SIGNIFYING BODIES: THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SUICIDE WRITINGS BY WOMEN IN MING-QING CHINA

BY

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Abstract

This paper examines the form, content, and cultural significance of poems written by a number of otherwise unknown women before they committed suicide. The specific conditions under which these inscriptions are produced are disorder or violence in various forms, whether cultural, social, or familial, that threaten the integrity of the female body. The suicide poems are often accompanied by a short autobiographical preface. The author argues that this act of self-inscription at the moment of death is an act of agency. Through this textual production, the women reproduce a peculiarly Chinese sense of embodiment in inscription, and as self-recorders, they write themselves into history. These women construct the integrity of their bodies in/out of disorder by textualizing and transforming them into cultural bodies inscribed with value and order.

In the Ming-Qing period, the gendered agency of women became visibly self-scripted for the first time in Chinese history. This is the effect of a significant cultural phenomenon—the emergence of writing women as a critical mass among the scholar-gentry class. Many gentry families gave their daughters literary training often as cultural or symbolic capital—an asset to the family and future marriage prospects. This widespread female literacy relative to previous historical periods brought about an unprecedented level of textual production by women. As recent studies of women’s culture of this period have shown, many of these texts are poetry collections, which were printed and circulated, and in which women inscribed their self-representations in their own voices. Women developed a growing self-consciousness in relation to writing, and, despite the rhetoric of modesty they often employed, a self-confidence about their literary performance also emerged. Regarding this change in attitude, Susan Mann has stated with insight that “we may imagine poetry as a constant personal resource available to learned women whenever
they were moved to use it …. Poems on silk and paper...entered the arena of literati discourse where the sentiments they celebrated were dignified, appreciated, and accepted as normative by elite men and women alike.” In the sense of a regularly employed technology of self-expression and self-representation, women’s literary practices indeed gained entry into a discursive field shared with their male counterparts.

Within this broader context of female literacy, this paper will examine the intersection of gender, literacy, and agency in contexts of violence and disorder by focusing on women’s suicide writings from this period. What social or cultural meanings does the female body have that acts of violence render intelligible? What are the content and form of suicide writings by women and the agitated and brutal contexts of their production? In other words, what motivated women to write, and what did they write before they took their own lives? What did women hope to achieve by their actions and their words? What cultural significance can we draw from this body of writings? By attempting to seek answers to these questions, I hope to articulate the relationship between the female embodiment of violence and the agency of self-inscription. Through analyses of these texts my paper thus emphasizes as much as possible the perspectives of the women involved. The cultural contexts of the production of these writings and their circulation are inevitably implicated, and thus this inquiry also addresses issues that pertain to context.

Signifying Bodies and Female Agency

Recent historical studies have shown that the female body was a potent site of meaning production in imperial China, the body/site on which cultural values were inscribed. From early biographies of exemplary women, we find examples of the self-mutilated face of resistance: cases of beautiful widows who embodied the female virtue of faithfulness literally by applying a sign on their visage. In order to prevent themselves from being forced to remarry, young widows would disfigure their faces by slashing them or cutting off nose or ears—the most visible signs of feminine beauty. Such self-mutilation also rendered them ritually incapable of serving the ancestors of any future proposed husband, because they could not

perform the sacrifices with "unwhole" bodies. In late imperial times, the flesh sliced off from the young female body and cooked as medicine (gegu 銮股) for parents and parents-in-law materialized filiality, particularly the giving back of nourishment in a condensed form in return for that received in the womb and in infancy. The "disciplined" bound feet manifested by their shrinkage and concealment multiple and contradictory significations of femininity. In erotic art, the bound feet were the part of the body that was most apparent to the observer by being decorated and covered, controlled and cultured (tamed). From an anthropological perspective, C. Fred Blake argues powerfully that the painful and protracted process of binding the feet that the mother performed on and trained the young girl to do produced a "mindful body" informed "of its fate in patriarchal society and armed it with an effective discipline, not only...to maintain the strict rule of chastity, but also to deal with the travails of becoming a wife, daughter-in-law, and mother." In times of "national" crisis, such as the disorder following the dynastic conquest by the Manchus and during the many local rebellions and banditry that wracked the late Qing, women’s bodies furthermore embodied through violent acts normative social values and cultural meanings.

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2 For the locus classicus of mutilating the face by cutting off the nose, see Liu Xiang 呂向, “Liang gua Gaoxing 高興” Lienü zhuan 列女傳 (reprint, Taipei: Guangwen shuju, 1987), 4.7b-8a. Examples from later periods include disfiguring the face and cutting off other compromising or compromised parts of the body such as ears and arms. For the prevalent practice of guge among women in Shexian 歙縣, Anhui, see T’ien Ju-k’ang, Male Anxiety and Female Chastity (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), 161. For the multiple meanings of bound feet as a gender, cultural, and ethnic marker, see Dorothy Ko, “The Body as Attire: The Shifting Meanings of Footbinding in Seventeenth-Century China,” Journal of Women’s History 8.4 (1997): 8-27. For the commodification and eroticization of the virtuous female body in the commercial print culture of the late Ming, see Katherine Carlitz, “The Social Uses of Female Virtue in Late Ming Editions of Lienü Zhuan,” Late Imperial China 12.2 (1991): 117-48.

3 C. Fred Blake, “Footbinding in Neo-Confucian China and the Appropriation of Female Labor,” Signs 19.3 (1994): 676-712, quote is on p. 685. Blake points out that “footbinding violated an ironclad dogma that pervaded the whole of the Confucian doctrine—the rule that prohibits the physical abuse of the body” (695). Furthermore, he also notes that women performed significantly many more acts of physical abuse on their own bodies. His explanation, originating out of an anthropological perspective, is that “the rule against self-mutilation applied less to women because they did not constitute, in the dominant discourse, a formal link in the agnatic chain of descent through fathers and sons. They constituted instead a formal ‘break’ in that linkage” (696), that is, through exogamy.

4 Dorothy Ko argues for women’s supportive role in producing the female virtue
We may consider further the link between the various modes of disciplining the female body and the potential for female agency. The specific conditions under which women’s suicide writings were produced were disorder and/or violence in various forms—cultural, social, and familial—that threatened the integrity of the female body. On a public scale, during the two major traumatic periods of social and political disorder—the Manchu conquest of China (mid-seventeenth century) and the Taiping Rebellion (mid-nineteenth century), countless women took their own lives in order to preserve their integrity and chastity, to preserve the cultural value inscribed on their bodies. Before they committed suicide, a not negligible number of these otherwise unknown women wrote poems, often accompanied by a short autobiographical preface. These writings provide details concerning the circumstances in which the writing was produced; the material medium of inscription—paper, cloth, ink, blood; and the site of the inscription—wall, cliff, and often the body which carried the inscribed cloth or paper. These writings point back to the conscious and deliberate actions that these women carefully planned and executed under extremely difficult and stressful conditions. Similarly, ordinary women—usually young widows—caught in predicaments arising from private contexts of family conflicts and pressures to remarry also often inscribed their personal history, feelings, and self-determination in prose and poems before they committed suicide. This paper examines suicide writings by women produced within both public and private, or personal, domains.

Women who wrote before they took their own lives create another signifying body, another medium of embodiment: the text. The physical body of the woman and the material body of the text are both inscribed with social and cultural values that the writing subject—the woman about to commit suicide—brings together in the ultimate moment of disembodiment that threatens disappearance and oblivion. Through this act of self-inscription on body and text, women (re)produce the ethical values of female virtue and the social values of order and integrity in moments when their bodies threaten to become abject—objects out of place, outside the social and cultural space in which they should properly be located. The exposure of chastity, “The Complicity of Women in the Qing Good Woman Cult,” in *Family Process and Political Process in Modern Chinese History*, Part 1 (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1992), 451-487.

5 I draw on Judith Butler’s elaboration of the abject in *Bodies That Matter* (London:
of these women, beyond the normative physical and moral boundaries, turns their bodies into transgressive bodies, “matter out of place,” to use Mary Douglas’s term,\(^6\) or potentially objects of defilement. In this light, their writings and suicides can be read as at once discursive and material attempts to reverse this ethically and ritually polluted status of abjection and reincorporate themselves into the dominant discourse.

By the combined acts of writing and self-immolation, these women assert their agency and appeal to future generations for their right to be remembered; they also insist that they had acted correctly. They claim to have a history and write themselves into history. My theoretical emphasis on public significance is not meant to underestimate the personal meaning that acts of suicide would give to these women’s lives and deaths, or to suggest that their suicides might not be psychologically fulfilling. As a matter of fact, we will see from the specific texts examined below that this process of textual embodiment at death is a strong instance of gendered subject and identity construction. The texts are death inscriptions produced by, significantly, more or less “anonymous” women, that is, women about whom we know little, if anything, other than what they themselves tell us in their writing. These women resisted or preempted violence by committing violence on themselves—suicide. The perpetrators of violence and disorder are usually marauding soldiers during invasions and suppressions, rebels and bandits in raids and attacks, cruel and opportunistic relatives, who would commit slander, rape, and other forms of defilement on women. Women caught in such circumstances were expected by parents, husbands, brothers, in short, by representatives of Confucian ideology and themselves as interpellated subjects, to resist the marauders and preserve their virtue, their chastity.

By bringing critical attention to bear on these texts of self-inscription written on the point of death, I want to question and oppose the

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\(^6\) This is developed in her influential work *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1984), 40.
common biographical motif of women who burn their manuscripts just before death, thereby destroying the symbolic embodiment or extension of themselves when they die. This is the familiar trope of female self-effacement, which expresses women’s real or supposed acquiescence to the cultural ambivalence towards or disapproval of women writing and their self-expressiveness. This is one type of embodiment, to which I oppose its paradigmatic negation with the self-inscriptions at death examined in this paper. To the trope of effacement and obliteration are opposed those of visibility and continuity. At the same time, these writings also show that female suicides were neither impulsive and facile nor indicative of “an unhealthy craving for posthumous glory by unfortunate women,” which may have been encouraged by the progressive severity of the law in the Ming and Qing regarding female chastity, at least as suggested by repeated examples from legal case histories.

