The Courage to Be: Suicide as Self-fulfilment in Chinese History and Literature*

Joseph S. M. Lau

Contrary to common practice for professional papers, I would like to begin my discussion with a personal note. Since 1966 I have taught "Chinese Literature in English Translation" at the University of Wisconsin to help our undergraduates fulfill their "humanities requirements." Along with *The Book of Songs* 詩經, *Ch'u Tz'u* 楚辭, T'ang *ch'uan-ch'i* and major poets of the T'ang and Sung dynasties, we have read such selections as "The Biography of Ching K'o" 荆軻列傳 from *The Historical Records* 史記 by Ssu-ma Ch'ien 司馬遷, "Kan Chiang and Mo Yeh" 干將莫邪 from *Sou-shen chi* 搜神記, and *The Revenge of the Orphan of Chao* 趙氏孤兒大報仇雜劇 from *Yüan ch'ü-hsüan* 元曲選. Understandably, being brought up in a culture that treasures individual worth as a cardinal virtue, my students have constantly been disturbed by the number of self-annihilations that occur in these works in the name of what Emile Durkheim would have classified as "altruistic" suicides.[1] Ever conscious of what the United States stands for in the cause of promoting human rights throughout the world, it has been quite common for my students to venture this question: Does self-killing in such a nonchalant manner reflect to some degree the fact that life in ancient China was relatively cheap?

Normally, when an instructor is confronted with such a question, he could easily suggest that the student consult some relevant titles after class. However, in this particular case one is at a loss for any specific references that treat Chinese suicide in terms of ethical or philosophical manifestations. Of course, if one's interest is not confined to Chinese examples, one can be truly overwhelmed by the sheer volume of studies of suicide that have seen print since the publication of Durkheim's classic *Le Suicide* in 1897.

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This paper is fondly dedicated to Anthony C. Yu of the University of Chicago.

In Jacques Choron's estimate, the total of books and articles in Western languages well exceeds seven thousand, even though the vast majority of them falls within the domain of "Psychological-General," "Sociological" and "Medical-Legal" studies.[2]

That the kind of "idiosyncratic" suicides committed by the dramatis personae in the Chinese works cited above cannot be explained in clinical terms is evident from the manner in which a specialist in a suicide-prevention clinic deals with his patient. It is reported that Ari Kiev, Director of the Cornell Program in Social Psychiatry once told his charge: "Look, you have a disease, just like the Hong Kong flu. Maybe you've got the Hong Kong depression. First, you've got to realize you are emotionally ill. . . ."[3] Nor can it be analysed sociologically, the way Maurice L. Farber attributes the causes for suicide in modern American societies: "In our own culture, the findings in the following report on suicide causes for the city of San Fancisco are fairly typical of the U. S. today. The list of precipitating causes in order of frequency is: 1) Poor health; 2) Economic stress; 3) Death of a loved one; 4) Domestic difficulties."[4]

To be sure, passing mention has been given to a number of suggestions as to why the Chinese do violence to their own persons. In a chapter entitled "Oriental Attitudes toward Suicide," Louis I. Dublin, for example, has correctly pointed out: "There are certain motives which were considered honorable in China, such as the suicide of generals who killed themselves after defeat; tyrants who thus escaped impending doom; dethroned rulers and statesmen who thereby protested against political policies; wives who refused to survive their husbands; affianced women whose husbands died before the nuptial date; and those who committed suicide in memory of a dead father or ancestor."[5]

Hsien Rin, who is a medical doctor by training, placed suicide in ancient China in three broad categories after he consulted "general representative stories of suicide written in the history of China [that] appear to be characteristic of legends and therefore reflect cultural influence."[6] They are: 1) Politics and/or war; 2) loyalty to nation, emperor, or master; 3) family affiliation, such as a wife's loyalty to her dead husband.[7]

One of the more recent works on suicide in non-Western societies is Lee A. Headly's *Suicide in Asia and the Near East* (1983). But again, the modus operandi adopted by most contributors is by and large sociological, relying on data provided by governments or organizations such as Suicide Prevention Centers or the Samaritan Befrienders. Dr. Hsien Rin, whose

earlier observation on this subject we have just cited, has, in collaboration with Tuan Chen, contributed a report on suicide in Taiwan to Headly's volume. The conclusion to his findings once again makes it clear that empirical research won't be of much help in answering my students' questions. Dr. Rin utilized four sources of data as a basis for his research: 1) national statistics; 2) clinic case studies of attempts; 3) suicides reported by newspapers; 4) and suicide attempts among inpatient psychiatric cases. His self-assessment of this approach is worth quoting: "One is aware of the limitations in basing a discussion of etiological and ecological factors in suicide on information from official records. The same criticism can be leveled at many studies of suicide in varying cultures."[8]

II.

My search for an answer to whether life in ancient China was considered cheap has convinced me that such an answer can only be sought within the context of the Chinese value system. As Anthony Gidden rephrases it for Durkheim, "the existence of any form of society necessitates the existence of moral regulation, and what is demanded of the individual by the obligations entailed in this does not always accord with his private wishes or inclinations: hence morality implies sanctions."[9] Thus it behooves us to examine the extent to which the ramifications of such ethical concepts as *chung*忠 (loyalty), *hsiao*孝 (filial obedience), *chieh*節 (chastity/integrity), *yi*義 (righteousness), *jen*仁 (goodness/benevolence), and other personal codes of honor molded the Chinese mentality in traditional China. Since the above terms recur frequently throughout this paper, a note of explanation about their English translation is in order. These terms are most recalcitrant for the translator. As James R. Hightower reminds us in his study of *Han Shih Wai Chuan* 韓詩外傳: "Technical words, even within the limits of usage of a single school at a given period, seldom have a single equivalent English word."[10] Thus *jen* is rendered as "virtue" by James Legge; "Goodness" by Arthur Waley; and "benevolence" by D. C. Lau.[11] The fact of the matter is, the implications of these words are simply too broad and complex to be pinned down by a single equivalent. In most cases, the proper meaning has to be understood in its immediate context. For this reason, it seems the most sensible thing would be to leave them untranslated. The only drawback to this practice is that when phrases such as "a man of *jen*" or "a woman of *chieh*" appear too often in the text, it becomes cumbersome

for the reader to follow. To keep textual confusion and stylistic infelicities to a minimum, I will use an English translation for each of these terms according to the best of my judgment. It will be followed parenthetically by the original word in romanization.

