Text, Practice, and Life Narrative : Bridal Lamentation and a Daughter's Filial Piety in Changing Rural China

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Text, Practice, and Life Narrative: Bridal Lamentation and a Daughter's Filial Piety in Changing Rural China

Fei-wen Liu[1]

Abstract

This article explores, through the lenses of text, practice, and life narrative, how Chinese peasant women as daughters manage patrilocality and carry out—or fail to carry out—filial piety toward their parents. Based on field research in a locale in southern China conducted since 1992, this article focuses on four women's life histories and juxtaposes how these women articulated filial piety as daughter-brides in wedding lamentations and how they practiced it after marriage. This research illuminates how peasant women perceive daughterly filial piety as a complex entailing not only emotional attachment but also peace of mind, tolerance, and material support. For these women, concerns about filial piety emerge as a focus of their maneuvering and negotiating among the strategic possibilities in their lives—their social responsibilities, personal conditions, the broader social–political milieu, and above all, the male support that is often ignored but indispensable in these women's stories.

Keywords

filial piety, bridal laments, practice, life narrative, daughterhood

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Filial piety in traditional China was expressed in terms of care-giving, ancestor worship, the glorification of the family via writing or sociopolitical achievement, and the fulfillment of ritual responsibilities (mainly mourning). In Confucian androcentric rural communities, where ancestor worship, an anchor of Chinese metaphysical worldviews, could not be dislodged and where women's "inner persona" and lack of literacy restricted their participation in the public sphere, care-giving was the last domain where women could exercise filial piety toward their natal parents, save the requisite ritual performances.[1] Such care-giving filiality, however, had to confront practices around patrilocal village exogamy on marriage. Based on the field research I have conducted since 1992 in the county of Jiangyong in southern Hunan Province, this article explores how women as daughters manage the structural constraints of patrilocality and carry out—or fail to carry out—their filial concerns. I will approach Jiangyong women's daughterly filiality through the lenses of text, practice, and life narrative. Inspired by Dorothy Ko's (1994) tripartite model, which construes Chinese women's lives as a summation of shifting realities that engage ideal norms, self-perceptions, and practice, I will use bridal laments, a body of literature women composed and publicly performed in the face of impending marriage, as a foundation from which to reconstruct the social norms and female perceptions of daughterly filial piety. I will also employ Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of practice to investigate how these women maneuver to nurture ties with their physically distant natal parents after marriage. In addition, to better comprehend how these perceptions and practices have changed over time, I will take into account women's life narratives as "a window to personal configurations of history and culture" (Blackman, 1991: 58).

I focus on the life histories of four elderly Jiangyong women. By juxtaposing ideas of filial piety they articulated as daughter-brides in wedding lamentations with how they actually practiced it after transferring their primary support and obligation to their in-laws, we can see the gulf between articulation and practice. This in turn highlights the methodological limitations of textual analysis, an approach that has dominated the study of Chinese bridal lamentation and folk literatures generally (e.g., Tan, 1990). Conceptually, I hope to demonstrate that in-depth ethnographic investigation and a life-narrative approach with its extended temporal dimension, when combined in a practice theory, may complement each other and weave a sociocultural tapestry that is dynamic and complex. Ethnographically, I aim to enrich our limited knowledge of married women's changing interactions with their *niangjia* (natal family) (e.g., Judd, 1989) at different stages in the life cycle and throw new light on the irresolvable contradictions and emotional burden inherent in a woman's life as a filial daughter in a rural community.

Bridal Lamentation, Practice, and Life Narrative

Bridal lamentation prevailed for centuries in Jiangyong and many other areas in southern and southwestern China, among Han Chinese as well as ethnic minorities. A part of wedding ceremonies, the performance of bridal lamentation was a reflexive and reformational occasion whereby the social, emotional, and humanistic (in the Confucian sense) transformations of the bride and her natal community were effected. At the social level, lamentation was a psychological mechanism by which the bride made her way through liminality (Blake, 1978); it was also a mode of "verbal sorcery" that brought forth a tide of favorable fortune and exorcised the forces of evil on behalf of the bride's natal community (McLaren, 2008: 13). As a form of "licensed expression" (Blake, 1978: 17), and perhaps "women's only legitimate means of vocal expression in public contexts" (Johnson, 2003: 30), lamentation allowed women to register the inexpressible, such as protest against androcentric institutions and resistance to "feudal" systems and practices (Tan, 1990). Furthermore, the bride could take advantage of this expressive "space" to demonstrate her talents and virtues (Zhang, 1969), delineate her perception of woman's fate (Ho, 2005), and reinforce affective ties with her natal family (McLaren, 2008). But above all, the ritual of bridal lamentation was the most important public occasion in which peasant women could express sadness and loss upon leaving home and grief over their inability to discharge filial piety after marriage (Watson, 1996; Zhang, 1969). That expression marked filial piety as a "core emotion" (Epstein, 2009) at the center of women's social identity. Since women's voices are largely unrepresented in other ritual discourses, more orthodox genres, and literati writings (e.g., Epstein, 2009; Hu, 2009; Knapp, 2005; Kutcher, 1999; Lü, 2006), lamentation thus provides an invaluable account of women's filial concerns.

Despite its significance in giving voice to usually "silent" peasant women and despite its long history and wide circulation in the premodern era, bridal lamentation has received remarkably little attention; historical documentation and academic research on the practice are extremely scant. This is partially because oral traditions have long been marginalized in Chinese societies and partially because bridal lamentation began to fall out of fashion under the "socialist education movement" (*shejiao yundong*) launched by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the 1960s. The social-political atmosphere that discouraged perpetuation of cultural traditions also censored any research on those practices, making field study difficult for both domestic and overseas scholars. The few extant early investigations of bridal laments had to rely heavily on content analysis of transcribed materials, and field research

was confined to then-colonized Hong Kong (Blake, 1978; Ho, 2005; Watson, 1996; Zhang, 1969). Only recently has research—including studies of the Tujia minority group (Yu, 2002) and the Shanghai region (McLaren, 2008)—been extended into China proper. The government's regulations on fieldwork have become more relaxed, but finding practitioners or witnesses to the performance of bridal lamentation becomes more challenging as elders die and as the custom becomes increasingly unpopular among the young. Because of these constraints, existing scholarship, except for Yu Yongyu's (2002) musical analysis of Tujia laments, often fails to go beyond the text to explore the "extra-textual" (Foley, 1992)—and that is a challenge this article wishes to take up.

