

# Virgin Widows and The Cult of Chastity

By Bettye Walsh

"Earthen walls crumbled, wooden houses rotted and collapsed, only to be replaced by stone walls and stone houses to begin a new cycle."<sup>1</sup>

Gu Hua's first novel, *A Town Called Hibiscus*, later adapted for the screen as *Hibiscus Town*, catapulted him into international view. This Hunan Province writer followed success in 1985 with another gem, *Virgin Widows*—literally "virtuous women." A story about women written by a man is often suspect, but what better way to parse a culture's understanding of women's roles than through analysis of their representations.<sup>2</sup> The issue represented is as profoundly limiting and as integral to Chinese culture as footbinding: chastity among widows.

His narrative technique, translated by Howard Goldblatt, combines a landscape painter's dexterity with the voice of an ancient storyteller. This novella—short, engaging, powerful and non-Western—has proved a potent catalyst for discussion and cross-cultural analysis in my community college composition and introduction to literature courses.

**Figure 1 (above):** Stone arch honoring a chaste widow. From Doolittle 1867, 1:111 in Susan Mann, *Precious Records*, 1997. Courtesy of Stanford University Press.

**HISTORY OF THE CULT OF CHASTITY**  
Widowhood was tremendously complex in China. *The Book of Rites* says, "Faithfulness is the basis of serving others, and is the virtue of a wife. When her husband dies a woman does not remarry; to the end of her life she does not change."<sup>3</sup> Mann suggests that the Confucian notion of a twice-married woman as unfaithful garnered imperial support when in 1304 the Mongol Yuan Court officially celebrated widow chastity. Through the end of the Qing period, 1912, court practice and policy consistently elevated the cult of the chaste widow (*jie fu*); in fact, the most famous Manchu policy on women was its support of this cult.<sup>4</sup> Government

women held up half the sky until 1949. Attitudes toward the position of women changed slowly.

The following section summarizes the novella's story line with its parallel plot structure, and explores the complex gender issues related to woman as source of pride and paranoia, woman as haven to man, woman as sacrificer for the greater good, and woman as victim of stone.

## THE STORIES

*Virgin Widows* is the story of two women separated by time: Guihua, the twentieth-century virtuous woman, and Qingyu, the nineteenth-century virtuous woman. The backdrop is a small Chinese village,

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campaigns encouraged exemplary behavior through a system of commendation. An imperial decree of 1644 mandated shrines in every county for "celebrated officials and local worthies."<sup>5</sup> Names of women officially designated as chaste widows by the Board of Rites were listed in these shrines. Even more honorific, however, was a stone arch memorializing the widow's fidelity (see Figure 1).

The fall of the Qing dynasty and the new political environment did not immediately change customs and attitudes. While the May Fourth Movement (1919) called for writers to examine the plight of women, Mao did not proclaim that

Love Goose Shoals. Prior to socialist modernization, Love Goose Shoals is famous throughout China for its Street of Chaste Women, an avenue of fifteen stone arches memorializing the purity of exemplary women. While the stone arches are eventually removed, the attitudes that erected them are not. As a result, both heroines struggle to live virtuously in this community.

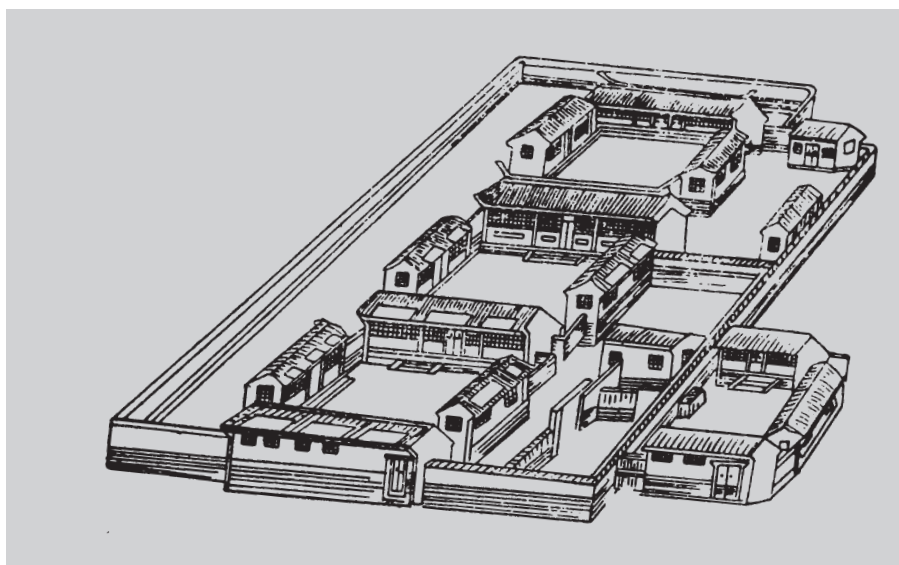
Yao Guihua, Big Sister Guihua, orphaned at fifteen during the Cultural Revolution, is "reduced to scavenging," and becomes a "dirty-faced ragamuffin" with "little more than skin and bones."<sup>6</sup> A sympathetic neighbor arranges a mar-

