

# Study on Women Committing Suicide in the Middle of Qing Dynasty: Focusing on Archives of Baxian County

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**Abstract:** Based on historical data of female suicide cases in the middle of Qing Dynasty recorded in the official archives of Baxian County, this paper takes women who committed suicide as the research object and perspective to observe this female group. Through the study of female suicide cases, it can be seen that different from the ideal women described in classics, these women have multiple features in different life situations. For a long time, the concept of chastity advocated by the literati and officialdom has deviated from ordinary people's daily life to a certain extent. Although the Xianxi marriage was common in the society at that time, the actual marriage quality was not optimistic.

## 1. Introduction

Zongzhi Huang once pointed out that in Qing Dynasty, the expression and practice of the official legal system were contradictory, but they formed an inseparable whole.[1] In traditional Chinese society, there were similar differences and deviations in the norms and standards of women. Different from the ideal women described in *Stories about Famous Women*, women of the common class are faced with different life situations and present multiple features. First of all, not all women in the patriarchal society played the role of “victims” and “the oppressed”. They also acted as “injurers” and “perpetrators” of crimes. Female crime was a serious social problem at that time. Secondly, the concept of chastity presented two states, explicit and implicit, and the society acquiesced to adultery behaviors. Thirdly, although “Xianxi” marriage was the most common marriage form in Baxian society during the reign of Emperors Qianlong and Jiaqing, there were many potential problems in this form of marriage, and the quality of marriage was not optimistic.

## 2. Suicide and Female Crime

In the traditional society, men's superiority and women's inferiority formed a fixed mode of social operation. However, respect and inferiority, victims and injurers, as well as the oppress and the oppressed, are all relative results. Leaving aside the image of women as “victims”, through the analysis of female suicide cases, it is found that it was not uncommon for women to become “perpetrators” in committing crimes. In the case of the suicide of Xiang'er, her mother-in-law, Li, committed adultery with her neighbor Fuxing Lang. Xiang'er found the scene, but Li beat her and forced her to commit suicide by taking poison.[2] Wuzhu repeatedly instigated Li to escape and provided the route. After being arrested, Wuzhu hung herself and died. [3] In the 55th year of Qianlong's reign, Gui Zhang married Wu, who repeatedly abused his ex-wife's son and was reprimanded by her husband. Finally, Wu committed suicide.[4] After being arrested for stealing money for many times, the maid Juhua hanged herself for fear of being beaten.[5] Huangzhao often helped her neighbor Ma'er Ren to hide stolen goods. In July of the 18th year of Jiaqing, Ren was arrested for stealing. Huangzhao, worried about being implicated and hanged herself at night [6].

In above cases of suicidal women, the crimes they committed include forced rape, crooked abduction, maltreatment, theft and concealment of stolen goods. These vivid cases confirmed the widespread female crime in the society at that time. Women's criminal behaviors not only refute the female image of “the victim”, but also supplement it. It can be seen that in real historical scenes, in

addition to playing the role of “victim” for a long time, women also play the role of “perpetrators”. Through the analysis of cases of suicide women, we find that women in lower classes show multiple features in real life; we need to re-consider the traditional positioning of women as “victims” and “the oppressed”.

### 3. Suicide and the Concept of Female Chastity

Since Ming and Qing Dynasties, the number of chaste women has greatly increased through the system of clan tables and historical writing. Huimin Lai once proposed, it is worth further discussion that whether the concept of chastity written by literati in Qing Dynasty was popularized in the lower class.[7] So what’s the role of chastity in the bottom society? According to the analysis of female suicide cases, we can see that in the society of Baxian County in the Qianlong and Jiaqing period, the concept of chastity appeared in both explicit and implicit levels. On the explicit level, the concept of chastity presents two extreme polarization states. On one hand, women firmly adhere to the chastity concept that “I would rather starve to death than lose my chastity”. On the other hand, adultery is a common social problem. On the implicit level, adultery between men and women can be acquiesced by the society and become a special life scene.

In the explicit level, women have extreme worship of the concept of chastity. The *Case of Guinv* is an example. In March of the 56th year of Emperor Qianlong's reign, Zhongli, claimed that his maid Guinv hanged herself.[8] In fact, Guinv in this case did not be raped. But the criminal Lanting Shi repeatedly claimed that he would grab the girl, which caused fear in her heart. Later, they went to the court, which was a great harm to the honor and reputation of the girl. Since the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the concept of chastity not only requires women to keep chastity after their husbands' death, but also requires women to protect their bodies and honor from being violated and insulted. The suicide of Guinv is the extreme maintenance of the concept of chastity.

In addition to the extreme maintenance of chastity, cases also show that sexual intercourse between men and women was a widespread social problem at that time.[9] Baxian was a typical immigrant society in the middle of Qing Dynasty. A lot of men went outside to do business or become servants. The long-term separation led to the indifference between the husband and wife. The lack of the husband's supervision also gave women the possibility of adultery. These women who committed suicide because of adultery were not only suffering from mental torture, but also faced with other realistic factors, which led to their extreme behaviors.

