

TO CHASTEN SOCIETY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF WIDOW HOMES IN THE QING, 1773-1911*

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During the last decades of the eighteenth century, in the Jiangnan region, a new type of public philanthropic institution arose: societies and homes for chaste widows, generally known in Chinese as *xuli hui* or *qingjie tang*. Most research on this institution discusses it only in the context of the nineteenth century, implying that it was essentially a phenomenon of the post-Taiping era (Gao 1990 [1935]; Lum 1984; Tao 1991). A more precise and complete historical reconstruction of the institution has recently been provided by the Japanese scholar Fuma Susumu, who argues that the origin of widow homes can be traced back to the late eighteenth century. According to his evidence, the idea of a home for chaste widows was first conceived in 1773, by Wang Zhong of Yangzhou; a year later, the first home was established in Suzhou. Fuma rightly emphasizes that the first organizations for accommodating chaste widows were essentially for widows of poor scholars, and that the institutions extended their services to other social classes only later on, in the nineteenth century (Fuma 1991).

The present study, while confirming Fuma's basic findings, sets out to explain the social and ideological forces that lay behind the proliferation of widow societies in the Qing. I am particularly interested in tracing the links between the cult of widow chastity, the familial model of philanthropy, state ideology, and local social activism in the development of such societies during a period of increasing social disorder. First, however, it is necessary to highlight the importance of the institution's development: after the appearance of the first model and before the outbreak of the Taiping rebellion in 1850, at least 56 widow institutions were established in the provinces of Jiangsu,

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Zhejiang, Hunan, Guangdong, Fujian, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Guizhou, and Hebei, although most of these were concentrated in the two provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang (41 out of the 56, or 73.2 percent). After 1850, the spread was even greater: at least another 132 institutions were established in the half century between 1850 and 1900, reaching the provinces of Hubei, Gansu, Anhui, Yunnan, Henan, and Shandong. In the remaining eleven years of Manchu rule, another 28 institutions were founded (finally reaching Jiangxi). Thus, a total of 216 institutions were established between 1773 and 1911, not including those numerous multi-functional institutions, quite common in the nineteenth century, that included aid to chaste widows as one of their many functions (Leung 1991).¹

When compared with the other major types of philanthropic institutions—foundling homes, poorhouses, and dispensaries—that were established at the beginning of Manchu rule, chaste widow institutions seem to have been a belated effort and their number relatively small.² But their organizational principles are most revealing of the nature of Chinese public philanthropy of the mid- and late-Qing period. They reflect the deep-seated anxiety of the elite classes, as well as the lower gentry, over the preservation of Confucian virtue in a period of increasing social violence, especially against young widows. They reveal the enormous gap between the ideology of widow chastity and the social conditions of the later Qing period.

Chaste Widow Institutions as a Moral Instrument

The emergence of chaste widow institutions was not only part of the philanthropic movement of the late imperial period, but was also closely linked to the penetration of the cult of chastity. Indeed, one major purpose of these institutions was to uphold the cult. It is commonplace to say that the late Ming and Qing period saw an increasing obsession with women's chastity, and that widows' virtue in particular was a topic of much discussion. The conventional wisdom has been that the phenomenon was indisputably the outcome of the development of Neo-Confucianism since the Song (Chen 1978 [1937]:177-82). This was certainly the view of those anti-traditionalist scholars of the early twentieth century who condemned it as oppressive and reactionary. More recent studies, however, look for explanations of the cult of widow chastity in

¹This research project has not taken into account materials on the following regions of the Manchu empire: Jilin, Heilongjiang, Xinjiang, Qinghai, Tibet, Mongolia.

²The first foundling home was established in 1655. There were at least 972 foundling homes and related institutions established throughout the empire during the Qing; the first poorhouse was probably the one established in Suzhou in 1694, and the first public dispensary was established in 1656. See Leung 1984:313-14; 1987:147. For the numerical count of the various institutions see Leung 1991.

changes in social life. For example, Jennifer Holmgren considers the remarriage widow's increasingly limited right to property to be the main basis for her aspiration to chastity. Susan Mann, on the other hand, sees the cult as a form of protection of widows against sexual abuse (Holmgren 1985; Mann 1987:49). The search for the "real" reasons behind the cult will certainly continue to generate further debate and speculation,³ but there is at least agreement on the popularization of the phenomenon by the nineteenth century. Mark Elvin calls the system of arch-building for chaste widows "an assembly line" by the mid-nineteenth century. Mann, taking the spread of chaste widow institutions as an illustration, calls the process an example of Friedl's "lagging emulation" (Elvin 1984:135; Mann 1987:51). In other words, by the time the idea that widows were supposed to remain chaste was widely accepted by the common people,⁴ the official ritual to honor chaste widows had lost much of its initial glitter.

However, the apparent triteness of the cult does not mean that it had by the nineteenth century become a mere formality, incapable of provoking any ideological reflection. On the contrary, as shown by the proliferation of chaste widow institutions, it was precisely during this later period that the ideological content of the cult had its greatest impact on the larger society. As we shall see, the basic principles of the widow institutions reveal a very active concern over the fundamental tenets of the cult of chastity. In terms of basic organizational patterns, the chaste widow societies were identical to other major charitable institutions such as foundling homes and poorhouses: a board of local notables took turns running the institution with funds donated by local people and individual local officials (Leung 1984, 1986, 1987; Fuma 1986). However, an important feature unique to the chaste widow institutions

³One of the most recent and provocative studies is T'ien 1988.

⁴Early Ming rules stipulated that chastity arches could only be erected for widows of commoners; arches could not be built in honor of the widows of officials and degree-holders. In 1523 the rules were liberalized: it was stipulated that arches were prohibited only for the widows of higher degree-holders (*jinshi* and *juren*) and those widows who had already been given an honorific title (*mingfu*) because of the deeds of their late husbands, thus leaving a larger number of widows of lower-degree holders and petty bureaucrats eligible (*Da Ming huidian* 1976 [1587]:79/8a-b, 10a-b).

The Qing state apparently followed the same stipulations: the Yongzheng Emperor reiterated the above Ming regulations (*Da Qing huidian shili*, 1899:403/20a-b) but the privilege of honoring chaste widows was extended to Manchu imperial lineages, which was obviously a conscious effort at simulation of a Chinese custom (*Da Qing huidian shili*, 1899:403/8b-10a; see also Elvin 1984:124).

Thus the ritual aspect of the cult did not undergo a simple process of downward penetration. It was reclaimed by the middle-lower strata of officialdom during the Ming, and by the aristocracy during the early Qing, when it was initially meant to be valid only for the lower classes.

was the criteria devised to determine who would receive relief. These criteria clearly show the strong moralizing character of the widow institutions.

Other charitable institutions had originally employed such moralizing criteria, but this particular feature had gradually faded in the course of a century of bureaucratization and decentralization (Leung 1988, 1990a). By the nineteenth century, the major criterion for assistance by these institutions was poverty. But this was not a sufficient reason for a widow to be aided by a *qingjie tang*. As the name of the institution clearly indicates, the widow had to prove that she had the potential to be officially and ritually honored as a chaste widow before she could hope to receive aid. The great majority of the institutions followed the definition of “chaste widows” established by the state in 1304 under the Yuan: only those who lost their husbands before the age of thirty *sui* and remained unmarried till fifty *sui* could be called chaste widows and honored as such (Elvin 1984:123). This age requirement was not always strictly applied, but the basic principle implied in this definition was—that is, the potential duration of a woman’s widowhood was often the yardstick used to measure priority. One of the earliest organizations, the *xuli hui* in Dantu (Jiangsu) (established in 1785), classified relief recipients into four categories in order of priority: those who vowed not to remarry after the death of their fiancés (the *zhen nü*), those who were widowed before thirty *sui*, between thirty and forty *sui*, and after forty *sui*. They were given a monthly stipend of one tael, 350 cash, 280 cash, and 200 cash, respectively. Moreover, only the children of those who were widowed before forty *sui* and the adopted children of the *zhen nü* could receive relief money and be given a stipend for their education in a local charity school. This set of rules was a copy of that of the first society for chaste widows created in 1774 in Changzhou (Suzhou) (*Dantu xian zhi*, 1879:36/45b; *Deyi lu*, 1869:3/2a-b), which served as a model for later institutions. There were naturally variations on the model. Some simply accepted widows younger than thirty *sui*;⁵ many only specified the age of the widows aided, but not the age at which they had to have lost their husbands. Some institutions also claimed that they would take in widows who were not impoverished, on the understanding that for some reason it was impossible for them to stay with their families.⁶ Indeed, those institutions that classified the relief recipients simply by their level of poverty were a mi-

⁵Examples: The *Lizhen tang* in Gaoyou established in 1844 (*Zai xu Gaoyou zhou zhi*, 1883:7/6b), the *Quanzhen tang* (1846), the *Qingjie tang* (1871), the *Baojie ju* (1840) in Shanghai (*Shanghai xian zhi*, 1872: 2/24a; *Songjiang fu xuzhi*, 1883: 9/17b-22b; *Shanghai xian xushi*, 1918:2/43a-b).

