The Feelings of Chinese Daughters towards their Mothers as Revealed in Marriage Laments

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In this article I deal with the Chinese daughter-mother relationship in greater detail than previously. I provide additional texts to illustrate the rapture of a Chinese daughter under the care of her mother and the tragedy of the daughter's departure into marriage.

In patriarchal society the parent-daughter relationship rests on shifting sands of emotion. The daughter has no institutionalized role. In China she is never entered into her father's genealogy, and even after marriage only her surname is recorded in her husband's genealogy. As a daughter she is called p'ei-ch'ien-huo ('goods on which money is lost'). As one who can never requite the expense of rearing her, she literally exists at the sufferance of her parents. If she is reared to maturity before she is abandoned, sold, or given away, she begins to rely upon the very special sacrifice of her mother.

Between 1971–1973, my wife, Linda Chock, and I copied a corpus of 40-odd marriage laments from a Hakka village in Sai Kung, a township in the Hong Kong New Territories. Traditionally the bride sings, chants, or sighs these laments for several days and nights prior to her departure into marriage. Most are addressed to her significant relatives, the majority to women, the most passionate to her mother. The daughter's expressions include tender devotions and regrets, but also remonstrations aimed at arousing mother's maternal instincts.

In Sai Kung the colloquial term for the daughter's laments is chiao ai ('to call for love'). The 'love' refers to a mother's love, hence, 'calling for mother.' For a Chinese woman, marriage means the severance of maternal love more than the union of erotic love. Each verse begins with ngai ai which means 'enduring love,' 'my love,' or 'my mother.' (I have deleted these address terms from the texts below.) In her most intimate lament, the daughter recounts her mother's many sorrows and few joys in rearing to maturity a mere daughter. It begins with the first year in the womb and the travail of childbirth:
First year there was I,
Mother's heart was lifted;
Second year there (I was)
Cradled in mother's arms.
Mother's feet wore embroidered slippers,
Thirty days went by;
Hand shaking off a knife,
Thirty nights went by.
Ginger helped rice mother ate,
There was time for rest;
Ginger helped congee mother ate,
Her severed bowels healed.

The birth of a daughter simply proves that mother is fertile, as symbolized in her embroidered slippers. A hand shaking off a knife is analogous to the effects of post-parturition bleeding. After giving birth, mother is in a state of ritual pollution, weakness and 'cold.' The ginger root broth is the 'hot' food which is served a new mother to 'warm' her empty womb and to restore her strength. After thirty days there is a party to welcome the newborn into the family fold. If it is a female, the celebration is rather more subdued.

The daughter's nursing and bed-wetting continue to sap her mother's strength:

Every dawn eating,
How much mother's blood;
Dusk to dawn mother was consumed,
Three drops of marrow.
How often as mother slept,
Bed mats were wet;
One morning the bed,
Next morning the spread.
At three your daughter's figure was formed,
The shape of roughly hewn stone;
Mother kept an eye out,
Laughing at me in her sleeve.

Then comes the dreaded measles which Chinese treat as the critical stage of child development. At parturition the infant retains the mother's uterine heat and poison. The heat and poison are discharged several years hence through the eruption of measles pustules. One of the fears is that the pustules will leave permanent scars on the child's face:

At four the measles erupted,
The pustules were greatly feared;
Measles pustules broke out,
Mother suffered so.
To rear a son is to be oblivious,
What hardships a mother endures;
Rear a daughter and it's very clear,
How much a mother suffers.
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Having survived the ravages of measles, the daughter's sexual identity is proclaimed as her hair is tied into pigtails, and she learns her domestic duties symbolized in the maintenance of the hearth.

At five your daughter's hair was left long,  
The hair was separated into pigtails;  
At six firewood was carried,  
To make a fire for mother.  
Mother watched,  
Laughing ha! ha!  
At seven a book was carried,  
School was attended;  
At eight the sickle was grasped,  
Grass on the hill was cut;  
By your daughter's ninth year,  
All had been taken in.  
With the villagers,  
Work was accomplished together;  
As mother watched me,  
Happiness was secretly felt.

II

To appreciate the force of the daughter's lament to her mother, we must comprehend her 'persephonian' dread of married life. In the tragic Greek myth, Persephone is abducted from her mother's bosom and married to the King of Hades. The Chinese bride also likens her marriage to a death in Hell as she is handed over to strangers to whom she refers as 'dead people.' Their interest is simply in her ability to bear their male progeny without regard for her erotic needs. Her bridalhood is simply a concatenation of fertility rites in which her ah-sao ('elder brother's wife') imparts fecundity to the bride through the combing of the bride's hair.