We will begin our discussion of Chinese suicide by examining the text of "Kan Chiang and Mo Yeh." We are told that when the sword-maker's son Ch'in 赤 reached manhood, he asked his mother Mo Yeh the whereabouts of his father. After learning that Kan Chiang was unjustly executed by the King of Ch'u, the son's mind was occupied with nothing but thoughts of avenging his father. His desire for vengeance was such that he managed to appear in the King's dream warning the latter of his intention. Accordingly, the King posted a reward for his capture. Ch'ih then took refuge in the mountains where he met a stranger.

"I've heard that the King has set a price of one thousand gold pieces on your head," the stranger said. "If you give me your head and sword, I will avenge your father's death for you."

"I would be very much obliged!" said Ch'ih, who then drew his sword over his own throat. Still standing erect, he held his head and sword with both hands and presented them to the stranger.

"I won't fail you," the stranger said. Only then did the young man's corpse fall over. True to his words, the stranger acted as the surrogate-avenger for Ch'ih. He took the young man's head to the King and demanded that it be boiled in a cauldron. After three days and nights, however, the head still did not dissolve. The stranger then invited the King to come by the cauldron and take a look. As the King was looking down into the cauldron, the stranger decapitated him. Afterwards he directed the sword at his own head and it also fell into the boiling water.[12]

According to an earlier account in *Wu Yüeh ch'un-ch'iu* 吳越春秋 quoted by Yüan K'o 袁珂, after the King's head fell into the cauldron it immediately engaged in a fight with Ch'ih's. Fearing that the young man was no match for the King, the stranger cut off his own head to assist Ch'ih in his battle. The three heads fought fiercely for seven days before they finally disintegrated.[13]

It is precisely in the light of such supernatural elements that Yüan K'o has designated this tales as a "myth" 神話, even though in the Western tradition it would be more appropriate to classify it as a legend 傳說 because the protagonists in question are human rather than supernatural beings. However, there are certain advantages in taking this tale as a mythical

demonstration of moral paradigms in traditional Chinese culture. At once familiar and strange, the imagination that sustains the narrative is that of a shared ethos rather than an individualistic consciousness. As soon as Ch'ih is old enough to be cognizant of such sentiments as later echoed in *The Book of Rites* 禮記 that "With the enemy who has slain his father, one should not live under the same heaven,"[14] his life is already defined for him. He would be a living disgrace to his family and society if his father's death were to remain unavenged.

Since Ch'ih was unable to assassinate the King, the least he could do was to surrender his life to someone who could do the job for him. While Ch'ih's self-destruction can be explained in terms of filial obligation, we have to look elsewhere for a probable answer to the stranger's puzzling behaviour. Nominally, he has agreed to carry out his mission for the reward. But, as we have seen, his mercenary motive is at once overridden by his genuine concern for Ch'ih, so much so that he eventually surrenders his own life to help Ch'ih avenge his father in the underworld.

Reading this legend as a celebration of the "class struggle" between the oppressor and the oppressed, Yüan K'o appears to be more impressed with the nameless stranger than with the vengeful son. Perhaps in Yüan's eyes, Ch'ih's self-immolation, admirable as it may have seemed in feudal times, is nothing more than an effort to redress a personal grievance. The stranger, in Yüan's conjecture, could be in the same profession as Ch'ih's father – a swordmaker who has narrowly escaped the King's tyranny.[15] If this argument is tenable, then the stranger is the murdered man's comrade giving his life to eliminate a common class enemy.

On the other hand, if we may speculate further, it can be argued that the stranger, despite his vaunted motive, is at heart a *hsia* 俠 or a knight-errant. In James J. Y. Liu's words, "One of the most remarkable characteristics of the knight-errant is their altruism. They habitually helped the poor and the distressed, and often risked their own lives to save others. Their unselfishness extended not only to their friends but even to strangers, . . ."[16] His self-sacrifice thus embodies the nobility of righteousness (*yi*). But whatever his true identity, the stranger's self-sacrifice, together with Ch'ih's compliance with a given ethical code, has been consolidated into a repository of ancient values only to reassert themselves in later literature.

Because myths and legends subsist on elements of the supernatural and the fantastic, one would not question the authenticity of the dramatic details that typify a tale like "Kan Chiang and Mo Yeh." For examples

of suicide that are presented as historical facts, let's turn to the biography of Ching K'o in *The Historical Records*. It is recorded that after Prince Tan of Yen confided "matters of state" to T'ien Kuang 田光, the prince cautioned him not to let word of it leak out. Thereupon T'ien Kuang paid a visit to Ching K'o and solicited his service in behalf of the prince. Almost as an afterthought, T'ien Kuang advised Ching K'o: "They say that a worthy man does not act in such a way as to arouse distrust in others. Now the prince has warned me that the matter we discussed was of vital concern to the nation and begged me not to let word of it leak out. Obviously he distrusts me, and if my actions have aroused his distrust, then I am no gentleman of honor!"[17]

At this point T'ien Kuang had already made up his mind to commit suicide in order to end the prince's suspicion on the one hand and to spur Ching K'o to action on the other. So he continued: "I want you to go at once and visit the prince. Tell him I am already dead, so he will know that I have not betrayed the secret!" With this he cut his throat and died.

