bring her to such straits?”
Characteristically Chinese is the conclusion that, because of her firm
resolve in having her lineage provide heirs for adoption, “Heaven
had no power over her”.137 The problems of Job’s situation
(unacknowledged sins, an unjust deity, or an incomprehensible deity)
did not affect Chinese theorists of virtue.

In extreme cases, incompatible duties could lead to authentic
tragedy in the sense that all courses of action were morally wrong.
An example where the demands of filiality to a parent-in-law and of
the continuation of the descent-line clashed was that of a widow
whose family was caught in a flood. Hearing the cries of her aged
mother-in-law, she abandoned her baby son to carry the old lady to
safety. Far from being grateful, the latter abused her for having
rescued her rather than preserve her husband’s succession. She
then jumped back into the water and drowned herself, leaving her

132 Ibid., p. 967.
133 Song huyao jigao, ed. Xu Song, 2, juan 61, p. 1691 (report of Lou Zhao).
135 One eulogist wrote of a faithful fiancée: “She did not obtain an award through
the imperial regulations, yet among the Sages she is assured of praise”: ibid., p. 722.
This may of course refer to living “Sages”. Confucian sins were severely punished in
the hells of popular Chinese Buddhism. See W. Eberhard, Guilt and Sin in Traditional
China (Berkeley, 1967), esp. chs. 2, 3; p. 86 gives a case of the dedication of a chaste
girl.
136 Guiyang zuzhi, juan 84, pp. 22b-23a.
137 Qing shiduo, ed. Zhang Yingchang, p. 715.
daughter-in-law no option but to do the same. A poem on the widow's dilemma commented that "She did not venture to feel resentful towards her mother-in-law, but only to feel loathing for herself". The poet offered no theoretical resolution of her dilemma, but his sympathy seems to have been with the course she took. "We can but do what brings peace to our heart", he says, and adds: "The principles of Heaven have always been entirely a matter of human feelings".

In most cases, though, there was a measure of choice available, both between alternative morally admirable actions, and also between actions that were morally admirable and those that were merely permissible in the sense of not being thought wrong by society in general. This range of choice showed up not only in unlike actions under like circumstances, but also in internal conflicts within families when different members favoured different courses. The main points of contention are presented in the accompanying Table. Permissible acts that were not virtuous appear in the second column as "Usual social practice". Virtuous acts are shown in the third and fourth columns. Those that gave rise on occasion to direct (but laudable) disobedience to the wishes of parents and/or parents-in-law are printed in italics. It is clear that virtue was a potential source of social disruption, however much it may also have reaffirmed important social values.

The first possible crisis arose when a girl reached marriageable age but decided not to marry. In a typical case from Jiexing the daughter of a farmer, "seeing that her father had no son, . . . desired to remain all her life without marrying, to serve and care for her parents". The motivation behind such an act was summed up in the words said to have been spoken at a tender age by a Guiyang girl who later refused to wed: "We all of us [boys and girls] benefit in similar fashion from the toilsome efforts of our fathers and mothers. Yet when we [girls] grow up we leave home to serve others. What is the reason for this?". Sometimes the refusal to marry was against the parents' wishes. The gazetteer compilers nonetheless regarded such acts as virtuous, and they could receive awards. Young women who wished to remain single might also encounter hostility from other kinsmen, whom the hagiographers usually portray as motivated by greed. One such was a Miss Sheng from Shangyu, whose four sisters had already married when her parents died:

Certain relatives, who were powerful and high-handed, benefited from [her late father] Shijun's modest holding of land, and they put pressure on her to marry. "How can the autumn and winter sacrifices for my parents be looked after?", she

138 Ibid., pp. 701-2.
139 Jiexing fushu, juan 64, p. 1940.
140 Guiyang fushu, juan 86, p. 16ab.
141 Jiexing fushu, juan 64, p. 1937.
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### TABLE

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<td>Stay alive (if only to care for others)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Commit suicide to preserve personal purity</td>
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said. So she gathered the lineage together, and had them establish an heir for her father.¹⁴²

The converse of such behaviour was the insistence of a betrothed girl on going through with her marriage in defiance of the will of her parents. This may be illustrated by another case from Shangyu:

[Her fiancé] had been mentally ill for more than ten years, and a communication was received from her [prospective] father-in-law withdrawing from the match. To this her father consented. She was very startled when she heard this news, and said to her parents: “I should like to say farewell to my father-in-law and mother-in-law. After that I can be betrothed to someone else”. Her father was furious and would not agree. She shut the door of her room and tried to hang herself. Her mother was terrified and pleaded with her father, with the result that she was able to go. Once she had entered the door [of her parents-in-law] she was unwilling to return. “I am”, she said, “a wife of the Xu family”. Her father rushed over to drag her back by force, but she swore [to remain constant] with the threat of death.¹⁴³

The role of unmarried daughters as son-substitutes is also suggested

¹⁴² *Shangyu xianzhi*, juan 14, p. 291.
by the way that such girls occasionally dressed as men; and this
transvestism was not condemned by the hagiographers.\footnote{144}

The second possible crisis arose when a bereaved fiancée wanted
to attend the funeral of her husband-to-have-been and, usually, to
take up residence in his parent’s house. Once there, she might
perform a marriage ceremony with the “wooden lord”, her husband’s
soul-tablet. Parents frequently tried to stop this happening. In such
circumstances the stock reply by the girl was: “Before the exchange
of the betrothal presents [one recognizes] only the orders of one’s
father and mother. But today I am not under the direction of my
father and mother”.\footnote{145} If she won this battle of wills, which was far
from certain, her parents-in-law would usually receive her with
respect, but sometimes they might refuse to take her in. In such
cases it was still meritorious for her to persevere in her disobedience
to both authorities, an unusual situation in Neo-Confucian ethics.\footnote{146}

An analogous conflict of duties could arise out of uxorilocal
marriage. For fear of losing her, a wife’s parents might refuse to let
her visit her parents-in-law or, after a husband’s death, serve them.
Such a refusal could lead the widow to kill herself.\footnote{147}

A third crisis could arise over whether or not to commit suicide
on the death of a fiancé or husband. One bereaved fiancée from
Shangyu county justified her decision not to kill herself with these
words: “To die would be to wound the feelings of my parents. It
would be a way of buying a reputation for purity while forgetting
the substance of filial duty”.\footnote{148} In another instance, however, when
parents begged their widowed daughter to remarry, “because we have
no son on whom to rely”, she at once virtuously killed herself.\footnote{149}
The existence of a baby son was a powerful argument for staying alive,
though not always decisive. According to one widow, “If one has a
son, it is sweet and easy to preserve fidelity; but if there is no son,
it is bitter and difficult”.\footnote{150} Ideologically, to kill oneself when there
was a son to be looked after was “to turn one’s back on one’s late
husband”.\footnote{151} Even so there were cases, also accounted virtuous, of
a widow disobeying a dying husband’s injunction to remarry, and

\footnote{144} \textit{Ibid.}, juan 14, p. 295.
\footnote{145} \textit{Juxing fuzhi}, juan 64, p. 1966. The formula that applied to the married state
was that: “A wife serves her mother-in-law as a son serves his father, and a minister
his ruler”; \textit{Guizang fuzhi}, juan 8, p. 221.
\footnote{146} One girl in such a plight observed: “Even if my father and mother give me
orders, my steadfast purpose cannot be altered”. \textit{Ninghe fuzhi}, juan 29, p. 2187.
\footnote{147} See for example \textit{Juxing fuzhi}, juan 65, p. 2002. Sometimes, though, widows
shuttled back and forth between the houses of their parents and parents-in-law; see
for example \textit{Ibid.}, juan 64, p. 1958.
\footnote{148} \textit{Shangyu zianzhi}, juan 14, p. 294.
\footnote{150} \textit{Ibid.}, juan 67, p. 2040.
\footnote{151} \textit{Ibid.}, juan 65, p. 2019.
Lingnü, the young widow of Cao Wenshu (third century A.D.). She is cutting off her hair to show her father and mother she is resolved not to let them remarry her. Later, when Cao’s entire family was wiped out and she had no one to support her, they tried again to persuade her. She then cut off both her ears and her nose, and lay under the coverslet pouring blood. From Guifan, juan 3, p. 53b.
Li, the widow of the prefectural military official Wang Ning, whose body she is taking home for burial (not shown here). She is marooned with her young son at nightfall outside an inn in Kaifeng. The innkeeper has refused her lodging and dragged her out by her arm. She has therefore cut off the defiled hand with an axe to preserve the purity of her fidelity. The prefect of the capital later had the innkeeper flogged. From Gufan, juan 3, p. 58a.
killing both a son and herself. Sometimes a pregnant widow would wait to see if she was carrying a son, and only kill herself if the baby was a daughter. But it was no impediment to virtue to declare, as one widow did: “Although I am pregnant, it is not certain whether it will be a boy or a girl. To prolong matters out of a regard for something that is uncertain is a course of action that, to my dying breath, I will not take”. So she killed herself.