My investigation of bridal lamentation began in 1992–1993 when I was conducting research in Jiangyong County on women's unique written script known as *nüshu* (female writing) and the women's singing tradition referred to as *nüge* (female song). At that time, bridal lamentation as part of the nüge tradition had almost disappeared—since the mid-1970s, it had been performed out of personal choice rather than ritual compulsion. In spite (or perhaps because) of its being on the verge of extinction, many elderly women took the initiative to fill my cassette tapes with their bridal laments, an effort that indicated their deep attachment to this nearly lost cultural practice. My understanding of Jiangyong bridal lamentation known as *kuge* (crying song) was therefore based primarily on my informants' recollections of them, laments they had witnessed or participated in between 1910 and the early 1960s, plus a few accounts of a minor kuge revival from the mid-1970s to early 1990s. The revival had occurred after the Cultural Revolution but before the large-scale migration of adolescents to coastal cities to work in the factories.

To move research on bridal lamentation beyond the purely textual tradition, this article will consider Jiangyong lamentation in both its textual and practice dimensions, with reference to women's narration of their lived experiences. Just as Ko's (1994: 8) "dynamic tripartite model" considers seventeenth-century Chinese women's writing to be an intersection of ideal norms, self-perceptions, and practice, Jiangyong bridal lamentation can be used as a text where the protagonist's individual perceptions and society's shared concerns are interwoven. However, unlike the gentry women Ko describes, who wrote throughout their lives, for the women I studied bridal lamentation was a once-in-a-lifetime performance. To further comprehend how the ritually articulated text is performed, or not, in daily life, we need to refer to Bourdieu's theory of practice in conjunction with the anthropological life-narrative approach.

Bourdieu (1977) in his study of parallel cousin marriage in Algeria introduced the notion of "practical kinship" to counterbalance, if not challenge, genealogy-based "official kinship." His discussion of "kin relationships as something people *make*, and with which they *do* something" (35, emphasis in original) highlights the significance of practice as a theoretical orientation toward strategies instead of rules. Any form of practice, according to Bourdieu (1993: 314), is enacted by an actor who makes moves based not on regulations but by positions taken up in a "field," a space of "strategic possibilities." The actor evaluates the situation with reference to the values (e.g., prestige, recognition, and authority) s/he aspires to and the capital or resources (symbolic or material) s/he possesses. Practice in this sense is not a finished object but a process of maneuvering and negotiating, and this reorients our analytical focus from the official model or social structure to agent-centered action and history. Action can be participated in and observed through fieldwork, which is of course time-constrained. To open up the temporal horizon of practice, we need also life history—the trajectory of actions, moves, positions, and encounters a particular individual has experienced (Langness, 1965; Langness and Frank, 1981; Watson and Watson-Franke, 1985).

The life-history approach was once a conceptual embarrassment to academic anthropology due to its literary orientation and supposed lack of scientific validity (Crapanzano, 1984). But in line with Michel Foucault's (1980) proposition of "power," it has become recognized as a meaningful genre for "empowering and giving voice to those who have been regarded as silent or suppressed" (Blackman, 1991: 57), whether an illiterate working woman (Pruitt, [1945] 1967), a household servant (Buechler and Buechler, 1981), a spirit partner (Crapanzano, 1980), or a hunter-gatherer woman in a savannah environment (Shostak, 1981). Insofar as data collection is concerned, the life-history method provides an exceptional resource for uncovering the perceptions and experiences of ordinary people "whose 'silence' reflects our own dependence on the written word and our inability to cope with such an enormous and complicated 'data base'" (Geiger, 1986: 335). As a theoretical topic, life history refers to both an account of life and a life experienced in the world (Runyan, 1986). As an account, it is a symbolic production by virtue of the culturally constructed notions of narrative structure, telling and tellability, poetics and performance—and this raises the issue of how to decode the meanings behind both telling and narrative (e.g., Ochs and Capps, 2001). As a life lived, it reflects its subject's inner world and outer reality; but it reflects only partially and sometimes involves disguise, distortion, hyperbole, and memory lapse—and this raises questions about which part of the life is, or is

not, selected for narration, and how we can infer a broader historical and cultural landscape from an idiosyncratic life story.

Despite being symbolic, subjective, and selective, each life history, as either an account or as an experienced life, is valid and meaningful in its own way. The challenge therefore is not so much how to verify its truthfulness or falsehood but to discover how to locate the narrated life history within appropriate contexts that will illuminate its significance, meaning, and intentionality—contexts including the concerned subject's personal conditions (personality, economic standing, marital status, etc.) and broader social–political and cultural settings. To tackle this challenge, I will interpret the narrated life stories in light of the ethnographic investigation I have conducted over the past two decades or so, mainly my own participant observation in the field and my interactions with the subjects who have been willing to share their stories with me. In addition, with the recognition that a single subject's life experience cannot fully address a complicated social milieu and dynamic historical process, I will rely on multiple life stories to capture a broader horizon of women's lived experiences.

In the following analysis, after a brief introduction to the expressive genre of bridal lamentation in Jiangyong, my discussion will center on four elderly women—their perceptions, practices, and narratives of daughterly filial piety—and use comments or narratives from third-party informants on the concerned subjects for supplementary and intertextual reference. I will examine how the women expressed filiality toward their natal parents in their wedding lamentations and how they did so after taking up different positions and responsibilities in their marital contexts. The four women, Lanying, Qiqi, Nengci, and Meizhu, were born between 1910 and 1940.[2] I chose these particular women mainly because their life trajectories highlight various aspects of China's changing social milieu over the past century, in particular the transition from concubinage, village exogamy, and a family-based agrarian system to the new marriage law, land reform, the commune system, the collectivization of production, and romantic love. Their diverse experiences illustrate the dilemmas any filial daughter might encounter: the double burdens of affinal and natal responsibilities, splitting/shifting identities and changing perceptions of filiality over time, as well as a lack of resources for coping with various challenges.

Bridal Lamentation in Jiangyong

Jiangyong County, historically known as Yongming prior to 1955, is located near the boundaries of Hunan, Guangxi, and Guangdong. Surrounded by

mountains about two thousand meters high, Jiangyong was connected to the outside world by two courier roads during imperial times (Jiangyong xian zhi, 1995). One linked upper Jiangyong, where the Xiaoshui, a tributary of the Yangzi River, flowed, through Dao County (Hunan) to Han Chinese cultural and political centers. The other went through Gongcheng (Guangxi) to link lower Jiangyong, traversed by the Taoshui, a tributary of the Pearl River, to the Yao-Miao-Zhuang minority region. Upper Jiangyong, where Han Chinese and sinicized Yao lived, is the geographic locus of this research.