riage, first unsuccessfully with an old truck driver, whom Guihua refuses, and then successfully with the old man's young apprentice. After the raucous wedding, the darkened bedroom becomes the source of deceit; the old trucker, Boss Wu, is substituted for his young apprentice. Guihua awakens angry but is eventually reconciled to the union saying: "it was an absurd marriage in absurd times."<sup>7</sup>

Stability and food transform Guihua into a ravishing young beauty; and Wu, proud of this beauty, opens Night Fragrances Tavern for his wife to run. Domestic tension escalates to abuse, and she considers divorce, a new women's freedom touted by the communist party. Legally possible, divorce is thwarted at every bureaucratic level. The civil court states: "Divorce can be considered only if lives are at stake. This isn't a capitalist society."<sup>8</sup> Guihua resolves to "take back my petition [for divorce] and burn it."<sup>9</sup> But Wu, nursing his ego and a bottle, plunges over a cliff and dies.

The community and family blame Guihua's divorce petition and engage in the ancient practice reserved for an adulteress who murders her husband: they try to bury her alive by dumping baskets of yellow clay on her and the tavern. This attack is stopped, but later when she decides to marry Che Ganzi, her husband's apprentice to whom she was supposedly married many years before, the crowd returns to the tavern intent on looting and creating havoc. Neither divorce nor remarriage comes easily to this modern virtuous woman.

The nineteenth-century widow, Yang Qingyu, betrothed at nine, moves to the patriarchal compound of the Xiao clan. As child-wife she cares for, baby sits, and sleeps with her three-year-old toddler-husband until he can consummate the marriage. He dies, sexually inactive, at thirteen. The widowed teen vows eternal chastity and offers her father-in-law, Fourth Master Xiao, the honor of erecting the next stone memorial arch, a testament to the virtue of the Xiao ancestors: "Qingyu, daughter-in-law of the Xiao clan, originally of the Yang family, has taken a vow of chastity at the age of nineteen as a bid for the sixteenth white



**Figure 2:** Home showing (1) the outer courtyard, for receiving visitors, (2) the inner courtyard for daily activities, (3) the deeply recessed "inner apartments" reserved for women, and (4) the servant's quarters. Permission from C. A. S. Williams, *Precious Records*, 1997 courtesy of Dover Publications, Inc.

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marble memorial arch on the Street of Chaste women!"<sup>10</sup> Her life work, then, is to die chaste and secure the stone arch; she is "installed in a private room with a single door in the northwest corner . . . never straying from the inner chambers."<sup>11</sup> The inner chamber in Figure 2 reflects the architectural controls on female chastity.

A counterpoint to the idealized notions of female fidelity is Fourth Master Xiao, who takes another concubine at 62 and a mistress at 64, both bearing him sons. Fidelity is a female virtue or at least imposed differently, for the narrator tells readers that the respected family patriarch is just doing his filial duty and that "true pleasure is found in bed."<sup>12</sup> The Ming Laws which codified concubinage and male divorce did not extend to women and were not repealed in China until the 1950s. Legally protected to live his sexual life as he chooses, Master Xiao

is also able to benefit from the family glory garnered by the sacrifice of the virginal female.

When Qingyu dies at 27, her purity is proclaimed by the patriarch in the face of "disagreement within the clan as to whether Yang Qingyu deserve[s] to have a memorial arch."<sup>13</sup> The patriarch quells the dissenters, but the new age, ushered in by the 1911 Revolution and the fall of the Qing dynasty, is surging forward. Ironically, the sixteenth arch on the Street of Chaste Women is never built; Qingyu's chastity and early death are offered in vain.

