

## Writing for Justice: An Activist Beginning of the Cult of Female Chastity in Late Imperial China

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*This article examines the rise of the chastity cult—the quintessential symbol of patriarchal suppression of female agency for modern reformers—during the sixteenth century. Despite the resultant stricter control over female sexuality, the growing dominance of the chastity cult cannot be simply construed as a product of top-down imposition. What made possible the penetrative power of chastity practice, this article argues, was a state indoctrination working in reverse. That is, the fast ascendance of the chastity cult in the late Ming was powered by various strains of activism that sought to protest and repair the failing system of chastity awards. The activist impetus greatly enhanced the centrality and influence of chastity practice in social life and, in doing so, opened the notion of chastity to contentious and sometimes subversive negotiations.*

THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY SAW an explosion of chastity accounts that commemorated widow celibacy or suicide in the face of sexual aggression. Such fervent dedication to familiar order and patriarchal purity convinced early twentieth-century intellectuals that chastity practice had effectively turned into a cult with a massive following—well over a million by the end of imperial times (S. Guo 2000). A century later, historians have largely demystified the cult's seemingly inexplicable sway that drove so many women to irrational self-destruction. Those gloriously celebrated chastity acts were directly promulgated and codified through imperial awards (*jingbiao*), which by the end of the eighteenth century had evolved into an elaborate institution buttressed by a sprawling web of social legislation and cultural engineering (Theiss 2004).

What remains a mystery, however, is how the cult began. It certainly did not start with the kind of meticulous *jingbiao* machinery that motored the cult in its peak time; on the contrary, the Ming's imperial awards were fraught with criticism, even severe attacks on their credibility. The widespread appearance of chaste women also occurred at a time when a major wave of commercialization relaxed (or in contemporaries' words, "corrupted") social norms, including those of gender and sexuality (Ko 1994, 31). Commercial publishers, probably motivated by profits, highlighted corporeal details of women's bodies and their physical

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ordeals in chastity stories and illustrations. The foregrounding of the female body eventually allowed these stories to break out of their exemplary frames and rendered women as both virtuous icons and objects of sensuous connoisseurship. The line between chastity and sexuality was further blurred by the late Ming intellectual obsession with *qing* (passion, sentiment) that lent legitimacy to extreme and unorthodox chastity practice, including courtesans' claims of the title of chaste paragons (Carlitz 1991, 1994). Yet the cult appeared to have thrived within the least ideal breeding ground for moral purism and state indoctrination. In fact, this period witnessed a critical breakthrough of the chastity cult where the popularity of chastity practices spread well beyond the elite class and underwent a process of "democratization" (Elvin 1984).

The cult's improbable beginning in the late Ming defies simple causation between state indoctrination, social change, and gender regime. To navigate through the murky moment when the chastity cult began to take hold, we need to draw guidance from the perspectives of historical actors. This article will retrace the beginning of the chastity cult through a matrix of agendas and encounters: a court that wanted to make female virtue measurable but still exceptional; a society that simultaneously held conviction and suspicion of the granting of imperial chastity awards; a class of educated men in search of a new place in a fluid social landscape who saw in the advocacy for chaste women a chance to assert their own agendas.

Emerging from these crossed paths, this article will argue, is a state indoctrination that worked in reverse. The fast rise of the chastity cult in the Ming, as it turns out, was powered by various strains of activism that sought to protest and repair the failing system of chastity awards. The activist impetus greatly enhanced the centrality and influence of chastity practice in Ming social life and, in doing so, opened the notion of chastity to contentious and sometimes subversive negotiations.

## I. ANXIETY OVER IMPERIAL CHASTITY AWARDS

The unraveling of the delicate relationship between the chastity cult, state, and society begins with a careful reading of the cult's principle sources: the massive corpus of chastity accounts appearing in the sixteenth century. These accounts have been uncritically cited as clear evidence that more women were indoctrinated by the emerging ideology of female chastity. Yet recently historians have taken a more vigilant approach and considered these records not as transparent archives of chaste women, but rather as deliberate responses to the world the writers inhabited. Beverly Bossler (2013), for example, finds that the seemingly formulaic appearance of chastity discourse belied its widely varied foci from Song to Yuan as literati responded to specific concerns of their time. In the Ming, the nature of chastity writing underwent another major shift.

Most prominent was a growing dependency on and resistance against imperial chastity awards. The complicated relationship was especially apparent in the largest reservoir of chastity accounts—local gazetteers, written and edited by local elites, who were not necessarily serving as state officials, yet who still had deep and direct connections to the court's vision of society.

By the Ming times, local gazetteers had evolved into a forum promoting local prestige and the selection of local worthies and moral paragons had become competitive and fraught with politics (Bol 2001). Yet whereas the compilation of other categories (filial sons, righteous men) still relied on the collective discretion of editors, the selection of chaste women came to be increasingly obsessed with state awards, *jingbiao*. The typical editorial approach can be found in *Huizhou fuzhi* (Peng et al. 1502), where the entries of chaste women were organized into two sections: those who received imperial awards (*yijing* 已旌), and those who were qualified but had not yet received imperial awards (*weijing* 未旌). While imperial awards were considered the ultimate yardstick against which female chastity was measured, the need to compile a complementary section of *weijing* also made it clear that this yardstick was constantly falling short. The sentiment resonated strongly with other forms of chastity writing, to which the reception (or the lack of) of imperial awards was a central reference point. In fact, there emerged a distinct line of chastity writing solely devoted to advocating for chaste women—especially those of humble background—who did not receive imperial awards.

Given the long history of canonizing chaste women in imperial China, this sudden fixation on chastity awards is indeed curious. The anxiety over chaste women, as this section will show, came from a crucial change to state chastity awards—*jingbiao* 旌表—in the Ming, an honor that came with thirty taels of silver from local government to build a commemorative arch and the privilege to be exempted from corvée service. Although awarding superior moral practice was a long-standing institutional practice in China since the beginning of the imperial era, regulations on chastity awards underwent a major change in the Ming. The court began to stipulate a standardized definition of female chastity under two specific circumstances: remaining chaste after a husband passed away or committing suicide when facing sexual assault. Female chastity was composed of two categories: *lie* 烈 and *jie* 節. *Lie* referred to the safeguarding of sexual purity by women through self-mutilation, and suicide if necessary, or fidelity to marriage by “following one's husband in death.” Of special importance is the newly quantified definition for *jie*, chaste widowhood, which changed from a vague reference to women who remained faithful to a deceased husband, to demarcating a specific group of women whose husbands died before the women reached the age of thirty and who remained chaste after the age of fifty.