Secondly, I want to reconstruct a female perspective on the significance of this writing. In other words, I hope to show from the writers’ own perspectives, their conceptions, as they express them, of women’s relationship to the act of writing as self-construction and self-representation, in a symbolic and material sense. In extreme conditions of violence and violation of social order and cultural norms, in a word, luan or disorder, ordinary women will assert not only their position but also their voice, or so it would appear from these texts of death inscriptions. What we have in these cases is the creation and/or preservation of their manuscripts at the conjunction of writing and dying. At the point of disappearance a material and

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7 Judith Zeitlin examines the element of visibility and perceived ephemerality in verses written on walls (tibishi), many by women, and the relation to loss in her paper “Tibishi and the Collecting of Women’s Verse in the late Ming and early Qing” (paper presented at the Conference on Gender and Literature in Ming-Qing China, Nanjing, May 16-19, 2000). While this line of inquiry is also germane to a reading of the death inscriptions by women, Zeitlin’s study restricts itself to poems on walls—many of which are not suicide poems—from the late Ming and the Ming-Qing transition in the seventeenth century. Furthermore, the focus of her paper is on the role of the male literati who were interested in collecting these poems on walls by women and writing poems to match them.

8 M. J. Meijer, “The Price of a P’ai-lou,” *T’oung Pao* 67.3-5 (1981): 288-304. Though studies in case law bring out perspectives, practices, and voices, especially in relation to the lower social classes absent in other discursive modes, by the very nature of dealing only with transgressions, such cases when read cumulatively can also skew the picture. The recent spate of legal studies by scholars such as Matthew Sommer and Paola Paderni that draw on case history archival materials previously unavailable are giving us a more complex picture.
discursive presence is (re)produced, a body of inscriptions, an autobiographical voice. The women clearly intend their death inscriptions, materially inscribed with ink and brush, on cloth or paper, to continue the existence denied them, to be their symbolic bodies. They arrogate to themselves the act of writing their own lives, producing self-epitaphs and self-memorials.\(^9\)

**Suicide Inscriptions**

Unnatural death and writing have been linked in Chinese culture from early times in the practice of composing a “verse on cutting off/ending life” (jueming ci 絕命詞). As early as the Western Han (206 BCE-8 CE), the imperial advisor to Emperor Ai (r. 6-1 BCE) Xifu Gong 惠夫公 wrote a “Verse on Ending Life” when he was Expectant Official, fearing that he would meet with an untimely end, even though, as it turned out, he did not die until a few years later.\(^{10}\) This act of self-inscription, performed at the point just before dying, constructs a sense of agency in death. With the imminent destruction of the body or the embodied self, writing constitutes an attempt at continuity or vindication of the to-be-disembodied self in a textual body. Ironically, the significance of self-inscription at death is predicated on the notion of the immortality attainable through one’s words canonized in the *Zuozhuan* 左傳.\(^{11}\) The sense of urgency at the moment when a person faces imminent extinction, I believe, is manifested in the common shorthand form that most suicide writings took, an idea which will be examined in the next section.

In general, examples by male suicides demonstrate that a heroic dimension and sense of personal integrity surround the production of self-inscription at death. The classic example cited for *jueming ci* is the martyred official Fang Xiaoru 方孝孺 (1357-1402), who wrote a death poem before he was dismembered as a consequence of disobeying the Yongle 永樂 Emperor (r. 1403-24) who had usurped the throne.\(^{12}\) Loyalty (*zhong* 忠) to sovereign, state, or moral ideal is the

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9 Men produce self-writings in a number of different genres often as self-conscious literary self-projections or inventions in times of peace, see the numerous examples collected in Guo Dengfeng 郭登峰, *Lidai zixu zhuanwen chao* 輯代自叙傳文抄 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936).

10 The poem is recorded in his biography in the *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 45.2187-88.


virtue exemplified by male suicides. The foremost virtue embodied by female suicides is chastity (zhenjie 貞節). Here I wish to emphasize again that to perform this act of inscription before death by a woman requires cultural and social disciplining on several levels, disciplines that used to be the prerogatives of elite men. In addition to the moral discipline that produces the appropriate sense of virtue and ideological commitment, the literary disciplines of prose writing and versification and the practice of calligraphy that materializes the script are also necessary skills.

What are the implications of this practice when it was performed by women, in particular ordinary, even “anonymous” women, in the late imperial period? That women could or would write self-inscriptions at death presupposes the moral, literary, and technical disciplines and training described above. Such disciplinary attainments usually belong to women from the elite class. It is thus not so surprising to come across the case of Empress Xiao 畿后 of the Khitan Liao dynasty (925-1125), who was implicated in a palace intrigue and accused of a sexual liaison with a palace musician through a series of erotic poems she had unwittingly copied in her own hand. When she was ordered to commit suicide by the emperor, she wrote a jueming ci, “verse on ending my life,” an autobiographical record of her life that proclaims her innocence before she hanged herself with a white silk cord.\(^\text{13}\)

That there was an increased incidence of the practice of writing self-inscriptions at death among women correlates with the spread of education among women in the Ming and Qing, the latter a phenomenon quite well mapped by a number of recent studies.\(^\text{14}\) The women who wrote these self-inscriptions at death, however, were

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not ordered to commit suicide as in the case of Empress Xiao, but chose to do so themselves. I want to argue that, through the choice of suicide and self-inscription, women assume or even construct positions of agency and power on the grounds of normative values of female virtue, both literally and discursively. In this sense, agency, as the cultural theorist Judith Butler puts it, is “a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power.” She further observes in her discussion of both the constructedness and materiality of sex and body that “if there is agency, it is to be found, paradoxically, in the possibilities opened up in and by that constrained appropriation of the regulatory law, by the materialization of that law, the compulsory appropriation of and identification with those normative demands.” In other words, though these women are inscribed in ideology, I believe we can try to think through the possibilities of agency as it might apply in the contexts of their suicide writings. Even though agency is located within a set of cultural constraints or determinants, the act of writing imparts to the women a sense of meaning and gave the suicide increased significance even as the women still were limited in the forms of action or resistance that were available or conceivable.

I would suggest that, ironically, death inscriptions are textual sites in which “ordinary” women attempt to construct their identities (as agents of their own action), and in which they work out their relationship with the perceived and perceiving “public.” The message inscribes an individualized identity (the woman who is writing about herself) and a collective target audience—the public who will witness, assess, and take action as a result of coming into contact with this inscription. Some inscriptions explicitly give instruction for specific actions to be taken, such as burial of the body. Most often, they are rhetorically structured to elicit from the readers reflection, sympathy, or admiration. The text is thus constructed as a gendered individual voice addressed to a collective readership. In this process, the disorder inflicted on the physical body is transformed by female agency into order inscribed on the textual body. That order is first and foremost articulated in the formal prose and poetic structures of the writing. The resulting text embodies not only social virtue and integrity, but also individual history and memory. The act of writing, if you will, provides the possibility of self-transformation from within the social system and gender ideology.

16 Qingshi jishi 22.15529.
When we examine the suicide writings themselves, we are at once struck by the similarity of form they take, to such an extent that we can say that their formal characteristics are culturally determined. A surprising number of these texts consist of a self-preface—a short essay in literary prose—followed by a series of poems, most commonly the five- or seven-character quatrain (jueju 餓句). One is tempted to make the link between the “cut-off poem” (jueju) and the “cut-off life” (jueming 餓命). This combination of preface-cum-poems is very much conceptualized along the lines of a collection of poetry by an individual author, that is, the bieji 別集, except in extremely abbreviated form, which recalls my comment earlier about suicide notes as shorthand writing. The form adopted also suggests the perceived authority of poetry as the canonical medium of self-expression, and of the collected work (bieji) as a statement and extension of the person. The prefaces are, almost invariably, autobiographical, providing some or all of the following elements: her identity (name and native place), family background, upbringing, the circumstances leading to the decision to kill herself, her action in the last moments, a strong wish to be remembered, and injunctions to the reader. The poems tend to include nostalgic memories of a peaceful and contented life, recount dramatic moments of the self-narrative, and highlight the moral character, determination, and heroism of the author.

To illustrate these textual practices by women, I will discuss three exemplary cases of suicide inscriptions by women: the first two were written by adolescents caught during periods of “national” disorder and the third by a young widow in a difficult family situation. My first example Du Xiaoying 杜小英 (1638-1654), is a sixteen-year-old who was captured by Manchu troops in 1654 and before committing suicide wrote ten poems framed by a preface. Through her suicide writing, which circulated widely and was recorded in a number of contemporary accounts, Du Xiaoying became a celebrated chaste heroine of the Ming-Qing transition. The second example is Huang Shuhua 黃淑華 (1847-64), a seventeen-year-old who was captured by Qing soldiers when they had retaken Nanjing (Huang’s hometown) from the Taiping rebels in 1864. Before she committed suicide by hanging herself in a hostel in Xiangtan 湘潭 (in Hunan), Huang Shuhua also wrote a series of ten “poems on ending life” with a self-preface in which she identified herself and her family. She
recounted how they had lived under the rebel government in Shangyuan 上元 (Nanjing) and how she was abducted by a Qing soldier who killed most of her family members and carried her off to Xiangtan by boat. The third example is Ling Zhinü 萍萍女 (1806-27), a twenty-one-year-old widow who committed suicide by starvation. In preparation she wrote on the night of the Mid-Autumn Festival in 1827 an autobiographical postscript to her collection of more than three hundred poems, which she had kept hidden in a bamboo satchel. She detailed her family background, marriage, widowhood, and the pressure on her to remarry which brought about a maligning of her virtue and a lawsuit by her husband’s family.