Lucky water is poured from the brass dish,  
The jade dish is filled;  
The jade dish is filled,  
The dragon's bed is anointed.

This theme of impregnation and gestation is belabored in one metaphor after another in lament to her ah-sao, and it becomes most explicit in the final verse:

By my brother's left hand,  
My sao's crape gown is removed;  
The bed is full of little dragons,  
Calling father and mother.

The sexual act is linked with the wife's bearing 'little dragons' or sons. The consummation is enacted before the ancestors in the rite of unveiling: the groom raps his bride on the head and removes her veil with a folded fan or
chopsticks. Both are phallic instruments—the word for 'chopstick' has the same sound as 'quickly have sons.' This rite reflects the mother's traditional warning to her daughter that, 'If you become a bride, on the first night no matter what your husband does and no matter how it hurts, you must quietly endure it.' Perhaps this is what is symbolized in the rape of Persephone by the King of Hades. The bride's dread of sexual encounter with a stranger and of bearing his children finds voice in her laments to her 'sisters' in terms of how she keeps her lotus under wrap, nurtures her body to resist invasion, is unprepared to give felicitous greetings, or how her new pair of scissors would be difficult to open and would cut the dead people to death!

III

Whatever the father feels toward his daughter, his primary concern is to uphold the family face and to promote family financial interests. The mother, on the other hand, may promote her daughter's interests within the confines of the patriarchal society. Here once again the mother sacrifices for her daughter, for the mother's institutional interests lie in the welfare of her son and his agnatic kin. Thus it is to the mother that the daughter appeals for mercy and reprieve. She addresses mother with the same plaintive sounds, ngai ai, now meaning 'enduring sorrow,' 'my sorrow,' 'my mother.'

The daughter constantly compares her fate to the vegetables and livestock which the family raises to sell. 'In the tenth month the mustard green goes to seed, and mother becomes worried lest she cannot sell it.' The daughter remonstrates that she is not yet grown, that she has not yet gone to seed, and she begs her mother to:

Rear me several more years,
It'll not be too late to sell (me then).

Often her comparison of her fate with that of other livestock is unfavorable. In succeeding verse she bewails the fact that whereas cows and pigs are bought and sold on a rational basis, there is nothing rational in the buying and selling of a daughter. (In this verse the prospective mother-in-law is referred to as the 'bitch,' and her son is the 'runt.')

People know how livestock are sold,
Everyone chooses the cow by its foot;
My mother has no way of choosing,
Much less knowing if the bitch is evil or not.
People know how livestock are sold,
Everyone chooses the cow by its low;
My mother has no way of choosing,
Much less knowing if the runt is naughty or not.
People know how livestock are sold,
There are several months to look them over;
My mother would sooner die,
Much less take a month to look over the new key
to hear it jingle:
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When the bridal chair leaves the father’s house, a cup of water is thrown over the chair: as the water can never return to the cup, the daughter can never return home. Unlike other Asian cultures, the more patriarchal Chinese allow no period of testing to see if the bride and groom are compatible. There is no way for the bride to know the quality of the ‘new key’ before it is inserted in her lock for keeps.

The enigma of her mother’s betrayal becomes most poignant in the following verse as the daughter describes how her mother has sold her to the ‘dead people.’

Mother is with the dead people,
(Their) mouths make the same sounds;
Beef is fried with ginger,
Ginger is fried and fried.

There is a strong pungency in the air as the negotiations are opened.

Mother is with the dead people,
The talk reaches accord;
Beef is fried with ginger
Ginger is fried with sugar.
Mother is with the dead people,
The talk is then sweetened;
Dead people send a one-footed raven,
To come proclaim life.
Mother utters one sentence,
There is approval;
Dead people send a one-footed raven,
To come proclaim death.
Mother utters one sentence,
There is release;
The ocean freezes the heart,
Sand is dashed to the bottom.

A single utterance by mother seals the daughter’s fate, and the daughter feels like a grain of sand tossed in the ocean depths. In patriarchal society, daughters ‘live in rage at their mothers for having accepted too readily and passively “whatever comes.”’

