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Bridal Laments in Rural Hong Kong

Abstract

This study examines Chinese women's perceptions of fate by looking into the custom of bridal laments that had been practiced in rural Hong Kong for over three centuries. Traditional Chinese marriage rites are delineated, showing how ritual actors, the bride and her kinsfolk, demonstrate their tacit understanding and acceptance of the cultural ideals embodied in the ritual rules regarding womanly obedience. The bridal lamentation afforded a special ritual space for Chinese women to express themselves publicly. The analysis here shows that the voicing of the suffering of women through the bridal lamentation was a means by which it was possible to introduce a note of discord, shaking the communal consensus on Confucian ideals of womanhood. The last section, on the communicative features of the bridal laments, analyzes the unique language structure of the laments. In doing so, it casts light on the possible link between the fate of the women and their articulation of their life experiences. This section, in itself, serves to distinguish this study from many others in the field of women's studies, which mainly focus on the perceptions of women and their subjective feelings.

Keywords: Hong Kong – marriage rites – ritual lament – Chinese women – language

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THE CHINESE PROVERB on the three forms of obedience, “follow one’s father when young, follow one’s husband when married, follow one’s son when old,” states clearly how a woman’s destiny was defined in traditional Chinese culture. It shows how a woman was expected to lead her life. It also tells what particular goal a woman should pursue at different stages of her life: to follow her father, husband, and, finally, her son. Or, to put it another way, the view that “men decide and women follow” reflects the ethical values of traditional Chinese culture which placed much emphasis on a woman’s obedience to men. Obviously, this differs greatly from the ideas of equality and individual freedom cherished in modern Western societies. Many social studies on Chinese women employ the concept of male domination and explain the Chinese family structure and the condition of Chinese women primarily in terms of inequality between men and women (see, for example, STACEY 1983; WATSON and EBREY 1991; JASCHOK and MIERS 1994; PEARSON and LEUNG 1995; CHEUNG 1997).

The perspective of male domination is not only adopted in studies on Chinese women; it is widely employed in similar studies in other parts of the world, both in developed Western societies and in developing nations. The relevance of the perspective of male domination in women’s studies is a point commonly agreed upon by social scientists. It is yet worth noting that male domination is only a general perspective that offers a particular way of viewing things, without much regard to detail. One can see that although male domination is found across different cultures, its substantive content varies. Male domination in Chinese society partly takes the form of cultural norms. In other words, the norms and values contained in a society’s traditional culture give that culture its substance. The norms and values of a society are the standards or principles by which one’s behavior is guided and evaluated. At first glance, the idea of male domination may give the impression that women unwillingly submit to the will of men. But if we consider that the submission of women to the will of men is itself a cultural norm, then it is far from sufficient to solely view male domination as an unreasonable force coercively imposed upon women.¹

Let us go back and look at the life of Chinese women portrayed by the

proverb mentioned above. The idea of the three forms of obedience shows very clearly how traditional Chinese culture defined a woman's fate. The notion of fate is related to some of the deepest aspirations and desires cherished by Chinese women which, in one way or another, constitute their understanding of self. Chinese women interpret the meaning of their existence in the light of a male-dominated ethical order. In this respect, the obedience that Chinese women accord to their men or their submission to their fate needs to be considered in light of the way Chinese women identify with their cultural norms and values. This study attempts to look into Chinese women's perceptions of fate. How women identified with the traditional cultural norms and ideals such as the three forms of obedience is the focus of this study. I shall look into how these norms and values served as principles of reference for women to make sense of their lives. In pursuing an understanding of Hong Kong Chinese women's perceptions of fate, I examine at the same time how women expressed themselves. By examining how women articulated their life experiences, one can see more clearly how they came to evaluate their own fate.