The age requirement for chaste widows was not invented in the Ming; it originated in the Yuan dynasty and was probably prompted by the racial tension between Mongol rulers and Han-Chinese literati. Since the conquest regime

denied Han-elites entry to government, *jingbiao* awards became one of the few opportunities for literati families to be remitted from the onerous corvée duties (Bossler 2013, ch. 9). Suspicious of the motives behind *jingbiao* applications, the Mongol court imposed an age clause to chastity awards to regulate the vigorous—and in its view, excessive—pursuit for *jingbiao* from Han literati families. Although the Ming inherited the same standardized criteria of female chastity, the state gave the award system a new mandate by stipulating the awards to commoners. In particular, it disqualified women who already received *mingfu* 命婦 titles (ladies of rank, usually due to their husbands' or sons' achievement) from state *jingbiao*. Although the court's pledge to reserve awards for commoner households did not stop officials trying to circumvent the rule, it did, however, inject a populist impulse to chastity awards and alter the social dynamic of award competition. The standardized criteria for female chastity, although starting off as a countermeasure against corvée evasion, now became an instrument to promulgate an imperial vision of female virtue to the general populace.

The impact of this change was immediate and visible: for the government and the public alike, the standardized criteria took the contingency and the elusiveness of the definition of “virtue” out of the *jingbiao* equation. The concrete criteria of *lie* and *jie* awards allowed the state to select awardees with ever-greater efficiency. Instead of honoring extraordinary deeds and great virtue, which, by definition, were few and far between, state awards would go to whomever met the criteria of chastity. This gave rise to the need for new bureaucratic procedures to manage the surging number of candidates. Toward the middle of the Ming dynasty, state awards started to be granted en masse—*lei jing* 類旌. The appearance of group awards indeed marks an important departure in state policy from previous dynasties (Yu [1602] 1987, 65.22a–23b).

To expand the reach of state chastity awards into the general populace, the court regularly placed pressure on local officials to nominate candidates through touring regional inspectors. In surviving archives of *jingbiao* application, we find cases that were submitted in response to—and with specific reference to—the regional inspector's call for nominations (*Shuang jie lu* 1597). For officials, records of *jingbiao* nominations were also integrated into their career evaluations and considered a critical element for promotion (Wen 1987, 490).

These state initiatives significantly enhanced the appeal and influence of chastity awards. The number of awardees skyrocketed, far higher than all other types of moral practice combined.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, Ming *jingbiao* did not exclusively honor female chastity. In fact, the court always solicited submission of the names

<sup>1</sup>Feng Weimin 馮惟敏 (1511–90), who took part in the compilation of the *Shilu* 實錄 (Veritable Records) in the beginning of the Longqing reign (1567–72), observed that the records of chaste women were countless (W. Feng et al. 1608, 36.48a–b). He weeded out 70 percent of the available records and submitted only the most extraordinary cases to the education commissioner, who still decided that there were too many chastity cases and cut them by half. Even so, the remaining number was ten times more than all the other categories combined.

of possible award candidates from categorized social groups: *xiaozhi shunsun yifu jiefu* 孝子順孫, 義夫節婦 (filial sons, dutiful grandsons, righteous husbands, and chaste wives). Except for female chastity, however, none of the other award categories established specific criteria and were thus evaluated on an individual basis. Does cutting one's flesh and mixing it with medicine to feed one's parent constitute an act of filial piety? How about building a shed guarding one's parents' tombs for three years? How much dedication can qualify as "extraordinary"? In contrast, for chastity awards, the only question at issue was whether or not the candidate truly met the specified criteria: widowhood over thirty years or suicides in resistance against remarriage or rape.

Many gazetteer editors—all male—took note of the overwhelming number of chaste women compared to filial sons in their archives. Some were dismayed and disturbed at being surpassed by the opposite sex.<sup>2</sup> Some, such as Gui Youguang 歸有光, held a more sanguine attitude and tried to find an explanation. Gui decided that it should be seen as an imbalance of *qi* in the universe where the righteous *qi* (ether, moral capacity) had somehow become concentrated in women. This view leads to Gui's famous verdict "the righteous *qi* all gathered around women" (*Tiandi zhengqi jin ji yu nu fu* 天地正氣僅集於女婦) that placed women on a higher moral ground than men (Gui 1987d, 7.7a).

However, this radical view was not embraced by all male elites and some indeed held the built-in bias in the *jingbiao* system responsible for the apparent gender disparity in moral performance. In this view, the fact that far more state awards went to chaste women than filial sons was because filial piety was a life-long endeavor, and therefore, the goals were set so comprehensive that it was extremely rare for anyone to achieve them all. In contrast, chastity had become an act with specific definition that made such moral deeds much more attainable than others (Liu Fangsheng et al. 1571, 7.19b).

Yet despite its success in popularizing chastity practice, chastity *jingbiao* in the Ming never became automatic and routine. To maintain the awards' aura of moral exceptionalness, the review process was prohibitively prolonged and complicated. As the mid-Ming Grand Secretary Li Dongyang 李東陽 (1447–1516) declared, "[th]e *jingbiao* of our dynasty is certainly strict and rigorous. Out of a hundred chastity candidates submitted for review, only one would receive the award" (1985, 236–37). The majority of the cases, though with equally qualified candidates, simply failed to survive the lengthy bureaucratic process—an issue we will return to later. The elusiveness of *jingbiao* made it extremely desirable, but also provoked strong discontent.