Upper Jiangyong was a Confucian agrarian community marked by androcentrism in terms of descent line, residential rule, and social authority. In this social context, women neither enjoyed property rights beyond their dowries nor did they take charge of the family's subsistence by working in the rice fields, unless they were born into extremely poor families. Defined as an "inner" or "domestic" persona, women took responsibility for such things as making shoes, weaving belts, and doing embroidery. Concubinage was not uncommon, especially when a first wife failed to bear a male child. If she lacked male support or her very survival was in question, a widow might remarry. After Liberation in 1949, the new marriage law and socioeconomic reforms undercut the authority of certain traditions. For instance, concubinage, bondservants, and the landlord class were abolished; restrictions on village and surname exogamy were relaxed, although patrilineality, patrilocality, and the ideology of *sancong* (thrice-following) persisted. In the past two decades, the village economy has undergone great changes, with a large number of adolescents leaving home for factory jobs in coastal cities. Romantic love has become more popular than arranged marriage. Patrilocality and arranged marriages were the key practices that gave birth to bridal lamentation.

In Jiangyong, bridal lamentation, or kuge, was performed in conjunction with a ritual known as *zuo getang* (sitting at the singing court), which was held for three consecutive days prior to a wedding.[3] During this rite the bride performed kuge and her peers, called *changge nü* (singing girls), sang ritual wedding songs as a group to underscore the solemnity of the event. Broadly defined, zuo getang might occur over a period as long as six months, with dozens of singing girls (depending on the size of the village) invited to stay with the bride day and night, a custom called *pei hongniang* (accompanying the red lady). During the period of pei hongniang, girls did needlework together, shared social knowledge or gossip, and learned the locally distinctive written nüshu and oral nüge, including kuge. As it was described to me, "If you didn't go to school, you wouldn't not know the rites and etiquette. If you didn't attend the singing court, you wouldn't learn the tunes and tempos."[4]

The three-day kuge ritual began with a ceremony called *kaisheng* (initiating vocalization); it was held on the first day of zuo getang. A "good-fortune matron" would be chosen as the kaisheng mistress to lead the wedding ceremonies in the bride's natal village. At this opening ceremony, she stood on the third step of the stairway in the bride's house, with the singing girls nearby and the bride at the head of the stairs on the second floor. As soon as the kaisheng matron pronounced her first line, "Today is a good day, a good time," the singing girls immediately joined in with a chorus known as *wugeng chou* (heartbreak through all the five watches) and the bride then debuted her lament. In other words, the three parties—the bride, the singing girls, and kaisheng matron—sang simultaneously, yet each sang separate lyrics and melodies, which respectively symbolized the bride's past (girlhood days), present (liminal transition), and future (as a happy and fortunate married woman).

After uttering her first lament, the bride descended the stairs, indexing her stepping down from girlhood days, for upstairs was where the unmarried girls' chambers were and where female work took place. (In traditional Jiangyong, maidens were thus referred to as "upstairs girls," or *loushang nü*.) After the bride reached the ground, she gained autonomy in the succeeding kuge, taking the lead regarding to whom she addressed her lamentation. As a ritual performance, the lyrics of her laments were improvised, based on her personal situation while drawing heavily on the formulaic repertoire of the Jiangyong kuge genre. The formulaic or generic repertoire, as Anne McLaren's (2008: 17) study of Shanghai bridal laments has suggested, conveyed a crystallization of the "commonsense" wisdom of the community and dictated how a lament should be formulated in order to meet social expectations. The generic expression of kuge thus projected women's collective consciousness and shared concerns.

Three expressive horizons can be identified in the generic repertoire of Jiangyong kuge: the bride's sentiments upon departure; edification or admonishment about responsibilities aimed at younger generations; and the sensibility of kinship relations, social hierarchies, and key cultural values. Sentiments upon departure were often complaints and expressions of sorrow addressed to parents. Complaints were pronounced with reference to patrilocality: "I was wrongly born a woman, worthless, and therefore must go his village, to another's home." Sometimes, they were aimed at the bias that favors male children:

Parents care about money, not their daughter,
Money is saved for the single son to purchase a house and farmland.

This house and farmland, the daughter has no share in,
Even the paved street her feet touch she only borrows for walking.

As for sorrows, they were often mixed with gratitude and self-criticism for the bride's failure to pay back her parents for their sacrifice:

To bring up sons and daughters, you went sleepless many days and nights.
You have suffered all kinds of hardship and all sorts of difficulty.
When your sons are grown they will pay you back,
But when daughters grow up, they won't.
Daughters are like wild birds deep in the mountains,
Flying off when they are full-fledged.

In addition to expressing sentiments, kuge was also a platform for demonstrating a bride's maturity, such as her ability to edify the younger generation (e.g., cousins and nephews) with words such as "The household won't be well off if a man is not diligent. The trousseau won't be full if a woman does not work hard." Another common admonitory discourse was

I advise my younger brother not to stand around gambling;
There's no future in the gambling house.
Even if you don't lose money, you'll lose time.
Even if you don't lose time, you'll become lazy.
Read more poems and books to improve yourself;
Don't fool around—that will disturb your thoughts.

Maturity was also demonstrated by the bride's command of kinship knowledge and social hierarchies. For instance, when lamenting to a distant relative visiting from outside the bride's village, she expressed courtesy in the form of compliments regarding the addressee's wealth (or dowry), literacy, or auspicious birth place. Still more direct acknowledgement was due toward the bride's maternal uncle (*jiu* or *jiuye*). A key figure in Jiangyong's kin network, the jiuye represented not only the origins of the bride's mother but also a third authority vis-à-vis the bride's paternal lineage for such important functions as witnessing the division of family property. To a maternal uncle, in her lament the bride thus expressed gratitude along with praise:

A newly built courtyard is three *zhang* wide;
There stand three hundred pelicans in two rows.

The pelicans thank the mountains and the waters;
I thank my jiu, for he is where I come from.[5]

In contrast, if lamenting to fraternal relatives who live in the same village, such as *shuniang* (father's younger brother's wife), the bride accentuated their social and geographic proximity:

The Meiying tree, the Meiying vine,
Shuniang lives by the vine along the road. . . .
I visit there three times a day;
Between sunrise and sunset.
Mom asks where I've been.
I've been to my shu's place to speak my sorrows.

While addressing various kinship ties, Jiangyong kuge also highlight women's awareness of two major issues they would confront after marriage: fertility and interaction with affines. Often, when lamenting to a sonless woman, the bride would reveal her sympathy while expressing her best wishes:

In the front garden water chestnuts grow.
They will bloom and bear fruit, though late . . .
The chestnuts will bloom and bear fruit, though late . . .
Our family is truly blessed;
Noble sons and noble grandchildren will eventually come, though late.

If targeting a young married woman, the bride articulated her anxiety about moving to live in a completely strange environment where she would have to cope with new social relations, most critically "his mother" (*taniang*), a term for mother-in-law that carries no little tinge of alienation:

The carp lives in the water (and therefore knows how deep the water is);
Sister, you have experienced what his mother is like.
Does she treat you well?
Does she give you a hard time?
If so, let me know beforehand;
I would then take off my red shoes, and not ascend the steps [of the wedding cart].