The first two texts have obvious similarities in form and meaning, as structured by similar situations and experiences in periods of social disorder. But there are also marked differences in poetic style and the motivation for suicide. Though like Du Xiaoying, Huang Shuhua did not kill herself immediately, her reasons for postponing her death are very different. The text expresses a passionate, even obsessive, desire to take revenge on her captor, who in front of her had murdered in cold blood her mother, little brother, and a sister-in-law. Huang committed suicide only after she had succeeded in exacting the life of her captor in return for the violence he had perpetrated on her family. The example of Ling Zhinü is different from the other two. She had preserved a substantial collection of unpublished poems that she had written over a number of years. She does not have a series of “poems on ending life.” Her suicide writing is the long autobiographical postscript, which also has a practical purpose—to clear her name socially and legally. These three texts all bear significant points for comparison with each other and with this genre of writing as a whole. They offer possibilities for reading female agency in a culture that tends to obscure it.

Finally, these textual bodies are also significant in a material sense. The recurring act of careful concealment of the piece of writing on the body in so many cases of female suicide is paradoxically intended to effect disclosure and revelation. The suicide notes are hidden/carried on the body to be found. These women seemed to have tacit knowledge of the mandatory forensic examination by a coroner in cases of homicide and suicide and they manipulate this practice to get their word out. This self-inscription, then, embodies not only moral and social values but also individual agency. When
death and silence rule, this is the body that speaks, that remains to tell the tale.17

Du Xiaoying (1638-54): The Girl from Hunan

In 1654, sixteen-year-old Du Xiaoying wrote a self-preface to her series of ten “poems on ending life.” It is among the most detailed self-prefaces to suicide poems I have found.18 Right at the beginning, she identifies herself as the daughter of a respectable family in Chen City (Yuanling) in western Hunan. Her desire to distinguish herself as an exceptional woman is indicated by her including the unusual account of her birth told her by her mother: “On the night my mother conceived me, she dreamed of a girl with a beautiful voice like jingling jades who bowed to her and said that her name was Miss Yingtai，and that she wished to rent a place to live in for a few years. Mother woke up and was pregnant. When I was born, she thus named me Xiaoying (Little Ying). My parents both loved me.” This story with the unusual dream hinting at the supernatural background of Du Xiaoying no doubt also had an impact on the girl’s perception of her own identity and character. Du Xiaoying was also meticulous about naming the male members of her family who had achieved distinction by passing the first level of the civil service examinations. It is a way of emphasizing that she came from a family of moral standing and cultivation. She also located her own education within this cultured family setting. It is interesting that her feminine training and education all came from her maternal relatives: she developed her skill in embroidery by going to learn from her maternal aunt who was married into a powerful lineage in the same city but had been widowed early. Impressed by Du Xiaoying’s

17 Janet Theiss discusses in detail the procedures of the examination and the experts, including midwives, involved in “Medicine, Law and Propriety in the Forensic Examination of Women in 18th Century China” (paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Association for Asian Studies, Boston, March 11-14, 1999). It would seem that literate women’s practice of carrying a suicide note on the body, creating expectation of discovery, had become a normative practice in the late imperial period. In 1922 Shanghai, the sensational modern case of a secretary who hanged herself in a newspaper office generated endless speculation in the press concerning the missing suicide note, because people expected to find it on her body. I am grateful to Bryna Goodman for sharing with me her draft of a paper on this case, “The New Woman and the Vengeful Ghost: Reflections on Gender in the Public Culture of Early Republican Shanghai.”

18 Qingshi jishi, 22.15534-35.
intelligence, her maternal uncle offered to tutor her. In concluding the passage on her family and education, Du Xiaoying significantly stated that her models for ancient prose and poetry were only those of the recorded discourse of virtuous daughters and chaste widows. She goes further by dismissing the popular heroines Mulan 生 芷 and Huang Chonggu 蒋 葫, whose accomplishments were attained by cross-dressing and venturing into the male public domain and mixing in male company. Her self-presentation and her evaluation of other women in Chinese history establish her own high moral and ethical standards, which enables the reader to understand her choice of actions later.

Du’s narrative continues with the disorder that beset her area in 1654 when the Qing army took Chen City. This forced her mother to take her into hiding in the mountains, but she was subsequently captured by the soldiers and presented to the general, surnamed Cao 曹. Explaining that she was two months from the end of a three-year period of (sexual) abstinence taken for the sake of her mother’s sickness, she records how she appealed to the general’s sense of filial piety as a ruse to postpone her defilement. She declares her real reason for not killing herself at this time: “In the vastness of Lake Dongting 邓 池, it isn’t that I could not die. But I could not bear to throw my sincere heart into the desolate mist and wild waters; then no one would know.” The need and desire for her life and action to be known are inscribed here explicitly, and it is through the medium of this inscription that her desire could be fulfilled.

Du’s narrative mentions that it was the year of the triennial examinations, expressing the hope that “there might be people from my native city who are here to take the examinations,” and she indicates precisely that “this is the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month.” In analyzing the function of Du Xiaoying’s self-narrative, which had been inserted into the eighteenth century erotic novel Gu wang yan 语 言 (Words said just for the sake of speaking), Martin Huang has noted astutely that “Du Xiaoying seemed convinced that those literati were the most likely people who would appreciate her heroic act of chastity and they were sure to spread around her good name.”

Knowing that she will be unable to resist the general’s

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19 Martin Huang, “The Polarization of Qing and Yu in the Eighteenth-Century Erotic Novel” (paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Association for Asian Studies, Boston, March 11-14, 1999). Surely Du Xiaoying never anticipated the spread of her fame, even ironically, to the most unlikely place—the heart of an erotic novel, even though it is meant as a didactic biography, a virtuous model
desires much longer, she sees the present as offering the opportune time and place to die. Her strategy is to manipulate the general’s empathy with filial conduct. She tells him that her mother had in fact been thrown into the lake by the rival army. She reveals that she is able to write and asks permission to compose an elegy mourning her mother before she acquiesces to the general’s wishes. This then was the opportunity she created for herself to write the self-preface and the ten poems. The ending of the preface is significant in that it takes the self-narrative almost right up to the last moment, in which she states her desire to be known to posterity: “If the river spirit has efficacy, escort me in the roaring waves so I can transmit my immortality.” If she should die, she would not die in vain. Her penultimate action was to produce the poems and to carefully preserve them on her body: “Thus I write ten quatrains, and with a piece of oiled cloth I insert them inside my bosom.” I provide translations of Du Xiaoying’s ten suicide poems below:

(1) Once parted from my home town, I can’t overcome my feelings. Today in shame I come to Hancheng 独骑。 Suddenly I hear the general’s order to search all, How can I dare to cherish any remaining days?

(2) The journeying sail they say is passing the Double Gu Peaks 双谷。 Only the cawing of the ravens at night conceals my crying. I’d rather be buried among the river fish, going with the thick waves, Than to leave behind a green mound among the Tartars.

(3) I bid farewell to my brothers and close kin, But they follow me a thousand 里, always startling me in my dreams. My soul wants to return on the homeward road, But when I arrive my parents are no longer living.

(4) I hate listening to the songs and laughter of the Tartar youths. How many times my heart breaks—so many gibbons on the ridge. The blue bird intends to follow the Queen Mother, So in vain nets are set up in the human realm.

(5) Covering my body is still my old silk robe. In dream reaching the Xiao 湘 and Xiang 湘 Rivers—when will I return there? Crossing distant wind and waves—who will be my companion? Deeply I pray from afar to the spirits of the two ladies.

which inspires other women, read from a lienü zhuan within the novel’s narrative. This intertextual borrowing also points to the wide and continuing circulation of new or newer lienü stories.
(6) When I was a small girl, alone in the painted pavilion,
I had paid respects to my mother’s brother as my teacher.
When night after night the sound of waves bring utter grief
I still remember studying the Chuci (Songs of the South) in lamplight.

(7) I cherish the times of leisure in the boudoir.
For what reason am I dragged by my skirt to follow the shore?
I send word to my parents not to worry about me,
When I descend into the river, I am still the body of a daughter.

(8) In life I have not yet pinned up my hair,
My body drowned in the river’s waves—I sigh at the incompleteness!
If the river god has a heart and pities my ill fate,
Let me flow directly east to the west of Lake Dongting.20

(9) How sad to see my reflection in the river!
Taking leave of the mirror I knit my eyebrows.
By the vermilion gate, in vain it becomes Qin and Jin.
In death we meet but would never recognize each other.

(10) In years past, my parents explained firmly to me the illustrated histories.
Since ancient times to kill oneself is to desire to become humane.
Though for [lack of] official hat and pin,
I might feel ashamed before an outstanding man,
Still I far surpass those ministers who serve at court.