Indeed, the clearly defined criteria made the gap between qualified chaste women and actual *jingbiao* awardees glaringly apparent and began to prompt

<sup>2</sup>The editor of the Funing prefecture gazetteer (Shi et al. 1593), for example, criticized the apparent disparity between chaste women and filial sons. Given that filial piety was ranked the top virtue in the *Zhou li*, he urged officials to rectify this imbalance.

grave concerns for the rulers and the ruled. On this point, an exchange between Luo Hongxian 羅洪先 (1504–64, who was ranked first in the 1529 exam but offended the emperor in 1539 and became an “independent scholar”) and an education supervising commissioner proves revealing. During the latter’s visit to Luo’s private academy, Luo brought to his attention a widow Huang, with whom Luo pledged no personal connection. Clearly her story was widely known in the area but had failed to reach the ears of officials. The commissioner lamented the inevitable oversight in awarding chastity *jingbiao* and regretted the failure to include every qualified woman in nominations. Luo responded with an alternative procedure: given the goal of state awards to encourage virtuous deeds, local officials could easily extend such a policy by granting their own localized version of awards. Measures such as in-person official visits to the house, gifts, and plaques were consistent with the *jingbiao* ideal without violating the state law. Although not as glorious and prestigious, these alternative measures would to some degree mitigate the lapse in the efficiency of state *jingbiao* (Luo 1987, 14b–16b).

This conversation signifies a number of important developments within the Ming chastity cult that will be addressed later in this article, all stemming from the newly established criteria for female chastity. Most apparent is the frustration of officials with the *jingbiao* system’s inability to recognize all virtuous women who met the criteria. Despite the long history of state *jingbiao* since the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), this widely felt frustration was a new development of the Ming, since never before had the criteria for the awards possessed such transparency and predictability—even to the eyes of non-officials. The anticipation and excitement of possible chastity awards drove the fame of chaste women—such as widow Huang—to circulate through tightly knit local communities with far greater ease and speed than they would have through official channels. As a result, the limited reach of state awards became apparent to locals, and their frustration usually translated into disappointment with the government. Finally, while the collective frustration was alarming, it also created new opportunities. For example, Luo Hongxian emerged as an alternative authority with whom officials consulted. The collective anxiety over chastity in effect created a new space for Luo to assert his cultural authority.

The implication of this new space of authority will be addressed later. For now we will focus on Luo’s suggestion of the local recognition of chaste women. Luo’s advice, though private and personal, clearly resonated strongly with contemporary bureaucrats. Many reached the same assessment of the *jingbiao* system and similar solutions and, as such, alternate local awards had evolved into a common practice by the late Ming. These honors and awards dotted the local landscape with steles and stone tablets. Honoring chaste women was also featured prominently in communal ceremonies such as village compacts (*xiangyue* 鄉約) or the ceremony of libation (*xiangyinjiu* 鄉飲酒) (Ye 1987, 336). However, the hierarchy remained clear and state *jingbiao* was still the most desired prize. Thus all these complementary recognitions that reached down to the grassroots level



of Ming society did not relieve the pressure and demands for chastity awards. In fact, the proliferation of lesser awards probably further entrenched and exacerbated social aspirations for state *jingbiao*. As a result, officials still felt obligated to nominate eligible chaste women for imperial *jingbiao*; families and local communities continued to lobby for their women to be honored, regardless of the multiple local recognitions they might have already received.

The mounting expectations and the resultant strong sense of entitlement among chaste women and their families put great pressure on state agents even at the most central level. In 1605, Xiao Jingao 蕭近高, an official in the Ministry of Ritual, memorialized the emperor about the problem. Xiao singled out chastity awards, which, in his opinion, had been granted in excess and degenerated into an automatic, pro forma state function. The problem, he argued, lay in misplaced expectations. As soon as a widow reached the age of fifty, her family launched a *jingbiao* campaign with incessant petitions until a state *jingbiao* was granted. Xiao pointed out that the Ming *Huidan* 會典 (The Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty) stipulated that the nomination of *jingbiao* be for “extraordinary determination and deeds” that went beyond formulaic age stipulations. To reverse the trend, Xiao suggested the emperor admonish the sons or grandsons who submitted rash applications for their widowed mothers or grandmothers (Gu et al. [1605] 1966, 414.2636–38).

Indeed, the frequent usage of the term *daijing* (待旌 awaiting chastity award) as a title in biographies indicates that a new perception of chastity practice had taken hold in the Ming, that the granting of state awards was no longer a random honor doled out on the emperor’s whim, but something that was earned by chaste women and expected by their families and communities. The standardized criteria for female chastity elevated the deeply seated social expectation to a tangible sense of entitlement that was practically contractual. This contractual interpretation of chastity awards gave families legitimate grounds to petition for *jingbiao* fiercely—so much so that even a central official like Xiao felt pressured. As will be discussed in the following section, it also prompted literati to advocate for chaste women who did not have the resources to advocate for themselves.

Granted, this view represented an extreme rendition of the *jingbiao* statute that saw the court as bound to recognize any woman who met the criteria. Yet by all indications, this sentiment was prevailing. Family members felt wronged if their applications were denied or stalled in the bureaucratic review process; editors of local gazetteers expressed outrage on behalf of the local community for known chaste women who failed to receive a state award; even officials found themselves frustrated for failing to properly award chaste women. The granting of chastity awards was thus elevated from a matter of administrative judgment to one of social justice. The court appeared ambivalent and indecisive about this new sentiment. Xiao was probably not alone in his opinion that the excessive granting of chastity awards had begun to damage its credibility and

urged the emperor to take an aggressive stance to suppress such expectations (by admonishing rash applicants). Yet the court also recognized that it was the same predictability—and attainability—that made chastity *jingbiao* the most successful program of state indoctrination; thus such oppositions failed to entail any concrete policy change.

### Social Expectations vs. Bureaucratic Inefficiency

Although the Ming court largely acquiesced to the semi-contractual expectations for chastity awards that saw it as the court's duty to recognize any women who met the criteria, its effort to deliver fell short on many fronts. First of all, the review process was notoriously complicated and lengthy. Nominations, initiated by village elders or county school students, had to be first reviewed and approved by the county magistrate, then forwarded and approved by the prefect. Prefects would then submit the nominations to censors, who would send the case back through the bureaucratic chain (village–county–prefecture) for a second review before the prefect formally forwarded the case to the Ministry of Ritual for final imperial approval. In addition, according to extant archives, at every point in the review process, the case might be returned to the previous official requesting more interviews or collaborating documents.<sup>3</sup> If during the review process any presiding official was transferred to another post, then the case would be stalled or even aborted.