To counterbalance the bride's anxiety about her status as a hierarchically inferior daughter-in-law in her affinal context, she needed backup from her

natal home, her niangjia. But niangjia is more of a relationship ideal than an unchanging physical locus of support. After the death of the parents, it would be her brother, and more crucially her brother's wife, who would assume the position of household head. Support would then became contingent. To reinforce that natal connection, the bride often demonstrated her good intentions toward the brother's wife in her lament with compliments on her nobility:

> The moon shines; the moon is bright.
> The moon lights up my sister-in-law's room.
> My sister-in-law's room is full of everything:
> A gold lacquered washbasin and a silver stand.

It might also be expressed in terms of her intimacy with the sister-in-law and therefore her sorrow at their separation:

> Maple tree, maple wood,
> A lantern hangs on the maple's tail.
> The oil lamp is soon blown out by the wind,
> Just as I must soon part from my sister-in-law.

The above excerpts exhibit the three key dimensions of the generic repertoire of Jiangyong kuge—their sentimental, edificatory, and kinship-oriented worldview. With regard to filial piety, women's feelings and understandings are particularly complicated: a complex of love and protest, complaints at female denigration, sorrow at leaving, gratitude mixed with a sense of guilt, and uncertainty about post-marital natal ties. They are part societal expectation and part the bride's own perceptions. Perception, of course, is not simply a lens through which we see the world; it is also molded by the world we live in—it changes the world as much as it changes with the world. When a woman's lifeworld is reformulated socially and physically on marriage, so are her perceptions of filial piety, as we will see.

From Articulation to Practice

Almost without exception, women use the occasion of ceremonial lamentation to articulate their distress at not being able to serve their aging parents on a daily basis once they are married. They understand that marriage is a position-making mechanism that creates multiple new roles a bride must assume: dutiful daughter-in-law, virtuous wife, and later caring mother. These positions compete with, and threaten to overwhelm, a woman's daughterly role in various

ways, as we can see from the life histories of Lanying, Qiqi, Nengci, and Meizhu.

Lanying

Lanying was born in Tangjia Village in 1911. When she was four, her family added a new member, a concubine, who was brought in, not by her father, but by her mother. In Jiangyong, a household would typically marry in a second wife when the first wife had not borne any sons. But Lanying's mother had already given birth to a son, so she did it for a different reason: to quiet her husband's complaints that she could not fetch water from the river because of her bound feet (so her husband had to do it). Lanying remembered, "My mother thus said to my father one day, 'Don't be angry! Let me take 200 *haoqian* to purchase a concubine to do the job.'"

Four years later, Lanying's mother died and this concubine, whom Lanying called *erniang* (second mother), assumed the role of wife. Erniang was quite capable in handling laborious work and daily chores, but she was not sensible or smart enough to manage the household. She could not mend clothes or make shoes—basic female work in peasant Jiangyong—nor even prepare food for entertaining guests. So, as a young girl of eight years, Lanying had to take over these household responsibilities. In later years, she even helped arrange her elder brother's two weddings. His first marriage lasted only two years.

> The couple had acquired a shop where they lived. My brother loved to play the *erhu* [a two-string instrument], even at night. My sister-in-law was pregnant and she couldn't tolerate the "noise"; she wanted to go back to their original house in the village for a restful sleep. My brother became unhappy, and said, "You short-lived old woman, go play dead! And buy a pair of nylon stockings [for strangling yourself] before you go home!" That night, my sister-in-law did just that. She committed suicide by hanging. So I had to arrange a second marriage for my brother.

Marriage in rural Jiangyong involved meticulous preparations, complicated procedures, and careful planning. "I took charge of all the details; my brain swelled so huge!" "My father had to worry about nothing," Lanying proudly related.

Probably because of her extraordinary competence and because she was the sole daughter, Lanying's father was reluctant to let her go. "He said, 'If

she marries, I'll have no one to manage the household!'" Whenever a marriage proposal was brought up, no matter how good the match might be, her father always found some excuse to turn it down. "My fraternal uncle could no longer put up with it, and he said to my father, 'Are you going to marry your daughter to the Son of Heaven?'" Lanying was finally engaged at age twenty-one.[6] But it took another three years for her father to agree upon a wedding date proposed by the man's family—quite late compared with the ideal marriage age of seventeen in rural Jiangyong, as reflected in the local saying, "Marry at seven[teen] but not eight[een]" (*jia qi bu jia ba*). Lanying was not married until twenty-five. "Some villagers talked behind my back: 'See, that old lady hasn't yet married!'"

But in her wedding lamentation Lanying did not complain about her late marriage—indeed, Jiangyong brides most always grumbled about being married so young, never the other way around. Nor did Lanying claim credit for her contributions to the family. Instead, she paid tribute to her father for his hard work and expressed concern about his welfare in his old age, a typical demonstration of a daughter's filial piety[7]:

> How useless it is to raise a red flower!
> When she is as tall as the table, she is still her father's daughter;
> When as tall as the closet, she becomes the woman of his [the husband's] family.
> At age eight, I lost my mother and was raised by my father.
> Now the wedding band, with piping [of *suona*] and crashing [of gongs], is here to take me to his home.
> After suffering all manner of difficulties, you [the father] have finally earned fame and recognition.
> Moreover, you have a grandson seven years old;
> You'll have no further worries for the rest of your life. . . .
> It's only that my mother had left me when I was still young,
> And this makes me inferior to many others.
> I'm not mad that I don't have this or that;
> I'm only mad that my father suffers all sorts of worry,
> Worry about his son, his daughter . . ., and then
> The daughter-in-law who died at a young age.
> Because my father takes good care of everything,
> Now that he is aged sixty-nine years,
> I am to be married and become worthy. . . .
> My elder brother is marrying off his sister;
> With everything meticulously prepared,

The dowry is complete and replete.
But to my father I'm unfilial.
I can no longer keep my father company,
But count on my sister-in-law to serve him.
Father, do not take on heavy loads;
Let Sister-in-law give you a hand.
Let Sister-in-law tackle all difficulties;
This worthless red flower is useless. . . .

This lament to some extent is a self-portrait: Lanying declares herself to be a motherless daughter with a remarried brother and a young nephew. On her transformation from daughter to daughter-in-law, her greatest concern regarding her natal family, like that of most brides, is her parents' future, both in this world (i.e., having subsistence) and beyond (i.e., having offspring to continue the line)—the latter very often, though not in every case, also guarantees the former. This concern results from a daughter's being "useless" to her parents in the Chinese androcentric setting, for "when as tall as the closet, she becomes the woman of his [the husband's] family." Fortunately, the fact that her father has a helpful daughter-in-law and a loving grandson soothes Lanying's worry. This allowed Lanying to concentrate on challenges that came up in her marital context.