⁶According to the regulations of the widow home *Quanzhen tang* in Songjiang (1829), women with landed property could be accepted if their family situation was “troubled” (*Songjiang fu xuzhi*, 1883:9/17b-18a).

nority.⁷ Even for these, it was understood that the older women (those over fifty), though poor and widowed, were qualified only to enter the poorhouses. The widow institutions were essentially for younger, thus marriageable and potentially reproductive, widows.⁸

One major function of many of the widow institutions—the application for collective arches of chastity to honor qualified widows in their care—necessitated observation of the official definition of chaste widows. Those institutions that placed particular importance on this function usually accepted young widows no older than thirty (*Dantu xian zhi*, 1879:36/45b; *Deyi lu*, 1869:3/2a-b). One good reason for them to focus on acquiring this honor was the gradual loosening of the requisites: even though the Yuan and Ming regulations required a minimum of twenty years of widowhood for a woman of fifty to be qualified for an arch, the number of years required for widows who died before fifty was gradually reduced during the Qing to fifteen, ten, and eventually (in the latter half of the nineteenth century), in some regions, to as few as six years (*Qingding libu zeli*, 1844:48/11a; *Jiangsu shengli*, 1883: “1881 regulations” 9a-b; *Jiangdu xian xuzhi*, 1883:12 xia/21b). The relaxation of this requirement probably also explains the variations in the age stipulations of the different widow institutions. The great importance the institutions placed on the age requirement for relief recipients clearly indicated that, even though widows had become by the late eighteenth century objects of public charity, the main goal of the institutions was to encourage widows to remain single.

Here, one difficult question arises: if the popularization of the cult of chastity had been in process since the fourteenth century, and if the deed of giving relief to needy widows had been high on the lists of charitable acts for benevolent societies and private individuals as early as the sixteenth century (Leung 1986:57; Brokaw 1987:192), why then did charitable institutions specifically for widows appear only as late as the 1770s? The first foundling homes and dispensaries had indeed by this time already been established for more than a century, and poorhouses for more than fifty years. My argument

⁷So far, I can only find three that explicitly stated poverty as the sole criterion for aiding widows: the New Society for Widows (*Xuli xin hui*) in Gaoyou (1841) gave aid to widows of four different levels of poverty (*Zai xu Gaoyou zhou zhi*, 1883:7/5a); the society in the market town of Yangxin in Baoshan *xian*, established in the 1840s, classified widows into two categories according to poverty (*Baoshan xian zhi*, 1921:11/4b); and the institution in Nanxi in Sichuan (1900) followed the same practice (*Nanxi xian zhi*, 1937:2/30b).

⁸Fuma Susumu points out, however, that there were some variations in the actual age of the widows aided by some late nineteenth century chaste widow homes: in an Anhui institution in 1886, for example, the average age was twenty-seven, whereas in the *Guoyu tang* in Shanghai, in the category “below thirty,” the average age of the widows aided was thirty-six in 1882. See Fuma 1991:83, 89.

is that the emergence of widow institutions occurred at a time when the ideal of female chastity clashed most violently with social realities. The institution was an instrument used by local elites to uphold the cult of chastity despite unfavorable material conditions. It reflected a high point in the increasingly evident Confucianization of the philanthropic movement.

It is well known that the cult of widow chastity was often in contradiction to the material needs of the widows and their families. The advice of the famous administrator Wang Huizu (1730-1807) that the livelihood of needy widows should be protected by allowing them to remarry is one illustration (Wang 1991 [1889]:3/18a-b). Such recommendations were not rare even among nineteenth-century scholars. As for a widow who had property, it has also been argued that the Ming-Qing property law was such that, even when she had no interest in remarrying, the family of her deceased husband had considerable incentive to force her to do so, in order to appropriate her late husband's share of the family property and even her own dowry (Holmgren 1985:12-14; Ebrey 1991:18-19). The pressure to remarry, either from poverty or from a family, was particularly hard on widows during years of scarcity. That was the reason behind Chen Hongmou's (1696-1771) entreaty to families in the Suzhou area to take moral responsibility for their widows (Chen 1896 [1760]:46/2a-4a).⁹ The advice of Wang and Chen shows that pressure on widows to remarry had always been heavy, and that the moral responsibility for preservation of the chastity cult had rested largely with their families.

However, beginning in the early eighteenth century, the crime of coercing young widows into remarriage no longer seemed to be only a matter of simple manipulations within the family. In the more commercialized area of Songjiang (Jiangsu), groups of bullies, hoping to extort money from men eager to purchase a wife, reportedly employed a variety of ways of coercing widows into remarriage: they might spread slander about certain widows, creating public indignation that pressured them into remarriage; in extreme cases, they might actually abduct widows and force them to remarry. As a consequence, "those poor people who married the widows not only were deprived of their possessions, but also became heavily indebted. As for the remarried widows, they lost not only their honor but also their wealth" ("Qingpu xian wei jin difang bihai gaoshi bei," 1984 [1701]:445-50). Chen Hongmou observed in 1759 that local bullies arranged remarriage for young widows without their consent and abducted them for the wedding, frequently provoking widow suicides; another local official, Zhu Chun (1709-1784), also pointed out that "marriage (of widows) by abduction" was a problem which confronted local

⁹Chen indicated in this 1760 text that it was common in the Suzhou area for families of young widows to arrange for, and sometimes coerce them into, remarriage.

officials (Chen 1883 [1759]:3/35a-b; Zhu 1867:7/15b). All of these observations were made in the commercialized parts of Jiangsu province, where there was a long history of urban bullies committing organized social and economic crimes (Ueda 1981). While it was relatively rare to see organized crimes committed around the remarriage of widows in the late Ming period, such events became increasingly noticeable in the mid-eighteenth century and developed into a serious public problem in the nineteenth century.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the abduction of young widows in the areas around the prefectures of Suzhou, Songjiang, and Taicang in Jiangsu, and Jiaxing and Huzhou in Zhejiang, was already rampant; this problem could be found, perhaps in lesser frequency, even in less developed places like Funing. The local people classified the crime into three types: striving to marry a widow (*zhengjiao*), coercing a widow to remarry (*bijiao*), and snatching a widow away for remarriage (*qiangjiao*), all of which were masterminded by local “loathsome bunches of ruffians” (*yigun*) or “unemployed bullies” (*wuye diaomin*) in order to extort money from the families concerned. The government of Jiangsu province repeatedly issued public prohibitions against such abuses in the latter half of the nineteenth century, but apparently to little avail (*Jiangsu shengli*, 1869: “1867 Prohibition” 3a-b; *Jiangsu shengli*, 1875: “1875 Prohibition”; *Jiangsu shengli*, 1883: “1880 Public announcement” 4a-b, “1881 Public announcement” 11a-b; *Funing xian zhi*, 1886:1/5b-6a). Local governments also took drastic measures to curb the practice: convicted criminals involved in kidnapping widows were punished by decapitation or hanging. We know that at least three such criminals were actually executed in Taizhou and Jiading by Shen Baozhen (1820-1879) when he was the governor-general of Jiangsu (1875-1879) (*Jiangsu shengli*, 1875: “1875 Prohibition” 3a; *Jiangsu shengli*, 1883: “1881 Public announcement” 4a).