Du’s ten poems highlight her emotional experience and strong resolve on the journey on boat after being taken captive. The poetic narrative begins with their arrival in Hancheng, when the captain’s order to round up all the captives precipitated her resolve to die (Poem 1). In Poem 2 she compares her predicament to Wang Zhaojun 王昭君 of the Han, journeying away from her homeland to marry the chief of the Tartars. However, she rejects Wang Zhaojun’s narrative—she will not become “a green mound among the Tartars,” that is to say, she would rather preserve her purity by drowning rather than going on to live out her life in shame as Wang Zhaojun did and be buried in foreign soil. The negation of Wang Zhaojun’s choice is commonly found in suicide poems by women in captivity. By rejecting Wang’s choice, these women demonstrate their uncompromising loyalty to nation and family. In other words, they repudiate a model of self-sacrifice who had compromised her chastity, even though historically Wang had elicited sympathy from countless male poets. The allusion to Wang Zhaojun and the refer-

20 The direction appears to be reversed. As Lake Dongting is southwest of Hancheng (i.e., Hanyang 鄂陽 and Wuchang 五常), she should flow (south)westward to reach first the east side of Lake Dongting. The idea is that her body would flow back in the direction of home, which is further west of Lake Dongting.
ence to Tartar youths in Poem 4 points to Du’s captors as Manchu troops. This poem also contrasts the indigenous element of the gibbons’ cries on the shore, long a poetic motif for denoting a Chinese traveler’s homesickness along the Yangzi, with the uncouth songs and laughter of the Tartars.

By midpoint, the series is poised between Du’s nostalgia for her girlhood and her family and, recognizing the impossibility of reunion, her resolve to die. The images begin to take on double meanings. For example, the blue bird in Poem 4 is a metaphor for herself, hinting at the divine origins suggested by her mother’s dream before her birth. It also constitutes a metaphor for death when it “intends to follow the Queen Mother of the West,” thus eluding the traps set by men. The two goddesses of the Xiao and Xiang also point to suicide, as these two wives of the legendary sage ruler Shun had drowned themselves in the river out of wifely loyalty when they found out Shun had died on his tour of the south (Poem 5). But the two rivers also stand for Du Xiaoying’s native home in Hunan, as does the Chuci (Songs of the South), named in Poem 6 as the text she had studied as a girl. Etched in her memory is her girlhood and study, the process of the inculcation of cultural values—loyalty, purity, uncompromising integrity, embodied in the text and its author Qu Yuan, who also drowned himself for these values. Caught in the turmoil of the Ming-Qing transition, Du Xiaoying clearly states that she will preserve her virginity in death (Poem 7): “When I descend into the river, I am still the body of a daughter.” However, she also contemplates and regrets her unfulfilled role as a woman. To die not having been betrothed or married, she realizes she has not achieved complete social and ritual status as a woman. Yet in the penultimate poem she rejects the idea of union with the general by leaving the mirror behind—the token of union he has given her, mentioned in the preface.

The last poem seeks self-fulfillment in Du’s resolve to die for the

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21 Xiwangmu, the Queen Mother of the West, is a powerful female deity worshipped by women especially in the Tang. See Suzanne Cahill, Transcendence and Divine Passion: The Queen Mother of the West in Medieval China (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993). Xiwangmu’s mythical domain in the Kunlun mountains in the west also suggests the realm of life after death, similar to the Western Paradise of Amida Buddha where good souls are reborn.

right cause. She turns to identify with history and tradition: “Since ancient times to kill oneself is to desire to become humane (ren 仁).” She cites the famous passage from the Analects, which the Southern Song martyr Wen Tianxiang 文天祥 (1236-82) and other heroic men had also cited in their suicide poems when they committed suicide for a worthy cause. Confucius had said: “For gentlemen of purpose and men of benevolence while it is inconceivable that they should seek to stay alive at the expense of benevolence [ren], it may happen that they have to accept death in order to have benevolence accomplished.” (15.9) Women began to allude to this canonical passage to inscribe a sense of righteousness and heroism through death, as my second example Huang Shuhua also did in her last poem, discussed below. In upholding the cultural values she believed in by taking her own life, Du Xiaoying ultimately realizes herself in the larger cultural context in which she sees herself, standing above many scholar-officials who have compromised their integrity as former subjects of the Ming.

The Girl Avenger Huang Shuhua (1847-64)

The thematic focus and narrative content of Huang Shuhua’s autobiographical preface resemble those of Du Xiaoying’s text, such that it might suggest the one is modeled on the other. I do not believe there is a direct relationship between these two texts, with one consciously imitating the other. Rather, as I argued above, the exigencies of suicide may have dictated certain parameters of the writing, and cultural conventions also may have played a determining role. Gender difference offers yet another perspective on the issue of form and content. Men who wrote suicide poems tend to be well-known, whereas the women are unknown to the public outside of their families, and they are conscious of themselves as such. Thus, women’s

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23 For Wen Tianxiang’s death inscription in the form of a zan 詩 in four-character lines, see Songshi 宋史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 418.12540. It was placed in his sash.
25 For the text of Huang Shuhua’s preface and poems, see Qingshi jishi, 22.15931-32.
26 For a small collection of suicide poems by both men and women through the ages, see Yang Guangzhi 杨光治, Lidai juemingshi 历代绝命诗 (Tianjin: Bihua wenyi chubanshe, 1996).
strong impulse to self-identify and the various means they take to make “public” their suicide writings evolve into a common practice. Simply to die, to sacrifice oneself in silence is not enough—these women desire to *tell*, to *state*, to *enunciate* the particulars of their identities, life circumstances, motivation, and moral and individual values. If chastity is emphasized in both their own self-records and in their biographical narratives by male scholars, it only demonstrates how a “private” virtue has acquired broader public and cultural significance.

Though we may not be able to pinpoint the precise beginning of this gendered practice, the section of “Biographies of Virtuous Women” in the *Songshi 宋史* may contain some of the earliest examples from the Mongol conquest. Before she leapt to her death, one woman, simply identified as Wang the Chaste Wife 王貞婦, wrote a poem on a cliff with blood from her own bitten finger. The suicide poem of another woman, Han Ximeng 韓希孟, was found in her sash after her corpse was retrieved from the river. Both these women were captured by the Mongols during the conquest of the Southern Song.27 They became paragons of virtue, courage, and literary talent enshrined in the official history, belonging to the model biographies Du Xiaoying studied under her uncle’s tutelage. The autobiographical strain becomes more apparent and elaborate in suicide poems by women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.28

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27 The biography of Wang the Chaste Wife does not include the text of her suicide poem (*Songshi* 460.13489-90), which is provided in Yang Guangzhi, *Lidai juemingshi*, with no indication of the source (80). Richard Davis discusses the element in this narrative of female suicide as an example which deconstructs the male historians’ representation of women as not capable of political consciousness. Before leaping off the cliff, Wang Zhenfu “faced south” and wept bitterly, an action which Davis correctly identifies as “ritualistic” and a sign “of some greater social and political consciousness.” He interprets Wang’s “wish to leave a written message” as indication that “she intuited her actions as having some historical import.” See Richard Davis, *Wind Against the Mountain: The Crisis of Politics and Culture in Thirteenth-Century China* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1996), 185-86. The second example, Han Ximeng, is thought by some to be a descendant of the Northern Song prime minister Han Qi 韓琦; her suicide poem is included in her biography (*Songshi* 460.13492). In her study, Judith Zeitlin highlights the three quatrains with preface by the Girl from Kuaiji 菜農女, discovered around 1618, that set off a trend among male literati in collecting and matching poems written on walls by women in the early Qing (“Tibishi,” 9). I believe this “collecting” is both broader in scope and a more persistent cultural phenomenon than the focus of Zeitlin’s paper (see discussion in the conclusion).

28 See for example “Song of Everlasting Resentment,” the long autobiographical
Huang Shuhua began her preface by naming herself, her native place, and the achievements of the male members of her family. She understood precisely her role and status within the Chinese social and moral universe in which she and her readers were located. Thus, she knew well that, as an unmarried young woman, her own identity, character, and credibility were founded on the status and scholarly credentials of her family before Shangyuan County (part of Nanjing) fell to the Taiping rebels when she was four.\(^29\) As the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom established its capital there until its defeat by Qing forces more than ten years later, Huang Shuhua essentially grew up under their regime. This raises the possibility that Huang did not have her feet bound, as the Taiping government prohibited this practice and Huang was too small to have started the process when Nanjing fell. Vincent Shih in his study of Taiping ideology quotes this passage from the 1855 source of information on the Taipings, the *Zeiqing huizuan* compiled by Zhang Dejian: "When the rebels reached Nanking, all women were prohibited from practicing foot-binding. Violators were to be executed. Those whose feet were already bound were unable to walk when they were suddenly ordered to unbind them."\(^30\)

Of their life under Taiping rule, Huang Shuhua drew a discreet veil. She only mentions that her two older brothers who were at home turned to farming for subsistence.\(^31\) They continued to edu-

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\(^29\) If the year of her birth, based on the reference in the first poem (see below), is 1847, then the year when she was four, when her family came under the rule of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, would be 1851. Could it be that her family did not reside within the walled city of Nanjing, the county seat of both Jiangning and Shangyuan, but in the surrounding county which would have come under Taiping control earlier? Her brother’s words seem to indicate that they lived in the city. Nanjing’s walls were finally breached on March 19, 1853. On the Taiping rebellion, which devastated half the Qing Empire for over a decade, see John K. Fairbank, ed., *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 10, Part I, 264-317. There appears to be some discrepancy in Huang Shuhua’s recollection of the dates in her childhood if by the fall of her family to the bandits she means also the fall of Nanjing.


\(^31\) This is consistent with the Taiping program for an ideal society based on
cate her and her little brother with materials from the family book collection and instill in them an appropriate sense of cultural integrity and courage in adversity. She quotes her brothers’ words to her: “We are forced to stay in the city. If the city is conquered [i.e., retaken by the Qing], we will inevitably meet with calamity. You must be careful not to save your life by ignoble means and disgrace our ancestors’ virtue.” On her part, she dissuaded her brothers from arranging her marriage when she came of age.32 By recording her view on the matter, Huang shows she had her own mind and discernment regarding what should be done with her life.