### ANALYSIS

Even chapters (Guihua's story) and odd chapters (Qingyu's) are paired; for example, chapters two and three develop respective backgrounds of both women, six and seven conflict, ten and eleven suspense. Not only does the structure

underscore comparison, but so too the content in at least four areas is reflective of woman's plight.

Both women are the source of male pride and paranoia. Brought into the family through arranged marriage, they grow more beautiful and desirable at the hands of their male protectors. The stable food supply afforded by Boss Wu's salary transforms Guihua into a ravishing young

personal happiness for a greater good. The family's honor, represented by the memorial arch, requires Qingyu to relinquish sexuality and hope of male companionship; Little Leopard, the dog, kills the scholar/tutor, caught under compromising conditions with Qingyu. Comparable to this is the concern for communal stability inherent in the committee's demand that Guihua retract her divorce request.

order to control them; society and governments, instead of lending protection have been the culprits." A young black male writing about *Virgin Widows* and Gwendolyn Brooks's "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed" came to the epiphany that subaltern groups, no matter how different, can suffer similar losses at the hands of a dominant group. Another observed that widows in his small, conservative Virginia community are excluded from "community" and decision making in much the same way as in the novella.

In sum, the content and structure of *Virgin Widows* conspire to make a highly entertaining and immensely engaging addition to a range of courses, inviting creative handling by both students and faculty. ■

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beauty. But, as tavern mistress, she becomes more vulnerable to her husband's paranoid questions regarding her faithfulness. Concern for her fidelity leads him to physical and mental abuse with frequent "chastity" checks, humiliating for the loyal, hardworking wife. Similarly, lovely Qingyu, carefully cloistered in the family compound's inner chamber, must tolerate frequent unannounced visits and oral examinations from her father-in-law concerning the specific details of the lives of exemplary women. His pride over her sacrifice leads him to a rather single-minded pursuit.

Next, women's quarters often act as havens to men. According to Mann, these quarters, deep in the recess of the compound, protect men from the world's "flux, chaos, and corruption."<sup>14</sup> Essentially, Qingyu's inner quarters provide a haven to her father-in-law and also to the young scholar, source of the threat to her chastity, brought in to tutor the family children. A different inner quarter surrounds Guihua at Night Fragrances Tavern, the place to which men from the larger family-community come for solace, to be refreshed: "truckers and their helpers" would spend time and money to "unwind by talking among themselves and basking in the feminine grace, charm, and youthful beauty of the proprietress."<sup>15</sup>

Both women are asked to sacrifice

Finally, just as stone undergirds the foundations of Love Goose Shoals and provides the material from which the village is built, Guihua and Qingyu are dominated by stone images and mores. In the thousand years preceding the nineteenth century, stone builds the arches for which the town is famous; in the twentieth century, stone builds the economy with promises of new beginnings and continued progress. Both heroines are its victims. Qingyu is hostage to the stone memorial arch built upon values and mores that enslave her, physically and emotionally. Guihua is enslaved by a stone man, employed by a cobblestone company and controlled by the mores written in the stone of tradition unchanged by modernity.

*Virgin Widows* provides an interesting addition to the World, African-American, and Women in Literature modules, which comprise my ENG 112 course. Although an optional assignment to my diverse student cohort, most included the novella in their major paper. An older female student observed that the treatment of women in the novella was similar to voiceless "others" discussed in post-colonial literatures. She passionately notes that when society's "standards are not met, women are physically beaten into submission, emotionally stripped of self-worth, and sexually exploited in

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#### NOTES

1. Gu Hua, Howard Goldblatt, Trans., *Virgin Widows* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), 1-2.
2. Ellen Widmer and Kang-I Sun Chang, *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 420.
3. Patricia Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 195.
4. Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 23.
5. *ibid.*, 23.
6. Gu, 8-9.
7. *ibid.*, 10.
8. *ibid.*, 35.
9. *ibid.*, 55.
10. *ibid.*, 17-8.
11. *ibid.*, 28-9.
12. *ibid.*, 31.
13. *ibid.*, 151.
14. Mann, 50.
15. Gu, 20.