Granted, the lengthy and meticulous review process was designed to authenticate each case to the fullest extent. Officials such as Li Dongyang or Xiao Jingao would certainly have defended the prolonged review process by citing “extraordinary and exceptional,” to argue that imperial awards should not automatically go to anyone who met the criteria. Yet in reality, the prolonged process exposed the candidate to multiple layers of clerical abuse and extortion and put the poor and powerless—whose deeds would be deemed most “extraordinary” and award-worthy specifically due to their powerlessness—at a disadvantage. The court was well aware of the dilemma and eventually eliminated the double review and instituted a single review process.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, complaints of corruption remained frequent. Seeing too many cases obstructed by corrupt clerks and officials, the editor of the Guangzhou gazetteer, for instance, concluded his collection of chastity biographies with a bitter lament: “Alas, what is the point of applying for a *jingbiao*? Since the validity of applications is to be determined by community elders, the court essentially entrusts the final judgments to the hands of the Money God” (F. Guo et al. 1602, 572). Many widely circulated anecdotes relate

<sup>3</sup>Private publications such as *Shuang jie lu* include all the official paperwork leading up to a state *jingbiao* award.

<sup>4</sup>The double reviews were abolished in 1531. Although the Minister of Ritual defended the double review procedure in its intention to fully vet each chaste woman, he also conceded that it impeded many qualified applications and had to be changed (Yu 1602, 65.22a–23b).



how clerks swarmed the houses of chaste widows to solicit bribes, especially during the tour of the regional inspector (M. Li et al. 1584, 100).

The perception of corruption did not deter prospective applicants; it only compelled families to lobby their cases more fiercely with all means possible. Zhu Zuwen 朱祖文, for example, wrote about his deep anxiety when he applied for a *jingbiao* for his widowed mother. Zhu was definitely not alone, as such anxiety was prevalently felt among families of chaste women who saw it as their filial duty to secure a *jingbiao* that their loved ones earned and deserved. Even though he was from an established official family, Zhu was still convinced that he did not possess the kind of political clout and the financial means to move his mother's case through all the bureaucratic hurdles. With much effort and a stroke of luck, Zhu was able to win sympathy from a higher-up official who then lobbied fiercely on his mother's behalf from county magistrate to regional inspector. Otherwise, "should local clerks follow the regular routine," 待胥吏徇行故事 Zhu pointed out, his mother's application would not have seen the light of imperial honor (Zhu 1984, 2995).

Zhu's reading of the situation was indeed perceptive. Although virtually all complaints against *jingbiao* cited official corruption as the grounds for protest, the root cause of the corruption lay with the extremely lengthy and complicated review process. The bottom line was, even if clerks did not engage in outright extortion ("no bribe, no nomination"), the case would still very likely fall through the cracks if the applicant did not actively push the paperwork through bureaucratic hurdles (in Zhu's words, "follow the routine"). In this sense, bribes or political connections provided that crucial incentive for moving the application through the bureaucratic process.

As a result, true to public suspicion, a disproportionate number of imperial chastity awards went to well-connected or wealthy households, leaving out those of humble economic or social standing. Yet at the same time, the lack of resources made the deeds of these chaste women all the more precious and valuable, and the impoverished more deserving candidates for imperial awards. The failure to honor these women, therefore, was seen as a direct affront to the original mandate of *jingbiao* honoring women from unprivileged families and soon escalated to an issue of social justice. This cause, as we will see in the following section, was soon to be taken up by a class of educated elite eager to redefine their place in society.

## II. IN THE NAME OF JUSTICE: LITERATI ACTIVISM AND THE PRODUCTION OF CHASTITY BIOGRAPHIES IN THE MING ERA

What emerges from the previous discussion is a picture of a court that was somewhat trapped in its own success: the Ming state was certainly successful in convincing the general populace of the value and glory in observing its code of female virtue, which was the principal goal of the *jingbiao* system. Yet such

conviction and knowledge also made the bureaucratic inefficiency all the more apparent and deplorable in the eyes of the public. While such discontent gave families of chaste women justified grounds to lobby and advocate for imperial awards, their efforts only subjected families of lower class to further disadvantage. Indignation over the failing of *jingbiao*'s very mandate—to honor women of humble cultural and social background—continued to mount, precipitating a new cultural space for literati to advocate for chaste women. This new space is critical in understanding Ming literati's tremendous investment in producing the largest corpus of chastity accounts up to their time. Indeed, historians have mulled over many possible psychological factors to explain their sudden passion for chaste women: anxiety and frustration over the excessive competitiveness of civil service examinations (T'ien 1988), fascination with moral heroism due to malicious court factionalism (Weijing Lu 2008), etc. While these theories illuminate the psychological impulses that drove male literati to identify with chaste women (instead of other moral paragons), they only reveal part of the picture. For these authors, what was at stake in the enterprise of chastity writing was far more than psychological satisfaction.<sup>5</sup> As we will find in this section, the growing concerns over chastity justice created a coveted new role for the learned class whose collective identity had come under attack by the late Ming.

On this point, the activist advocacy for a particular brand of chaste martyrs offers useful hints: that of *ailie* 哀烈 (tragic chaste martyr), which constituted a special chastity award. Essentially victims of domestic violence, these chaste women were often brutally murdered after refusing to surrender to the sexual advances of the lovers of their mothers-in-law. The criminal element in these cases took the pursuit of chastity justice from local gazetteers into actual courtrooms. The defense of chaste martyrs in actual murder cases often required such extensive networking and mobilization of the literati community that it gave chastity activism a most vivid expression.

The story of Lady Zhang represents a typical scenario of *ailie* cases. Zhang was a wronged chaste daughter-in-law who was murdered because she refused to comply with the demand of sex from the lover of her mother-in-law. Fearing that Lady Zhang might expose her illicit affair, the mother-in-law conspired with her lover to murder Zhang and falsely accused her of adultery. Outraged by the news, Gui Youguang wrote an open letter calling on his fellow students to intervene in the trial of Zhang's murderer, who was about to bribe his way out of prison. Gui organized a collective show of force of county students on the day when the magistrate was scheduled to attend a ceremony at the county school. The letter was printed to further widen its circulation and to mobilize as many county students as possible to show up at the school ceremony to put

<sup>5</sup>Katherine Carlitz's study (1997) on the case of a chastity shrine, for example, points out the importance of "righteous compassion" to literati's participation in the chastity cult. This article further explicates the institutional root of this literati sentiment.

pressure on the magistrate in person. Gui's call for collective action proved successful. The magistrate was reported to be ashamed of his previous negligence in Zhang's case and reversed the acquittal of Zhang's murderer. In fact, the public pressure was such that it forced the magistrate to pay a public visit to Zhang's tomb and build a shrine for her in 1546. The intervention of local literati transformed Lady Zhang from an adulterer to an enshrined chaste martyr (Gui 1987a, 90–91; 1987b, 145–46).