In the 55th year of Qianlong's reign, Zhang committed adultery. When the adultery was revealed, she hanged herself for fear of being punished by the official.[10] Li and his brother-in-law Jiulin Luo had an affair. On the fifth day of August in the 21st year of Jiaqing, the adultery led to Luo's “disease”, and he finally “died for losing blood”. Afterwards, Li hanged herself and was rescued by her mother-in-law. Later, she bought rat poison and died after taking the poison.[11] In May of the 46th year of Qianlong's reign, the husband Youzhang Song went out to do business, and her mother-in-law returned home to visit relatives. Shaoji Zhou and Feng committed adultery. Her mother-in-law knew the situation and wanted to repudiate Feng immediately. Feng was ashamed and worried that her mother's family would know about her adultery, so she hanged herself in the bedroom.[12] In above-mentioned cases, women were faced with various practical problems when their adultery was revealed. Zhang was afraid of going to the court; the adulterer of Li lost his life; Feng was facing of being divorced. The double torture of “shame” psychology and practical problems made these women finally choose suicide. According to the analysis of above cases, we can see that there were two extreme concepts of chastity in the society at that time. On one hand, women like Guinv committed suicide because of attempted adultery; on the other hand, there was widespread adultery between men and women.

At the same time, adultery is a kind of tacit existence in specific life scenes. In the 59th year of Qianlong reign, Wenpei Wang reported that his younger brother Wenbi Wang and Zeng both hanged themselves. Their adultery had long been an open secret within the family and had been tacitly approved by other people.[13] Acquiescence in adultery was not uncommon. In the case of Xiang'er

who was raped, the adultery of her mother-in-law, Li, also had other people's acquiescence. In the case of Luoli's suicide, although her mother-in-law had been informed of the adultery for a long time, she did not stop her. In the case of Songfeng's suicide, her neighbor, Zhang, committed adultery with others many times, first with Si Zhou, and then with Mazi Zhang. Zhang's mother-in-law helped her to deceive and did not tell her husband, who was making money outside. The adultery hidden behind these suicide cases has become one of the scenes that can not be ignored in the bottom society.

#### 4. Suicide and Xianxi Marriage

Child bride was a common marriage system in ancient times. According to incomplete statistics, among the 93 women who committed suicide, there were 6 women who entered the husband's house as "Xianxi", and there were 21 cases of "child mate". According to sample cases, the earliest age of bride was 3 years old. Rongxiu Ou's eldest daughter, Changgu, "married to Da Tan, the son of Shifeng Tan, at the age of three"; Daideng, who was older, did not "get married" until she was 16. In the group of suicide women, the proportion of child adoptive daughters-in-law is high, which makes us consider the potential relationship between suicide and child bride marriage.

The ancients have discussed the disadvantages of child bride marriage. When a woman enters a new family as Xianxi (the daughter-in-law) when she is young, her body and mind are not fully developed; she often fails to meet the psychological expectations of her husband and her parents-in-law. With the growth of age, these Xianxi who did not pass the comprehensive test could not be recognized by her husband's family, and they were in the weak position of family conflict for a long time. The life situations and suicide behaviors of a large number of Xianxi confirmed the hidden danger of this kind of marriage.

The husband's family may complain the Xianxi for her congenital diseases. In the 13th year of Jiaqing, Chaoxiang He of Linjiangfang in Baxian County reported that his daughter-in-law, Luoshi, had hanged herself, saying, "she was not only suffering from the hidden disease, but also detested my poor family. She was restless day by day, and refused to change after being persuaded. She hanged herself on the vertical beam of the wooden platform with a foot binding cloth after making trouble with my son." From her father-in-law, Chaoxiang He's attitude, we can see that Luoshi did not get along with in her husband's family. The relationship between her and her husband was not harmonious. She was in the long-term family conflict.

In addition, Xianxi may be dissatisfied with her husband's family due to her immoral behaviors. When women entered the husband's family when they were young, their mind was not fully mature; they could not fully understand the traditional concept of "three principles and five virtues", which may lead to immoral behaviors. These women did not receive good instruction and education in their childhood; they even had some stealing behaviors. Tangu picked peas from her neighbor's garden, and was reprimanded by her father-in-law, so she hanged herself.[14] Zhou picked her neighbor's beans and was found, so she hanged herself on a tree.[15] Zhangwang cut the firewood from his neighbor's house and was caught by Xiangfang Zhang, they quarreled with each other. Later, Zhangwang's ran into Xiangfang Zhang's room and hanged herself with a bamboo rope.[16]

"Three obedience and four virtues" requires women to meet the four standards of "morality, speech, appearance and housework". The "housework" requires women to undertake the responsibility of household chores, and take care of her husband and children. However, Xianxi may not be able to fulfill the requirements due to her young age, which leads to her husband's dissatisfaction. In August of the 23rd year of Jiaqing, Daliang Che reported that because his wife was young and could not handle the housework, he scolded her. However, his wife did not listen to him. She quarreled with him and was beaten by Che. After that, his wife was angry and hanged herself at home, but was rescued by the neighbor.[17] In Xianxi's marriage, the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law presents a natural tension. Among the six women who chose to commit suicide after their quarrel with parents-in-law, five were "married since childhood". These women were adopted to their husband's home when they were young. They were not mature enough physically and mentally, and could not meet the standards of the ideal daughter-in-law. In their daily

life, friction was inevitable, leading to disputes between them and their mothers-in-law, and may lead to suicide.

## **5. Summary**

This paper discusses the multiple features of women, attempting to find the deviation between the official expression and the actual life of ordinary women in lower class, and analyze the actual living conditions of ordinary women from the perspective of practice. For a long time, women's studies have formed the mode of "oppression and resistance"; the "oppressed" women have become a stereotype. In fact, if we put aside the model narration and official propaganda, return to the historical scene and analyze women's actual life situation and thoughts from the perspective of empirical research, we can find the new field in women's studies. For these women who end their lives by suicide, they are described as immoral women who "don't listen to reprimand" and have the "wolf's nature"; they deviate from the traditional female images. But their stories supplement the image of female described by the literati class.

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