Rebellion and revenge: the meaning of suicide of women in rural China

Meng L. Rebellion and revenge: the meaning of suicide of women in rural China

The current literature on suicide in China shows that the female suicide rate is extraordinarily higher than the rate for males. Many studies have been conducted on the prevalence and perpetrating factors for suicidal incidents. Few have attempted to understand women’s suicide acts. In this article, the ethnographic data are used to explore the special meaning of the suicide act in a Chinese family and its impact on the other family members. Research has shown that suicide may have a different meaning in the Chinese context, especially for women with an inferior status within the family. Suicide is taken as an act of revenge in a moral and spiritual sense. The act of suicide is very powerful; it grants the woman so much power that she may achieve what she could not during her lifetime. The suicide event remains in the collective memory of the relatives and other people who knew the person. Its powerful meaning is related to the memory of the transgressive event of taking one’s own life as well as to the collective and personal guilt connected with the event.

Introduction

In the international literature on suicide, it is a common finding that the male suicide rate is much higher than the rate for females. However, China is an exception in that the female suicide rate is much higher than the rate for males. The detailed figures can be seen from Table 1.

Existent quantitative studies that focus on the suicide in relation to gender differences in Chinese populations have found that family conflicts are the most important precipitating cause of suicide. Such conflicts include: the husband–wife conflict, daughter-in-law and parent-in-law conflicts, child–parent conflicts, sibling conflicts, and marriage problems. Other causes of suicide are poverty and physical and/or psychological diseases (Pearson, 1995; Zhao, Qu, Peng & Peng, 1994). These studies pay little attention to the cultural aspects of suicide behaviour and the personal experiences of the people involved. This article explores the issue of suicide from the women’s perspective, the function of suicide behaviour, especially the meaning of suicide in the women’s lives. The question raised is: to what extent do women have autonomy over their own lives? The article aims at providing a deeper understanding of the reasons for the higher female suicide rate in China.

As for women’s suicide, studies have shown that in countries like India and Sri Lanka, the rate of early adulthood female suicide (between the ages of 18 and 30) is much higher than that for males (Miller & Kearney, 1988; Waters, 1999). In a study of victimisation factors and suicidal behaviour among African American women, Manetta (1999) found that the group of women who are most likely to attempt suicide are those who suffered physical

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Male</th>
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Key words: Chinese cultures, collective memory, coping skills, female suicide, in-law conflicts, suicide, rebellion, empowerment, wife abuse

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Accepted for publication June 25, 2002
abuse in childhood and then by their partners in adulthood.

In a study of suicide among women in India, Waters (1999) found that women’s suicide was closely connected with marital problems, often having to do with dowry death. It is claimed in the study that female suicide can be understood as self-directed violence against women, and that women’s suicide is part of a broad incitement to commit suicide in which violence is internalised and directed against the self. From the literature, it is obvious that women with abusive histories and family or marriage conflicts are at risk of suicide ideation and acts. This provides a background for understanding women’s suicide act in a broader sense.

Understanding suicide

There are many theories and concepts that can help us to understand the act of suicide from different perspectives. Durkheim (1951) grouped suicide into four kinds: 1) egoistic suicide, 2) altruistic suicide; 3) anomic suicide, and 4) fatal suicide. Suicidal behaviour is taken as an act of self-damage inflicted with self-destructive intention (Stengel, 1965). Freud proposed two major hypotheses to account for suicide. One is that people may kill themselves when they lose someone ambivalently loved. When aggression is directed inward and these feelings are strong enough, the person will kill him/herself. The second theory postulates that the death drive, thanatos, can turn inward and make the person take his or her own life (Davison & Neale, 1990). Many writers have conducted studies of suicidal behaviour with different groups of people with the intention of exploring the risk factors for suicide and working out intervention strategies for clients with suicidal problems (Blumenthol & Kupfer, 1990; Bongar, 1992; Jacobs & Brown, 1989; Shneidman, 1991). These have opened the way to a better understanding of suicide among different groups of people and a better insight into the individuals’ reasons for ending their lives.