Like Zhang, Tang Guimei 唐貴梅 was also a renowned *ailie* case in the late Ming. Tang was widowed and lived with her mother-in-law, who was also widowed and later began an affair with a man. After Tang rejecting her mother-in-law's proposal asking Tang to partake in the affair, the mother-in-law took Tang to court, accusing her of being unfilial and demanding harsh punishment. Tang was said to have been almost tortured to death. Yet out of loyalty to her deceased husband, Tang never exposed her mother-in-law's affair, as it would bring shame on the whole family. Torn between considerations of filial piety and chastity, Tang finally committed suicide. Yet, although she never formally exposed her mother-in-law, the truth still got out. Fearing revenge from local bullies (or guilty of taking bribes), the magistrate had never nominated Tang for a state chastity award that she so clearly deserved for her heroic act. The father-in-law of Yang Shen 楊慎 (1488–1559) happened to travel through the area and got wind of the story, asking Yang to write it down. Yang Shen was a scholar widely known for his courage and integrity to remonstrate two consecutive emperors and, as a result, spent most of his career in exile. Because of Yang's fame and prestige, the story received instant attention and stirred outrage among the literati community at the fact that Tang's name had never been cleared in court.

The dramatic mix of sexual violence, family tragedy, and official corruption no doubt turned stories of *ailie* into popular sensations at the time. Yet for activists such as Yang or Gui, these cases were important because they made a compelling statement of their mission: instead of mere after-the-fact documentation, writing for chaste women was, above all, an act of political intervention. As will be further discussed below, this cause of literati activism continued to gather momentum into the late Ming and developed wide-ranging forms of actions—and marked by a radical belief in writing as the most effective instrument redressing injustice for chaste women. Thus it is only fitting that decades later, at the height of chastity activism, the outspoken late Ming cultural icon ultimately prosecuted for his radical remarks, Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602), would revisit this landmark case to formally explicate the political stakes in chastity writing (Z. Li 1982, 208–10).

Li contends that contrary to received wisdom, Tang's name had, in fact, been restored by Yang Shen's biography. Unlike state awards, no amount of money or political clout could have bought a word of praise from Yang Shen. Had Tang received a state *jingbiao*, she would only join the ranks of thousands of state-recognized chaste women. Yet because her case was stalled by a corrupt local official, it moved Yang to write a biography for Tang, which by any

measure was much more valuable than a state award. Li declared with conviction to the reading world: “Lady Tang can now rest in peace.”

Li’s comment sheds an important light on the literati’s passion for chastity justice and their self-appointed role as the cultural custodians for these powerless and voiceless heroines. Like many of his peers, Li criticized the failure of the state award system to honor chaste women such as Tang. But Li took this conventional criticism a step further, insisting that Tang was better off being commemorated by famed literati because they were not entangled in the corrupt state system and their words carried greater weight and credibility than those of powerful officials. Indeed, Li went as far as contending that Yang’s words possessed greater authority than state *jingbiao* awards. Moreover, praise from Yang, a popular author, would, through the power of print, travel farther than an imperial arch.

Clearly, championing the cause of chastity justice opened a space for literati to position themselves as an alternative, if not superior, cultural authority to that of the state. The image of ultimate, incorruptible cultural arbitrators held powerful appeal to literati, especially those who were marginalized by the Ming political system. It is no accident that all advocates in the *ailie* cases were either officials in exile or county-school students, *shengyuan*. *Shengyuan* were the lowest degree holders in the civil service examinations. The size of this group expanded enormously during the Ming era, from just over 30,000 in 1432 to half a million toward the end of the Ming. With practically no expansion in the imperial bureaucratic system, most of these candidates were doomed never to rise higher in the ranks of officialdom (Z. Liu 2003). Failing to achieve higher degrees, these examination candidates, *shengyuan*, faced not only immense frustration but also unemployment. For this group of lettered men, status anxiety was a fact of life. As such, promises of alternative routes to establishing a name could not have been more alluring. Yang Shen and Li Zhi (as well as aforementioned Luo Hongxian), on the other hand, represent another type of elite who were marginalized by the vicious factionalism of the Ming court and craved a political stage outside the imperial bureaucracy. Even established officials had reasons to get involved in chastity cases. The late Ming was a time when tax reform tensions vilified the gentry class as exploitive and even vicious. In particular, the highly contentious issue regarding elite exemptions from corvée conscription placed the gentry class under fierce attack.<sup>6</sup>

The collective identity crisis of the literati class made the chastity cases more appealing than ever because the well-defined realm of chastity justice opened up a much-needed space for aspiring students, marginalized officials, and even established officials/gentry to redefine their place in society. The shared enthusiasm of the literati class produced the greatest corpus of chastity accounts in history. At the same time, the authors’ implicit suspicion toward and alienation

<sup>6</sup>The rising tension divided rural society into the privileged and the deprived. In fact, the appearance of the term *xiangshen* 鄉紳 (rural gentry, usually associated with exploitation) in the mid-Ming is a clear indication of deteriorating social relations in the countryside (Shigeta 1984).

from (especially the marginalized literati) the establishment also led this literati activism to strengthen as well as destabilize the notion of female chastity; this emerging iconoclasm will be further elaborated in the following survey of various forms of chastity activism.