In the beleaguered history of Nanjing 1864 was another bloody page. The Qing army under the command of Zeng Guoquan 曾國籛 (1824-90), brother of the eminent official Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 (1811-75), besieged Nanjing and breached its walls on July 19. As Huang Shuhua noted in her preface, when the imperial army succeeded in retaking the city, they did not bring peace; they burnt it and massacred its inhabitants. Huang’s suicide writing is an individual woman’s indictment of the ruthless and lawless behavior of the military in general and of her captor in particular. She recounts how almost her entire family—two elder brothers, one sister-in-law, mother, and little brother—were all butchered, the latter three in plain sight before she was abducted and taken on a boat south along the Yangzi River. The note to Poem 4 tells the reader that her captor is surnamed Shen 申 and a native of Baoqing 寶慶 in Hunan; the last line of the poem indicates that he traffics in women and intends to sell her: “I am glad that the slave of fortune only wants merchandise.” He has taken his loot back to his home province Hunan. In the note to Poem 8, which tells that they have reached Changsha 長沙, Huang Shuhua also records, “Arriving here, he plans to turn me over to a broker.” Certainly, if Shen was interested in money, he could fetch a higher price in the sale if he refrained from deflowering her and she could be sold as a virgin.

Like Du Xiaoying, Huang Shuhua did not kill herself at the first available opportunity. It was three months after her capture when she wrote in the preface to her suicide poems: “It is not that I could

equal land distribution to families to farm. Huang may also be implying that her brothers rejected participation in the Taiping civil service examination and recruitment, which began after Nanjing was established as the capital, and chose to live as peasants instead. Shih, The Taiping Ideology, 81-84; Fairbank, ed., Cambridge History, vol. 9, Pt. I, 278-79, 291-92.

32 Usually at fifteen 岁, or fourteen years old.
not find a place to die on the vast river, it is just that I regret having involved my aged mother, my sister-in-law, and my little brother [the three who were killed in front of her]. Now that I have come with him, if I did not think of how to avenge them, what good would it do to die?” Her motivation was clearly to take revenge on her captor, the cold-blooded murderer of her family. Huang Shuhua’s preface and poems were written in an inn in Xiangtan, Hunan, where her captor, after disembarking and meeting up with an acquaintance, had checked in for the night. She had decided this was the moment to carry out her action—revenge and suicide. There are signs that the preface and poems were written hastily and under stress: “Even though I have decided to die, I do not know what method to use to die or where to die.” On the one hand, they are less elegantly composed than Du Xiaoying’s, whether due to differences in literary training, or talent, or the intense hatred Huang felt towards her abductor. Huang’s poems employ almost no turns of metaphor, no textual allusions save the most important passage from the Analects on the necessity for moral suicide. On the other hand, Huang’s prose and especially her poetic style convey an urgent need to provide information. She supplies additional details in the form of annotations that supplement her self-preface in five of the ten poems, as can be seen in the translations below.33

(1) I feel sorry for myself—born to meet with strange adversity,
So very pitiful to have encountered the calamity of the red sheep.
If I go against my true conscience and follow the wastrel,
Though I get to preserve my life, my name should be cursed.

(2) In recent years banished to live in the dusty cage,
I’ve been ungrateful to my parents’ kindness in giving birth to me.
A grave cannot bring peace to their bodies and souls,
Trimming the lampwick I’m overwhelmed by memories.

(3) Unfortunately my family had to be in this city,
Twice meeting with destruction we resent war.
Why does hoary Heaven have to hate goodness?
Half of us are dead, but those of us living are scattered.

Author’s note: The ones alive are myself, second brother and his wife and my niece. But we are in different corners of the world. What sorrow! What grief!

33 I discuss this practice of annotating one’s own poems in the poetry collection of Shen Shanbao 世綸, an older contemporary woman poet. See “Writing Self and Writing Lives: Shen Shanbao’s (1808-1862) Gendered Auto/Biographical Practices,” Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in Early and Imperial China 2.2 (2000): 259-303. The stylistic differences between Du Xiaoying and Huang Shuhua may also reflect broader trends and tendencies in the late Ming and late Qing periods.
(4) Since they came to our gate and I was seized,
    Daily I’ve been in violent waters but I can’t yet die.
    I am glad that the slave of fortune only wants merchandise,
    Heaven let my white jade not be blemished by a fly.
    Author’s note: The one who seized me is surnamed Shen, a native of Baoqing (Hunan). Fearful of being defiled by him, I have already sewn up my garment.

(5) Shortly after we saw the crescent moon again,
    He forced us to board the boat on the river.
    The boatman hoisted the sail with good wishes—
    Do you know that I do not want to keep on living?

(6) Who among our female companions were not dishonored?
    Myself, Madam Zhang, and Aunt Jin.
    I admire Jin Meishou who rises above the group—
    Her death can yet give protection to her friends.
    Author’s note: Jin Meishou 金湄秀 was an old friend of mine. When one of the men wanted to dishonor her, she would not obey. As the boat window was open, she jumped into the river and drowned. After Aunt Jin died, they did not dare to force me. I really respect her high principles. Therefore I say this.

(7) I remember following my female companion to the shore,
    Swearing that my body will become immortal in the world.
    Traversing the turbulent waves, who is my companion?
    Relying on each other, there are only my shadow and form.

(8) They say the traveling sail has arrived at Changsha.
    Gazing afar at the Temple of the Xiang Goddess 我祈祷 for blessing.
    I beg her to cut the red thread into pieces,
    So I do not have to tell my sadness and anger to the Tartar’s pipe.
    Author’s note: Arriving here, he plans to turn me over to a marriage broker. So I silently implore the goddess.

(9) On land the storm subsides then rises again.
    Where can my body seek safety?
    With entreaties I avoid being sold into marriage,
    Though I want to avenge this unique wrong, I fear I won’t succeed.
    Author’s note: Here he met up and traveled with a man with the surname of Fu.

(10) Since ancient times to become humane one always kills oneself.
    Why should I myself shrink back from this?
    I will return the boundless breath to Heaven and Earth,
    And keep company with the chaste spirits at Heaven’s gate.

The power of the self-preface and the poetic narrative is achieved through a combination of mimetic realism and the violence of representation enunciated in a strong first-person female voice. Huang Shuhua repeatedly uses the first-person pronouns in the poems: nong
In her preface, she had recorded the butchering of her family in a few swift strokes that projected the suddenness and senselessness of the brutality:

They killed my two elder brothers in the courtyard, went inside and surrounded all the rooms. A sturdy fellow found and carried me out. My little brother held onto his clothes while my mother knelt and pleaded with the soldier. He said irately, ‘Those who surrendered to the bandits are to be killed without pardon. This is the commander’s order.’ He then killed my mother and little brother. When eldest sister-in-law came, he also killed her.

Poem 1 begins with “I feel sorry for myself”—the individual caught powerless within what is perceived as a cosmic scheme beyond her comprehension. Poems 1 to 3 reflect on being born in the wrong place at the wrong time. The term employed, hongyang jie, “the calamity of the red sheep,” stands for national calamity. In the hexagenary system of calendrical calculation, the years bingwu and dingwei in the cycle were believed to be years in which national disasters would occur. In the ten heavenly stems (tiangan) bing and ding, the first character in each combination, belong to the element fire, and their color is red; furthermore, of the zodiac animal signs for the twelve earthly branches (dizhi), the sheep stands for wei. Hence, the “calamity of the red sheep.”

In the mid-nineteenth century, the year 1847 is dingwei in the cycle, a most inauspicious year. Huang sees herself born into a disastrous period, her life coinciding with the temporal beginning and end of the Taiping Rebellion. Geographically, as a native of Nanjing, she was confined to their “dusty cage” since the Taipings established their capital there in 1853.

While she is overwhelmed by a sense of powerlessness in the unfolding of history, paradoxically a sense of personal agency is generated as she contemplates taking action to right the injustice perpetrated on her family members. She cannot live or die in peace until she can “avenge this unique wrong” (Poem 9). But while she waits for an opportunity to carry out her revenge, the overwhelming cultural and personal imperative is to prevent herself from being defiled. In the note to Poem 4, she states that she has taken the precaution of sewing up her garment. This attempt to protect their chastity was a common and apparently effective measure taken by women who were captured or about to be captured.

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34 Hanyu da cidian 9.705.
As Huang Shuhua contemplates her life and tragedy shortly before suicide, she goes beyond her personal grievance to embrace other women in her writing—her female companions who were also captured and brought on board the boat. She records the two who stood out in courage with her, forming a kind of sisterhood in resistance. In particular, she declares that her friend Jin Meishou, by jumping into the river when she was threatened with rape, offered protection to the other women. Her suicide acted as a deterrent on the soldiers’ lust. Through her self-inscription, Huang commemo-
rates the firm courage and principle of the other women and writes them into history. But she also mourns the loss of Jin Meishou, which left her feeling utterly alone. Coming to Changsha, the an-
cient land of Chu 鄱, Huang Shuhua also prays to the goddesses of the Xiang River for prevention from being sold into bondage. She begs the goddesses to “cut to pieces” the “red thread” that the legendary Old Man in the Moon uses to tie together the man and woman destined to be husband and wife (Poem 8). Line 3 in the penultimate poem seems to indicate that Huang purposely sought not to be sold into marriage right away after they disembarked in Changsha, in which case she would lose track of her enemy, but to travel on with him watching for an opportune moment to carry out her revenge. Huang writes the final poem as a summation of her resolve to die despite the uncertainty of success. It is again the prin-
ciple enunciated by Confucius that is cited: “Since ancient times to become humane one always kills oneself.” In death, Huang Shuhua also seeks a larger cosmological frame for the meaning of her selfhood above the physical and mundane.

When Huang Shuhua wrote her preface and series of poems, she was unable to predict the outcome of her action. The writing was done just before she attempted her revenge. The reader only knows her intention but not the result.