Understanding suicide in the Chinese context

Patriarchy and gender relations

China is a patrilineal and patriarchal society (Croll, 1983; Lang, 1946; Wolf, 1985). Male superiority and female inferiority have been embodied in many aspects of social life. Chinese culture emphasises the hierarchical order within the family, with the senior male at the top and juniors and females at the bottom. The patriarchal ideology regards women (wife, daughter and even mother) and children as dependents and as the property of the men (father, husband and son). Also, as dominant superiors, the social norms and the culture entitle men to beat their wives and their children since wives and children are their property (Yue, 1990). This belief is still sustained in society and dominant in everyday family life.

Since 1949 the Chinese government has made efforts to advocate the gender equality policy. In the ‘Constitution and Protective Law on Women’s Rights and Interests’, it is stated that men and women share equal rights in social and family life. Nevertheless, male superiority and female inferiority have been enforced and sustained due to the patriarchal nature of the equality policy (Andors, 1983; Croll, 1983; Liu, 1999; Wolf, 1985). In public life, women concentrate on the lesser-paid jobs. They have been devalued and commercialised as goods (Chan, 2001; Honig & Hershatter, 1988). Different forms of violence against women – trafficking in women, rape, sexual harassment, wife abuse, prostitution – occur repeatedly day after day. In family life, husbands have more to say in important family decision-making, and they spend less time in parenting and doing household chores (China Women News, Sept. 26, 2001: 1). The unequal reality provides a background for understanding why and how women fight against their harsh life situation.

Cultural acceptance of suicide for honourable reasons

Chinese culture maintains a conflicting attitude toward suicide. On the one hand, the culture has paid special attention to human life, as it was believed that our bodies came from our parents’ blood and bones. To show our respect and thankfulness to our parents, we were not entitled to harm our bodies without good reason, not even to cut our hair. Life was viewed as the most valuable gift given to us by our parents. On the other hand, it was culturally accepted to sacrifice our lives for some honourable reason. In ancient China, the social order was established on the three cardinal guides – ruler guides subject, father guides son and husband guides wife – and the five constant virtues – benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity. Personal daily interactions had to be in accordance with these guides and virtues. Therefore, behaviour connected with these guides was viewed as acceptable and righteous. In this sense, suicide was incited as a form to show one’s fidelity and loyalty (Ning, Ning & Ning, 1999). The memory of death of the superior persons was materialised in the death and physical disappearance of an inferior person. The personal death became a public event that reproduced the existent hierarchical power relationships between Chinese people.
In Chinese history, there are a number of famous suicides that are still remembered as heroic events. For instance, the renowned poet Qu Yuan committed suicide to rebel against the corrupted king of his times. The Dragon Boat festival is held in commemoration of this national hero. This personal event has become part of the public memory. In the Ming Dynasty, there was a general who after the Manchu pulled down the Ming Dynasty and took over the reign, refused to submit to the new governors and committed suicide to show his loyalty to the Ming Dynasty. People raised a memorial hall in his honour.

There are also other culturally acceptable reasons for suicide in China. Sustaining the family interests, glorifying the family’s reputation, retaining one’s chastity and virtue out of loyalty to father or husband were all acceptable reasons for committing suicide. This kind of suicide was regarded as an act to protect the family’s interests, as the loss of the daughter’s virginity and chastity brought shame on the whole family (Ning, Ning & Ning, 1995).

Accordingly, in Chinese culture, suicide could be honoured and accepted for ‘altruistic’ reasons, but not for ‘egoistical’ reasons. This attitude might be connected with the collectivist value system and the patriarchal family system prevailing in Chinese society (Lang, 1946).

Belief in the power of ghosts and spirits

According to Buddhism, it is possible to be reincarnated and achieve liberation after death. When a person dies, the spirit is still alive, and this spirit may help the person to realise his or her goals after death. Consequently, according to this belief system that after one dies, the person’s spirit may revenge his or her rivals by invading their homes and bringing them bad luck. This belief was sustained in many local legends and dramas and transmitted from one generation to another.