### Taking Action: Chastity Activism

The radical affront to local government's authority as seen in the case of Lady Tang was sensational, but also exceptional. A more typical form of activism was not about wrongly convicted chaste women but about their *jingbiao* advocacy, as in the story of Wang Da'er. In a 1513 rebellion in Shandong province, child bride Wang Da'er and her sister-in-law fled together, disguised in men's clothing. Their camouflage, however, failed to deceive the bandits, who chased after them, forcing both women to jump into a deserted well to escape. Surrounding the well, the lustful bandits tried to lure the young women out with the promise to spare their lives. The sister-in-law emerged, but Da'er insisted on staying and perished in the well. After the bandits left town, her parents-in-law, who had probably raised her from childhood and therefore regarded Da'er as their daughter, found her body at the bottom of the well. Stricken by grief, they burst into tears, venting their anguish and wailing, "Gouliu's wife [the sister-in-law] survived and you died. What a fool!" Their public display of grief caught the attention of a neighbor called Wang, who was a veteran scholar, and judging from the lack of reference to any official titles, most likely a *shengyuan* who never passed a higher level of exams or entered officialdom. Wang came out and realized that the parents, with a very humble cultural background (fully revealed in the name they gave their son Gouliu 狗留 ["only dogs would keep"]) had no idea what a noble deed their daughter-in-law had accomplished. Wang explained to them that Da'er's deed was a thousand times more honorable than that of the sister-in-law who survived the assault, while commenting to himself that "out of this cesspool grew a fragrant flower." Here the "cesspool" refers to both the dirt well and her humble upbringing. The encounter must have made such a strong impression on Wang that ten years later, his son Wang Dao 王道, then vice minister of personnel, still remembered this story and told it to his friends, among them Xu Mengyu 徐夢漁, who decided to write a biography for Da'er, and Qian Jianglou 錢江樓, who in his capacity as assistant censor-in-chief enshrined Da'er as a chaste martyr and commemorated her virtue with his own poetry. Da'er became a local legend known as Wang Lienü [chaste martyr Wang] (Wang 1525, 8.35a–37a).

The story of Wang Da'er can be read at multiple levels. It is one of cultural encounter where a group of literati brought the culture of chastity to an illiterate family with whom they rarely crossed paths. It also presents a story about the pursuit of justice driven by somewhat obsessive passion. Indeed, Da'er provoked such a strong reaction because her story struck at the heart of the chastity activism: a lowly woman whose illiteracy made her honorable deeds all the more

valuable but whose name was obliterated not only by state agents but also by her uncultured family. This disturbing realization must have convinced scholar Wang, as well as many like-minded literati, to take cultural custody of chaste women and advocate on their behalf. Yet as discussed above, this cultural mission was not completely out of altruistic compassion. In doing so, these literati were also able to claim a high ground in the fluid social landscape and a share of the cultural prestige of chaste paragons.

Finally, the story also relates a convoluted journey by which Wang Da'er became an officially enshrined chaste martyr, one that showcases the long-term dedication and broad-ranging network involved in the advocacy for chaste women. As in the case of scholar Wang and his friends, literati either mobilized their personal networks to lobby for chastity awards or resorted to the power of their pen (or rather, brush) to honor chaste women in writing. As such, we find local chaste women becoming a frequent subject in literati correspondences to solicit support from officials in charge of *jingbiao* nominations.<sup>7</sup>

### Chastity Writing as Political Activism

Active lobbying for chastity awards represented the conservative end of chastity activism because it still subscribed to the authority of *jingbiao* awards and sought recourse within the system. On the whole, however, trust in state *jingbiao* was declining and activists began to seek justice for chaste women through the production of chastity biographies. For literati with natural affinity to letters and prints, “to keep the record straight,” or to maintain an accurate and current cultural genealogy, had always been considered a tangible form of justice and one of great cultural valence, for the written word would endure the test of time and regime change. Because of the extreme difficulty with *jingbiao*, many literati such as Li Zhi began to see biographies as a viable, even superior form of commemoration over state chastity awards. Biographies from esteemed and renowned authors (such as Yang Shen) not only exhibited far greater credibility and authority than the corruption-ridden *jingbiao*, moreover, because of the fast-developing printing industry of the time, their words also exerted much wider social influence. In the words of a popular late Ming novelist, “Neither an official memorial for *jingbiao* or a plaque from local officials compares with the power of a gentleman’s good praises that can spread the name of a chaste martyr to remote wildness and grant her a new life of immortality” (Lu Wenlong 2002, 10.174).

Driven by this conviction, many late Ming elite became as it were investigative journalists on the hunt for stories of obscure chaste women. Gui Youguang 歸

<sup>7</sup>Wei Jiao 魏校 (1336–74), for example, on behalf of a group of literati, wrote to an education supervising commissioner with regard to the enshrinement of a chaste martyr (Wei 1563). The commissioner appeared to have some reservations regarding the merit of this case. Wei presented a well-rounded analysis to prove that her act met all the criteria for state awards.



有光, for example, was one such enthusiastic exposé writer who collected stories of chaste women wherever he traveled. Knowing his passion, Gui's friends also frequently sent him information about deeds of chastity. Gui even interviewed community members personally to verify the accounts before he turned them into commemorative biographies (Gui 1987c, 95–96). Such investigations became even more intensive in the wake of major rebellions and warfare because accounts of chastity martyrs during periods of social unrest were easily lost.

The passion for investigative journalism found an institutional outlet in local gazetteers. To be sure, editors of local gazetteers had always considered themselves the ultimate guardians of the local cultural universe, in which maintaining the genealogy of moral paragons was essential. This expectation was further heightened in the Ming because written accounts were now seen as an important counterbalance to the partiality of the state award system. The new impulse also subjected the notion of female chastity to negotiation. Which women would qualify to enter the virtue pantheon of local gazetteers? Those who received state awards and imperial recognition would be natural candidates. Nevertheless, the widely perceived corruption of the state *jingbiao* review also compelled many editors to cast a wider net for local chaste women, as long as they met the standardized criteria of female chastity. Women whose cases were still pending review or whose deaths had disqualified them from state awards were often included. In extreme cases, even those who did not meet the age criteria were recorded as well. Clearly, as far as the editor was concerned, the thirty/fifty cutoff (thirty years old when the husband died and remaining widowed until fifty years old) was arbitrary and should not be held against those widows who were truly chaste (Yang et al. 1560, 51a–52a).