Besides harsh punishment, the Jiangsu provincial government also developed stricter measures to protect the chastity of young widows: the rural *baojia* and the *xiangyue* (community compact or lecture) systems cooperated to protect young widows at risk. Persons in charge of the local *baojia* system, the *dibao*, were to submit the names of those widows in their locality who wished to remain unmarried to the general *xiangyue* bureau (*xiangyue zongju*) at the county seat. The *xiangyue* bureau, or in some places, the local notables (*shendong shezhang*), would then issue to the concerned widows official certificates, which could be stuck to their doors to ward off potential criminals, and used as evidence against those people who might try to coerce them to remarry. Poor widows who would prefer to remain unmarried could also be given financial aid by the *xiangyue* bureau. The funds for the issuing of certificates and welfare money to the needy widows were apparently pro-

vided by the magistrates and local worthies. In some places, the *dibao* of a locality that had succeeded in purging the place of widow-abduction for one year would be awarded another year of service, and a silver medal if there had been no such crime for three years. This system, occasionally known as the *baojie ju* or *baojie fangjian ju* (chastity preservation bureau), appeared to be an innovation of the Shanghai *xiangyue* bureau, and was adopted widely in the Shanghai neighborhood and in counties like Changshu, Jingjiang, Nanhui, and Jiangdu (*Jiangsu shengli*, 1883: "1880 Dispatch" 1a-5a, "1881 Registration form" 1a-5a).¹⁰ The semi-bureaucratic *baojia* system could even be used by non-governmental widow institutions to facilitate their recruitment: the institution in Shanghai not only relied on the *dibao* to certify the identity of interested widows, but would award the *dibao* 700 cash each time he introduced a widow to be a resident of the institution (*Shanghai xian xuzhi*, 1883:9/26a).

The public outcry against the abduction of young widows by local bullies from the eighteenth century on unmistakably reflected an increasingly serious social problem in the more commercialized areas of the Jiangnan region. Disguised rhetorically as a degradation of local mores (an unscrupulous few, for the sake of money, prevented innocent and well-intentioned widows from preserving their chastity) was the fact that the cult of chastity was increasingly threatened by the lack of young women in the marriage market, especially in the more commercialized and urbanized areas. Marriageable women, including young widows, had become a rare and thus expensive commodity. The lack of precise and systematic demographic data in this period makes all assumptions about male and female ratios in the reproductive age groups no more than sheer speculation.¹¹ However, an official document of the late nineteenth century tells us that even people of that time were conscious of the problem of the lack of marriageable women in the market, especially amongst the lower classes:

¹⁰ Prominent Nanhui gentry found the existing *Xuli ju* not adequate to eliminate the crime of widow-kidnapping and adopted the same model as Jingjiang, by involving the *baojia* system; see *Nanhui xian xuzhi*, 1929:3/17a-20b; *Jiangdu xian xuzhi*, 1883: "baojie ju," 12 xia/19a, 21a.

In more remote counties like Funing, it was reported that local worthies took measures to prohibit the abduction of young widows with some success, but no details were given (see *Funing xian zhi*, 1886:1/6a).

¹¹ Ho Ping-ti's study indicates a high male-female ratio in Jiangsu province in 1776-1850 (from 1.28:1 to 1.35:1), and there seems to be an increase in the ratio in the post-Taiping period in some counties of Zhejiang (as high as 194.7; see Ho, 1959:59, 68). But the data he obtained from gazetteers yield no information on age groups. The studies based on genealogies by Liu (1983:287-89) do not seem to imply high male celibacy in this period. However, genealogies may exclude information on most people from the lower classes; it was such people who were most likely to have material difficulties in acquiring wives.

The reason [for the increase in the crime of widow abduction] is that since the upheaval [of the Taipings] there are very few women in the various counties of Jiangnan. Peasant households who have accumulated some modest resources and would like to have wives to take care of the family find it difficult [to get a wife] (*Jiangsu shengli*, 1883: “1881 Public announcement” 11b).

Though the writer of the document attributed the lack of women to the Taiping upheaval, the fact that such crimes began to gain notice as early as the first half of the eighteenth century strongly suggests that the demographic reasons behind them were structural ones that had been in existence for a long time.¹² The upheaval could only have aggravated the situation.

The emergence of societies and homes for chaste widows in the latter half of the eighteenth century, especially in the Jiangnan area, and their great expansion after the Taiping Rebellion, reflected a concerted effort on the part of elites at all levels to address the problem of the widening gap between the ideal of the cult and harsh social reality. When the cult was observed essentially by the upper classes alone, who had the cultural resources and material means to protect their widows from potential harassment, there was no need for society at large to uphold the cult organizationally. It was not until society felt the tension between the ideal of the chastity cult and social reality to be unbearably great that chaste widow institutions appeared. One of the stipulations of the Society for Widows established in 1785 in Dantu stated that the society was to protect widows from being abducted by bringing bullies to justice (*Deyi lu* 1869:3/3a). In more remote areas like Guizhou, where social crimes were probably less well-organized, an institution was nonetheless created in 1838 by governor He Changling (1785-1848), in order to protect widows from “contamination by violence” (He 1882:5/54a-b). The later drastic governmental measures to curb widow abduction, mentioned above, were taken when the tension between the ideal of widow chastity and the real scarcity of women reached a breaking point in certain areas after the Taiping Rebellion. In this environment, both non-governmental institutions and the government endeavored to contain social violence by reinforcing the

¹²Another interesting example of how nineteenth-century officials related the widow homes to the demographic problems of China is Wang Shiduo (1802-1889) (1935:2/20a, 3/29a), who recommended a wider establishment of widow homes as a measure to reduce birth rates and restrict population growth, which he considered to be the major reason for China’s great crisis of the 1850s. I am grateful to Dr. Lin Man-houng for bringing this valuable piece of information to my attention.

Wang’s interest in the widow home might be due to his Nanjing residence’s proximity to the institution. After the Taiping Rebellion, in 1865, he sold his house to the institution so that it could expand its facilities (*Jiangning fu chongjian puyu si tang zhi*, 1886:1/17a).

moral ideal of the cult, in a sense deepening the gap between the ideal and social needs.

Such attempts were doomed to failure. The proof was that the phenomenon of widow-abduction was never really eradicated by these measures. The organizers of the institution in Tongxiang (established between 1875-1882) continued to consider their task to be an effort to exterminate the "evil custom of abducting and selling widows"; so did many of the widow institutions created during the last decades of the Qing. A few examples are those established in the market town of Nanxun (Huzhou prefecture), Shanghai, and Nanhui (Songjiang prefecture) as late as 1896, 1894, and 1907, respectively. During the first years of the Republican period, in the Shanghai region, there was even a new organization to search for and accommodate kidnapped women and children (*Tongxiang xian zhi* 1887:4/8b-9a, 16a-b; *Nanxun zhi* 1920:35/1a; *Shanghai xian xuzhi* 1918:2/43a-b; *Nanhui xian xuzhi* 1929:3/17a-b; *Jiangwan li zhi* 1921:10/2a).

The *qingjie tang*, which attempted to provide material relief and social protection to needy, younger widows, remained primarily a moral instrument, despite its appearance as an institutions developed to address a real social problem. In times of crisis, the collective behavior of the chaste widow institution was also one of moral display, as illustrated by the example of the Suzhou widow home during the Taiping upheaval: the majority of the residents of the home moved to Taixing, on the safer northern bank of the Yangzi, with the manager and the chief administrators, and were unharmed during the uprising. Many of those women who remained in Suzhou committed suicide to preserve their chastity when the Taipings came to the city (Yu 1933 [1903]:30/18-19).

As an instrument of moral instruction, the chaste widow institution was no new invention. It was, in many ways, simply an elaboration of the clan charitable estate (*yizhuang*) system.