Wife abuse in China

As a consequence of international women’s movements, wife abuse has become one of the most significant aspects of domestic violence in China (Liu, 1999), although there have been few national or regional surveys on wife abuse in the country. However, data from previous surveys on the status of women’s status can serve as a reference for the prevalence of wife abuse. A 1990 survey on the status of women in China showed that almost one-third of the respondents had experienced physical abuse: 0.9% were frequently beaten by their husbands; 8.2% were often beaten, and 20.1% were occasionally beaten (Tao & Jiang, 1993). In a national survey on family relationships in seven cities conducted in 1993, the rate for husbands beating their wives in marital conflicts was 9.32% for Beijing, 8.54% for Shanghai, 9.36% for Chengdu, 17.19% for Nanjing, 6.71% for Guangzhou, 13.21% for Lanzhou and 15.22% for Harbin (Shen & Yang, 1995).

In a survey of family and marital relationships conducted in four cities in 1996, among the 3,205 couples in the sample, 42.1% of the urban husbands reported that they would scold their wives and 17.9% would beat them in the course of a family argument; 60.2% of the rural husbands reported that they would scold their wives and 21.9% that they would beat them in a family argument (Xu, 1997).

In a survey conducted in Tianjin, of the 2,002 women respondents, 18.5% reported that they have experienced being beaten by their spouses. The rate among the 300 divorced women respondents was 45.8% (Overseas Daily, March 8, 2000: 8). In a recent survey of the prevalence of domestic violence in China (Liu & Zhang, 2002), 34.7% of the respondents reported that they have experienced domestic violence in their marital life, with frequencies varying from several times a week to once in several months. All these figures give a picture of the situation regarding domestic violence in China.

A number of studies have indicated that wife abuse is linked to female suicide. For instance, Pearson (1995) points out that in rural areas, in-law conflict is a major reason for daughters-in-law to commit suicide. This finding was confirmed in a Chinese report (Xie, 1999) which also found that in-law conflict is the major factor for young rural women to commit suicide.

All the existing findings focus only on the victimised image of women, neglecting the symbolic strength that is implied in the woman’s act of suicide and the powerful meaning that is attached to the woman who kills herself. The present study explores why so many women commit suicide after marital conflicts and what the act of suicide means for the women themselves. The answers to these questions should give us a better understanding of the reasons for the high female suicide rate in China and the cultural-relevant meaning of suicidal behaviour.

Methodology

The data for the present case study are derived from ethnographic interviews with a woman prior to her suicide and with her family members after her death. During my first fieldwork trip in the 1996, I met Fang, a woman living in a rural village in southeast China. The woman was introduced to me by her neighbours, as she was often beaten by her husband because of her conflicts with her mother-in-law. I conducted a two-hour interview with Fang to get a better insight into the
experience of wife abuse. Several months later, when I returned to the village again, the neighbours told me that Fang had committed suicide. Their interpretation was that she was taken by a ghost after a previous conflict with her mother-in-law. This news shocked me, because in my memory Fang was of a woman full of hope and proud of her two sons and her husband. I had not seen any indication that she would take her own life. The first idea that came to me was that she must have had a very difficult time just before her death. The question of why she committed suicide has haunted me day and night, and I felt it was my responsibility to discover the meaning of her suicide, and why and how the collective memory recorded her in the way it had. I decided to do interviews with her family members and neighbours in an effort to learn more about her suicide. The qualitative method is applied in the data collection and analysis. All the interviews were tape-recorded with the consent of the people interviewed. The tapes were transcribed. Data analysis is based on the transcriptions.

Fang’s story

Fang was 32 years of age when she died. She had been married for 12 years and the couple had two sons. Her husband is the oldest of three children and has a younger brother and sister, both of whom are married. His parents are in their 50s and are still strong and healthy. The three families live in the same courtyard in separate houses next door to Fang and her husband. Fang’s marriage was a love match. By all accounts, the couple were affectionate towards one another and seldom quarrelled. In the family decision-making, Fang’s husband had the final say.