There is no mention in the text as to whether Ching K'o had attempted to restrain his friend from taking such drastic action. In any event, we are immediately informed that no sooner had T'ien Kuang drawn his last breath than Ching K'o was seen reporting to the prince what had transpired. In order to gain the confidence of the King of Ch'in so that he could get close enough to assassinate him, Ching K'o wanted the head of General Fan Yü-ch'i 樊於期 as a greeting "present." General Fan had formerly been in the service of the Ch'in tyrant and now had taken refuge in the state of Yen. Ching K'o realized that the prince would not have the heart to betray him and accordingly decided to take the matter directly to Fan.

In a business-like manner, Ching K'o reminded the general the harsh treatment he received from the tyrant, that his parents and members of his whole clan had been executed, and that a reward of one thousand catties of gold and a city of ten thousand house-holds had been offered for his head. Afterwards, Ching K'o volunteered a solution to him: "Give me your head, so that I can present it to the King of Ch'in! Then he will surely be delighted to receive me."[18]

To this General Fan replied: "Day and night I gnash my teeth and eat out my heart trying to think of some plan. Now you have shown my the way!"[19] He then took his own life in front of Ching K'o.

Now the manner in which this famous assassin demands General Fan's head is just as unapologetic as the stranger's in the tale "Kan Chiang and Mo

Yeh" discussed above. In both cases the requests are met with equal alacrity. Does this self-disposal of life lend any credence to David Hume's (1711-1776) alarming remark that "the life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster?"[20] An answer to this demands a brief look at the stance toward suicide before Hume's times. Plato (427-347 B. C.), who views life in terms of body-ownership, considers man a "chattel of God", the way a slave is a "chattel" of his owner, and he therefore has no right to dispose of his own life. Aristotle (384-322 B. C.), though his quest for knowledge differs from Plato's metaphysics, is in agreement with his teacher on the issue of suicide. In fact, he goes a step further by defining a brave man as one who is fearless in the face of a noble death because of a sense of honor. However, to be killed in a battlefield or in other emergencies is one thing, whereas to take one's life in order to escape a crisis or to avoid suffering and pain is a totally different matter. As Jacques Choron interprets it, "suicide is a cowardly act. Since it deprives the state of a citizen, it is a crime similar to a soldier's desertion of his post."[21]

A different understanding of the meaning of life and death is found in the writing of Seneca (4 B. C. – A. D. 65). Ordered to commit suicide for an alleged conspiracy against Nero, this Roman Stoic had earlier considered the morality of suicide and he was of the opinion that "mere living is not a good, but living well. Accordingly, the wise man will live as long as he ought, not as long as he can. ... It is not a question of dying earlier or later, but of dying well or ill. And dying well means escape from the danger of living ill."[22] A determined advocate of freedom, he urged his fellowmen to master their own fate by declaring: "the foulest death is preferable to the cleanest slavery."[23]

In this view, Hume's argument for the right of self-extermination is essentially a desire to escape the onerousness of dying ill. Indeed, when a man is "tired of life, and hunted by pain and misery,"[24] he becomes as much a burden to himself as to society. Thus, he concludes his essay on suicide with the assertion that: "If it be no crime, both prudence and courage should encourage us to rid ourselves at once of existence when it becomes a burden. T' is the only way we can then be useful to society."[25]

III.

In the final analysis, whether a man's life has more importance in the universe than that of an oyster depends on his self-image as well as his

perception of human relationships. Plato disapproves of suicide because one cannot destroy something one does not own. Aristotle decries self-murder on grounds of civil responsibilities. Seneca's position is more self-centered: Life is worth living so long as one's freedom is not threatened. To the extent that suicide is taken as an expedient means to end suffering, it is passive self-destruction.

All of the Chinese characters instanced in the works cited above have "died well" in the Senecan sense. Each of them has used himself as a vehicle for the fulfillment of a worthy cause in his own definition. When life is conceived as a series of obligations to be honored, and when one takes upon himself the role of executor of these obligations, one could not possibly think of himself as anything less than a missionary. Self-sacrifice, then, denotes a positive gesture affirming the sanctity of human existence. On the part of the suicide, it is also a process of self-fulfillment. As Y. P. Mei put it, human obligations "are essential to the fulfillment of the supreme mission of man, for man to break out of his individual shell and become completely social, human, and therefore divine. . . ."[26]

Apparently, when one elects to live up to one's moral obligations, one may be forced to make a choice between the "fish" and the "bear's paws." Mencius made the choice unequivocally:

> I like fish, and I also like bear's paws. If I cannot have the two together, I will let the fish go, and take the bear's paws. So, I like life, and I also like righteousness [*yi*]. If I cannot keep the two together, I will let life go, and choose righteousness.
>
> I like life indeed, but there is that which I like more than life, and therefore, I will not seek to possess it by any improper ways. I dislike death indeed, but there is that which I dislike more than death, and therefore there are occasions when I will not avoid danger. . . .
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> Therefore, men have that which they like more than life, and that which they dislike more than death. They are not men of distinguished talents and virtue only who have this mental nature. All men have it; what belongs to such men is simply that they do not lose it.[27]

Similar sentiments have been expressed by Han Ying (fl. B. C. 150) in *Han Shih Wai Chuan*. I quote Hightower's translation below:

> The Prince Pi-kan sacrificed himself and thus completed his loyalty [*chung*]. Liu-hsia Hui sacrificed himself and thus completed his trustworthiness [*hsin* 信]. Po-i and Shu-ch'i sacrificed themselves and thus completed their integrity [*lien* 廉]. These four sages were all of them the empire's gentlemen of understanding. Nor is there any question of their not valuing their persons. If *yi*義 is not established and his fame not apparent, a gentleman is ashamed; this is why they sacrificed themselves and so brought to perfection their [ideal of] conduct."[28]

What should be stressed in the above quotation is this line: "Nor is there any question of their not valuing their persons." In other words, life must have seemed so uncompromising to these four "sages" that they felt compelled to affirm it with their deaths. To be sure, both Mencius and Han Ying were echoing Confucius's call for the realization of the all-pervasive principles of *jen*. The Master said: "The determined scholar and the man of virtue will not seek to live at the expense of injuring their virtue [*jen*]. They will even sacrifice their lives to preserve their virtue complete."[29]

Though the "determined scholar" and "the man of virtue" referred to in this Confucian persuasion are probably confined to men, this admonition carried equal force for womenfolk. As Andrew Hsieh and Jonathan D. Spence have discovered, the Confucian ideal of sacrificing one's life for the preservation of Goodness (*jen*) that is "drawn from the political world of males was rapidly transposed into the ethical world of female behaviour."[30] Among the works Hsieh and Spence consulted in their study is Liu Hsiang's 劉向 (B. C. 77-6) *Biographies of Women* 列女傳. To demonstrate how the concepts of *jen* and *yi* affected the conduct of ancient Chinese women, I quote the biography of Lady Chao of Tai 代趙夫人 below:

> Lady Chao, wife of the King of Tai, was the daughter of Chao Chien-tzu 趙簡子 and the sister of Chao Hsiang-tzu 趙襄子. After Chien-tzu's death and before the mourning period was over, Hsiang-tzu ascended Mount Hsia-wu and beguiled the King of Tai to join him for a meeting. He ordered the cooks to serve the food to the king and his followers in bronze vessels. When wine was being poured, [Hsiang-tzu] instructed his

> attendants to assassinate the king and his followers with the vessels. Thereupon he sent his troops to subdue the land of Tai and was prepared to take his sister Lady Chao [as his wife]. But the lady told him: "I was charged by our late father to serve the King of Tai and I have served him for more than ten years. You have killed him, though he did nothing to provoke you. Now my husband is dead, where am I to return? I have heard that a woman of righteousness [*yi*] would not remarry. How could I take a second husband? Where do you intend to take me to? Betraying the memory of one's husband to comply with the desire of one's brother violates the principle of righteousness [*yi*]. On the other hand, it is contrary to the spirit of benevolence [*jen*] to bear grudges against one's brother on account of a murdered husband. For this reason I can no more bear grudges against you than I can marry you. Thereafter she wept and called on Heaven. She killed herself at a place called Mi-chi. The people of Tai all cherished her memory . . . .[31]

That the boundaries of meanings in certain Chinese ethical terms often crisscross is evident in the way Lady Chao invoked them. In the name of *yi*, Lady Chao refused to take a second husband. She could have invoked the moral dictates of *chieh* (chastity) with equal force. In Mencius's definition, *yi* is "straight path."[32] Faithful to the memory of her husband, she is at the same time abiding by the quality of *chung* (loyalty).

Lest my remarks above be misconstrued as a vain attempt at *cheng-ming* 正名 or "rectification of names," I must hasten to point out that due to the imprecise nature of valuational terms in Chinese ethics, a person who claims to have given his life for one thing may not be seen by others in the same light. For example, in Han Ying's opinion, Po-i and Shu-ch'i starved themselves to death in fulfillment of the expectations of "integrity" (*lien*), whereas in *The Historical Records*, Ssu-ma Ch'ien canonized them for their "righteousness" (*yi*).[33]

But of course, except for the scholars, no one would argue whether Lady Chao's suicide was appropriate. So in the name of whatever cause that conformed to their idealization of values, the Chinese killed themselves one after another. We have seen how they have destroyed themselves in compliance with the demands of *hsiao, yi, jen* and other cherished codes of honor. In the examples below, we shall see how the concept of *chung*

has engendered numerous incidents of martyrdom in Chinese history and literature.

Unlike the unwieldy *jen* and *yi*, *chung*, like *hsiao*, poses little problem for the translator. I have seen no rendering of this term other than "loyalty." However, in common usage this word has often been appropriated by politicians almost exclusively to mean "loyalty to the ruler of the government." In point of fact, as Hsieh Yu-wei correctly pointed out: "For Confucian ethics, it is incorrect to interpret loyalty [*chung*] as loyalty to king or prince. Loyalty means self-devotion, that is, doing one's duty with all one's strength. Loyalty is loyalty to one's duty as prescribed by *jen*, or the humanity within oneself."[34]

Upon closer examination, loyalty to self and to the prince do not necessarily contradict. For a man in his position, T'ien Kuang's committing suicide so as to spur Ching K'o to action is as much a testimony of self-devotion as it is a demonstration of political loyalty. The King of Ch'in was an acknowledged tyrant. Brought up in a culture so heavily invested with the priorities of *jen* and *yi*, Ching K'o must have felt it his moral duty to have this tyrant eliminated. In such a case, it may be conceded that his loyalty to the state of Yen must have been predicated on his self-devotion. In other words, his suicide is a response to his inner compulsion to do "one's duty as prescribed by *jen*, . . ."

IV.