The Widow Home as an Extension of the Family Process

No other public charitable institution established during the Qing can show us more clearly its character as an extension of the family system than does the chaste widow home. The foundling homes took in abandoned infants, the poorhouses the destitute elderly, and the dispensaries gave aid to the helpless sick, but the chaste widow homes accommodated needy widows, not only to offer them protection from a hostile environment, but also to enable them to fulfill their familial obligations: to take care of the in-laws who survived their husbands and, especially, to educate their children. We need to look more closely at the origin and the organization of the homes to clarify

this point.

Fuma Susumu traces the origin of the concept of the chaste widow home to a letter to a friend written in 1773 by the Yangzhou *kaozheng* scholar Wang Zhong (1745-1794) (Fuma 1991:51-2). In this letter, Wang, who was then active as a secretary for various local officials, envisaged one public chaste widow home, to be called *zhen ku tang* (hall of chastity and hardship), for each county seat. A charity school was to be attached to each home to educate the young sons (from five to ten *sui*) of the widows. They were to be given a Confucian education or training in a craft until they were sixteen to twenty *sui*. Those who became successful and wealthy would be expected to return one third of their income to finance the widows' home. The widows would do needlework and weaving in the home to earn an income, and the institution would also give extra grain and cloth to them if they had in-laws to care for. Run and financed entirely by the local people, especially by the ex-residents of the home (viz. children of the widows), the institution should be free from bureaucratic intervention, just like the majority of the existing charitable institutions (Wang 1971 [1773]: "bielu"/12a-14a). Wang Zhong, who lost his father as a young boy and was brought up by his mother, had bitter memories of their being snubbed by wealthier members of the clan during the lean year of 1756. It was the famine in that year that had also motivated Chen Hongmou to write the text cited above urging families to protect their poor widows (Wang 1971 [1773]: "bielu"/14a; "buyi"/18a-b). Wang's plan for a public widow home was—besides being an expression of guilt over his suffering widowed mother¹³—above all an accusation of the inadequacy of the familial welfare system and a projection of the system onto society at large.

At almost the same time that Wang conceived his plans, the Changzhou scholar Peng Shaosheng (1740-1796), who was also a Buddhist lay monk, organized the first society for poor widows in his hometown in 1774 (Fuma 1991:48). Though there was no direct indication that Peng's society for poor widows was inspired by Wang's ideas, its regulations reflected much of the same spirit: young children and in-laws of the widows were also given material aid, young boys were given education in the local charity school, and the society was entirely financed and managed by local notables.¹⁴ It was this

¹³Wang Zhong was certainly not the only one who was motivated by guilt. In the same region, in the county of Ganquan, one of the backers of the home which was established in the town of Gantang in 1809 pushed for the creation of the home there to commemorate his widowed mother and aunt (*Gantang xiao zhi* 1855:3/15b). The role of guilty sons of widowed mothers in the establishment and running of widow institutions might have been greater than we think.

¹⁴There is no record of the regulations of the society established by Peng Shaosheng in

fairly uniform concept of widow homes, shared by at least two prominent scholars of the late eighteenth century, that triggered the founding of the first series of widow institutions in this period.¹⁵

Since the first societies for widows did not have premises of their own, the relief delivery method was basically outdoor—that is, relief was distributed to the widows from the headquarters of the societies. In fact, this remained the most common relief method for widow institutions throughout the Qing, as it was simple and relatively effective. As the societies later developed into institutions with buildings of their own, a more elaborate system combining relief with confinement was conceived, especially in major metropolitan areas like Suzhou, Nanjing, and Shanghai. Although outdoor relief was still practiced by these institutions (that is, money was regularly distributed to qualified non-resident widows), it was their system of confinement which reminds us of many of the austere family rules of the Confucian tradition, and it was this association with Confucian familial values that became emblematic of the institution in the nineteenth century.

Four of the biggest widows homes, the *qingjie tang* in Nanjing (established 1806), Suzhou (1812), and Shanghai (1871), and the *quanjie tang* in Songjiang (1829), were governed by detailed regulations, which are fortunately still extant. These provide a picture of the principles that were to shape the more ambitious of the institutions for widows.¹⁶ For example, the Nanjing home was the first of its type to provide both room and board to needy widows. Initiated by a Buddhist monk and one of his devotees, the institution was from the beginning substantially financed by rich local traders and one prosperous Yangzhou salt merchant. The rich resources permitted

the two papers on this society that appear in a collection of his essays: “Xuli hui huixiang wen” (Huixiang Text on the Society for Widows), in Peng 1921:1/2b-3a. His father, Qifeng, also wrote a preface to a text, no longer extant, on the origin of this society: “Xuli hui yuan qi xu” (Preface to the Origin of the Society for Widows), in Peng 1785:10/21b-22b. However, the society established in Dantu in 1785, which copied its regulations from Peng’s society, clearly recorded its rules (*Deyi lu* 1869:3/2a-3b).

¹⁵All of the scholars known to have been involved in the organization of widow homes were *kaozheng* scholars. This may imply a deeper ideological relationship between such institutions and scholarship of the late eighteenth century (an issue which lies beyond the scope of this article). I owe this observation to Benjamin Elman.

¹⁶The following information is from the sets of regulations of the four homes: “Qingjie tang zhangcheng,” Suzhou 1819 (in *Deyi lu* 1869:3-2/1a-12b); “Zhangcheng” of the *Qingjie tang* in Nanjing (Jiangning) (in *Jiangning fu chongxiu puyu si tang zhi* 1886:1/17a-20b); “Qingjie tang zhangcheng” (in *Jiangning fu chongjian puyu tang zhi* 1871:5/7a-12a); “Juncheng quanjie tang,” “Nanhui xuli ju” (in *Songjiang fu zuzhi* 1883:9/17a-22b, 28b-33a). These are by far the most complete and detailed sets of regulations on chaste widow homes that we have, although other more laconic accounts exist in great quantity in gazetteers. Such accounts support the information in the fuller standard texts used in this paper.

the institution to board regularly over one hundred widows with their children within the building.¹⁷ Despite the resources and the good intentions of the philanthropists, the life of the widows was one of austerity. They were not allowed to go out at will. The only occasions when they could go out were the illness or death of their own parents or in-laws, the weddings of their own children, and the two annual "tomb-sweeping" festivals, when they could visit their late husbands' graves. Even then, they were accompanied by the elderly employees of the institution, who would take them back to the institution the same day. Under no circumstances could the widows stay overnight outside the home. Nor were they allowed to receive visitors freely. Only their closest female relatives (usually their mothers and mothers-in-law) could visit them in their living quarters twice a month. All other visitors were forbidden to enter the inner quarters. Female visitors and their own male children over fourteen *sui* could talk to the widows in the middle courtyard across the inner gate; male visitors were only allowed to talk to them in front of the second gate across the courtyard. These were not allowed to stay long, nor to come frequently. All errands were run by employees of the institution, who were to report every trip to the manager.

Very similar rules applied to the Suzhou widow home, though we know that, there, widows could earn income by selling their needlework, apparently the only activity they were encouraged to occupy themselves with. Food, clothing, and bedding were also standardized in the Suzhou institution.¹⁸ The Songjiang and Shanghai homes, which began to have living quarters only in the early 1870s, had rules almost identical to those of the Suzhou institution, but were innovative in accommodating not only the children, but also the mothers and mothers-in-law of the widows (*Songjiang fu xuzhi* 1883:9/20b).

One important aspect of the relief system was the emphasis on the educa-

¹⁷ "Qingjie tang beiji" (Inscription on the History of the Chaste Widow Home) 1812 *Jiangning fu chongjian puyu tang zhi*, 1871:6/10a-12a.

There is no precise figure for the number of widows accommodated in the pre-Taiping period. From the same source, we know that from 1865 to 1871, the number decreased from 222 to 138 (1/2b-5b). If the higher figure was due to the influx of women seeking refuge from the devastation in the immediate aftermath of the Taiping Rebellion, the lower figure might reflect the "normal" number of widows accommodated before the upheaval.