Fang had a difficult time with her parents-in-law from the very beginning of her marital life. According to the neighbours, the tense in-law relationship resulted from the parents-in-law’s dissatisfaction with her and with their son’s marriage. Fang came from a hillside village some 80 km away. The people in that village do not grow rice and wheat, so when Fang moved down to her husband’s village she could hardly do any farm work. The husband’s parents were afraid that after the marriage their son would have to do all the work himself. They hoped that their son would change his mind and choose another woman who was better at working in the field. However, the marriage took place in disregard of the in-law family’s wishes. Conflicts quickly arose in the family’s daily life, and there were frequent quarrels between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. The major incidents occurred because Fang believed that her parents-in-law treated her and her husband unfairly, as they seemed to prefer their second son and his family. She wanted fairer treatment.

The events that led up to Fang’s suicide were described in the interviews in the following way. In 1996, during the autumn harvest, Fang’s younger sister-in-law collected all the ripe stems from the field and took them home for winter fuel. She needed a place to store them, and as the two families lived next door, she wanted to put them alongside Fang’s kitchen. As first daughter-in-law, this place belonged traditionally to Fang. The second-daughter-in-law asked Fang for the favour of letting her store the stems there, but Fang refused. Then the second daughter-in-law appealed to her mother-in-law for help. The mother-in-law talked to Fang in the courtyard in an attempt to persuade her to grant the favour, in the course of which a quarrel ensued that went on for a long time. Fang cursed her mother-in-law using inflammatory language (she called her mother-in-law a whore, a very insulting term in China). For this her husband slapped her, angering Fang even further. Then she tried to enter her mother-in-law’s home but the mother-in-law locked her out. Fang returned to her own home and sat by herself in the kitchen crying. Her husband bathed her sons and sent them to bed. Then he decided to have a bath. He went into the kitchen and found that the light bulb had burned out so he went to the store to buy a new one. Unfortunately, the new bulb did not work either and he had to return to the store to change it. It took him almost half an hour to do all this. When the husband went to the store for the second time, Fang left her home and went to a neighbour’s house to tell her that she owed a certain person 40 yuan and asked the neighbour to remind her husband to return the money to that person. She explained to the neighbour that she had used the money to buy a pair of rubber shoes for herself. She also asked the neighbour to take care of her sons. Then she left.

After putting in the new light bulb, Fang’s husband noticed that Fang was no longer in the kitchen. He thought that she had most likely gone to bed. He then took a bath and went to bed where he discovered Fang that was not there either. He went to sleep anyway. Next morning he told his mother that Fang had not slept at home the previous night. They thought she might have gone back to her natal family as she had sometimes done in the past. The second day after Fang’s disappearance, while her husband was preparing breakfast for the children, a neighbour rushed into his house and told him that his wife had been found lying dead in the river.

In-law conflicts and suicide

In-law conflict, especially between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, is a long-standing topic of concern in China. It appears to be connected with the high rate of
women’s suicide, since, as was shown above, family conflict is the major risk factor for suicide among the Chinese population. There are four major reasons for mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts: two women fighting over the love and care of the same man who is both son and husband (Pei, 1987); financial conflicts between parents and married sons, as it is taken for granted in Chinese culture that the parents are responsible for supporting their adult children, and vice versa (Beijing Shunyi Women’s Federation, 1997); the style of residence, education level, level of financial independence, and conflicts over way of parenting (Zhang, 1995); and power struggles between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in connection with the family’s resources (Rong, 2001).

Fang’s husband’s family were living in a traditional lifestyle when Fang came into the family. The mother had the final say in the family decision-making. According to the villagers, this was ‘a very happy family’. The parents had two sons and a daughter. The children were filial and hardworking and the family was well-off. This system changed with Fang’s arrival. It was the first time that the elder son had not followed his parents’ instructions. He made his own decision regarding his choice of spouse, which constituted a challenge to the mother’s authority at home. At the very beginning, Fang was positioned as a trouble-maker and a challenger. The competing relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law was the determining factor in their subsequent conflicts. In Fang’s situation, the in-law conflicts with her husband interacted with other factors that resulted in the suicide and, in turn, the suicide had a permanent impact on these perpetrating factors.

