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Yao, Ping, Zhang, Cong Ellen, Ebrey, Patricia Buckley

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WOMEN AND SUICIDE

Writing on an inn wall by Qiongnu 瓊奴 (11th c.)
and a poem by Han Ximeng 韓希孟 (mid-13th c.)

In the face of physical and mental abuse and the prospect of violation by foreign invaders, women might choose to commit suicide. Below are two pieces in which Song women write about the crises they faced and their decisions to die in defense of their honor.

Most of what we know about women in early Chinese history was recorded by men. Didactic writing instructed women to limit their activities and influence to the domestic sphere and act subservient to fathers, husbands, and sons. Biographies in the dynastic histories celebrated women from palace ladies to commoners as dutiful daughters-in-law, devoted wives and mothers, and capable household managers. Actual women’s lives certainly varied greatly, but only a very small number of them, such as Ban Zhao (45–117), Cai Yan (Wenji, ca. 177–ca. 249, selection 7), Zuo Fen (ca. 255–300, selection 9), and Li Qingzhao (1084–1155), left behind self-narratives of any sort. All three of them were intelligent, scholarly, and talented writers. Their life stories therefore challenged dominant ideals about women and their places in the family.
and society. Ban, Cai, and Li each suffered a variety of trials and tribulations, ranging from widowhood at a young age and family misfortune to political turmoil, dynastic change, and forced relocation.

Less prominent women sometimes also wrote about similar experiences. The two pieces below offer examples of how sudden changes in family situations and foreign invasion could impact the lives of individual women. Qiongnu and Han Ximeng were from office-holding families. Both were literate and would have enjoyed a comfortable life had it not been for the unexpected domestic or political disruptions. Due to the sudden passing of her father, negligence of her brother, and annulment of her engagement, Qiongnu became a concubine and had to endure jealousy and domestic abuse from the main wife. After being captured by Mongol conquerors in the last years of the Southern Song, Han Ximeng was adamant about protecting her honor as a devoted wife and a chaste woman. She and Qiongnu turned to the last resort in life, suicide, when there seemed to be no other way out. Qiongnu survived, but Han did not. The two women not only protested against their misfortune in action, they also expressed a desire to be remembered. This wish explains the strong tone in their accounts: both intended for their writing to be widely publicized.

It should be noted that there was a long tradition of men writing in women’s voices in Chinese literary history. Given that neither woman’s identity is verifiable through other sources, there is the possibility that these accounts were indeed written by men, as contemporary male writers showed great interest in and concern for family relationships, downward social mobility, and female chastity.

Writing on the Inn Wall, by Qiongnu

In the past, I passed by this government lodging station with my father, who at the time was a high-ranking official. My family was rich and powerful, and everything was done as we wanted. There were parties day and night during which we sang, drank, played music, and recited poems. Since this happened on a daily basis, how could I have anticipated that someday I would suffer from hunger and cold!

Unfortunately, during the early Jiayou reign period [1056–1063], like a severe frost falling in the summer, my parents died in quick succession. Once the family’s wealth was all gone, my brothers took their wives and children...
and went away. Left with no resources, I had no idea where to go. When I was young, I was betrothed to the Zhang family from Qinghe [Hebei]. After I fell into poverty, they quickly broke off the engagement. I realized I would never be able to marry and would have to lower myself just to survive. Unable to escape a concubine’s destiny, I ended up in the household of Chief Minister of Imperial Sacrifices Zhao.

In the beginning, the entire family was happy to have me join them. Then I had the misfortune of becoming the master’s favorite, which led the principal wife to turn against me. I had to endure flogging every day and was unable to leave the family. Many times I wanted to kill myself. But when I had the knife or rope right in front of me, to my surprise I couldn’t bring myself to do the deed.

On my previous visit to this place, I was high-spirited and happy. Passing by the same lodging station now, I see that the building and scenery have not changed. It is as if the people I was with the first time are still around. Who could possibly know the pain and sorrow this causes me!

At night, holding a candle, I sneaked out of my room and wrote this on the wall. I hope that heroic and righteous gentlemen will see it and sympathize with the hardships I have suffered. Humbly written by Qiongnu of Taiyuan [Shanxi].


**Poem, by Han Ximeng**

Han Ximeng of Baling (Hunan) was Han Qi’s [1008–1075] fifth-generation granddaughter and was married to Jia Qiong, son of Minister Jia. When Yuezhou [Hunan] was taken by the Mongols, she was captured and wrote a poem on a piece of cloth torn from her clothes, hoping that interested gentlemen would circulate it to let people know that the Song had subjects who preserved their chastity. The poem reads:

I am the daughter of a good family,
And by nature eccentric and unsophisticated.
I married the son of a minister
Who served in the palace library.
I married him because of his talent and virtue;
He did not mind that I was less than good-looking.
When we first tied the knot,
We swore to love each other for as long as the sun and moon
continue to shine.
Mandarin ducks fly in pairs;
Flounders wish to stay side by side.
How could I expect that our vows to stay together forever
Would end so abruptly?
Our love was at its zenith
When war broke out.
I did not expect that the seemingly impossible would happen:
The Mongols taking my native region.
Once the area was captured and looted,
All my relatives perished in an instant.
I was like a yi bird forced to fly backward by a gale,
Or a solitary phoenix gliding in the sky without her partner.
A hairpin is strong enough to break white jade;
A jar's weight can sever fresh rope.
The path leading to death is dark.
My heart is heavy, but I am undeterred.
My heart is firm, unwavering.
They can transfer me but not alter my loyalty to my family and home.
I started as a ritual vessel—
How could I be willing to serve as a chamber pot?
My determination to remain chaste can move a boulder,
But my qi is choked, like a fishbone stuck in a throat.
If I can't be a torch burning brightly,
I'd prefer to be the cold ash.
I'll give up my life, insignificant as a tiny moth.
Begging for mercy would be as humiliating as being trapped is
for a tiger.
Into the water of the Qing River
I'll bury my whole body.
If Heaven has consciousness
It will surely let me to make a sincere request.
I want my spirit to become the Jingwei bird,
To carry enough stones to turn the sea into a mountain range.

Soon after finishing the poem, she drowned herself in the river.


Further Reading