¹⁸ Inmates had rice gruel for breakfast and rice for lunch and dinner. Meat (four ounces each) and fish were provided twice a month. Half a catty of meat, four rice dumplings (*zongzi*), and two salty duck eggs were provided for the Dragon Boat Festival; half a catty of meat and two moon cakes for the Mid-autumn Festival; one catty of meat and one fish for the New Year. Those who preferred to have money instead of food were given the equivalent value in cash. They were also given standard summer and winter clothes. The wadded cotton in their blankets was changed every three years, quilted jackets every two years, and new cotton clothes were given once every one or two years (*Deyi lu* 1869:3-2/8b, 9a-b).

tion of the male children of the widows. All of these institutions had a charity elementary school (*yixue*) attached to them, which gave free instruction to widows' sons below the age of sixteen *sui*. The more talented would even be given an opportunity to sit for the civil examinations. Those who had no aptitude for a scholarly career would be given craft-training until they were old enough to leave the institution.

All four widow homes, as well as the majority of the other institutions in the country, provided some pocket money, medical care, and funerals for resident widows. Residents might be expelled from the home if their behavior did not correspond to the norm—that is, if they indulged in gambling or quarreling, or in some cases, if they practiced Buddhism by chanting sutras, etc. While they could live in the institution for their whole life if they behaved correctly, they could also hope to leave the widow home in dignity if their sons were able to make an honorable living and were willing to take care of them.

Though these strict rules are reminiscent of some medieval European nunneries, there is no way to compare the two in more meaningful ways. The austerity of the institution for chaste widows had its origin in traditional Confucian family rules. The strict division of the premises into outer and inner quarters where the females were confined, the prohibition against the women leaving the home, even for brief periods, the regularity of daily life, including the stress on hard work (weaving or needlework), the emphasis on education for the sons and their filial piety toward their mothers, the ban on popular religious texts, and so on, all were familiar values to widows who chose not to remarry. Moreover, the fact that such widows sought refuge outside their natural families implied either extreme poverty or antagonistic family relations, and suggested that they needed seclusion which would protect them from a dangerous world. For some widow homes, the severe reclusive policy limiting the visits of family members was a kind of reprimand of the widows' families for failing to take care of them.¹⁹

If the families of the widows could not provide them with the moral or material protection needed for the preservation of chastity, making it necessary for them to seek refuge elsewhere, the widow homes would recreate for them a social milieu not dissimilar from that of a proper Confucian family. Within this environment, the widow could preserve her chastity, fulfill her duty to continue the descent line of her late husband, and even, in some

¹⁹This is explicit in the rules of the home in Liangshan in Sichuan, which state that since the family and the neighbors of the widows could not take care of them and sent them to the widow home, "even though this does not mean that there is no more kindness and no bond between them, they after all can no longer socialize as usual" (*Liangshan xian zhi* 1894:3/6a).

cases, perform filial piety toward her own parents or in-laws. With a bit of luck, she might even be successful in launching her son on a scholarly career and her daughter on a decent marriage.²⁰ On top of all this, the home could even honor her and her family with an arch of chastity. The 1903 tribute to the Suzhou widow home written by the late Qing scholar Yu Yue (1821-1907) emphasized that, in the ninety years since its establishment in 1812, the home had managed to obtain official chastity awards for 150 widows, and provide an education to “countless” orphans, some of whom even made their way into the local academies (Yu 1933 [1903]:30/18-19). Thus, widow homes were in effect an extension or reconstruction of the family process.

I have argued elsewhere that the foundling home ideal of the early Qing period underwent some profound changes as it was put into practice in the post-Qianlong period; most notably, infants were no longer secluded in an institution, but were put back into their natural home by the new *baoying hui* system (Leung 1990b). This decision to reconstitute the family shaped the widow homes as well; thus, organizers of widows’ homes tried to reconstruct a whole family system around each widow, to protect not only her but her dependents as well. This was one of the reasons why the new *baoying* system was frequently combined with the widow institutions in the nineteenth century.²¹ The rapid expansion of community charity schools after the eighteenth century was also part of the same process whereby the clan charity system was extended into society (Leung 1989).²²

Not only were these institutions an extension, or imitation, of the family system, but they also marked the high point of the Confucianization of the philanthropic movement which began in the late Ming period. No other charity can illustrate this point better than the widow institutions.

The influence of Buddhism and Daoism in the early phase of the development of public but non-governmental charitable organizations has been relatively well studied (Sakai 1960; Brokaw 1991; Fuma 1983; and Smith 1987).

²⁰The Nanjing home, among other similar examples, took care of widows’ daughters up to sixteen *sui*. Their mothers were expected to choose a husband for them when they reached that age. The institution would give 2000 cash for the expenses of the marriage (*Jiangning fu chongjian puyu tang zhi* 1869:5/10b).

²¹See Leung 1990b. Many nineteenth-century foundling institutions simply combined the function of preserving chastity with that of caring for children, e.g. the society in the town of Yuepuli in Baoshan was called “Baoying jingjie” (*Yuepuli zhi* 1934:10/2a). Also, in the mid-nineteenth century the Nanjing foundling home clearly stated that while the foundlings kept in the early Qing period were real orphans, those who were kept in this later period were mostly children of the widows of the widow home located next door.

²²My preliminary survey of eleven prefectures of the Lower Yangzi region shows that at least 83 charity schools were set up during the Qing before 1820, the majority of which (68) were built after the eighteenth century. There was a further acceleration of the development in the nineteenth century.

It is true that religious influences never quite disappeared from the general development of the charitable institutions throughout the Qing. Innumerable institutions, in their formative stage as charitable associations or societies, held their meetings in Buddhist or Daoist temples (*Songjiang fu xuzhi* 1883:9). Numerous institutions had altars to various gods which were worshipped regularly (see, for example, *Songjiang fu zhi* 1815:16/13a; *Songjiang fu xuzhi* 1883:9/16a; *Tongzhou zhili zhou zhi* 1875:3/6b; *Jiashan xian zhi* 1894:5/16a; *Pinghu xian zhi* 1886:4/22a-b; *Nanxun zhi* 1859:34/20b; *Jiangyin xian zhi* 1878:1/25b; *Shanghai xian zhi* 1872:2/25a; *Kun-Xin liang xian xuxiu hezhi* 1881:3/13b-14a; *Chang-Zhao hezhi gao* 1904:17/9b; *Shangyang xian zhi* 1873:2/24a). Indeed, the entire philanthropic movement was heavily influenced by a wide variety of popular beliefs. However, after 1724, when the Yongzheng Emperor ordered the nation-wide establishment of foundling homes and poor-houses (Leung 1984:121-22), Confucianization seemed to be the increasingly dominant trend in the overall development of philanthropic institutions. Let us examine this point in the context of the chaste widow institutions.

We have already seen that, at the beginning of the organization of the widow institutions, there were some obvious Buddhist elements: the first society for chaste widows was set up by Peng Shaosheng, the Buddhist lay monk. He was converted to Buddhism in 1773 after having turned down a magistrate's post; barely one year later, he established a series of charitable societies including the one for widows (Miura 1988:459-63). Similarly, the creator of the first institution that accommodated widows was a Buddhist monk (see above). Moreover, the establishment of "societies to release sentient beings" (*fangsheng hui*), which had strong lay Buddhist overtones, was again very much in vogue at this time.²³ The nature of lay Buddhism in the eighteenth century, which was dominated by two emperors sympathetic toward Buddhism, has been very much ignored by scholars who have focused research instead on the *kaozheng* movement.²⁴ Thus it is difficult at this stage

²³The importance of the *fangsheng hui* in the movement of charitable societies in the late Ming is discussed in Fuma 1983:193-204. Peng Shaosheng reorganized a *fangsheng hui* in 1774 in connection with his other charitable societies. See "Wenxing ke chongzheng fangsheng hui yin" [Introduction to the Re-establishment of the *fangsheng hui* in Wenxing ke], in Peng 1882:7/10a-b. I have not systematically investigated the incidence of the organization of *fangsheng hui* in the eighteenth century, but it seems that many were organized in connection with the other charitable societies and are recorded in gazetteers. One such example, picked at random, is the *Pinghu xian zhi* (1886:4/31a-33b) in which it was recorded that three *fangsheng hui* were established or re-established during the late Qianlong and Jiaqing periods.