For examples of *chung*, we turn to the Sung loyalists Lu Hsiu-fu (1236-1279)陸秀夫 and Wen T'ien-hsiang (1236-1283) 文天祥. After repeated attempts to bring about a restoration of the empire had failed, Lu first "disposed" of his wife and children by pushing them into the sea at sword point. Afterwards, he placed the eight-year-old emperor Ti-ping on his back and committed suicide by walking into the sea.[35] While it is futile to speculate what kind of fate would have awaited him had he chosen to stay alive and allow the invading Mongols to take him captive, it can be assumed that in his mind he must have concurred with Seneca that "the foulest death is preferable to the cleanest slavery."

Suicide is self-inflicted death. To the extent that a captured military officer or a government official refuses to surrender to the new ruler, this resolution can be seen as a desire for "vicarious suicide." Defeated by the Yüan forces, Wen T'ien-hsiang tried unsuccessfully to kill himself by

swallowing *nao-tzu* 腦子 (Borneo-camphor). The Yüan general Chang Hung-fan, impressed by his loyalty to the fallen regime, did his best to win him over. "Sung has collapsed," Chang told him, "You have fulfilled your obligations of loyalty [*chung*] and filial obligations [*hsiao*] in your position as Grand Councilor [*Ch'eng-hsiang*]. Now if you will only serve Emperor Shih-tsu [of the Yüan dynasty] with the same kind of loyalty as you served the Sung, you will keep your title as Grand Councilor."

To which Wen T'ien-hsiang replied: "I deserve more than death for being a Sung subject without being able to rescue the country from ruin. How dare I hope to escape death by switching my loyalty?" After his execution, a note was found inside his gown which read: "Confucius speaks of the necessity to sacrifice one's life to fulfill the obligations of virtue [*jen*]. Mencius advocates the same necessity in terms of righteousness [*yi*]. Only when righteousness is completed can virtue be attained. For what other purpose should one study the works of the sages? With my death I shall have lived my life without shame."[36]

The martyrdom of Lu Hsiu-fu and Wen T'ien-hsiang leaves little room for debate with regard to the propriety of their loyalty. They were Sung subjects and the Mongols were non-Chinese "aliens." From a political point of view, they would have been labelled as turncoats had they sworn allegiance to the new government. From an ethnic point of view, they would have been stigmatized as traitors to their own race. But when it comes to the case of the Ch'ing loyalists, the connotations of *chung* take on new dimensions. In an illuminating article entitled "Romantics, Stoics, and Martyrs in Seventeenth-Century China," from which I benefitted enormously in preparing the discussion below, Frederic Wakeman, Jr. informs us that while "most political martyrs . . . in this period were Ming loyalists, [another group of martyrs] consists of Qing [Ch'ing] loyalists among the Han bannermen who chose to remain loyal to the new dynasty during the revolt of the Three Feudatories."[37]

The two Han banner leaders Wakeman selected for special attention are Governor-General Fan Ch'eng-mo 范承謨(1624-1676) of Fukien, and Governor Ma Hsiung-chen 馬雄鎮(1634-1677) of Kwangsi. For their opposition to collaboration with the feudal lords who were in revolt against the Manchus, they were thrown in jail and subsequently suffered a death far more brutal than any suicide described in this paper. Ma's martyrdom in Wakeman's account is particularly gruesome. At a banquet given by Wu Shih-tsung in Ma's honor, at which Wu hoped to procure his support

for the mutinous cause, Ma refused to be prevailed upon. He reiterated his loyalty to the Ch'ing dynasty and railed at Wu San-kuei, Shih-tsung's grandson, for being a treacherous official. In the end Wu decided to get rid of Ma if he wouldn't change his mind. He ordered his guards to seize Ma's two young sons and held knives to their throats:

> Yield, [the guards] said, or his sons would die. Ma Xiongzhen [Hsiung-chen] refused to compromise his and his family's honor, but could not bear to look on as the boys were slaughtered. Turning to the side, he steadfastly insisted that Wu Sangui [San-kuei] and his soldiers were no more than murderers and bandits. Moments later, Wu's men threw the bloody heads of his sons at Ma's feet. He shuddered, grabbed the heads in both hands, and thrust the bloody stumps in the faces of the soldiers. The assassins slashed back with their knives, and Ma reeled away long enough to pay obeisance to his emperor [Kang-hsi] before they struck him again and again, until he died.[38]

When the news of the deaths of Ma and his two sons reached Kweilin where the rest of the family remained in confinement, all the women in the household, from Ma's wife to the female servants, hung themselves. The number of deaths totalled twenty-four. Wakeman considers Ma's martyrdom "truly tragic acts – incongruous and inevitable, heroic and ironic"[39] with good reason. Hsiung-chen's great-grandfather Ma Chung-te, after all, had been a great Ming loyalist, and one would presume that he would as gladly have laid down his life for the House of Ming as his grandson had martyred himself for the Manchus.

The Sung loyalists Lu Hsiu-fu and Wen T'ien-hsiang, we have seen, accepted death rather than renounce the defunct government because they didn't want to be remembered as an *erh-ch'en* 二臣, or officials who serve two dynasties. As Lynn A. Struve remarked, "when a dynasty fell, traditional morality called for mortal sacrifice on the part of men (and their womenfolk) who had placed themselves in direct relation to the ruling house by earning formal degrees, accepting imperial bestowed honors, or by holding official military or bureaucratic positions."[40] If we use the deaths of Lu Hsiu-fu and Wen T'ien-hsiang as a yardstick to measure the degree of "orthodoxy" of one's political loyalty, then Ma Hsiung-chen's self-sacrifice would indeed appear "ironic" if only because he identified

himself with the "alien" Manchus who conquered the Middle Kingdom from the hands of the Han Chinese.