Two years after she married, during the Sino-Japanese War, Lanying's husband was conscripted into the army. For ten years, she received no word from him. During his absence, she had to take charge of burying her mother-in-law, whose coffin had sat in the house for eight years—a normal practice in traditional rural Jiangyong, this was considered filial treatment of the deceased. She had also prepared a wedding for her brother-in-law—he was due to be drafted, but his place was taken by his younger brother, Lanying's husband, because the older brother had not yet married.[8] The brother-in-law, despite this huge favor from his younger brother, forced the division of family property not long after his own marriage and left his only sister-in-law, Lanying, with only a quarter acre of land to survive on. To raise her two children, Lanying, with bound feet, earned a living by making soybean curd and wine and selling them at the local periodic market. Fortunately, her husband returned after being "missing" for ten years. But that same year, just when Lanying had extra hands to help with family support and might have been able to assist her natal family, her father, at the age of eighty-one, died.

Qiqi

Qiqi was born into a wealthy peasant family in 1930. Her father had two concubines. The first, brought in not long after Qiqi was born, was vicious; she constantly beat the first wife, Qiqi's mother. Qiqi's mother could not tolerate this treatment and returned to her natal family for good. Several years later, when Qiqi's father died, Qiqi moved to live with her mother and uncles. They made a living by leasing the mother's "dowry land" (*suijia tian*), a 40-*gong* (20-acre) parcel. With Liberation in 1949, renting land was no longer allowed, and the land was eventually confiscated as part of the land reform implemented by the CCP in the early 1950s. They were now forced to work their allotted 3.5 acres on their own. Lacking any experience or skill in farming, the mother, with bound feet, and her daughter, made clothes and shoes in exchange for help in the fields and for grain. Through all this toil and difficulty, mother and daughter depended on each other emotionally and materially.

Such mutual dependence could not last; the daughter had to leave home sooner or later. In 1954 Qiqi was married to a man in a distant village—so distant that it took two days for the wedding procession to travel from Qiqi's natal home in Dayuan Township to her affinal village, Heyuan, in Shangjiangxu Township. Since Qiqi had no brother, her mother was left completely alone, which made Qiqi particularly sad and anxious. In her bridal lament to her mother, she sang:

> Today, before I take leave, I bow to thank my mother;
> On the floor I kneel before her.
> The swallows are building their nest, but in vain,
> Because the young birds will fly away when they are full-fledged.
> Others fly away with brothers [living at home];
> Qiqi flies away without one.
> If I had brothers at home,
> I would be less worried about going to his [the husband's] home.
> His family came to ask for a wedding every day;
> Daughter and mother are thus separated.
> How can I bear to part from my mother;
> How can I bear to leave my peer sisters;
> How can I bear to depart this village, such a nice place!
> I bow to thank my mother and ask her not to worry about me,
> But take very good care of your health.

For Qiqi, marriage meant a definitive departure from home and separation from her natal family as a result of patrilocal village exogamy. Although the local custom of *buluofujia* (delayed patrilocal residence) allowed Qiqi to delay parting from her mother, she eventually cohabited with her husband permanently two years later, in 1956, when she gave birth to a boy. Considering the sonless widow's solitude, Qiqi's husband, referred to as Laohe (b. 1929), decided to bring his mother-in-law to live with them. Laohe can still remember how, during the buluofujia period, his mother-in-law would cry and cry whenever he went to take his wife back to his village for certain occasions (e.g., New Year holidays, the Mid-July Festival, and the seedling planting season when his family needed extra hands). He explained,

> My mother-in-law was a cripple; it was difficult for her to simply get some water to drink, never mind chopping and collecting firewood. We had to cook before we left. But she would eat nothing; she just lay on the bed crying endlessly. Truly there was no one to take care of her.

Laohe's sympathy for his mother-in-law perhaps reflects his feelings toward his own mother, who lost her husband in her late twenties when Laohe was just two years old. Laohe heard a lot from his widowed mother about how she had suffered as she struggled to provide for the family, for example "seeing ghosts when she went digging ditches for irrigating the rice paddy at night." But unlike Qiqi's mother, Laohe's had two sons to back her up—her elder son even quit school at age twelve to help with the farm work. As a graduate of a normal school, Laohe could not bear to see his mother-in-law left helpless; he thus asked for his mother's consent to bring home his in-law, and the two mothers then shared a room together.

Laohe's thoughtful arrangement was quite unusual and distinguished him from the typical son-in-law as portrayed in a local saying, "The yellow mud can't pass the wall; the son-in-law won't provide for his mother-in-law." Indeed, across the entire 300-household Heyuan Village, no one had done such a thing before. When asked why he did so, Laohe did not claim any credit but simply answered, "This is what should be done."

Laohe's unusual move should have solved Qiqi's dilemma over performing a daughter's filial piety, but it did not, largely because of the ensuing famine. Qiqi recollected, "It was a difficult time. In 1957 and 1958 all our cotton plants withered; we lost the main source of the family income." Then followed the implementation of the "communal dining system" (*gonggong shitang*) (1958–1961). Everyone was happy with the communist idea in the

first year, but then the whole village began to suffer from the ensuing food shortage. "Nobody will work if you'll be given food anyway," many village elders commented. To adjust the system, starting in 1959, food was distributed according to one's labor contribution. Qiqi's household had two working units (herself and her husband) and three dependents (her mother, mother-in-law, and son), and the family's survival was seriously jeopardized. To overcome the difficulty, "I had to work all day long. When my mother got sick, I had no time to even bring her to see a doctor," Qiqi said. Despite her diligence, the food supply remained extremely tight, and to relieve her anxiety, Qiqi complained to her mother: "If you can't help, why don't you go back to your own home?!" She even said things like "How come you're not dead yet?! You can only eat and do nothing!" (*zeme hai busi a! chi you chide, zuo you zuobude*).[9] These harsh words contrasted sharply with her lament at her wedding "How can I bear to part from my mother?" In another sense, they resonate with her expression that "the [mother] swallows are building their nest, but in vain."

Qiqi's mother, of course, understood that her daughter had no responsibility to support her—in traditional Jiangyong, a married daughter's filial obligations toward her natal parents were manifested mainly in sending gifts on parents' birthday celebrations and mourning at funerals—but she was still deeply hurt. One woman recalled, "Qiqi's mother would carry her grandson with her to the pavilion of the village, where she complained, 'This daughter has no heart! I've given her all I had and brought everything here, and she now wants to throw me out.'" The village woman sighed, "Qiqi's mother was a literate gentle lady, very polite; who could've ever expected that she would suffer such injustice." Some villagers were sympathetic with Qiqi's mother, but they could do nothing—"After all, the mother didn't belong to the village and was therefore in no position to claim support," remarked the then-village-head named Wenxiang. Probably for reasons between heartbreak and humiliation, Qiqi's mother died before the communal dining system came to an end in 1961.