One way in which widows compromised between the different demands made on them was what may be called “deferred suicide”. One stayed alive long enough to suckle and wean an infant son. Another said to her son: “I only kept alive because of you. You are married [now] and I must follow your father beneath the earth”. Sometimes if she had no son a widow would first ensure that her late husband had an adopted heir. Thus the bereaved fiancée Yang told her elder brother to separate off the fields that her father had promised for her dowry and put them under the care of her mother-in-law to serve as the means by which an adopted heir could in due course be established. This done, she swallowed powdered lead and died at the age of twenty-three. Lack of a suitable heir could lead to a sonless widow’s suicide, but we learn of another that “Her father-in-law and mother-in-law wanted to establish an [adopted] heir [for their deceased son] and to bestow landed property [on her], but she said, weeping, ‘What use is that to me?’ She then hanged herself”. Another motive for postponing suicide was to see that mourning was properly completed. One Jiaxing widow who had done this subsequently “placed her husband’s soul-tablet on a bonfire outside their house, leapt into the flames, and perished with it”. The fourth and perhaps commonest conflict arose between a widow and her parents-in-law, or else her parents or other senior relatives, over her decision to maintain fidelity to her dead spouse. When the mother of one Ningbo girl declared that in the absence of a son such faithfulness was “a useless infliction of suffering on oneself”, her daughter proved her determination by cutting out one of her eyes.

Another example, from the same area is the following:

Her mother wanted to make her remarry. She softly excused herself, saying that her parents-in-law were still alive, and that she would look after them in her [late] husband’s stead... After her parents-in-law had both died, her mother again urged her more than once, but she would not be moved. One day her mother...
arrived in a hurry. Her face was harsh, and so was her voice. "I have already taken the betrothal money", she said, "to make you so-and-so's wife. The sedan-chair will be coming tomorrow".

The daughter then hanged herself. We are told that "all the people in the community held her in esteem and cursed her mother's lack of consideration".\textsuperscript{162}

If parents could often extract a substantial bride-price,\textsuperscript{163} the husband's family could profit by keeping possession of the property of a widow whom they obliged to remarry. The financial motive behind the pressure exerted may be seen from the following story of a Guiyang widow:

Her husband died after six years... Some good-for-nothings in the [husband's] family were profiting from her property and made secret plans to marry her to a powerful notable. She was not aware of the marriage until the sedan-chair suddenly arrived at the door. She firmly closed [her room], and would not get into it. The mob [prompted by the conspirators] smashed the tiles with volleys of stones. She held her child in her arms, grasped a knife and, calling on Heaven, made as if she would kill herself. At this the mob retired. Later, taking advantage of her having gone out, they barred the door and did not let her stay in the house. She then sold her jewelry and bought another house, where she lived with her son and brought him up to manhood.\textsuperscript{164}

Conversely, widows who did not remarry seem to have kept control of their bridal portion.\textsuperscript{165} Case histories mention those who gave it to help impoverished parents-in-law (which means that the gift was not obligatory).\textsuperscript{166} or presented it to their lineage.\textsuperscript{167} One Jiuxing widow, whose father-in-law had lost a consignment of government grain to (so-called) "Japanese" pirates in late Ming times, "sold her bridal trousseau and her personal property with all speed and on bended knee presented the money she had obtained therefrom to the military authorities to serve as redemption. Her father-in-law was