What seems to be at issue is the interpretation of loyalty according to varying sets of circumstances. To begin with, though Hsiung-chen's great-grandfather was a Ming loyalist, his father was a Manchu collaborator. And he himself would not have been promoted to such a high office as that of governor of Kwangsi if he had not enjoyed significant imperial favor. It is also possible that he either viewed the Manchus as having become sufficiently Sinicized for him to be identified with, or, to quote Gertrude Roth, he himself had "become Manchu."[41] In any event, it is believed that most educated Chinese who came to maturity after 1644 "saw themselves as Ch'ing subjects, associated freely with Ch'ing officials, and in general responded positively to opportunities for public service under the new order."[42]

Another factor that may explain Ma Hsiung-chen's different response to Ch'ing rule vis-a-vis that of his great-grandfather could be his genuine belief that the new dynasty embodied the clear Mandate of Heaven. The passage in *Kueilin Frost* 桂林霜quoted by Wakeman is a valuable insight. At the banquet hosted by Wu Shih-tsung mentioned above, Ma volunteered the opinion that the Ch'ing dynasty had "grasped the divine troops, killed the bandits, and settled the Central Plain; Heaven and the people belong to it."[43] Surely we cannot say that Ma's loyalty to the Ch'ing is just an article of blind faith. What do we make of this "loyalist?" In the narrow sense of an ethnic purist, he is of course a traitor. In the literal exegesis of the word *chung*, he is a Ch'ing patriot because he does what he considers to be his duty with all his strength. In Ma's case, the ambiance of *chung* also embraces the virtue of *pao*報 or reciprocity: he suffers his death at the hands of the insurgents to repay the favor and trust he received from the Ch'ing government.

V.

But the sanctity of life as well as the meaning of death need not always be affirmed by suicide. At times it takes more courage to endure life than to receive death. Ssu-ma Ch'ien's work and life in "cleanest slavery" seem to offer a shining exception to Seneca's dictum. In his letter to Jen An, the Grand Historian listed a number of disgraces that can happen to a man, and he considered that "the worst disgrace of all is castration."[44] In

his circumstances, he confessed, "even a miserable slave-girl is capable of putting an end to herself."[45] But Ssu-ma Ch'ien decided to linger through his alloted years instead of taking his own life. "A man can die only once," he reminded his friend, "and whether death to him is as weighty as Mount T'ai or as light as a feather depends on the reason for which he dies."[46] He felt he owed it to himself and his ancestors as well as to Chinese civilization to stay alive long enough to finish *The Historical Records.* His magnum opus has vindicated his lasting reputation as an honorable man who, when driven by a sense of mission, would opt for a form of punishment more cruel than death in order to create, in his own words, "a philosophy of my own."[47]

Ssu-ma Ch'ien's sentiments are echoed in a debate between Ch'eng Ying程嬰 (a palace physician) and Kung-sun Ch'u-chiu公孫杵臼 (a retired counselor to the Duke of Tsin) in *The Revenge of the Orphan of Chao.* This takes place in Act II after Ch'eng Ying has smuggled the baby orphan to the retired counselor's residence. The usurper T'u-an Ku 屠岸賈 threatened to slaughter all babies in the State of Tsin from one to six months old unless the son of his enemy Chao Shuo 趙朔 (the Prince Consort) was identified and executed in due course. Ch'eng Ying and Kung-sun were both indebted to the Prince Consort in one way or other when Chao Shuo was in power. For this reason, both men are guided by the consideration of *yi* to do their best to protect the orphan. Seeing no other way out, Ch'eng Ying volunteered to offer his own baby boy as an imposter-orphan Chao and urged Kung-sun to report him to T'u-an Ku. If this proposal were accepted, Kung-sun would be left with the responsibility of bringing up the orphan to avenge his father.

Kung-sun protested, reasoning that he was already seventy years old whereas Ch'eng was only forty-five. In the end Kung-sun prevailed. T'u-an Ku, led by Ch'eng Ying, came to Kung-sun's hideout. The imposter-orphan was summarily put to death by the usurper in front of the father. Kung-sun dashed his head on a stone to commit suicide, leaving his friend to face the terrible burden as the orphan's keeper.[48]

Like other suicides cited earlier, Kung-sun gave his life in self-fulfillment. Ch'eng Ying, on the other hand, chose to stay alive after he is made to understand that it would take more sacrifice to live a life in pain as a bereaved father than to choose self-extermination. Both Ssu-ma Ch'ien and Ch'eng Ying have offered convincing arguments to the truism of Mencius's articulation on bravery and courage: "When it appears proper to sacrifice one's life, and *afterwards* not proper, to sacrifice it is contrary to bravery."[49]

One can only wish that Mencius's advice had been available to those women in *Biographies of Women* who took their lives presumably to avoid breaking the laws of propriety. Lady Chao of Tai was torn between the memory of her murdered husband and the natural affection for her brother. Whether the causes she died for are "worthy" or not to the modern sensibility is irrelevant to the basic premise of this paper, which is more concerned with the motivations of self-killing than with a moralistic evaluation of it. She believed she had offered a good example to posterity for attending to the requirements of *jen* and *yi*. As Benjamin I. Schwartz observed, "One may indeed say that *jen* relates to the happiness of its possessor, but that this happiness is based wholly on a 'virtue ethic.' Virtue is happiness."[50] Borrowing an idea from Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisphus*, we should imagine Lady Chao's death to be happy..