Worth noting is Qiqi's own account of her mother's stay in Heyuan. Qiqi did not tell me this story on her own initiative—I heard it elsewhere. But on my asking, out of my good intention to compliment her husband's generosity, she quickly responded,

> My mother didn't eat away the root of his [her husband's] family; she had brought money with her. . . . When my husband was in jail in 1962–1970 for political reasons, it was the money my mother had left me that I used to maintain the family.

She was defensive, perhaps more for herself than for her mother: "Laohe didn't consult with me about my mother's plan for where she would live"—as if she might have thought it over if he had. At the same time she admitted,

> My mother's staying here did add a burden to his family, so I had to work extraordinarily hard. I labored like a man, planting seedlings in the paddy field with my pants rolled up. Laohe's mother was very conservative and disapproved of my exposing my legs in public. She scolded, "Shame on you!"

Qiqi was often reluctant to talk about her own mother, but when speaking of her mother-in-law, her tone was always full of joy, comfort, and pride: "She treated me as if I were her own daughter." Daughters-in-law were required to get up very early to prepare breakfast, but "Laohe's mother would lock the kitchen. She wanted me to sleep better at night." She concluded, "His mother thought highly of me" (*kandeqi wo*)—a comment I rarely heard during my Jiangyong field experience.

Quite possibly Qiqi's meanness toward her own mother was a manifestation of her anxiety that the burden of her mother's presence in Heyuan could influence her own standing in her affinal context—especially when the family's subsistence was threatened, her mother-in-law's favor might be put at risk. Even Qiqi's recall of her mother's death is inaccurate: "My mother died in 1958, within just two years after she moved in with us"—but according to her husband and other villagers, her mother lived in Heyuan for almost five years. Her manipulation of those memories, probably a psychological defense mechanism, seems to speak to what actually happened in the outside world as much as to her inner self: She was faced with navigating divided loyalties and the dilemma of being at once a filial daughter, a cherished and hard-working daughter-in-law, and a caring mother in the face of a survival crisis.

Nengci

Nengci, born in 1939, lost her father when she was not yet two years old. She was then sent to live with her maternal grandparents, from whom she learned writing, both the official Chinese *hanzi* and the distinctive local female script known as nüshu. After Liberation, Nengci and her mother moved back to her father's village, Heyuan, to claim the land that had been allotted to them. Unable to work in the fields, Nengci's mother remarried in 1954, after almost

fourteen years of widowhood. In the meantime, Nengci, then a teenaged girl, went to school and became a junior high school graduate—the only girl of her generation in Heyuan with such a high level of education. With that education, Nengci was assigned to work in the county seat in 1958. There, through her roommate, Nengci was introduced to the director of the Jiangyong Police Station, Mr. Li. Li had been sent from Lingling County, the seat of Lingling district (which was responsible for several counties, including Jiangyong), and he came to consider Nengci a prospective daughter-in-law, so he arranged for his son in Lingling to meet her. The two young people were attracted to each other, and soon a marriage proposal was conveyed to Nengci's mother. Nengci's mother initially agreed upon and accepted the bride price, but then she changed her mind.

Nengci's mother opposed the marriage not because of the unusual romance between her daughter and the young man; rather, she had other reasons. The first was her strong emotional attachment to her daughter; she could not bear to see her only daughter marrying out to a distant place, nearly a hundred miles away, somewhere across the mountains. Even in 1993, the drive from Jiangyong to Lingling took four hours. Second, the mother was concerned about her own old age: She wished Nengci to marry nearby so that her daughter could take care of her. Understanding the mother's needs, Mr. Li invited Nengci's mother to move to Lingling County to live where the couple would settle. But Nengci's mother declined, partly because she realized how difficult it would be to live in a strange county where a different dialect was spoken, and partly because she knew what had happened to Qiqi's mother—in sum, such a move was too risky for her. More important, since Nengci's mother had remarried, according to the sancong doctrine, it would be absurd for her to follow her daughter rather than remain at her husband's place, even though he was a second husband.

Nengci's mother was determined to find a different match for Nengci: a high school graduate from their own village. After Liberation, such intra-village marriages had become acceptable. Nengci was upset with her mother's decision and begged her to reconsider. But her mother was not moved and only responded, "You're my only child. Who else can I depend on?! Have you forgotten how I brought you up? Your father died when you were just one and half years old! Can't you see how things look from where I stand?"

"But I already have someone in mind. I don't like the one you've chosen." Nengci argued.

"What does that matter? As long as he works, you won't starve," her mother concluded.

Unable to persuade her mother, Nengci went on a seven-day hunger strike and even attempted suicide. But her resistance did not work. Her bridal lamentation was her final protest:

On ordinary days, I go downstairs to see my mother,
Today I come to lament. . . .
In a dragon year my mother picks an auspicious day
To bury her red flower [daughter] among old graves. . . .
I lament that my parent oppresses her daughter.
I grieve that my mother fails to think things through. . . .
She picks for the daughter a grave nowhere
But in deep mountains, without sunshine . . .,
[Where] I will be covered with black clouds and endure life-long worries. . . .
Today, the red flower has something to say:
The daughter is pushed to death, having no way out.
The daughter had no father in her childhood,
But only the mother, who was widowed for more than a decade.
My mother takes care of me with all her heart,
Took care of this daughter till she was grown.
I pity my mother for what she has suffered;
I understand that each of her bones has been afflicted with snow and frost.
But even so, my mom should not press her daughter,
Press the daughter to marry a villager she doesn't accept.
A beautiful red flower is now stuck in cow dung,
Making her unable to hold her head up among others. . . .
This only explains that my mom does not wish her daughter happy
But would rather bring her to a dead end.

Even though marriage signifies a new beginning, Nengci used images of "graves" and "dead end" to express the death of her spirit, which had been buried with the denied marriage proposal from Mr. Li. Faced with such a charge, Nengci's mother defended herself in her responding lament:

This daughter is my single and noble flower. . . .
When she was one and half years old. . . .
Her father was driven to death by a landlord.
All the family property was taken away.
We mother and daughter had no place to go. . . .

Therefore, we went to Tianguangdong,
To settle down in your maternal grandmother's village. . . .
A few years later, at Liberation,
Mother and daughter returned home. . . .
Here, many things were in need of care,
And yet there was no one to ask for help.
Knowing nothing about farming,
I remarried,
Hoping that the new marriage would bring me a noble fate . . .,
But it did not.
And now there is no turning back. . . .
It is all because of my bad fortune
That I have only a single daughter.
Now that daughter is growing up . . .
She no longer listens to me.
I want to marry her to a man from her own village . . .,
But she refuses. . . .
If I had known that my daughter would be like this [I would have remarried earlier].
But now, the wrong chess move has been made and I can't undo it. . . .
If the daughter is ungrateful and doesn't listen to her mother,
What can I say?

