
The cult of the ‘faithful maiden’ (zhennü) cannot be considered a marginal pattern of behaviour adopted by impressionable young women brainwashed by Confucian gender ideology. Their performance of virtue, by either committing suicide or leading a celibate life dedicated to their deceased fiancés, was (together with chaste widowhood) part of late imperial China’s flourishing cult of female fidelity. Not only did it stir heated debates among the elite out of all proportion to the actual numbers involved, but also, as Weijing Lu persuasively argues, it was central to the processes of historical change. The huge numbers of women honoured as faithful maidens and chaste widows by the Qing government in comparison to men shows that these women were a key part of the ‘state’s envisioning and constructing of moral order’ (p. 250). Lu must be congratulated for a remarkable feat in gathering and distilling a wealth of sources to create a fascinating study. While concentrating on the social historical aspects, she also provides readers with the intellectual and political context of the cult. True to Her Word is both a pleasure to read and an inspiration to scholars of gender history.

The book is divided into three main sections. The first lays out the historical background. Lu shows how the cult emerged in the second half of the Ming dynasty, encouraged by a number of political trends like the focus on chastity and a public obsession with extreme forms of behaviour like loyal suicides and moral heroism. The Manchus came to favour this behaviour because it fitted their larger agendas. Lu demonstrates that by the High Qing, the honouring of faithful maidens had developed a strong geographical imbalance centred on Southern China, particularly the Lower Yangzi region. This is attributed to the region’s wealth and sociocultural atmosphere, which provided strong moral and emotional support from women writers.

The second section, ‘Choices’, centres on the psychology, emotions and beliefs of the girls and their relatives. How did parents react to a daughter’s desire to become a faithful maiden? How did the dead man’s family feel about the prospect of their ‘daughter-in-law’ moving in? Lu shows that girls were not always the powerless,
insignificant members of Qing patriarchal families that they have been painted. Often they were able to get their own way due to the family dynamics or won when they pitted their wills against those of their parents. Even as they desired to be faithful to their fiancés, the girls were still torn by their responsibilities as filial daughters. This was especially true of those who committed suicide. Living as a faithful maiden was certainly not the coward’s way out. While feted for their brave stance, they remained vulnerable figures not least because of their youth and beauty. Their main defences in their new homes were the moral authority attached to their status and the opportunity that their ‘widowhood’ provided to take charge of household management in some cases. The less fortunate were never truly welcomed and faced the same abuses suffered by other brides. The faithful maiden’s position became increasingly vulnerable if she did not succeed in adopting and raising an heir, especially if her parents-in-law’s wealth declined. She might then be taken back by her parents, but Lu notes faithful maidens were given priority of admission to charitable homes set up for chaste widows in the late Qing (p. 210).

In her third section, ‘Ideology’, Lu describes the moral dilemma faced by literati. As the cult grew, some of their daughters or relatives became faithful maidens. How could they reconcile what was in some cases their strong intellectual opposition to this behaviour with their personal emotions or family ties and loyalty? What is particularly interesting in the summary of intellectual positions is the seemingly deliberate distortions to which some scholars resorted. This twisting of sources to support their arguments sheds interesting light on the world of evidential scholarship.

Lu demonstrates that far from being voiceless and obedient young women, faithful maidens were agents of historical change. They considered themselves to be the ultimate ‘filial’ daughters, by insisting on honouring an engagement made by their parents. Notions of honour-bound duty (yi), tender feelings of love (qing) and religious faith were all present to varying degrees in their decisions. These were promoted in popular theatre, which, together with other practices such as childhood and long betrothals, fuelled the cult. Ultimately, Lu concludes, it was the widespread elite championing of female chastity and government awards for such behaviour (jingbiao) that enabled the cult to last so long and become so widespread.
Inevitably in such a wide-ranging work, some aspects of the cult could not be covered in great depth. While discussions of the intellectual debate on faithful maidens have been well summarized, scholars may wish to supplement their reading with the work of Taiwanese scholar Chang So-an.\(^1\) *True to Her Word* gives slightly short shrift to the late Qing and Lu has chosen not to deal with the early Republican decades. However, the former period is well covered by Joan Judge in her latest book, *The Precious Raft of History.*\(^2\) Although Lu says that faithful maidens came from all classes, the influence of her mentor Susan Mann can clearly be seen in the concentration on the world of Ming and Qing elite. In part this is probably also dictated by the nature and accessibility of the sources. However, she has not completely proved that her analysis is valid for faithful maidens from the non-elite and more work needs to be done on this. None of these matters detract from the contribution of this work. It is a must read for social historians of gender in China and its accessibility to non specialists makes it an ideal book for students to study.

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