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., p. 2185.
\textsuperscript{163} In Shangyu marriage could be so expensive for a man that he had to borrow from relatives to meet his costs. See for example Shangyu xianzhi, juan 15, p. 318. Unfortunately the overall situation was more complicated. There is evidence from the early nineteenth century that in Zhejiang, the province from which much of the material for this article comes, it was often the woman's family who paid to get her married. A governor launching a campaign against female infanticide, which he thought due in part to the high price of marriage, declared that it often cost the bride's family several hundred ounces of silver. "Even if people sell off their fields and go into debt, it still takes an effort to scrape it together. The family of the bridgroom glory in a rich marriage and scorn a poor one". Yu Zhi, Deyi lu [Records on Obtaining Perfection] (1869), juan 2, p. 160. I am grateful to Professor Piet van der Loon for the loan of his copy of this rare book. While it is clear that there would have been little sense in forcing a well-endowed widow to remarry if she had taken her property with her, the question of dowries and bride-prices in this area requires further examination.
\textsuperscript{164} Guiyang fushi, juan 85, p. 179.
\textsuperscript{165} Ming dynasty law expressly provided that tenless widows who maintained fidelity "should receive in full their husband's share", whereas in the case of those who remarried "the husband's family's property and the original bridal trousseau shall both pertain to the family of her former husband". Huang Ming shi shu, shang, huling, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{166} Shangyu xianzhi, juan 15, p. 309.
\textsuperscript{167} Jiuxing fushi, juan 67, p. 2049.
thus able to escape death”. Further proof of the power that Jiaxing women had over their own property comes from the story of a lady surnamed Zhou:

Her husband was addicted to gambling. The family fortune was totally exhausted. He several times obliged Zhou to lend money to her father-in-law, and his father-in-law would likewise from time to time help him out financially. He still never had enough. One evening he pressed her yet again [for a loan], but Zhou could not in righteousness accede to his request. He left in a rage. When he came back she had already hanged herself. He gathered together the clothes she had left behind her and went off to gamble as usual. Her father-in-law arranged for her to be buried.169

This power probably also extended over land, as is suggested by implication in the following case in which it was, apparently exceptionally, violated:

Her [late] husband’s elder brother benefited from her property and also urged her [to remarry], but without effect. He therefore sold all of [her] fields to someone else so that she had no means to clothe or feed herself ... She did not quarrel with him over this, but engaged herself in weaving.170

Lastly, wives and widows could be sold by their parents-in-law:

Since both her father and mother were dead she was brought up by her father-in-law. When she was thirteen, her father-in-law’s wealth was swiftly disappearing, and her mother-in-law died. Her father-in-law treated her like a slave ... Because his son was young he wanted to sell her off. She said with revulsion: “I am goods given in marriage. How can I be tossed to and fro in trade?”171

Seeing her position was hopeless, she drowned herself. It was, however, virtuous for an unmarried daughter to sell herself to pay for the costs of burying parents and relatives.172

Thus the state system of honours for virtue tacitly supported a measure of intrafamilial conflict. In most cases, morally justified disobedience by juniors had to be underwritten by a willingness to die or to withdraw from the world, as did the handful of widows who fled from remarriage by taking refuge in nunneries.173 Disobedience was only explicitly praised in cases like that of the Jiaxing widow who set aside her deceased father-in-law’s arrangements for the adoption of an heir on the ground that they violated the proper sequence of generations.174 The view of some contemporary scholars that the overriding concern of imperial policy was social harmony and the ascendancy of seniors over juniors,175 though broadly sound, does not do justice to the complexity either of ideology or practice.

168 Ibid., juan 64, p. 1930.
170 Ningbo fuzhi, juan 29, p. 2196.
171 Ibid., pp. 2153-3.
172 Songjiang fuzhi [Songjiang Prefectural Gazetteer], comp. Sun Xingyan et al., rev. Song Rulin et al. (1817); repr. in Chengwen gazetteer ser., Zhongguo fangzhi congshu, Huazhong section, 10, Jiangsu province, Taibei, 1970), juan 71, p. 154 (p. 1602).
173 See for example Jiaxing fuzhi, juan 66, p. 2027. Buddhist nunneries, needless to say.
174 Ibid., juan 67, p. 2049.
Fan, the destined bride of Jiang Wenzhu, has arrived in the nuptial sedan-chair (shown at the top right), but her husband-to-be has died of convulsions even before the wedding-cup can be drunk. She is shown here paying her respects to what is probably the altar bearing his soul-tablet. She was to live as a faithful widow for a further seventy-four years. From *Gufan*, juan 3, p. 62b.
VII

SOCIETY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

The standards of honour set by a society can critically determine an individual's sense of identity and self-esteem to the extent that if these standards cannot be maintained, he or she may prefer death to an existence with a social personality that is no longer, in some sense, viable. Thus Campbell has written of the Saraktsan shepherds that "the young man will lose the perfection of his manliness if he will not on the instant give up his life in the cause of honour". Moreover, "if death destroys the individual... it leaves untouched his 'persona', that part of his personality which... relates him to the ideal type of manliness". Analogous feelings, mutatis mutandis, were at work among traditional Chinese women who cared for a virtuous reputation. It was essential for them to avoid at all costs, including life itself, the contamination of sexual or quasi-sexual contact with any man other than a husband. If bandits appeared likely to commit rape it was virtuous for a woman to kill herself in advance.