In traditional Jiangyong, a young widow would usually remarry, especially if she had no son. However, if basic subsistence was not a problem, she might maintain her widowhood for her daughter's sake—to protect the daughter from becoming a neglected orphan or even a child bride once the mother had left (Liu, 2001). Nengci's mother, Chen, was widowed at twenty-eight and did just that. Even though she eventually remarried in her forties in order to cope with the effects of land reform, she chose to marry someone from her deceased husband's village. Such an arrangement allowed Chen to have someone to provide for the family's subsistence without having to part with her daughter as a traditional remarriage would demand. This late remarriage had brought Chen a male baby, but she lost it—which is why she cites her "bad fortune." Nengci remained her only child; the only one the mother could count on emotionally, if not materially.

That Nengci's objection to the arranged marriage disappointed Chen is expressed by "If I had known that my daughter would be like this." This counter-factual expression strongly demonstrates the mother's regret at not getting remarried at a younger age, for if she had done so she could have had

male children to depend on and would have had no need to ask her "ungrateful" daughter to marry nearby.

Although strongly dissatisfied, Nengci in the end yielded to her mother. Despite the mother's need for self-preservation, Nengci blamed her for ruining her life. Yet despite the blame, Nengci took care of her mother in her old age, right up until she died in her eighties in 1985. When she talked with me about this history thirty-three years later (in 1993), eight years after her mother had passed away, the sorrow and loss were still reflected in her eyes. But there was another dimension of her feelings that she did not express in her wedding lament, nor did she reveal it to me for another ten years—that is, her feelings of guilt and remorse, a sentiment she probably also concealed from herself. In a meeting during my 2002 field trip, Nengci and I were chatting with our friend Liang—we three have been very close since we swore sisterhood in 1993. Liang had just sung a song recounting a mother's complaint about her ungrateful daughter. The mother had entrusted all her property to the daughter, because she had no son, and expected to be taken care of. But she ended up being kicked out of the family and becoming a beggar. The mother was deeply aggrieved, "If I had known that my daughter was a woman with a hard heart, I would have remarried and been a happy person." The mother cried day and night for seven consecutive days. According to this sung narrative, her tears, symbolizing the daughter's lack of filiality, led to the death of her grandson, her daughter's child.

This story is not at all mysterious, but the way Liang learned it is. When Liang was fourteen (in 1957), a spirit medium was brought in to find out why her mother was ill. On her journey in the underworld, the medium was stopped by an old woman (a ghost) who asked her to help *chuan ming* (spread the news), that is, to carry her lament to the human world so as to appeal for justice. This song was performed while the medium was still in a trance. Liang witnessed the whole process and still remembered this unusual song.[10]

This song apparently captivated Nengci. When Liang and I had moved on to a different topic, she was still consumed with the story. And then in a whisper she interrupted my conversation with Liang and said, "This is a good song, a very good one. I'm going to write it down [in nüshu]"—Nengci is one of the very few who can still read and write the locally developed, centuries-old script.

"Write what?" I asked.

"The song Liang just performed; it's a good song," she reiterated.

She explained, "It's like how I treated my mother. My mother had only one daughter, and I almost abandoned her [in pursuit of romance]. Like

the daughter in this lament, I had no heart, a daughter without a heart!" To Nengci, even though she had in the end obeyed her mother, she knew very well that deep down she had betrayed her in spirit.

Meizhu

Meizhu, born in 1932, was married in 1950 when a new land allotment policy had just been announced by the CCP. By adding a daughter-in-law, Meizhu's new family expected to receive an extra share of land, but their above-average economic standing prevented that. Deeply disappointed, they vented all their frustration at Meizhu and demanded that she work in the fields—their bondservants had just been set free in accordance with government regulations and her affinal family needed extra hands. Meizhu had never done fieldwork before and got sick the next day. Thinking that she had just found an excuse for being lazy, her father-in-law handed her a basket and a pair of chopsticks, meaning that she was expelled from the family and would have to beg for food on her own to survive. Meizhu, used to being a cherished daughter at home, now faced terrible humiliation. Too embarrassed to beg, she went hungry for several days. But even so, it never occurred to her to return to her natal home for help. "Because I didn't want my parents to worry," Meizhu explained. A female cadre learned about her maltreatment at her in-laws' hands and eventually she was granted a divorce by the village committee. This gave Meizhu a chance to build a new life, and she is now the mother of seven children.

Meizhu's filiality was manifested not only in her concealing her troubles from her parents but also in her later caring for her sonless father, whom she had reason to resent for the way he had abandoned Meizhu's mother. Meizhu's mother had borne him no son, and this gave the father an excuse to take a concubine. He was attracted to a bondservant (another household's maid), but her master was willing to give her away only with the consent of Meizhu's mother. Meizhu's mother eventually gave in, but only because her husband beat her every day to force her to agree. After being brought in, the concubine began to run the show: she prohibited Meizhu's father from interacting with his first wife, who was thus forced to move out.

At that time, Meizhu was fourteen and knew what was going on, but probably because of her optimistic and tolerant personality, she hated neither her father nor the concubine, whom Meizhu called *xiniang* (second mother). "In those days," as Meizhu recalled,

whenever I finished the meal, my father would say to me, "Daughter, you are an upstairs girl; just get back upstairs and relax." I would do exactly as he said. But after he went away, I'd go to help Xiniang with her housework, such as grinding green beans, which was quite laborious. I tried to make all my parents happy.

At her wedding, Meizhu sang a lamentation to all three parents. To her second mother, she showed respect and praised this bondservant as if she had come from a noble family—a formulaic lament often delivered to a brother's wife:

She goes to the market for her daughter.
For her red flower [daughter], she suffers a lot.
One pair of white doves fly with tails swinging;
My [second] mother wears only silk fabrics,
Silk and satin from Guangdong,
Not the handmade cotton of Yongming.
Man-made cotton can be found in every household,
But you are the only one wearing silk from Guangdong.
You've been here not long and we'll be separated.

The tone of her lamentation changed from courtesy to sincerity when addressing her own mother, who had been divorced by her father due to the CCP's marriage law, which prohibited polygamy. Meizhu asked her to "resign yourself to reality" (*suibian guo*) and not hold a grudge against the concubine.

While I was lamenting to my own mother, Xiniang hid behind the stairs and listened carefully to what I was singing. She said if I had any word of complaint, she would come out to hit me. But I didn't. Why would I? I only wished that they would get along well.

As for her lament to her father, Meizhu wept as follows:

If I were born a dear son,
I would stay to take care of my father. . . .
[But now] the red book has been sent to the door and my father has received it;
The beautiful palanquin has entered the house and I have to confront it.
The resplendent drum is placed on the table, where it is not supposed to be.