‘Unblessed’ marriage

According to a regional survey on mate selections in rural areas in Gansu, the rate for arranged marriages is 60.8% and for matchmaking 26.2%; love matches account for only 12.9% of all marriages (Xu, 1997). It seems to be common practice for rural adult children to have their marriage approved and blessed by their parents, as they live together with their parents and are sometimes financially dependent on them.

Fang was not the spouse chosen by her parents-in-law. They did not bless and accept this marriage, even after Fang’s death. This put her in a very distressing situation. It was difficult for her to become integrated into the family of her parents-in-law. She was not invited to dine with them when guests came to visit. Even after she gave birth to the couple’s two sons, her parents-in-law did not change much in their attitude towards her. In Chinese culture, having a son is a major contribution by the daughter-in-law to the family, as the son carries the family name. Fang believed that her husband’s parents should have accepted her because of her contributions to the family.

Fang was puzzled about the refusal of the in-law family members to allow their son free choice of marital partner. Marriage has a very important meaning for Chinese women. Semantically, marrying means ‘going home’, which symbolically means that the marriage is the woman’s permanent residence for the rest of her life. The marriage is the permanent resident for the woman for the rest of her life. Therefore, a women’s lifelong career is to support her husband and raise their children (Shi, 1987). A woman derives her identity from her husband’s family. She is named in terms of whose wife she is and whose mother she is. Her status in the family decides her position in the family (Yue, 1991). For this reason it was very important for Fang to be accepted by her in-law family:

I never could understand why they don’t like me; I tried my best to manage this family, and they just don’t like me. I don’t feel I belong. My mother-in-law discusses things with my sister-in-law (her husband’s brother’s wife), but not with me. They invite her to have dinner with them when guests come, but not me and my husband. I never did anything to shame the family. They just don’t like me.

In the interview Fang said that her poor relationship with her in-law family resulted from their refusal to accept her. The parents-in-law preferred the second daughter-in-law because she was born in the same village and had been chosen by the mother-in-law. It seems that the mother-in-law was reluctant to lose control over Fang’s marriage. She continually fed her anger towards Fang by not treating her in the same way as she treated the second daughter-in-law. This made Fang depressed and unhappy. Fang said that she tried to please her parents-in-law at first:

I know they dislike me, but I’m married to their son, I’m a member of the family. At the very beginning when I got married, we lived with them; I tried to do well by them, I did all the cooking, washing and cleaning up at home; I made shoes for them and did the knitting. But they never changed their attitude towards me.

It seems that Fang was determined for a time to do what she thought was right. After her efforts to please her parents-in-law failed, she began to rebel in her dealings with them. She often disagreed with them in family household matters, and objected to many of her parents-in-law’s arrangements for daily life. Thus, the tension between Fang and her parents-in-law gradually worsened:
They still looked down on me, they said I’m good for nothing, and I can’t stand that, I had to do something about it . . . They built a new two-story house for the second son, and they did a lot of farm work for them, but they seldom helped us and it’s just unfair. Two sons are all their blood and bones, so why do they act this way? I can’t stand it.

After Fang had given birth to her first son, her family moved into another house in the same courtyard. This move was a turning point in Fang’s life. Living together with her parents-in-law implied that she was affiliated with them, a dependent family member in the extended family. With the parents-in-law as the authority in the family’s daily life, Fang’s role was that of daughter-in-law rather than a wife in her own family. The move to a separate dwelling meant that she was independent of her parents-in-law in daily life. Her role as wife became more significant and gave her more autonomy. The move did not mean that the two families were now wholly disconnected from one another. Fang still had considerable interaction with her parents-in-law as they lived so close by and Fang could see and hear everything that took place in her parents-in-law’s family. Then Fang began in earnest her long war with her mother-in-law. She frequently criticised her mother-in-law’s preference for the second son, and the quarrels continued at various intervals.