The following tale is told of the Shou clan of Ningbo in the sixteenth century:

They lived near the sea... Their lineage numbered two thousand persons, brave, cunning, and good at fighting. During the Jiajing reign (1522-66) the Japanese [probably local pirates] invaded several times. The Shous repeatedly killed the pirate chiefs and seized back [the persons and goods] that had been captured...

One evening the pirates arrived in great force. The [head of the] Shou lineage swore a heroic oath before his assembled kinmen: "We shall not send away our wives and daughters, nor shall we send away our goods in carts. We shall defend ourselves together to the death. Anyone who violates [this oath] shall be executed". Zhang [the senior lady] likewise gathered together the women of the lineage and swore to them indoors: "If men die in battle, women must die in righteousness, and not be defiled by the bandits"... When the bandits had surrounded them, the women gathered in a high building to await events. When the bandits effected an entry, Zhang was the first to fling herself into the river.

More than thirty of them died in this way.

Lesser causes for shame could also lead to virtuous suicide. One girl hanged herself after successfully resisting rape in a beanfield. Another killed herself when a youth flirtatiously took her hand during her mother's absence, an offence for which he was sentenced to death. The wife of a debtor killed herself when a creditor


177 In 1803 a discussion arose as to whether intent or act was the crucial factor in determining virtue, and it was decreed that the old rule that denied an imperial award to a woman who died resisting rape if, prior to her death, she had been "sexually defiled" was "one-sided and wooden": Qiding Da Qing huafian shi (1809 edn.), juan 404, p. 59. The nascent process of the internalization of virtue that this suggests needs further study.

178 Ningbo fuahi, juan 29, pp. 2155-6.

179 Fuzhou fuahi, juan 64, p. 1981.

180 Ibid., p. 1976.
shouted lewd abuse at her. One Jiaxing widow became enraged when someone spoke to her in an improper fashion. "Having received an insult of this nature", she said, "why should I continue a life of tears day and night?". She entrusted her baby son to her mother and hanged herself. Such cases received either full official commendation in the form of state honours or semi-official recognition in the form of an entry in a prefectural or county gazetteer.

In conclusion it may be suggested that the unusual feature about late imperial China was neither the nature of the behaviour defined as proper for a socially admirable individual, since there were and are quite numerous partial parallels in other cultures, nor the bestowal of medals through a state system, since many societies have recognized, and still do, both military and civilian bravery and public service in this way. It was, rather, the use of the political system to confer explicit honours for behaviour defined as virtuous in private, every-day life. Awards were also for the most part given for behaviour that was normative, even in a sense thought of as normal, if one accepts that the exceptional quality was often its fulfilment under difficult circumstances. And honours were potentially open, if not to all, at least to a very large number. The phenomenon that most nearly resembles the one which we have been discussing is canonization in the Roman Catholic church, but the differences are striking. Catholic canonization is otherworldly in its orientation, is placed in a clear metaphysical framework, functions through an ecclesiastical hierarchy, and — above all — honours qualities that are intrinsically exceptional (as is indicated by the requirement that miracles be adduced as proof of full sanctity).

The Chinese system was also unusual in its support for certain kinds of passive disobedience and protest. Approval was shown of the Ningbo wife who drowned both her five-year-old son and then herself in defiance of the wastrel husband who planned to sell them into slavery. A woman was deemed praiseworthy who refused to support her husband by engaging in prostitution. So too was the faithful widow who committed suicide because her husband's family would not allow her to sell land to pay for the burial of her late parents-in-law and husband.

We may end with a question and a hypothesis about the awards for women on which our discussion has concentrated. Did the Chinese system, besides affirming certain social values, also play here something of a psychological balancing role? Expressed paradoxically, may it not perhaps be seen as a public affirmation of private

182 Ibid.
183 Ningbo fushi, juan 29, p. 2120.
184 Ibid., pp. 2131-2; Guyang fushi, juan 86, p. 30a.
self-denial, a social immortality bestowed on those who had died early or unfulfilled, and a posthumous symbolic exaltation of those who, when alive in the real world, had been subordinates?

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