But it is doubtful the same can be said of the wives recorded in *Biographies of Women* who committed suicide in the name of *li* 禮(propriety or "proper behavior" in Schwartz's translation) as described in the Hsieh and Spence article. They include: "A wife allowed herself to be burnt to death in her home, because there was no chaperon to escort her from the blazing building. A wife attempted suicide because the carriage sent by her husband to bring her home after an accident did not have the proper seats and hangings."[51]

We need go no further than what is stated above to discern that the understanding which these women possessed of *li* had more to do with ritual than with propriety proper. Schwartz has argued that the Confucian concept of *li* has a great deal to do with the "whole network of hierarchy and authority on which the normative sociopolitical order is based."[52] On the other hand, it is equally legitimate to take *li* as a basis for the operation of reciprocity in personal as well as social relations in China. Unless we stretch the term *li* to encompass social etiquettes and ceremonial punctilios, it would be overstraining the case if we claim that these women died for a righteous cause.[53] Their deaths, it seems to me at least, were contrary to the concept of bravery in Mencius's description.

It is not my intention to provide an inventory of suicides in Chinese history and literature. Examples have been drawn for heuristic purposes, for illustrating the suicidal motifs that can be subsumed under the blankets of *chung, hsiao, chieh, yi, yen* and their ramifications. For this reason, even though I have not discussed love suicide (which belongs to the peripheries of *chung*), vengeful suicide (which is a form of *pao*), or suicide

on account of shame (which is an expression of *ch'ih* 恥), I would like to think that what I have presented should make a useful index against which to measure these kinds of self-destruction. With the exception of those women who killed themselves due to a questionable understanding of *li*, it is my belief that in essence most of the suicides treated in this essay correspond to the Stoic recommendation of suicide summarized by Paul Tillich: that it is "not directed to those who are conquered by life but to those who have conquered life and are able to live and to die and can choose freely between them."[54]

Notes

1. Durkheim's *Le Suicide* (1897; 2nd ed. 1967) is still a classic in this genre of study. It is available in English translation by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson under a modified title: *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1951). Its normative terms for suicide such as "egoistic," "altruistic," and "anomic" are particularly useful for suicidologists of all descriptions. However, the reasons and circumstances under which Durkheim's "altruistic suicides" take their lives are necessarily at variance with those described in this paper. For one thing, Durkheim's statistics are drawn from three categories of "primitive people": 1) suicides of men on the threshold of old age or stricken with sickness; 2) of women on their husbands' death; 3) of followers or servants on the death of their chiefs. "The weight of [the primitive] society is thus brought to bear on him to lead him to destroy himself" (p. 219). Though some of the examples cited in my essay do corroborate Durkheim's findings in categories Two and Three on the sociological level, our interpretation of the term "altruism" is characteristically different due to the difference in our methodological approaches, as we shall see in due course.
2. See "Introduction," *Suicide* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1972), pp. 6-7.
3. Quoted by Thomas S. Szasz from *The New York Times* (February 9, 1969), in "The Ethics of Suicide," in *Ethical Issues in Death and Dying*, ed., Robert F. Weir (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 383.
4. See Maurice L. Farber, *Theory of Suicide* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968), p. 39.
5. *To Be or Not To Be: A Study of Suicide* (New York: Harrison Smith and Robert Hass, 1933), p. 164.
6. "Suicide in Taiwan," in *Suicide in Different Cultures*, ed., Norman L. Farberow (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1975), p. 241.
7. Ibid.
8. "Taiwan," in *Suicide in Asia and the Near East*, ed. Lee A. Headley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 79.
9. "Introduction," *Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings*, ed. & trans. Anthony Giddens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 28. I am grateful to my colleague Professor William H. Nienhauser, Jr., for alerting me to this work and for his editorial assistance.

10. *Han Shih Wai Chuan: Han Ying's Illustrations of the Didactic Application* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 3.
11. For 當仁不讓於師 (*Lun yu,* XV: 35), Legge's translation is: "The Master said, 'Let every man consider virtue as what devolves on himself. He may not yield the performance of it *even* to his teacher,' " in *The Chinese Classics* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), I: 304; Waley: "The Master said, 'When it comes to Goodness one need not avoid competing with one's teacher,' " in *The Analects of Confucius* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1938), p. 200; Lau: "The Master said, 'When faced with the opportunity to practice benevolence do not give precedence even to your teacher,' " in *Confucius: The Analects* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 137.
12. A variant title for "Kan Chiang and Mo Yeh" is "San wang mu" 三王墓 . The text I have consulted is found in Wang Shao-ying's 汪紹楹 annotated edition of *Sou-shen chi* (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chu, 1979), pp. 128-129. My translation for the quotations is based on Cordell D. K. Yee's, in *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic*, ed. Karl S. Y. Kao (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 73-75.
13. See Yuan K'o's explanatory notes to the selection "Mei chien ch'ih" 眉間尺 (yet another title of "Kan Chiang and Mo Yeh") in *One Hundred Chinese Myths Selected for Translation* 神話選譯百題 (Shanghai: Shang-hai ku-chi, 1980), p. 277.
14. *Li Chi: The Book of Rites,* I, trans. James Legge (New Hyde Park: University Books, 1967), p. 92.
15. Yuan K'o, pp. 277-278.
16. *The Chinese Knight-Errant* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 4. One of the most comprehensive treatments of the various aspects of *hsia* in Chinese to date is a recent work by Ts'ui Feng-yuan 崔奉源 entitled *A Study of Classical Chinese Short Stories in the Knight-Errant Tradition* 中國古典短篇俠義小說研究 (Taipei: Lien-ching ch'u-pan-she, 1986).
17. *The Historical Records* (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chu, 1959), 86: 2530. This biography is translated by Burton Watson in *Anthology of Chinese Literature: From the Earliest Times to the Fourteenth Century,* ed. Cyril Birch (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 109.
18. Ibid., p. 2532; p. 112.
19. Ibid., p. 2533; p. 112.
20. *Ethical Writings: Selections from David Hume*, ed. Alasdair MacIntyre (New York: Collier Books, 1965), p. 301.
21. *Suicide*, p. 112. I have benefitted from Choron's brief survey in Chapter 13 of "philosophers on suicide" which provided information regarding the attitudes of Plato and Aristotle on this subject.
22. Quoted from *Epistulae Morales* by Robert F. Weir, in *Death in Literature*, ed. Robert F. Weir (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 230.
23. Ibid., p. 232.
24. Hume, p. 300.
25. Ibid., p. 305-306.
26. "The Status of the Individual in Chinese Social Thought and Practice," in *The Chinese Mind*, ed. Charles Moore (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1967), pp. 332-333.
27. *Mencius*, 6A: 10; Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 2: 411-412.