Abusive experiences

The conflicts between the in-law family members affected Fang’s marital relationship. Fang’s marriage was a love match and the couple’s relationship was affectionate. But as the tension between the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law grew, the couple’s relationship changed. In some of the more serious quarrels, the husband would intervene, slapping and punishing Fang for insulting his parents. Each time the husband beat her, he would apologise afterwards and ask her to forgive him; nevertheless, he believed that it was his duty to be filial and respectful to his parents.

The husband began his beatings of Fang shortly after the couple moved out of his parents house. What triggered the beatings initially was an incident in which Fang’s son fell down and broke his leg. Fang believed that it was the mother-in-law’s neglect while looking after the boy that had caused the accident. Fang was so angry that she called her mother-in-law a whore (an extremely insulting name for women in the Chinese language). This disturbed Fang’s husband very much. He asked Fang to stop and to apologise to his mother. She refused. It was then that he slapped her. A similar incident occurred on the day before Fang’s death. Her husband expressed deep sorrow for this in the interview:

I didn’t intended to hurt her, but, you know, sometimes she said very bad words to my mother, and that made me so unhappy, and, especially in front of the neighbours; if I didn’t intervene, they would have cursed me for not disciplining my wife.

No matter what reasons the husband had for beating Fang, his actions put Fang in a very oppressive situation. In the whole family, her husband was the only person Fang could relate to and from whom she could expect support. If her husband supported his mother instead, Fang would be totally alone. The last time her husband slapped her obviously made Fang lose her inner strength and this pushed her over the edge; she killed herself and possibly thereby exerted revenge on the whole family by disordering the family life.

Social isolation

Studies on wife abuse indicate that social isolation contributes to the victimisation of battered women: the more they are isolated from the outside world, the more dependent they are on their husbands and the abusive relationship (Bowker, 1983; Dobash & Dobash, 1980). If Fang was depicted as a challenger, she was a lonely one. She was socially isolated, without substantial support. Fang had little education and could barely read and write. Her natal family lived far away and the lifestyle in her native village was totally different from that in her in-law family. Her parents grew tea, bamboo and trees, not rice and wheat. She never learned how to do farm work, and she spoke a dialect that sounded strange to the villagers in her new home. They nicknamed her ‘mountain girl’. The nickname marked her as a non-local, an outsider. In the Chinese rural community, outsiders are excluded from community life and marginalised because they do not belong to the insiders’ kinship, and kinship is the cornerstone of the interpersonal relationships (Yang, 1995). In Chinese culture, being an outsider means belonging to an ethnic group that has less influence, it means feeling lonely, lacking a sense of security and being subjected to unfair treatment by the community. In their treatment of outsiders, Chinese people are indifferent and exclusive, and are dishonest in interpersonal interactions (Yang, 1995). In Fang’s case, although she was the wife and mother in the marital family and the daughter-in-law in her in-law family, she was still treated as an outsider because the parents-in-law did not accept her as a family member by kinship.

The fact that the marriage was a love match served in a way to escalate Fang’s social isolation. Here there
is a paradox: a marriage that is the result of a love relationship is perceived as being dangerous, a sin that has to be punished. In a study (Liu, 1999) of battered women’s social support network, it was found that in the case of arranged marriages, the natal families substantially supported their married daughters because they believed that if they arranged the marriage, they were obliged to help their daughters to cope with the ensuing problems. In the case of love-match marriages, the situation was just the opposite. In love-match marriages, it is the daughters who make the decision; the natal family has no responsibility to intervene in their married daughter’s marital conflicts. This means that love-match marriages limit women’s support from their natal families. In Fang’s case, this was very obvious. Fang never went home for help after she was beaten by her husband or when she had a conflict with her in-law families. It seems that a love match offers the woman some free choice to marry the mate of her choice, but also limits the resources she can turn to for help. As the relationship between Fang and her in-law family steadily grew worse, her experiences of abuse increased and her situation became exacerbated. Still, Fang did not give up her efforts to change her situation, but she had to cope all on her own.