²⁴Two rare, and brief, studies on the problem (Lu 1983:V; and Huang 1991) stress the influence of Buddhism amongst Confucian scholars and the potential tension between this belief and the dominant school of *kaozheng* in this region.

to compare the eclecticism one sees here with the syncretism that had been so prominent during the late Ming period. But obviously there was some continuity between the two phenomena, since late Ming benevolent societies were frequently invoked with veneration by eighteenth-century philanthropists, as shown in Peng's writings. However, the major difference from the late Ming case is that the few Buddhist features of philanthropy during the Qianlong period were mostly formal, and were almost immediately overshadowed in substance by Confucian values.

Again, the case of Peng Shaosheng's first society for widows is revealing. Though Peng created the society out of religious compassion (his attempt was also certainly facilitated by the good situation of his family), the main motive for this particular effort was his anxiety over the fate of the poor widows of his own kind—scholars. "The widows of poor scholarly lineages lead an even harder life than those of ordinary families" (Peng 1839:vol. 26/12b-13a). This point was elaborated by Shaosheng's father, Peng Qifeng (1701-1784), in his preface on the origin of the widow society: "Those simple and needy families are not watched over [by society], and whenever circumstances require, [their widows] can be employed to do manual work for other families and can still be self-sufficient. As for the widows and defenseless orphans of the scholarly families, they are lonely and helpless; their strength does not allow them to support themselves, and their status makes it difficult for them to beg from others." And, even if material difficulties could be overcome by hard work, there was the key problem of educating the orphan: who could bear the humiliation of seeing them "sink into the lowly world of shops and businesses" when they should receive a decent Confucian education? (Peng 1785:10/22a) Here Peng joined Wang Zhong in singling out widows and orphans of their own status as the objects of their deepest concern. Obviously, scholars of the late eighteenth century began to see their values threatened by an increasingly difficult environment. Fuma Susumu is quite correct in characterizing the first organizations for chaste widows as efforts at "self-salvaging" by Confucian scholars; the central purpose of these institutions was to reduce the hardship first and foremost of widows and orphans of scholar status (Fuma 1991:48-51).

Similarly, one of the first widow societies, the one we have already seen in Dantu (established 1785), specifically stated that primarily widows of "respectable scholarly families" (*qingmen shi zu*) were to be accepted, although an extra quota (*fu ce*) of 100 was also established for women from ordinary families (*hanwei zhi jia*) (*Deyi lu* 1869:3/2b). One should therefore not be surprised to observe that throughout the Qing, among the widow institutions, there were a significant number that gave material aid to widows mainly because they were impoverished members of the Confucian scholar class. In

general these were called *ruli hui* (Societies for Confucian Widows).

From our preliminary survey, among all the 216 institutions for chaste widows, at least 30 bore the name "*ruli hui*," or clearly stated that the priority was to give aid to scholars' widows (13.8 percent). At least 23, or 10.6 percent, clearly had a charity school attached (not including those that gave stipends for the children to go to local charity schools); six had both features (five in Jiangsu, one in Gansu). The majority of these 47 institutions were found, again, in Jiangsu and Zhejiang (27 *ruli hui* in the two provinces, representing 90 percent of all such societies; 18 institutions with charity schools in Jiangsu alone, representing 78.26 percent).²⁵ One must also mention the fact that quite a number of organizations for chaste widows only accepted widows of officially registered government students (*shengyuan*), who had formerly been enrolled in local academies (*shuyuan*). Indeed, local academies were also a potential source of financial or administrative support for widow societies.²⁶ This phenomenon might be related to the general impoverishment, both in economic and academic terms, of *shuyuan* students in the eighteenth century (Woodside 1990:176 ff). The incongruity between the need to observe the cult of chastity and the actual material difficulties of doing so was certainly most deeply felt by this lower class of Confucian scholars who, despite their poverty, were expected to uphold orthodoxy.

Members of the lower gentry were also increasingly involved in the organization of these institutions. Many were initiators of and donors to widow societies and homes. In some places, they were also managers or active partic-

²⁵ These societies and homes for "Confucian" widows represented 24.4 percent of all chaste widow institutions established in Jiangsu and Zhejiang before 1850 (10 out of 41), and 18.6 percent of all institutions set up between 1851 and 1911 (17 out of 91). See Leung 1991.

These figures are bound to be underestimated, as most extant sources on institutions for chaste widows do not provide full information on their organization.

²⁶ Some examples: the *Rugua rugu hui* of Changshu (established before 1821) only aided widows and orphans of the late students of the *xian* academy (*Chang-Zhao hezhi gao* 1904:17/3b-4a), and from the "Rugua hui zhangcheng" (Rules of the Society for Confucian Widows; 1852), we know that the society was largely financed by the famous Ziyang Academy and Zhengyi Academy, (*Deyi lu* 1869:3-4/1a-3a); the same is true of the *Ruli ju* of Kunshan (established 1881) (*Kun-Xin liang xian xubu hezhi*, 1923:2/4a-b) and the *Rugua hui* in Haining (established in 1893) (*Haining zhouzhi gao*, 1922:6/5a.)

The *Xuli ju* in Ganquan of Yangzhou aided the female family members of students of the local school in the following order of priority: their widows, widowed daughters or daughters-in-law, widowed nieces and sisters or nieces- and sisters-in-law (*Jiangdu xian xuzhi*, 1883:12 *xia*/20a). Many *shuyuan* fulfilled the function of certifying the identity of widows who applied for relief; many also verified the accounts of the institutions, e.g. the one in Nanxun (*Nanxun zhi*, 1920:35/7b).

Some chaste widow societies were simply located inside the local academies, as in the case of the one in Shimen (Zhejiang) which was inside the famous Chongwen Academy (*Jiaxing fu zhi*, 1879:24/31a-b).

ipants in the institutions. A notable example is the widow home in Yangzhou. Established in 1840 by a *jiansheng*, the institution had twenty-six members of the lower gentry (*wensheng*) who processed the applications of local widows to enter the home. The distribution of relief money, as well as the general administration of the institution, was also assumed by members of the local gentry, probably of the lower strata.²⁷

Whether this prominent feature of the chaste widow institutions could be considered an illustration of the link between "male anxiety" and female chastity, as T'ien Ju-k'ang argues (T'ien 1988), is a subject of debate, but it certainly highlights the Confucian orthodoxy that underlay the institution. The extent of the Confucianization is made abundantly clear if we consider the example of the Nanjing widow home mentioned above. Although established by a Buddhist monk in 1806, by 1871 this institution's regulations included an article stating that "the consumption of Buddhist vegetarian food and the reciting of Buddhist sutras are forbidden." Similarly, rules of certain nineteenth-century foundling homes made it clear that Buddhist and Daoist monks and nuns were not allowed to adopt children from these institutions (*Jiangning fu chongjian puyu tang zhi*, 1871:5/9a; *Songjiang fu xuzhi*, 1883:9/14a; *Jiangning fu chongxiu puyu sitang zhi*, 1886:1/14a).²⁸ While

²⁷ Although the text uses the term gentry (*shenshi*), it is likely that these were holders of the lowest examination degrees, who would be most likely to agree to undertake this kind of thankless task (*Jiangdu xian xuzhi*, 1883:12 xia/17, 18b-19a; *Xuzhuan Yangzhou fu zhi*, 1864:3/7b).

Other examples of widow institutions initiated by members of the lower gentry: Danyang, established in 1776 by two *jiansheng* (*Chongxiu Danyang xian zhi*, 1885:25/9a); Rugao, established by an elementary school teacher who did not succeed in passing the civil examination (*Rugao xian xuzhi*, 1873:1/19a); Taizhou, established in 1817 by several *shengyuan* and a *juren* (*Taizhou zhi*, 1827:7/12a); Huating, established in 1829 by a few *gongsheng* who also drew up the rules and donated land to the home (*Huating xian zhi*, 1883:2/22b; *Songjiang fu xuzhi*, 1883:9/17a); the Society to Preserve Chastity in Shanghai, established in 1894 by members of the upper and lower gentry (*Shanghai xian xuzhi*, 1918:2/43a-b). *Shengyuan* were often active in other tasks: two *shengyuan* took the responsibility of guarding the widow home in Jiangyin, as it was situated in an isolated spot (*Jiangyin xianzhi*, 1920:3/15b); the initiators of the Taizhou institution mentioned above were also in charge of its general management.