* A Widow’s Own Defense: Ling Zhinü’s (1806-27) Suicide and Written Testimony 

Examining Ling Zhinü’s text and context, we encounter an entirely different category and context of violence against women. Ling Zhinü is a classic representative of the now much studied familiar figure of the young widow driven into difficult and untenable cir-
cumstances by unscrupulous relatives who want to force her into remarriage. As a young widow, the subordinate junior female in the
family, Ling Zhinü’s subject position was constructed within the powerful discourse and practice of the official ideal of fidelity to the dead husband, or widow chastity, which are predicated on a grid of interlocking patriarchal, patrilineal, and political concerns. Matthew Sommer has discussed how issues of property and descent line are inextricably bound up with the sexuality of widows in the social and legal domain. In order to inherit from her husband—to possess or even just be the custodian of his property, the widow has to safeguard her sexuality for him after his death.\footnote{Matthew Sommer, “The Uses of Chastity: Sex, Law, and the Property of Widows in Qing China,” \textit{Late Imperial China} 17.2 (1996): 77-130.} Male and official vested interest in the cult of widow chastity also underscores how the ideal virtue of wifely loyalty to a single man has long been appropriated as the principal analogy undergirding the steadfast political loyalty of the male subject to his sovereign. Susan Mann suggests that the “ideology of chaste widowhood” is both symbol and practice of one of the highest Han ethical and ethnic virtues, the maintenance and perpetuation of which express symbolic capital for both local elites and the Manchu state.\footnote{Susan Mann, “Widows in the Kinship, Class, and Community Structures of Qing Dynasty China,” \textit{Journal of Asian Studies} 46.1 (1987): 37-56.} In social reality, the lives and experiences of widows encompass the whole contradictory range between the extremes of destitution, despair, and self-determination leading to suicide on the one end and empowered freedom and independence leading to successful fulfillment of maternal roles within patriarchy on the other. Current research has further articulated historical, class, regional, and individual differences that might have been obscured by official discourse and seemingly normative patterns of behavior. A complex picture emerges from critical studies that draw on and analyze previously un- or under-explored materials that contain biographies and writings on widows from sources as varied as local gazetteers and fiction, family genealogies, legal archives, legal codes and statutes, challenging any easy conclusion or monolithic representation on the issues of widowhood.\footnote{In addition to the works of Susan Mann and Matthew Sommer, see also Ann Waltner, “Widows and Remarriage in Ming and Early Qing China,” in Richard Guisso and Stanley Johannesen, eds., \textit{Women in China: Current Directions in Historical Scholarship} (Youngstown, N.Y.: Philo Press, 1981), 129-46; Kathryn Bernhardt, \textit{Women and Property in China, 960-1949} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), Ch. 2, 47-72.}

A major difference marking Ling Zhinü’s “case” is that she has produced her own written self-defense in the form of a collection of...
poetry framed by a self-postscript, when legal investigation left her in a vulnerable position for several years. The detailed self-postscript, which accompanies her unpublished poetry collection, is also her suicide note. In it she begins by discoursing on and thus showing her knowledge of the fundamental significance of poetry for self-cultivation; she asserts authoritatively the canonical tenet that “[poetry] is that by means of which one keeps hold of one’s nature and emotion in order to return to the correct.” By demonstrating her correct understanding of the function of poetry, Ling with one stroke upholds her engagement in poetic composition and sets up her poetry as proof of her character and innocence. She states that she began to study under her grandfather’s tutelage at six and practiced poetry writing for ten years. She inserts a note of fitting modesty regarding the place of feminine writing, which should not cross beyond the boundaries of the home: “I dare not show even a scrap of paper or a word to people.” As we will see, all this is being transformed by her action now of attempting to make her life and writing visible. She next recounts her life after marrying into the Tan family at eighteen in 1824. Though her husband’s family was poverty-stricken, her natal family was able to lend a helping hand. Specifically, she mentioned that her grandmother and mother could not stand the state of poverty she lived in when they discovered it during her visit home. Maternal concern prompted them to borrow money to lease some land from her brother’s father-in-law for her and her husband to farm for a living. The kinship network is tapped.

As soon as the problem of livelihood seemed to have been solved, the family was hit by an epidemic that killed all the male members. Ling Zhinü became a childless young widow at nineteen, resolved to serve her surviving mother-in-law and adopt a son for patrilineal succession. However, within a year she was forced to remarry by members of her husband’s lineage, who saw her as a “rare merchandise.” The problem of widows being forced to remarry had become a serious problem, and the Qing code instituted graded punishments for those responsible for the coercion, including the widow’s own parents and in-laws. Often the motive was greed on the part of in-laws, who stood to gain possession of the widow’s property inherited from her husband and even her own dowry she brought with her if she remarried. In the case of poor families, when there was no property to speak of, they could gain a bride price by selling her in

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marriage. This seems to be the situation in which Ling Zhinü found herself. When she resolutely refused to remarry, she tells us that her mother-in-law was induced to “file an accusation against me to involve me in a serious crime.” When she wrote the postscript in preparation for her suicide, she had already returned to live in her natal home for two years, with her name darkened under a cloud of legal investigation. It appears that what could have been an alternative solution was denied her when her brother’s father-in-law refused to give back the money for the leased field, which she said she could have used for supporting her mother-in-law. She felt trapped with no viable alternatives: “At this time I find it difficult to make any move. If I wish to serve my mother-in-law as a widow, my husband’s family has no sympathy for me, and neither would my grandmother consent. If I wish to depend on my mother as a widowed daughter, then what concerns my heart would never be cleared, and the gravity of my offence would be increased.” She decides death is the only way she can clear her name, even though she says she is aware that Confucius had criticized the shallow meaning of the suicides of the ordinary man and woman who kill themselves out of petty fidelity. Even worse, her suicide could be interpreted as resulting from her guilt and thus evidence of her culpability. She strongly anticipates that possibility by noting: “I only think that after I die it will be unavoidable that my mother-in-law’s family will file suit.” Thus, merely taking her own life does not suffice to serve her purpose; self-inscription becomes the space where she enacts a self-transformation from simply being a helpless victim to a woman using her literary

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39 From Ling’s postscript, we cannot tell what crime she was accused of. Nowhere does she spell out the precise nature of her alleged offense. According to Matthew Sommer, whose investigation focuses on issues around chastity, “expelling or selling off an adulteress became a legitimate act of patriarchal self-defense.” He also suggests that magistrates commonly ordered “an adulterous widow ‘returned to her natal lineage’ (guizong 告宗). She would become the responsibility of her natal family, to support or to marry off a second time” (“The Uses of Chastity,” 87 and 84 respectively). Does conviction of offenses other than adultery lead to similar legal settlements? Regardless of what they accused her of, Ling’s in-laws would appear to be acting with a view to the type of legal outcome similar to the conviction of adultery, which would give them the right to sell her in remarriage. Her actual situation after the lawsuit—going back to live in her natal home—seems to reflect the second type of judicial outcome reported by Sommer.

40 Presumably, since the lease was terminated early after her husband’s death, there was money left.

41 She cites the last part of Analects 14.17, trans. D. C. Lau, 127, in which Confucius defends Guan Zhong 管仲 for not committing suicide.
ability to stand up to and resist the family and legal entrapment. Neither act is sufficient by itself—she conjoins her death and writing as the most potent weapon she can conceive of, a voice of resistance set ambiguously within the dominant ideology, at once conforming to and defying its logic of compulsory submission.

Ling Zhinü concludes her self-postscript by returning to a discourse on poetry in widowhood. In recording her thoughts about her person and her poetry, she indicates that she has stopped using any form of adornment on her person and sequesters herself in her quarters with needlework and poetry. She treats her poetry in a parallel manner by keeping it concealed in a trunk. She emphasizes that she writes in the most serious subgenres for historical reflection (huaigu 懷古) and self-expression (ganhuai 感懷); but she does not see her writing in the same light as the poetry collections of famous gentry women. She believes her poems are probably inferior literary products, but for her, that is not where their value lies. They are what she has “scribbled with her blood and tears;” they are her. After her death, she intends them to come to light, to exonerate her person as she could not do during her lifetime. She expressly enjoins her brother to clear her from the false charges laid against her.

Much of the corpus of the more than three hundred poems was likely written during her two years of unhappy widowhood when she in fact had much time on her hands. Accused of some crime, she had returned to cloister herself at her natal home. She wrote that she has not “stepped outside” the door, and besides needlework, she just wrote poems to “manifest her intent” (shifu jianzhi 詩賦見志). Indeed, of the extant eighteen titles in Qingxianglou shixuan 清湘樓詩選 (Selected poems from the Clear Xiang Pavilion), all but four are plainly written after her husband’s death. Of the four exceptions, the first title with two poems celebrates the bucolic life shared by husband and wife:

**I Go With My Husband to Plough the Field at the Wei Family Land**

> Keeping each other company we go together to the Wei Family,  
> A few acres of poor land are our means of living.  
> My husband—how hard he toils with his strength,  
> I almost want to change my attire to help him tread the wheel.

> You plant mulberries and hemp, I plant flowers,  
> The flowers have not yet bloomed and we are ready to harvest the hemp.

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Work on the hemp just finished, the flowers quickly bloomed, Flowers, hemp and mulberry—all are equally fine.

(1a)

Though unsophisticated, these lines inscribe the simple delight of a woman able to share her days and activities with her husband in an open rural setting. There is another idyllic poem describing an evening scene entitled “Gazing at Dusk by the River” (1a). Such pastoral romance disappeared quickly in her poetry as it did in her life, a reminder of the close relationship poetry in the Chinese tradition so often bears to personal lived experience. Even as she was enjoying this brief period of happiness with her husband, she notes under the poem “Song of a Phoenix” that, because she went to work in the fields with her husband, vulgar men often came to jeer at her (1a-b). This is the price for showing herself and their conjugal affection in public. The lofty phoenix, which alighted on the fields and was harassed by hunters, is a metaphor for her self and her move downward in marriage.