Dead people call to fetch (me),
Mother calls to sell (me):

Then the rains fall, ‘mi...mi...’ in a dissipating drizzle, symbolic of mother’s tears. Mother’s display of grief is not convincing to her daughter:

Water presses on terraces,
Each sluice is opened;
Mother talks about grief,
Her heart is relieved.
As the sluice gate relieves the pressure on the terrace bunds that enclose the paddy, mother's heart is actually 'opened,' that is, 'relieved.' The next verse is similar: Mother's heart is like a stone which cools in the water:

Water swirls little stone,  
With each swirl it cools;  
Mother talks of grief,  
Her heart cools.

In Chinese, 'Her heart cools' means 'Her heart gladdens:' this theme is reiterated again and again in this and other laments. Mother's grief is superficial; her tears are like a drizzle and not like the churning ocean or the gushing river:

Only deep in the mountains,  
Water flows over the rocks;  
Never in my mother,  
Tears flow from the eyes.

Does the daughter see no pain in her mother's eyes? In Sai Kung the bride's mother is extremely contrite over the loss of her daughter. She steadfastly bears her daughter's ill-mannered remonstrations, wears her work-a-day clothes, and absents herself at the moment of her daughter's final departure. In her autobiography, after gaining perspective on her own motherhood, Ning Lao T'ai-t'ai recalled her mother's eyes:

When I left my mother she always sat with her face set and her eyes wide open. She did not smile but she did not weep. She held her eyes wide open and her face firm to keep from weeping.11

When the daughter is sold into marriage, it is towards her caring mother she turns for reprieve. But even if mother is all-loving, she is not all-powerful. The hand of maternal love is constrained by the patriarchal social structure to be a hand in betrayal. The daughter's laments pay homage to her mother's nurturance and sacrifice. They also reproach mother in attempts to arouse mother's remorse—'Mother's heart is like a stone which cools in rapid waters.'

NOTES


2. We copied these laments from a set of notebooks in which the village girls, who had become literate in recent years, had transcribed them in ideographs from their still active oral tradition. The girls appear to have made no attempts to refine their laments in the process of transcription. However, there are many places where the Hakka word has no ideograph, or where the girls are ignorant of the correct ideograph, and they use other ideographs for their sounds in Hakka. In my translations I have tried to remain faithful to the content of the verse without regard for the original rhyme and rhythm. I am grateful to Ms. Chan Yuk-Yun, a University of Hawaii student, for her help in deciphering some of the more cryptographic expressions.
'The custom of marriage lament is known in the Chinese folklore literature for much of mainland South China. See for example, Chang Cheng-P'ing, Weeping Songs (Hong Kong New Territories Folkliterature Study, Volume 1, Yu Hua Publishers: Taipo, Hong Kong, 1969. In Chinese). I know of no reported tradition of marriage lament in Japan, Taiwan, or Southeast Asia. However there is in North India: Hari S. Upadhyaya translates an apparent lament in his article on 'Mother-Daughter Relationship Patterns in the Hindu Joint Family,' Folklore Volume 79 (Autumn, 1968), p. 226.


4. In my corpus of lament the groom's side is referred to as Yin-jen ('dead people'). See 'Death and Abuse in Marriage Laments,' op. cit. In Chang's collection (1969. op. cit. p. 41) the bride laments to her mother how she, the daughter, is one among a long line of Chinese heroines who falls under the hands of the hu-fan ('barbarians').


6. The tragedy of Persephone is an allegory of marriage in patriarchal society. After Persephone has been taken against her will to Hades, she is morose and fails to eat until she bites into the pomegranate, a metaphor for conception. Having eaten the fruit of conception she is doomed to remain in her state of mortification and tribulation away from the primal unity with her mother except during specified periods.

Upon entering her new house, which in lament she calls 'Hades' and 'house of the dead,' the Chinese bride is extremely reserved and eats little or nothing at the wedding feast served by her new family. However, once she has eaten of their seed and borne their children, she too is doomed to a life of tribulation from which she can never return to her mother except during specified periods.


8. In a Chinese folksong, a young maiden wonders what girls are for?

   Pigs are raised,
   Their flesh to eat;
   Dogs are raised,
   The house to guard.
   Cats are raised,
   Mice to catch;
   Your stupid head is raised,
   For what purpose?


9. The prospective mother-in-law is literally kou-ma ('bitch'), and the groom is szu-tzu ('small corpse' which is more colloquially rendered as 'runt,' 'urchin,' or 'creep').