In other words, as literati activists elevated the recognition of chaste women into a form of community order and justice, they also seized the ownership of such justice. In upholding their own criteria and selecting their own pool of chaste women, editors of local gazetteers produced a localized interpretation of female chastity. With the state award as the central reference point, there developed a wide spectrum of different positions. Some editors followed the state's rules strictly and would only record the official awardees. Some gazetteers negotiated state award regulations such as the rules that excluded women from official families or those who had passed away before the *jingbiao* review was completed.<sup>8</sup> Local versions of chastity awards such as plaques or visits from the magistrate were frequently cited and accepted criteria (J. Feng et al. 1553; Xia et al. 1541). Some editors even considered praises or biographies (works

<sup>8</sup>It is interesting that although gazetteer editors were bound by the genre's convention of not recording living moral paragons, many made exceptions for chaste women. For example, the editorial guidelines of *Huizhou fuzhi* (Peng et al. 1502) reject living candidates for filial piety but make exceptions for chaste women because the state age rules qualify them.

from investigative journalists) written by known literati as legitimately qualifying chaste women as such (He et al. 1527, editorial guidelines). Public consensus (*gonglun* 公論) also figured prominently as a basis for selection, although it was often unclear exactly what measures were exploited in gauging public opinion.

The increasingly diversified criteria for chastity often came at odds with state standards. Seeing that the chastity activism was rooted in suspicion toward the state authority, the radical disposition of gazetteer editors should not come as a big surprise. In addition to confronting the state-imposed age or status clauses, gazetteer editors also embraced controversial forms of chastity practice such as that of faithful maidens, whose fiancés died before the marriage was consummated, but who nevertheless insisted on performing their roles as faithful widows by either remaining lifelong widows or committing suicide (Weijing Lu 2008). Conservative scholars attacked the ritual legitimacy of faithful maidens and condemned them as elopers, whereas defenders lauded their actions as antidotes to declining social morality. The debate turned the acknowledgment of faithful maidens into a combative issue for gazetteer editors.

Another controversial practice came from the late Ming cultural fascination with “*qing*” (情 sentiments, passion) as an authentic form of self-expression vital to moral action, including chastity practice. Following similar conviction, literati not only produced glorious hagiographies for chaste courtesans, some even advocated canonizing them in local gazetteers under the name of “*qing zhen*” 情貞. The editor of *She zhi*, Xie Bi 謝陛, related two fierce battles he personally took part in regarding chaste courtesans. First was when he sojourned in Yangzhou where a famed courtesan named Lady Xue committed chaste suicide for her deceased client. Her dedication moved many literati in Yangzhou to commemorate her deeds via poetry and essays. Yet such eager celebration turned into a major disappointment when Xue was denied an entry in Yangzhou’s gazetteer. Outraged by this injustice, Xie Bi dedicated a commemorative essay to Xue as a small gesture to express his regret for the undeserved attacks lashed on this chaste lady. This incident strengthened Xie’s resolve to admit Lady Wang to the gazetteer he compiled for She county. Lady Wang committed suicide when her husband passed away. Yet her qualification as a chaste paragon was heatedly contested since Wang was a courtesan entertainer before marriage to her gentry husband as concubine. Anticipating strong opposition to his radical decision, Xie mounted a preemptive defense invoking the story of Han Tong 韓通 and Yu Rang 豫讓, since before martyring themselves, both men served someone else. “Didn’t Han Tong serve two masters? Didn’t Yu Rang serve two masters? Yet are these grounds to obliterate the true spirit and glorious honor when they sacrificed their life for the [new] Master Zhi and Master Chai” (Tao et al. 1609, 8.25–26)?

### Chastity Activism and the Growth of the Chastity Cult

With more loosely defined criteria for female chastity came the need to expand sources. Literary anthologies were carefully combed for traces of chastity

stories, especially those written by authoritative biographers (Niu et al. 1642, 52.1a). Some editors asked local schools to nominate worthy candidates—because both community elders and local schools were given the right to nominate *jingbiao* candidates, these measures were seen as a natural extension of the state award system (Guan et al. 1544; Y. Liu et al. 1638). Diligent editors would even conduct a mini-version of a *jingbiao* review, interviewing neighbors to ensure the validity of these accounts. Some editors widened the net as broadly as possible by publicly soliciting chastity stories. Liu Fu 劉黼, for example, posted public announcements in the main streets of Hengzhou 衡州 (Hunan), pleading for the public to assist his search for chaste women in the area (Liu Fu 1536). When pressed by the scarcity of extant documents, editors would even resort to collecting oral accounts from community members (Liang et al. 1557).

The search for chaste women, most importantly, further exposed the general populace to the ideal of female chastity. Since chastity activists gravitated toward chaste women of obscure and humble social background, their actions brought the issue of chastity to the front and center of public concern, mobilizing local communities to the grassroots level in the search for chaste women. Just as with the story of Wang Da'er, the mission to rescue obscure chaste women is also one of cultural encounter through which the ideal of female chastity extended into the uncultured social classes. The literati activism, in this sense, became a central vehicle for the “democratization” of chastity practice. That is why this article was able to trace the emergence of chastity activism decades before the definitive rise of chastity accounts in the mid-sixteenth century: contrary to the conventional view of chastity biographies as a posteriori evidence for the rise of the chastity cult, chastity writing was in and of itself a contributing force to the fast ascendance of chastity practice in the late Ming.<sup>9</sup>

This point offers a critical qualification to how chastity activism affected the course of the chastity cult in the Ming: while it destabilized the cult's dogmatic center, it did not undermine its power in shaping social behavior. For literati who were devoted to the cause of chastity justice, their writing not only restored to these women the honor they deserved; more importantly, in publicizing their heroic acts, these writers also contributed to improving social morality, the same goal as the state awards. The state *jingbiao* program had a long tradition in imperial history aiming “to make known the excellence of the recipients . . . as moral examples to communities” (Elvin 1984, 135). That is, by placing the role models of chaste women in the public spotlight, imperial honor served as a central instrument to enhance the efficacy of state inculcation. In this sense,

<sup>9</sup>While literati activism enhanced the value and visibility of chastity practice, why the late Ming society was so receptive to state/literati's promulgation was a separate issue beyond the scope of this article. For example, scholars have argued that factors such as commercialization (T'ien 1988) might have played a central role.

the wide circulation of chastity stories generated by literati activism to rescue chaste women from obscurity certainly enhanced the visibility and influence of chaste women as role models. Efforts of activists such as Gui Youguang were not confined to paper. They aggressively sought out chaste women of humble social status, going into communities to conduct surveys and creating public spectacles around these otherwise obscure women. While these actions indeed brought chaste women to the center of public attention, the question is, what kinds of examples were being put on display to mold the hearts and souls of the masses? Faithful maidens? Chaste courtesans? When controversy arose, who got to intervene and arbitrate?