These are only a few examples of widows' homes founded and/or managed by men explicitly identified as members of the lower gentry. In many other cases where the general term *shenshi* is used for people undertaking tasks of little prestige, one also tends to suppose that it refers to those holders of the lower examination degrees, who had little hope to hold office.

²⁸ Rules explicitly forbidding Buddhist practice were rare for the average widow home. Nonetheless, such rules certainly represented an anti-Buddhist attitude which was not uncommon among certain *kaozheng* scholars of the Qing. It is interesting to note that charitable institutions of higher-level administrative units were more likely to have stricter rules against Buddhist influence. The three examples cited are all prefectural institutions.

only a very few widows' institutions had regulations that were explicitly anti-Buddhist and anti-Daoist, it is nonetheless very clear that the basic values supporting the institutions and underlying their provisions were first and foremost Confucian.

Indeed, Confucianization and the simulation of the family welfare system within the philanthropic movement were twin features of the same development. On the one hand, this development encouraged the penetration of orthodoxy without direct state intervention and, on the other, it generated a greater social dynamism, by encouraging the participation of growing civic groups in new social enterprises.

Promotion of State Ideology Through Civic Action

Despite the conspicuous Confucian features of the widow institutions and their conformity to state ideology, the institutions never obtained explicit state recognition, the way foundling homes and poorhouses did in 1724. The only widow society that was financially supported by the Board of Revenue was the one in Panyu, Guangdong province (established in 1818), after a request was filed by the governor-general in 1820 (*Qinding Da Qing huidian shili*, 1899:270/1a-b; *Panyu xian zhi*, 1871:15/19b-21a). This lack of attention from the central government was not surprising, as the development of philanthropic institutions from the late eighteenth century to the outbreak of the Taiping Rebellion was increasingly decentralized; that is, the institutions progressively became geographically more widespread, with less official intervention either from the central or the local government (Leung 1988:92-94). The decrease in systematic government involvement, however, does not imply the relaxation of social control through moral indoctrination. Indeed, in the late- and post-Qianlong period there was simultaneously a slackening of formal official control and a more thorough penetration of the orthodoxy.

In many ways, we can see parallel developments in the growth of lineages as a cultural system in late imperial China. Many scholars have argued that the tremendous growth of lineages from the late sixteenth century reflected the strengthening of state power. The popularization of genealogy writing, the intensification of the establishment of clan charitable estates, the institutionalization of lineage property management and ancestor-worship, etc., ensured that the cultural model of the family conformed with the political needs of the state. David Faure, in investigating the evolution of lineages in the Pearl River Delta since the late Ming, goes so far as to say that "this history of the lineage, therefore, is the history of the extension of state power

into local communities" (Faure 1989:29). Li Wenzhi calls the lineage organization a form of local government under the guise of kinship organizations (Li 1988:71-72). The two studies highlight the penetration of state power without giving much weight to the role of local elites in this process. Faure's survey does mention the simultaneous effect of the growing influence of elites who were empowered through lineage organization, but he does not elaborate on this important point.

The growing strength of the local elites has, however, drawn much attention from some other scholars, notably Mary Rankin and William Rowe, who have argued strongly for the existence in late imperial China of a "public sphere" in which elites exercised their social power (Rankin 1990; Esherick and Rankin 1990:1-24, 305-45; Rowe 1990). More recently, Kathryn Bernhardt has added two amendments to the notion of the public sphere: firstly, that it was overwhelmingly an urban phenomenon, and secondly, that the sphere not only allowed local elites to gain power, but also permitted an extension of the state's reach into local society (Bernhardt 1992:124-25). The domain of organized philanthropic activities which emerged during the late Ming, when Rankin sees the initial development of the public sphere, best illustrates these characteristics. Even though the relationship between local elites and the state was, in many ways, ambivalent,²⁹ by the eighteenth century, as shown by the institutions for chaste widows, local elites successfully extended the Confucian family model, both in ideology and in form, into the larger society, thus helping to enhance the official ideology without the slightest state instigation, and with little official financial support. It is worth mentioning that the rapid growth of clan charitable estates in the Jiangnan area after the Jiaqing reign coincided perfectly with the rise of the public charitable chaste widow institution, and the *baoying* system associated with it (Liu 1987:637-39, 645-46; Bernhardt 1992:140-41).³⁰ Confucian orthodox values were reinforced at the local level both by the strengthening of the lineage system, especially in more rural areas, and by its extension by local elites into urban society through organizations like widow institutions. This reinforcement of orthodox values not only enhanced the power of the state (which, of course, embodied these values), but also bolstered the influence of

²⁹In matters that involved conflicting material interests between local communities and the state (such as water conservancy and taxation), and in technical administrative procedures that might induce corruption, friction existed between local elites and the state. But such was minor compared with the tremendous ideological uniformity of the two.

³⁰Liu Zhengyun has compared the establishment rates of charitable estates in the Jiangnan region of the Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties and found that the Qing had overwhelmingly the highest rate (93.8 percent). Moreover, the Qing rates were highest after 1820, reaching a peak in the Guangxu reign (1875-1908) (Liu 1987:637-39, 645-46).

local elites in their communities.

This parallel between the development of lineages and the charitable aspect of the so-called “public sphere” can also be illustrated by the increasingly active involvement of a group that had rarely been active in public affairs before this time: women. Jerry Dennerline, in his study on charity in the clans of Wuxi county, shows us that women, especially widows, played an indispensable role in the establishment and management of charitable estates for the clans’ needy widows and their children during the eighteenth century (Dennerline 1986:191-94). Similarly, a number of public institutions for chaste widows were initiated and financed by local women, particularly widows themselves. Some such examples were the two institutions established in Jiangyin: both were initiated by local widows in 1877 and one of the buildings was donated by twenty-four *zhen nü* of the locality in 1880 (*Jiangyin xian zhi* 1878:1/51b; *Jiangyin xian xuzhi* 1926:3/14b-16a). Institutions in Gaoyou (1841), Zhaowen (early 1860s), Jiading (1891), and Nanxun (1896) in the Jiangnan region, and Huayang in Sichuan, were also established by local chaste widows or generously financed by them (*Zai xu Gaoyou zhou zhi* 1883:7/6b; *Chang-Zhao hezhi gao* 1904:17/3a; *Jiading xian xuzhi* 1930:1/2a; *Nanxun zhi* 1920:35/ab; *Huayang xian zhi* 1934:3/47a). Moreover, there were also institutions, like the home in Chongming (established in 1865), which were created by men “upon the order of their [widowed] mothers.” The first widow home in Nanjing, in fact, was established in 1806 by a Buddhist monk upon the request of his widowed mother (*Chongming xian zhi* 1924:1/14a; *Jiangning fu chongxiu puyu si tang zhi* 1886:1/16b). Women were also active participants in institutions in more developed areas. In the Shanghai widow home (1871), for instance, women executives (*nü sishi*) were employed to take care of the daily affairs of the institution. Moreover, a chaste widow of a notable local family was also appointed to be the manager (*dongshi*) of the institution; her responsibility was to supervise its activities during monthly visits (*Songjiang fu xuzhi* 1883:9/24b).

It is obvious that women were being more vocal and assertive in matters concerning their own welfare not only inside the family, but also in the affairs of the community. This new element of increasing participation of women in familial and communitarian philanthropy contributed to the growing social dynamism of the late Qing period. But on the other hand, it also reinforced the popularization of the official ideology, one of the salient features of which was female chastity.

The social degradation and instability of China from the late eighteenth century onward weakened the socioeconomic basis for the cult of widow chastity: the escalating incidence of social violence against widows of the

lower classes, and the growing precariousness of the situation of widows of the *shengyuan* class, made it increasingly difficult for widows of straitened cultural and material resources to observe the practices of the cult. The outcome of all this could have been a spontaneous decline of the cult itself. However, the unfavorable socioeconomic climate, on the contrary, simply provoked more organized efforts by all levels of the elite to enhance the cult. This reaction suggests the enormous social and ideological importance attached to the cult of female chastity. Let us now look at the dimension of the human force involved in this development.