**Fang’s coping strategies**

As a disliked daughter-in-law, an outsider in the village and an isolated woman, Fang actively tried to change her situation. She used different ways to cope with her situation: she sought spiritual assistance, she made friends outside the family and she ran away several times. She converted to Christianity (as often happens these days in rural China) five years after her marriage. She liked attending their meetings and belonging to the community where she made a lot of women friends:

> We got together often, we sang and sometimes they read to us from books; it was good. I liked that. But the meetings aren’t regular. The last time we met was two months ago.

It should be noted that in rural parts of China, Christian assemblies do not take place in a church but are held informally. Someone might tell Biblical stories, for example. Possibly, attending these meetings enlarged Fang’s social circle and helped to reduce her social isolation.

Fang began to make friends in the village after her second son was born. She could make beautiful shoes and clothes, and was skilled at knitting. So she offered to help the young girls and women in the village, and invited them to come to her home in the evenings. She succeeded in establishing good relationships with the neighbours and earned a reputation among the villagers as a warm-hearted and generous person. Unfortunately, this did little to improve her status in the in-law family. After one of these serious quarrels in 1994, Fang fled home and found a job in Gaoshun, a county in Jiangsu Province, not far from her home. But as she missed her children very much, she returned home a month later.

After all efforts had failed, and especially when her husband continued to support his mother by slapping her in front of her in-laws, we can presume that Fang realised that nobody could help and protect her, and so she took the final step and killed herself.

**Fang’s suicide within the collective memory of the community**

After her death, the people around Fang commented in various ways about her suicide. Her in-law family saw her suicide as a foolish act. Her natal family regarded it as a decision forced upon her by her in-law family. Her neighbours viewed the suicide as a fatal end.

**Suicide as a ‘foolish act’**

After Fang’s funeral was over, I interviewed her parents-in-law, her own parents and her husband’s younger sister. The mother-in law expressed sadness about what had happened, and said that she regretted having locked her door to keep Fang out:

> I never thought she would do such a thing. I should have opened the door and let her in. She was so foolish to do this. She has two sons, and a family to look after; how could she commit suicide?

Her sister-in-law commented:

> It was her decision to do this, nobody forced her to kill herself. It was a stupid act. She did it deliberately.

Her father-in-law said:

> She shouldn’t have done it, everything can be solved; she’s dead now and nothing can be settled.

According to her in-law family, Fang’s act was ‘foolish’ and cost them a great deal: a bad reputation in the village, and the loss of a wife and mother for their son and grandsons. By labelling her death as a foolish act, they minimised Fang’s suffering and subsequent death, as well as their own share in the responsibility for her death. At the same time, they continued to blame Fang for not taking care for her husband and two sons.
Suicide as a ‘forced decision’

Her natal family members believed that she was virtually tortured by her parents-in-law and that this precipitated her decision to end her life. They reported their daughter’s death to the police, claiming it was murder. Several detectives came to investigate the charge and decided that Fang had committed suicide of her own accord. Nevertheless, Fang’s parents and brothers maintained that the parents-in-law were responsible for her death. As partial compensation, they requested that the in-law family hold a big funeral, and considerable memory activities followed the funeral. Her brothers insisted that the ritual of the funeral should be equivalent to that of an elderly family member. The sad news was sent to all the relatives of the in-law family. Her body was kept frozen in the funeral parlour for a week prior to the funeral, and each day cost 100 Yuan (US$10.20). More than 50 relatives attended the funeral. After the cremation, her ashes were buried in the graveyard of her in-law family. A group of monks was invited to hold services for her for a week to lead her spirit to paradise. After the funeral, the ceremony was repeated every week for seven weeks, as it was believed that the spirit of a dead person could return in the first seven weeks, after which it would go to either heaven or hell for its new life. The funeral was arranged as for an elderly family member. It cost the in-law family more than 23,000 Yuan (US$2,800). The average annual family income in China in 1996 was between 4,000 and 5,000 Yuan (US$500–600).