The court made no effort to intervene. As a result, the underlying strain of iconoclastic radicalism flourished and distinguished the Ming chastity cult from what preceded and what followed. The chastity activism decentralized *jingbiao*'s public education about female chastity. Instead of state-directed inculcation, the widespread appearance and circulation of chastity accounts were prompted by deep discontent with the imperial award system. In challenging the court's failure to honor qualified chaste women, chastity activism created a new space to renegotiate the very notion of chastity, ranging from the court-imposed age limit of chaste widows to more controversial issues such as faithful maidens or even chaste courtesans. The porous boundaries of chastity, as observed by Katherine Carlitz (1991, 1994), are exactly the product of such a fluid space.

## CONCLUSION

The inquiry into the sudden rise of chastity practice in the Ming has unraveled around two motifs: a standardized notion of female chastity and literati activism. First of all, when all ideological rhetoric is stripped away, the so-called chastity cult, as first identified by early twentieth-century intellectuals, boils down to the growing number of state *jingbiao* awardees and accounts of chaste women in general. The driving force for both, as it turns out, lies not in top-down state inculcation, but stems rather from deeply ingrained social expectations. Although the standardized notion of female chastity allowed the state to grant *jingbiao* en masse, the review process in the Ming was lengthy and difficult. The procedural uncertainty forms a sharp contrast to the virtually automatic award-granting process in the Qing. After a major institutional reform under Yongzheng, all eligible chaste women would be enshrined at the Shrine to the Chaste and Filial (*jiexiao ci*) that was mandated in every provincial, prefectural, county, and district seat.

The tension between social expectation and bureaucratic inefficiency turned the awarding of chaste-women honors into an issue of social justice. The widely perceived failure of the state to deliver chastity justice prompted elites in the

Ming to take strong action to defend chaste women. Although this chastity activism was always justified under the rhetoric of civic duty, the underlying motivations prove to be not purely altruistic but a response to male literati's collective identity crisis—be it from the competitiveness of civil service examinations or from class tensions during the tax reform. The thriving publishing industry gave these activists a powerful weapon in this battle for chastity justice: print media. Because of their efforts, this time period witnessed the birth of an unprecedentedly large corpus of chastity biographies.

This analysis has two important implications: first, the drastic upsurge of chastity accounts in the Ming came from the fact that chastity writing had become an important form of political activism for literati, one that exerted far-reaching social impact. In other words, contrary to what has been seen as a reflection of changed social attitude, the widespread appearance of chastity biographies was in fact what triggered the social change. The highlighting of chastity activism, however, does not intend to trivialize the role of the state as a nominal patron of the chastity cult. Instead, it points to a new conception outside of the dichotomy between ideological enforcer and defeated figurehead. As this article has shown, while the Ming court did not aggressively manage and engineer chastity practice, it did cement a contractual belief of its chastity awards that precipitated and, in a way, legitimized chastity activism.

Second, the activist impetus of the Ming chastity cult did not undercut the sway of chaste paragons in shaping social attitudes and behavior; nevertheless, it did destabilize the cult's dogmatic center and created a space to negotiate and expand the connotation of chastity. It is thus not surprising that in the eyes of the compilers of the Official Ming History in the early Qing, two prominent features of the Ming chastity cult stood out: first, the cult's penetrative power into the illiterate lower class, "even women from remote areas and lowly background held themselves to the [purist] ideal of chastity" 乃至僻壤下戶之女，亦能以貞白自砥 (Zhang 1982, 7689); and second, its lack of dogmatic control allowed for—in fact, championed—extreme and radical practices. The early Qing criticism is indeed revealing: not because of its clarity of hindsight, but because it came from a crucial turning point of the chastity cult, when the Manchu conquerors asserted unprecedented control over the chastity cult. For the first time, the imperial state assumed the role of primary patron and claimed custody of even the minutest details of chastity practice. The iconoclastic nature of the Ming chastity cult forms a sharp contrast to the subsequent Manchu regime that saw meticulous management of the chastity cult as essential to its imperial ambition to socially engineer sexual behavior.<sup>10</sup> Or rather, the painstaking attention paid by the Qing state to the chastity cult was in fact a reaction to the runaway development of the Ming.

<sup>10</sup>Though not without resistance, as made clear by Theiss (2004).

In the final analysis, the chastity cult's ascendance in late imperial China altered the life course of chaste women and their families—to the tune of hundreds of thousands every year in the sixteenth century, and continuing to increase afterwards. Its centrality in public and private life offers historians a productive entry point to untangle the complicated power dynamics between the state, the elite, local communities, and women. Thus it is particularly exciting to see that, the fruits of recent scholarship have successfully moved the field beyond the early twentieth-century view of the cult as a creation of Confucian patriarchal suppression (Fei 2010). In this new intellectual frontier, the chastity cult will continue to command scholars' attention, but in very different ways. Instead of an instrument to strengthen patriarchal control, the cult is to be considered a central mechanism to gender regimes in late imperial China. Indeed, no issue regarding gender and sexuality had provoked as voluminous an output of court edicts and literati essays as female chastity. The unrivaled attention turned the cult into the most dominant platform where gender norms were enunciated and negotiated.

The finding of this article, in this sense, joins and expands the revisionist literature that has placed the cult's development in a matrix of ethnic politics, social legislation, and intellectual discourses, and further argues that these factors not only demonstrate the cult's significance as a conjuncture of major historical trends but in fact together defined the cult's internal heterogeneity. That is, despite its seemingly steady growth over the last millennium, the cult went through different stages. The racial politics in the Yuan led to a standardized definition of female chastity, but the competition of the cult remained an elite phenomenon; in the Ming, its populist drive led to semi-contractual social expectations that provoked various forms of literati activism. The iconoclastic nature of the chastity cult in the late Ming led to a recentralization of the cult in the high Qing. Because of the cult's pivotal place in shaping the gender regime, this new periodization of the chastity cult will allow for a more productive entry point for historians to study the interaction between state, society, and gender norms in late imperial China.

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