28: The text I have consulted is Lai Yen-yuan's 賴炎元 *Han Shih Wai Chuan: A Modern Annotation and Translation* 韓詩外傳今註今譯 (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1972), p. 9. The translation is Hightower's, p. 18. Both Lai and Hightower have alerted us to the fact that there seems to be no ground to believe that Liu-hsia Hui 柳下惠 had killed himself for the code of "trustworthiness" (*hsin* 信), and that in the *Shuo yuan* 說苑 version by Liu Hsiang 劉向 Wei-sheng 尾生 is substituted for Liu-hsia Hui. See note 2 in Lai and Hightower respectively.
29. *Lun yu*, XV: 8; Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, I: 297.
30. "Suicide and the Family in Pre-Modern Chinese Society," in *Normal and Abnormal Behavior in Chinese Culture*, ed. A. Kleinman and T. Y. Lin (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1980), p. 29. Readers interested in a more specific treatment of self-killing by Chinese women can consult Margery Wolf, "Women and Suicide in China," in *Women in China*, ed. Margery Wolf and Roxanne Witke (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), pp. 111-141.
31. I am grateful to my colleague Professor Tsai-fa Cheng for assistance in translating this entry. The text I have used for translation is based on the *Illustrated Biographies of Women*, I, 繡圖列女傳 edited by Wang Keng 汪庚 (Taipei: Cheng-chung shu-chu, 1971), p. 416. The illustrations are provided by Ch'ou Ying 仇英. A complete English translation of Liu Hsiang's *Biographies of Women* is included in Albert O'Hara's *The Position of Women in Early China* (Taipei: Mei Ya Publications, 1971). However, because my reading of the biography of Lady Chao of Tai is substantially different from O'Hara's, I have decided to use my own translation. For further information on Liu Hsiang's work, the reader can consult Marina H. Sung's "The Chinese Lieh-nu Tradition," in *Women in China: Directions in Historical Scholarship*, ed. Richard W. Guisso and Stanley Johannesen (Youngstown: Philo Press, 1981). Ch'en Tung-yuan's 陳東原 *History of the Lives of Chinese Women* 中國婦女生活史 Taipei: Commercial Press, 1970) is still a useful work in this field.
32. *Mencius*, 4A: 10; Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 2: 302.
33. The key phrase is "refused to eat the grain of Chou in compliance with the dictates of *yi*" 義不食周粟 (*The Historical Records*, 61: 2123).
34. "The status of the Individual in Chinese Ethics," in *The Chinese Mind*, p. 318.
35. *The Standard History of Sung* 宋史 (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chu, 1977), 451: 13276.
36. Ibid., 481: 12539-40.
37. *The Journal of Asian Studies* (1984), XLIII, 4, p. 647.
38. Ibid., pp. 652-653.
39. Ibid., p. 647.
40. Lynn A. Struve, "Ambivalence and Action: Some Frustrated Scholars of the K'ang Hsi Period," in *From Ming to Ch'ing: Conquest, Region, and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century China*, ed. Jonathan D. Spence and John E. Wills, Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 326.
41. "The Manchu-Chinese Relationship, 1618-1636," in *From Ming to Ch'ing*, p. 6. For an account of Emperor K'ang-hsi's efforts to mollify the anti-Manchu sentiments of the Han Chinese by taking a special trip to Ch'u-fu 曲阜 to honor the descendents of Confucius, see Richard E. Strassberg's *The World of K'ung Shang-jen: A Man of Letters in Early Ch'ing China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 75-116.
42. Struve, p. 328.

43. Wakeman, p. 652.
44. "Letter to Jen An" 報任安書, in *Selected Essays of Various Periods* 中國歷代文選, selected and annotated by Fung Ch'i-yung 馮其庸 et. al., (Hong Kong: Nan-kuo ch'u-pan-she, n. d.), p. 254. The translation is Watson's, in *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, p. 99.
45. Ibid., p. 258; p. 100.
46. Ibid., p. 254; p. 99.
47. Ibid., p. 258; p. 101.
48. A complete English translation of this play was done by Pi-twan H. Wang, in *Renditions: A Chinese-English Translation Magazine* (1978), 9, pp. 103-131.
49. *Mencius*, 4B: 23; Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 2: 328.
50. *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 80.
51. Hsieh and Spence, p. 30.
52. Schwartz, p. 71.
53. I am not sure if my view on this matter would be shared by Hu Kuei 胡軌, who stated in the postscript to the edition of *The Illustrated Biographies of Women* cited in note 30 that these women "are the shining lights of Chinese womanhood that have illumined the annals of history and penetrated the conscience of mankind." Similarly, Albert O'Hara, who is a Jesuit, endorsed the conduct of these women by observing that: "The author [O'Hara] hopes that this edition [his own book] will make Chinese culture better known and understood to the English reading public and may present modern Chinese women with many ideals which even in a modern changing world they may do well to imitate" (p. vi).
54. *The Courage To Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), p. 12.