A mystical interpretation of the suicide

According to the neighbours, Fang died as the result of mystical forces; they believed she was taken by a ghost. One of the neighbours related the following:

Fang told me some days before she died that one evening she heard voices in the yard; the voices said: ‘Fang, come up with me, come to me, I will take you away from here.’

Another neighbour said that he heard a woman crying in Fang’s backyard the evening before her body was found in the river. Furthermore, the neighbour who was the last to see Fang before she died reported that, at Fang’s request, she had promised to tell Fang’s husband to pay 50 yuan to another villager, but when she met Fang’s husband the next day, she felt that someone stopped her from giving the message. Then she forgot all about it. All these strange occurrences made the villagers believe that Fang was taken by a ghost. The ‘ghost story’ may serve the purpose of helping the villagers to escape from the strong sense of shared responsibility for Fang’s death. It is possible that they chose this interpretation in order to reduce their own sorrow and sadness for Fang’s husband and her natal family. They did not want to blame the in-law family, nor did they wish to blame Fang for her action. It is possible that they felt guilty for not having prevented Fang’s suicide and for not giving her enough support and care during her lifetime. Furthermore, it was possible that the neighbours in the surrounding areas would blame the whole village for forcing an outsider daughter-in-law to commit suicide. The mystical interpretation could help the villagers to assuage their feelings of guilt and responsibility for the suicide. Thus, a community can benefit by victimising the dead person in a collective story where the death was caused by supernatural forces. This belief then becomes part of the collective memory of the tragic incident.

The meaning of suicide: rebellion in the private space

The case study of Fang’s suicide shows that there was a single main goal that she hoped to achieve: to become accepted by her in-law family as a ‘proper’ family member. After all her efforts failed, she decided to take her life, and symbolically this act gave her a ‘special’ status in the in-law family.

It can be argued that in symbolical terms Fang achieved through her suicide a positive change of her status despite it being viewed as a negative event. First of all, after the suicide an important inversion of power relations could be observed. To die before one’s parents-in-law has several implications. Normally it is the daughter-in-law who arranges the funeral for the parents-in-law; but in the case of the woman’s suicide, the older parents-in-law will arrange the funeral for the younger daughter-in-law. This reversed relationship destroys the family hierarchy and the order of daily family life. Fang’s natal family argued for a grand funeral for her, and by her suicide Fang succeeded in making her parents-in-law bow to her memory and mourn for her.

Second, through her death Fang was for the first time formally and publicly accepted as the most important daughter-in-law in the in-law family. After her death, Fang’s natal family showed a united front. They believed that Fang was forced to her death by her parents-in-law. In a fit of rage, they damaged the furniture in the parents-in-law’s house. And as partial compensation for the loss of their daughter, they demanded that a huge and highly formal funeral be held for her. Fang was buried in the in-law family graveyard and a large stone carrying her name, date of birth and photo was raised over the grave. It seemed to be a declaration to the public that Fang was and is the foremost daughter-in-law in the family. Her parents’ anger was an expression of the care and love that was denied Fang during her life as the wife of a man from
which disabled her, but at the same time she retained a reputation as an outcast in her marital community and an unaccepted daughter-in-law. She lacked individual and social resources, and tried different ways to cope with the difficulties she encountered in her marital life. On a symbolic level she achieved through her death what she had failed to achieve in her lifetime. In this sense, suicide was not merely the ultimate escape, because Fang’s death endowed her with considerable power. Death by suicide is so powerful and significant that it has a permanent impact on the people concerned. It can be assumed that in a patriarchal society, suicide is not only ‘the last resort’ for the person who is suffering, but also a threat to others. By committing suicide, women fight against their oppressors and achieve goals that were unattainable in their lifetime. The price they pay is forfeiting their own life.

The findings from the present study are not representative of all female suicides in China. The study makes the assertion, however, that when considering the high suicide rate among women in China, it should be noted that suicide is one of the ways for women to rebel against their oppressive status in the society and a real denouncement of the unequal relationship between genders in China.

References


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