Replacing the short-lived gaiety is a lifetime of loneliness and sorrow, which she pours into long series of poems reflecting on historical figures (huaigu, 1b-2b) and poems “stirred by emotions” (ganhuai, 2b-5a), designated as written in the “widow’s apartment” (shuanggui 婚囝). The emotional condition of grief, mourning, unfulfilled desire and longing dovetail with the poetic tradition’s preferred seasons: spring and autumn recur as temporal settings.

Spring Day in the Widow’s Apartment: Stirred by Feelings

[First in a series of sixteen quatrains]
Playing “Parting from the Crane” on the zither, so much dolor gathers,
Desolate the empty chamber, but what can I do?
Idly let me borrow the blue sky for white paper,
And write out my song of the broken heart from the beginning.

(2a)

She continues in this series about her sleepless nights in spring as she mourns the loss of her husband. She envies the imagined merrymaking of the other girls in their spring outings and activities, while she has no companion except “the person in the mirror”—herself (3b). But she confesses that she cannot bring herself to be more of a burden to her mother:

Endless sorrow and anxiety—to whom can I tell?
Forcing myself to smile in front of mother I grieve behind her back.
Afraid that I would only bring distress to her kindness,
I shed tears in secret as anguish churns in my breast.

(3b)
Emotional experiences or at least their inscriptions in poetry are often culturally constructed. Sentiment and its representation meld to form variations in a common repertoire through practice. In this convention, spring is an effective signifier because the sense of joy and renewal in the season of love and desire can be deployed to contrast with and thus foreground the opposite—sadness, loss, and loneliness:

[Ninth in the series of sixteen quatrains]
The Primal Breath flows, the myriad things flourish.  
In gardens they fight to watch the rare buds bloom.  
Now I have taken leave forever from the path of spring breeze,  
I will not join the ladies of Wu treading on fallen petals.  
(3b)

Again and again Ling’s writing shows her caught in the vortex of unrelieved contemplation of her tragedy and constant denial of pleasure and distraction, surely a depressed state: “A bamboo curtain has long locked out spring/The east-facing window has not been open” (4b). When her thoughts go beyond the boundary of her sequestered quarter, the path of filiality and fidelity leads them towards her mother-in-law and her husband’s home:

*Under the Moon I Think of My Mother-in-law*

Weeping blood I inscribe a poem to send to my mother-in-law;  
Though I am lonely, I worry about her being alone.  
Moon at night over the empty mountain—who would be her companion?  
She sees the full moon but she does not see me.  
(5b)

*On a Spring Day I Long for My Husband’s Home*

[Second of two poems]  
Moving shadows of the banana tree brush against the gauze window.  
In utmost sorrow I remember our home.  
Are you there by the thatched hut and bamboo fence?  
In vain you’ve left a branch of flowers by the courtyard.  
(5b)

In the last line, the metaphor for the bereft woman is all too apparent. Widowhood becomes the veil through which every season and every festival is perceived, screening out all temptations:

*The Lantern Festival*

Night of the Lantern Festival—lights shine on buildings and terraces.  
I open all the windows facing the street.  
Just about to roll up the pearl curtains—I stop myself,
Afraid that I’ll bring the flowers’ shadows onto my body.

(5b)

When intrusions take on human form, Ling Zhinü also writes poems to block them. She prefaced two poems suggestively: “I was called beautiful. A certain nouveau riche person tried to persuade me to marry him; I write these poems to reject him.” These poems raise intriguing questions with no definite answers: Are these poems a gesture to herself of her unwavering resolve? Are they concrete evidence of the pressure on her to remarry, with suitors knocking on her door? Were they actually sent to their addressee or has the suitor simply provided the context for an implied reader around whom a dialogue can be constructed to reinforce the chaste widow image? The second poem reads:

Cutting off the arm to establish one’s reputation—this also is human.
Dare I use my looks to attract the dusty world?
Shutting the door, I pay no attention to the moon through the window.
Why would I care that plum blossoms have passed two springs?

(6b)

The first line alludes to the many historical examples of principled widows who disfigure themselves in order to maintain their chastity. In sum, this poetry embodies a chaste widowhood built on passionate attachments—attachment to love and sentiment, to virtue, to reputation, the constant adherence to some and denial of others point to the tenacity of the attachments. Some poems also indicate that she turns to Buddhist practices such as meditation and reading sutras for deliverance. We do not know why or how Ling Zhinü arrived at the decision to commit suicide on the fifteenth of the eighth month (the Mid-Autumn Festival), 1827. The extant couplet from her “Poem on Ending Life” reads:

Now I carefully cut out the insignificant words to be engraved on steles,
A thousand years after I die my bones will surely be fragrant.

(7a)

The ultimate vindication of these passionate attachments is self-inscription and suicide.

43 My interpretation of this enigmatic line is tentative. The puzzling term is “pijinzi 皮金字,” literally “skin/thin metal words,” which she carefully cuts out with scissors. Leaving out the pi, “jinzi” can mean either inscriptions that are carved on steles or Buddhist scriptures. My translation adopts the former meaning.
Conclusion: Male Mediation/Female Agency Revisited

I have presented these texts without reference to the problem of sources because I want to foreground these women’s voices and subjectivities in my reading of agency. Can my reading be challenged, itself compromised even, if their sources were brought in, which inevitably are entangled with the endemic problem of literati male intervention? In order to provide an answer to the question, I will now turn to discuss the provenance, circulation, and reinscription of these texts in the hope of arriving at some conclusion regarding the possibility of women’s agency in conjoining the act of writing with the act of suicide within a set of cultural determinants.

I will proceed first with Ling Zhinü’s text, her case being fresh in our minds. The small collection of Ling Zhinü’s extant poetry was published in 1832, just a few years after her death, by the scholar and poet Fan Kai in his collectanea Fan Baifang suokan shu. In his colophon, Fan Kai, a native of Wucheng, Zhejiang, who liked to travel, recounts how he was shown Ling’s poetry collection in Chengdu, Sichuan, by a traveler from her native county in Hunan. Much of the information he gives concerning her life history is also contained in Ling’s self-postscript, but Fan does include additional details such as her childhood name Xingfeng, “Rising Phoenix,” which connects to her use of the mythical bird as self-image in her poem “Song of the Phoenix.” He also records that Ling was betrothed to the Tan boy in infancy and that the Tan family subsequently declined in fortune so that ten years later they were so impoverished they became laborers. Another significant detail concerns the lawsuit: the Tan lineage incited her mother-in-law to accuse Ling of having failed in her chastity (kuijie), but as they could not produce convincing evidence, the case

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45 This is the name listed in Hu Wenkai, Lidai funü zhuzuo kao (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985), 454. Zhinü is her courtesy name, which she used to sign her postscript. Hu mistakenly lists her collection twice, the second time giving the author simply as Ling shì (née Ling).
was held up to over a year. So it seems that Ling was accused of sexual misconduct. Finally Ling’s depression turned into illness, and she refused medical treatment and starved herself to death in the ninth month. (Here we are told about the method Ling used to commit suicide.) After her suicide, her writing was what cleared her name. The local gentry rejoiced and made a selection of her poems to be put into print; that became the edition on which Fan Kai’s is based. Moved by her tragic circumstances, Fan said he decided to have her poetry reprinted to broaden the circulation. Fan also includes at the beginning the original preface written in ornate parallel prose composed by the local gentry of Hengyang 衡陽 when they first published Ling’s poetry collection in the fifth month of 1828, less than one year after her suicide. In it they place the date of her death precisely on the eighth day of the ninth month. Their sympathy breaks through the artificial style in a maudlin image—reading her poems causes them to “sniffle” (bisuan 鼻酸). Their pride in this local heroine—both talented and chaste—transforms into their sense of “responsibility to put into print this young wife’s new lyrics.” Finally, they expressed the hope that she would receive an imperial testimonial and archway to commemorate her virtue.

To my knowledge, this original edition of Ling Zhinü’s poetry has not survived. It appears that even it did not include the entire corpus of her more than three hundred poems. By reprinting a further abridged selection of her poems, Fan Kai did in fact help to circulate and preserve Ling’s poetry for posterity. By the same token, his selecting some and leaving out others is a representation of Ling Zhinü. We can access Ling Zhinü’s subjectivity only through the choices Fan Kai made. What was left out? And what was emphasized as a result? From the poems we have read, I think we already have some answers. Fan wrote in his editorial note at the end of his small selection that, since he could not print the entire collection, he has selected some of her fine lines for preservation. Among these is the couplet taken from her poem on ending life quoted earlier.

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46 Fan Kai, colophon 1a-b, appended at the end of Qingxianglou shixuan.
47 Preface to Qingxianglou shixuan, signed the Gentlemen of Heng City.
48 Ironically, Fan Kai’s own collectanea can hardly be said to be well preserved. The only copy I have discovered so far is in the Jinbun Kagaku Kenkyūjo. I have not been able to find the copy in China, which is supposed to be in the Shanghai Library. See Zhongguo congshu zonglu 中國叢書總錄 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), vol. 1, 966.
In spite of Ling Zhinü’s modesty about her poetic accomplishments in comparison to mingyuan 名媛 (notable women of the gentry class), the Guixiu zhengshi xuji 鬱秀正始續集 (Sequel to correct beginnings of talents in the women’s quarters), published in 1836, includes her “Song of the Phoenix” and three of her huaigu poems written in her “apartment in spring.” It also provides a brief biographical note. This work is the supplement to Yun Zhu’s 殌珠 monumental anthology of women’s poetry, the Guochao guixiu zhengshi ji 國朝鬱秀正始集 (Anthology of correct beginnings) published in 1831. Fan Kai’s 1832 publication of Ling’s poetry is quite likely the source for the four poems and the abridged biographical note. Almost a decade later, Shen Shanbao 沈善寶 (1808-62) also included Ling in a large collection of over five hundred short critical biographies of women from the late Ming to her own time entitled Mingyuan shihua 名媛詩話 (Remarks on poetry of notable women), published in Beijing in 1845. Ling Zhinü has written herself into the ranks of those “famous women of the world” to which she did not dream of belonging.

