

# More Than Chastity: Economically-Driven Suicide of Non-Elite Widows in the Qing Dynasty

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!!!Content warning!!!





Memorial stone arches to honour the chaste widows 

# Historical context—who are the “chaste widows” and the development of the cult of chastity

- Chaste widows
  - Broad definition
  - Narrow definition
- Faithful maidens
- The cult of chastity
  - Earlier Chinese dynasties
  - Song dynasty
  - Ming dynasty
  - Qing dynasty
- canonization/ honour of chaste widows

# Suicide vs Suicide



Suicide was generally unacceptable

- Human reason
  - "Love life and hate death: this accords with human reason."—ZHU Pei
- Body came from your parents
- Suicide would not happen in a glorious time

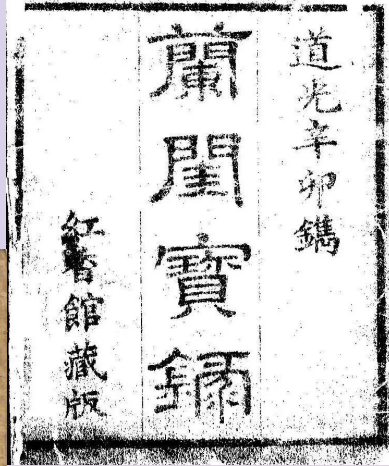
Widow suicide

- Ming dynasty: widow suicide would be exempted from the torture of hell and would be canonized
- Qing dynasty: widow suicide was seen as a cowardly behaviour to escape from familial responsibility
  - "LIVE AND SUFFER"

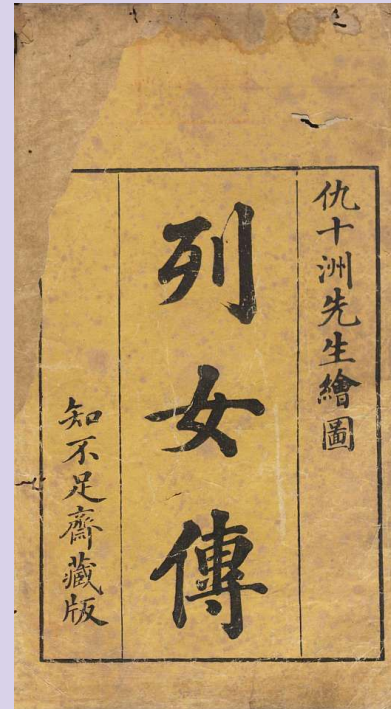
# Historiography: Elite women commit suicide because of politics + family honour

- Government policy: Regulation of sexuality
- Government policy: Bureaucratize the cult of chastity
  - Publications for elite girls
  - Canonization
  - Money to build memorial arches
- Family honour

Precious Record from  
the Maidens'  
Chambers (*langui  
baolu*) →→→→→→



Biographies of  
exemplary women  
(*lienü zhuan*)



## Then..... why did the non-elite widows commit suicide?

Although some non-elite women died for chastity and morality on the surface, the underlying reasons that made them end their lives were inherently economic reasons. Losing economic agency as well as economic conflicts with families were the two biggest economic reasons that drove the non-elite widows desperate and therefore caused their suicide.



Blanket used for weddings ↑

Verbal abuse ↓ (scene from one of my fav tv show)



Non-elite widows commit suicide  
for moral reasons:  
Threat of chastity and verbal  
abuse killed the non-elite women

Threat of chastity

- Coercion of remarriage
- Persuasion of remarriage

Verbal abuse

- Gossip and inappropriate languages

Why these did not happen to elite  
widows?



# Non-elite widows commit suicide for financial reasons:

## Lack of financial agencies

- Loss of husbands
- Loss of marital or natal family support
- Loss of government support
- Inability or unwillingness to work
  - What can women do for work?

Money from the Qing dynasty ↓





# Non-elite widows commit suicide for financial reasons:

## Economic conflict



← loan receipt from the Qing dynasty

- Unable to return the money
- Unwilling to lend money to others
- Others attempt to occupy her and her deceased husband's money
- Often, these economic conflicts would cause verbal abuse or moral attack to the widows

# Examples that non-elite chaste widows did not commit suicide

Women had financial agencies

Women had children

- More likely to receive support, either from family or community
- Having to hope and willingness to survive
- Older children can help them



# Bibliography of the pictures

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Thank you! <3