The number of widow homes and societies established does not tell us much about the numbers of people aided. The more than two hundred institutions established after 1773 could have given relief to and accommodated up to several tens of thousands of widows and orphans each year during the last century of Qing rule.³¹ This was still a small number in the context of the demographic realities of mid-nineteenth-century China. However, the significance of the widow institutions cannot be measured simply by the number of persons directly aided; we must also take into account the social dynamism that inspired their founding. The organization of these institutions reflected a determined and concerted effort by a significant sector of the society to fight against a “world of robust popular practicality and sensuality” (Elvin 1984:112), a world in which widows might well be enticed or forced to remarry. My argument is that this sector was growing rapidly from the late eighteenth century onward: geographically, it spread from the Jiangnan region to all parts of the country. Socially, it involved not only the traditional local elites, who had been in charge of major urban charitable institutions since the late Ming period, but also holders of the lowest examination degrees (such as the *shengyuan*) whose sense of insecurity had pushed them to become the activists of the movement. Most interesting is the increased participation of women concerned with their own fate and social status.

³¹The number of people given relief varied greatly from institution to institution. In big institutions like the ones in Panyu (Guangdong), Songjiang, and Jiangdu, there were reportedly over 1500, 1000 and 1900 relief recipients, respectively (institutional and outdoor relief included); in others, like the ones in Tianjin and Ganquan (Yangzhou), there were some 700 widows receiving relief. The ones we have seen in Suzhou and Dantu had quotas of 300-400 in the late eighteenth century. Most of the post-Taiping institutions offered room and board to 100-200 people and gave outdoor relief to slightly more people, as in the case of those in Nanhui, Guiyang, Shanghai, and Jiangdu. But many societies and homes in smaller places only gave relief to a few dozen widows (*Panyu xian zhi* 1871:15/20a; *Songjiang fu xuzhi* 1883:9/22b; *Jiangdu xian xuzhi* 1883:12 xia/19a; *Huangchao jingshi wen xubian* 1888:27/6b, text on the Tianjin widow institution by Li Hongzhang dated 1882; *Ganquan xian zhi* 1885:6/14a-b; *Songjiang fu xuzhi* 1883:3/34a, 9/24a; He Changling 1882:5/54b.

Conclusion

Widow homes established in the late eighteenth century in China were typical of Chinese charitable organizations in the sense that, unlike contemporary Western institutions, they did not intend to reform or re-educate their inmates. The Western institutions closest to the Chinese model here were the conservatories organized to preserve female honor in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italian cities, which basically aimed at instructing and correcting wayward women. The ultimate purpose of the Western institutions was to prepare their inmates for reintegration into society (Woolf 1986:24-25). While modern European societies have tended to confine in order to reform those considered social “marginals,” Chinese institutions sought to educate the society *outside* by establishing models who symbolized orthodox virtues. In the earlier Qing period, abandoned children confined to foundling homes symbolized the value of life; in the later period, young widows living in widow homes personified the virtue of female chastity (Leung 1990:55-60). Indeed, in the nineteenth century observers had already noted that chaste widow institutions were the main characteristic of post-Qianlong charity (*Baoshan xian zhi* 1921:11/4a-b), while foundling homes were incontestably representative of the earlier phase of Qing philanthropy. Admitting some regional differences, we can conclude with confidence that the “worthiness” of the poor in Qing China was essentially determined by the positive moral values they symbolized in society.³²

However, this feature of Chinese philanthropic institutions did not imply a correspondingly high respect or self-esteem for those aided. On the contrary, the social stigma borne by those who received relief was probably just as great as in the West. We know that quite a number of institutions allowed relief money to be home-delivered to those special cases of “Confucian widows” who found it too “inconvenient” to go to the institution to collect the money (*Nanhui xian zhi* 1927:3/27a; *Zai xu Gaoyou zhou zhi* 1883:7/6b-7a). The missionary W. Milne observed in mid-nineteenth-century Guangzhou that widows “who had kindred on the spot did not like the exposure of their names and circumstances—points elicited in getting these alms; so that the chief applicants were widows whose relations lived at a distance from the city” (Milne 1859:49). For the same reasons, only the most desperate would consent to take up residence in a widow home (Fuma 1991:109-13). After all, to satisfy the real need of poor widows was only a secondary purpose of the

³²While we have seen that widows of poor scholars were given priority in the *qingjie tang*, especially in the Jiangnan region, there were some regional differences: widows of the militia (*congzheng zhi jia*) of Hunan, for instance, were given preference in the Changsha institution in the post-Taiping period (*Shanhua xian zhi* 1877:1/8a).

homes. The true motivating force behind the charitable effort was the desire to satisfy the needs of the organizers themselves.

Widow institutions, thus, could not possibly be successful in realizing the aims of their initiators: protecting all needy widows and curbing familial and social violence against them. But they certainly were effective in rallying all available social forces and resources to enhance an orthodoxy that was very dear to the state during this period of great social instability. Already-influential local elites could gain even greater political and cultural power in their communities, as they used the instrument of charitable institutions that they, by then, had learned only too well how to manipulate, to uphold an orthodoxy closely identified with state ideology. The institutions were also comforting to poor scholars, who, deprived of strong lineage support, were now feeling more insecure about their status in the less favorable social environment. Women, especially those in urban settings, were also allowed some influence in the running of these establishments, but their power was safely contained within the framework of these institutions. Obviously the various political, social, and cultural interests of these different social groups converged to strengthen the cult of widow chastity. They thus tenaciously strove to conserve an orthodox ideal that, though strongly supported by the state ideology, flew in the face of contemporary material conditions.

Glossary

baojia	保甲	Changzhou	長州
baojie ju	保節局	Chen Hongmou	陳宏謀
baojie fangjian ju	保節防奸局	Chongming	崇明
baoying hui	保嬰會	congzheng zhijia	從征之家
baoying jingjie	保嬰敬節	Dantu	丹徒
bijiao	逼醮	<i>Deyi lu</i>	得一錄
Changshu	常熟	dibao	地保

dongshi 董事
 fangsheng hui 放生會
 fu ce 副冊
 Gaoyou 高郵
 hanwei zhijia 寒微之家
 He Changling 賀長齡
 Huangyang 華陽
 Huzhou 湖州
 Jiading 嘉定
 Jiaxing 嘉興
 Jiangdu 江都
 jiansheng 監生
Jiangsu shengli 江蘇省例
 jinshi 進士
 Jingjiang 靖江
 juren 舉人
 kaozheng 考證
 lizhen tang 立貞堂

mingfu 命婦
 Nanhui 南匯
 Nanxun 南潯
 nü sishi 女司事
 Panyu 番禺
 Peng Qifeng 彭啓豐
 Peng Shaosheng 彭紹升
 qiangjiao 搶醮
Qinding Da Qing huidian shili
 欽定大清會典事例
Qinding libu zeli 欽定禮部則例
 qingjie tang 清潔堂
 qingmen shizu 清門士族
Qingpu xian weijin difang behai gaoshi
bei 青浦縣為禁地方弊害告示碑
 Quanjie tang 全節堂
 Quanzhen tang 全貞堂
 rugua rugu hui 儒寡儒孤會

ruli hui	儒 嫠 會	wuye diaomin	無業刁民
ruli ju	沈 葆 楨	xiangyue	鄉約
Shen Baozhen	沈 葆 楨	xiangyue zongju	鄉約總局
shendong shezhang	紳 董 社 長	xuli hui	恤嫠會
shengyuan	生 員	xuli ju	恤嫠局
shuyuan	書 院	Yangzhou	揚州
Songjiang	松江	yigun	蟻棍
sui	歲	yixue	義學
Taicang	太倉	yizhuang	義莊
Taizhou	泰州	Yu Yue	俞樾
Tongxiang	桐鄉	Zhaowen	昭文
Wang Huizu	汪輝祖	zhen ku tang	貞苦堂
Wang Shiduo	汪士鐸	zhen nü	貞女
Wang Zhong	汪 中	zhengjiao	爭醮
wensheng	文生	Zhu Chun	朱椿
Wuxi	無錫	zongzi	粽子

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