Turning to Du Xiaoying, the earliest and also the complete written source for her self-preface and ten suicide poems (dated 1654) is the almost contemporaneous work by Tan Qian 顧炎 (1594-1657), the Beiyoulu 北遊錄 (Record of travels to the North). This collection of his poetry and prose records what he had heard and seen during his travels to and from Beijing between the years 1653 and 1656, which encompass the year 1654 when Du Xiaoying committed suicide. Tan Qian does not indicate how he came into contact with the text. In fact, he gives it absolutely no framing—the text stands on its own. Ji Liuqi 詹大奇, another contemporary, recorded in 1671 in his Mingji nanlüe 明季南略 (Abridged records of the

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49 Miaolianbao 抄龍保, comp., Guixiu zhengshi xuji 3.20a-b. Ling Zhinü’s entry is given under Ling Xingfeng, her name at birth. On the Zhengshi ji as well as Yun Zhu’s editorial authority and moral conception of women’s writing, see Susan Mann, Precious Records, Chapter 4.


51 Tan Qian 顧炎, Beiyoulu 北遊錄 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), 337-38. The entry is in “Jiwen shang 錄聞上” (Recording what I heard, Part A) and is titled “Chenzhou Du lienü shi bing zixu 軍州杜烈女詩并自序” (The poems and self-preface of the female martyr Du of Chenzhou). This is the text reproduced in Qingshi jishi 22.15533-35.
South at the end of the Ming) that he came into possession of the ten poems in 1661, but that already he “did not know what her name was.”\textsuperscript{52} It would seem that in the rapid transmission of Du Xiaoying’s poems, the self-preface that identifies her name and the circumstances of her capture and suicide had already been detached from the version obtained a few years later by Ji Liuqi. We would expect that such dramatic writings by young women of heroic stature would make a strong impact on male and female readers alike. In particular, the short quatrains that represent such intense personal feelings would circulate rapidly and widely through both word of mouth and written copies. In the process, it is almost inevitable that variants to the texts of the poems and prefaces and also misattributions or dual attributions would arise. Thus, in two later sources Du Xiaoying’s poems, with slight variants, are attributed to a woman née Zhu 朱氏 from Changsha during the same period, without the self-preface but given an abbreviated life story very similar to the outline of Du’s autobiography.\textsuperscript{53}

The provenance for the self-preface and ten poems by Huang Shuhua was at first somewhat unclear to me. The \textit{Qingshi jishi} quotes in full the biographical sketch provided by Shi Shuyi 施淑儀 in her 1922 work \textit{Qingdai guige shiren zhenglüe 清代闺閣詩人概略} (Excerpts of materials on women poets of the Qing) and then Huang’s ten poems and self-preface, without indicating the source. The source given by Shi Shuyi for her biographical sketch is a work whose title is missing the first two characters.\textsuperscript{54} Huang Shuhua’s biography is in fact included in the \textit{lienü} section of the gazetteer of her native district, the 1874 edition of the \textit{Shang Jiang liangxian zhi 上江兩縣志} (Gazetteer of the two counties Shang[yuan] and Jiang [ning]), ten years after her suicide.\textsuperscript{55} This entry refers to Huang’s poems as its own source, and fills in many details necessarily missing in Huang’s self-account, particularly concerning her actual murder revenge and suicide. According to this account, Huang wrote the poems and the self-preface after they disembarked in Xiangtan on the sixteenth of the ninth

\textsuperscript{52} Ji Liuqi 賈六奇, \textit{Mingji nanlüe 明季南錄}, quoted in \textit{Qingshi jishi}, 22.15535.

\textsuperscript{53} Quoted in \textit{Qingshi jishi}, 22: 15678-79. The two works are \textit{Lianpo shihua 倚楼詩話} by Zha Weiren 乍為仁 (1694-1749), and \textit{Gu sheng 慶賀} by Niu Xiu 鳳翔 (17th century).

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Qingshi jishi}, 22.15930-15932; \textit{Qingdai guige shiren zhenglüe} (1922; photoreprint Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1987), 9.29b/566.

\textsuperscript{55} I am indebted to Katherine Carlitz for discovering this biographical entry of Huang Shuhua. It initiated my search for a trail of evidence.
month (which is how Huang dates and signs her self-preface). She carried out her revenge two days later on the night of the eighteenth when they reached an inn in Guanwangqiao (安化) in Anhua (a village farther on). All accounts refer to hearing the commotion in their room that night. The next day it was discovered that Huang had poisoned one of the men and with one of their swords killed the other, who was drunk, before hanging herself. The owner of the inn reported the case to the authorities and was told to have Huang buried; the investigation did not go further. But two travelers, one a woman from Jiangning 江甯, Huang’s native district, who passed the inn (the scene of the murder) copied down her preface and poems and so they were transmitted in the world. The year 1874 also saw the publication of the Xiangxiang xianzhi 湘鄉縣志, the gazetteer of the county in Hunan where Huang Shuhua committed suicide. In it, a brief notice on Huang Shuhua is placed at the very end of the work, in a section called congji (Various records). The compilers noted how Huang’s chastity, intelligence, and courage are rare in this world. Thus, they concur that even though she was not a native of the county, she had martyred herself and left her inscription on the soil of the county, so they would record her deed and words to preserve them. The entire text of her self-preface and the ten suicide poems is appended.

If self-narratives by women were constructed by male literati, one can imagine that they could serve the purpose or intention of turning women’s bodies and women’s texts into allegorized objects that embody some of the highest ethical virtues of integrity: strength in adversity, intelligent discernment, and above all, chastity. Yet, it would be difficult to view these texts as unmitigated ventriloquist productions by male literati. In addition to the argument of the traceable records as factual proof, in my view, the specificities and force of voice and identity uttered in the autobiographical prefaces and poem series render more dependable the historicity and embodiment of these women. Huang Shuhua’s practice of annotating her poems with exact details is a case in point.

It is undeniable that the literati showed strong interest in gathering, recording, and printing what appeared to be fragile, ephemeral, and virtuous, with women’s writings constituting a significant but by

56 Presumably because no living person was implicated.
57 Shang Jiang liangxian zhi 上江縣志 (1874), 20.1b-2b.
58 Xiangxiang xianzhi, congji, juanmo 卷末: 25b-26b.
no means the only body of material attracting their attention. However, their apparent interest in—even fervor for, and the common act of picking up, circulating, and reproducing these women’s texts (and perhaps embellishing certain details in the process) demonstrate on some level a recognition of the power of female agency, usually hidden from view, located in the inner sphere of the home, unknown in more normal circumstances. It is a tacit admission that these out-of-place women actively demanded from them—their public—some form of acknowledgement. If we read from the women’s point of view, their sentiments regarding their own writings seem to be precisely the opposite of the male recorders’ concern about their perishability—like the poem that fades from the wall with age. These women see permanence and durability of their selves through the transmission of knowledge about them in texts they themselves produced. They did not worry about the ultimate material impermanence of the medium, but the exigency and efficacy of the means at the moment. I therefore argue that these instances of embodiment, when women inscribe their subject positions in texts they produce at the moment of their own disposal of their bodies, should be read and recognized as exemplary instances of female agency. This female agency also generates or precipitates a sense of male agency—it calls men into action.

To be sure, there were varied motivations in the strong male interest in these women and their suicide writings, and men did play a vital role in the preservation and circulation of these texts. There could also be commercial interest in printing some of these cases in or as dramatized and fictionalized elaborations for entertainment or instructive purposes, as in Du Xiaoying’s intertextual appearance in the erotic novel Gu wang yan. And finally, from the perspective of the ethical values they embody, these women and their writings were cultural capital writ large—whether on a local, Han ethnic, or national level. Women themselves internalized and acted on these values and perspectives. Namely, these women saw themselves as full participants in a long tradition that placed certain values of righteousness, loyalty, and courage above the value of preserving one’s own finite life. In this tradition, injustices may occur, including the

59 Folk songs, anecdotes, vernacular fiction, epigraphs, and catalogues of various subjects all appear in the literati propensity to ji (gather) and ji (record). Anthologizing women’s poetry is one manifestation of this interest. See Kang-i Sun Chang, “Ming and Qing Anthologies of Women’s Poetry and Their Selection Strategies,” in Writing Women in Late Imperial China, 147-70.
death (even self-inflicted) of good and innocent people, but the public recording of the injustice redeems it by giving a voice to the victim, a voice that helps transform the victim into a hero/ine. The act of writing and explaining the act of suicide, then, both ensures that the perpetrators of injustice will stand condemned in the light and the judgment of history and that the victim-turned-hero/ine will be written into cultural and historical memory.\footnote{I am grateful to Paul Ropp for the broader historical perspective he brings to my paper through these points.}

From our twentieth-century perspective, which is another level of mediation, we may critique the ideology that subordinated women, but we should recognize and make visible the agency of these women in constructing a sense of self and identity, even if their acts are inscribed within the discursive limits of the ideology. However, through all these layers of mediation, I hope to have uncovered to some degree some ordinary literate women’s sense of self, subjecthood, and agency in their embodiments of violence through their textual production.