The handsome flute is hung on the wall, where it is not supposed to be. . . .
If I can be kept for another February or August,
Then when the cotton blossoms,
I'll make an extra set of clothes to put on,
And make two extra pieces to put into the dowry trunk.
When I get to his family, I'll take one out and wear it.
I'll earn fame and my father will win recognition. . . .
A beam runs through the house for thousands of years;
But a hornet rests in the house for only moments.

At this point, my father was sobbing, saying "Daughter, wail no more! Wail no more!" So I had to wrap up my lamentation:

All sorts of seeds can always be stored for another year,
But destiny has its own reasons and cannot be negotiated.
I should have been a man but was wrongly born a woman,
I should have been the beam supporting the house for a thousand years,
But I am just a hornet resting there momentarily.
If I were a darling son,
I would stay and take care of my father
Attend to him in his old age.

Meizhu's lament is by no means "original," and yet this formulaic expression drew tears from her father because it played on his pent-up emotions. "My father married a second wife to produce children, but had only daughters. How could he not feel frustrated and sad!"

Although his lack of an heir was painful then, having daughters became his pride, and a source of comfort, later in life.

He often said, "Daughters, you all wait on me with all your heart. When people asked what I had to eat, I always told them whatever I like—whether fish, chicken, pork, or wine—because my daughters would just get it for me. These daughters are nicer than sons."

After Meizhu's xiniang passed away in the late 1990s, the daughters took full responsibility for their father's livelihood. Meizhu and her two sisters (born to Xiniang) took turns (five days a shift) caring for the old man then in his nineties: They brought him breakfast from home in the morning and fixed supper before leaving at dusk. It took Meizhu an hour to walk between her natal (Tangbei) and affinal (Dengjia) villages, a distance considered close.

(Her sisters were spared the trouble of traveling, for they had married within the village.) But geographic proximity alone is not sufficient for carrying out filial expectations, as suggested by Ellen Judd's (1989) perceptive research on a married daughter's interactions with her natal home. She must also be in good health and have free time that allows her to travel. As a grandmother of grown grandchildren, Meizhu is not tied down by the household chores or child-raising responsibilities that face many middle-age matrons or younger grandmothers, and she thus has leeway to be a filial daughter to her father.

Meizhu did not have to neglect her mother either, thanks to her considerate second husband. Before her mother passed away in the 1960s, Meizhu's husband traveled between the two villages; he went to help his mother-in-law before working in his own fields. Meizhu is truly lucky to have been able to manage her filial practices so well.

Conclusion: Confrontation and Negotiation

On examining the women's biographies in Jiangyong's historical gazetteers, *Yongming xian zhi* (1667, 1709, 1846, 1907), we find that to be counted a filial daughter it was absolutely necessary that a woman remained single. This points to the structural tension among the different social roles a woman assumes before and after marriage. Marriage creates not only a series of new statuses but also situations that a woman must accommodate and grapple with later in life: bearing sons, maintaining a companionate marital relationship and good relations with in-laws, and dealing with broader societal intrusions such as food shortages and political–economic change, all of which may complicate the way a woman performs daughterly filial piety.

As discussed above, Lanying is able to be filial because of her unmarried status plus her intelligence. Meizhu, in contrast, can be filial because she is a grandmother who has retired from the responsibilities associated with the roles of mother and daughter-in-law. However, when the roles a woman simultaneously must fill compete, she faces the dilemma of choosing among "strategic possibilities." Meizhu had to trade her (once jeopardized) survival to preserve her parents' peace of mind. Qiqi, under the pressure of a subsistence crisis and perhaps also some psychological burden, had to choose between caring for her own mother and fostering her husband's single heir, between being an unfilial daughter and a considerate (and thus highly regarded) daughter-in-law. Nengci, situated at the crossroads of personal romance and her mother's old-age security, compromised by obeying her mother in action while betraying her in spirit; she complained about her mother's selfishness while criticizing her own ingratitude.

In undertaking their negotiation of life's circumstances, these women evaluated their situation and made their decisions according to their resources and filial concerns. The resources they manipulated include time (which is highly associated with one's social roles: for instance, unmarried girls or old grandmothers enjoy more free time), space (the geographic distance between natal and affinal villages), personal qualities (intelligence, health, ability to work), economic standing, the broader social milieu, and above all, indispensable, though often ignored, male support. When male support in a woman's natal family is lacking (i.e., she is without brother or father), the affinal male—namely the husband—becomes crucial, whether in form of providing labor or offering refuge. The processes by which Lanying, Qiqi, Nengci, and Meizhu marshaled their resources to nurture, or fail to nurture, their interactions with their own parents highlight how peasant women's perceptions of daughterly filiality exist as a complex that entails not only emotional or affective attachment but also, whenever possible, peace of mind, tolerance, and material support.

These perceptions of daughterly filial piety are not fully articulated in bridal lamentations because while at their wedding women may be able to envision what reality may be like, they have not yet come to a comprehensive understanding. It is through daily practice—a process of maneuvering and negotiating, where they are confronted with the outward challenges of lived reality and must learn to manage their inner self—that their filial concerns may be fully realized.

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Notes

1. Female intellectuals can still perform filial piety in terms of glorifying the family by the practice of writing (e.g., Hu, 2009).
2. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
3. Strictly speaking, the bridal lamentation took four days to complete, including *chouwu* (sad house), *xiao getang* (minor singing court), *da getang* (major singing court), and *chumen* (leave-taking). But my informants always reported it as "three days," not counting chumen, that is, the wedding day.
4. This learning process differs from that in Hong Kong where bridal laments were taught by a specialist (Watson, 1996) and in Shanghai where they were learned from one's mother (McLaren, 2008). However, as in Hong Kong and Shanghai, the bride's command of kuge was considered a mark of her upbringing, talent, and virtue (McLaren, 2008; Zhang, 1969). In Jiangyong today, while kuge has faded away, the zuo getang ritual survives, and traditional nüge have been replaced by socialist revolutionary melodies or popular songs learned at school or from television.
5. The gesture of the pelican catching fish in the river resembles a deep bow from the waist; it is therefore used to express respect and gratitude.
6. It was a local custom for villagers to get engaged in early childhood. However, if one's prospective marital partner died before wedding, which was not uncommon in rural Jiangyong, the parents then would not find the child another match until s/he reached puberty.
7. Lanying did not perform a lamentation to her erniang, for she had died one year before Lanying married.
8. During the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), many Jiangyong villagers were forced to join the army. Each family was supposed to provide one member—usually the eldest son was chosen—for conscription.
9. This quote comes from a native of Heyuan Village.
10. One coincidence is that Liang's mother was from Tianguangdong Village, which happens to be the affinal village of the ungrateful daughter in the lament.

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Biography

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