The present study looks into bridal lamentations and places it in the context of traditional Chinese marriage rites. There are vast reserves of tacit consensus in traditional societies that can lead to concerted action in rituals and customs. When people act in accordance with the rules of marriage rites, such as a couple kneeling before a family altar or a bride undergoing the rite of having her hair dressed, the people are at the same time using their actions to show their understanding and acceptance of the cultural ideals, values and beliefs that are embodied in those rites. That understanding and acceptance are implied without being spoken. Whether the persons performing the ritual acts really believe in the cultural ideals embodied in the acts matters little. What does matter is that the individual participants show outward obedience and achieve conformity.² In a sense, a kind of tacit consensus on cultural ideals is assumed here. The notion of the three forms of obedience stresses a daughter's obedience to her father. The traditional Chinese marriage rites delineated in this study will show how the ritual actors, the bride and her kinsfolk, demonstrated their tacit understanding and acceptance of the cultural ideals on womanly obedience embodied in the ritual rules.

The bridal lamentation is part of the marriage rites, but it is a special ritual space for Chinese women to express themselves publicly (R. WATSON 1996, 125). While the ideas of marital fertility, fidelity, and harmony were propagated in traditional Chinese marriage rites, bride-daughters in lamentation spoke of their fate, giving voice to their sadness and discontent in ways that sometimes seemed to criticize or even denounce marriage. But the idea of the three forms of obedience stresses a daughter's obedience to her parents. Village daughters had to marry after tearfully singing their songs. The bridal laments delineated

in this study reflect a particular form of a Chinese woman's obedience. As mentioned earlier, far from simply following ritual instructions in silence, Chinese daughters gave public voice to their personal tensions and suffering, meaning that they introduced a note of discord, shaking the tacit communal consensus on Confucian ideals of womanhood. As my later analysis will show, I will term the bridal lamentation a display by Chinese women of "counterpoint obedience."³

Many studies on women have investigated the issue of how women subjectively interpret their life experiences. Very often the perceptions and feelings of women serve as the focus of investigation. In this study, I examine the women's fate and how they articulated it. This link between the women's fate and their articulation of it is what makes this study distinctive. Three closely related questions are: First, under what circumstances did women break their silence and tell about their fate? Second, how or in what ways did women give form to their utterances? And, third, to what extent were the women's public utterances able to bring about changes in their situation? These questions lead us to pay attention to the communicative power of lamentation. The first section will sketch out a general picture of the performance of the laments, and then highlight the significance of the words in the lamentation. The second section will describe traditional Chinese marriage rites from the perspective of the tacit consensus on cultural ideals regarding womanly obedience. The third section will analyze the texts of the laments and delineate the ideas and feelings expressed in them. The theme of "obedience" will serve as a thread running through the second and third sections, paving the way for the review in the fourth section of how Chinese daughters perceived their fate. The last section will analyze the communicative features of performances of laments that in a way responds to the questions raised in the first section.

THE PERFORMANCE OF LAMENTS AND THE "WORDS" IN LAMENTATIONS

The custom of marriage laments that had been practiced for over three centuries in rural Hong Kong ceased in the late 1960s (see R. WATSON 1996, 108; ZHANG 1969, 31, item 11; TAN 1990, 199).⁴ Before that time, one could see bridal laments performed in all marriage rites in this area.

On the fourth day of the marriage celebration, the bride, who had spent three nights in the loft, rose early in the morning. This was a day of vital significance, as it was the occasion of her actual transfer to the groom's household. Sister-friends and kinswomen prepared the bride for her departure. They folded up the mat on which she had slept on the last few nights. Then a "good luck woman," an old woman who had produced many offspring and whose husband was still living, came to make up the bride's face and to comb her hair in the style of a mature woman. This was called the rite of "putting up the hair" (*shangtou*

上頭). As her hair was being prepared, the bride sang a variation of the song of “putting up the hair” (*shangtou ge* 上頭歌), in a weeping voice:⁵

G minor

$\underline{3} \ 3 \ \underline{2} \underline{1} \ 6 \ 3 \ 2 \ 2 \underline{1} \ 1 \ 2 \ 1 \ 6 \ | \ 1 \ \underline{1} \underline{3} \ 2 \ 1 \ 6 \ \underline{6} \ \underline{1} \underline{3} \ 1 \ \underline{1} \underline{1} \ \underline{1} \underline{2} \underline{1} \ 1 \ 6 \ |$
 雙手拉埋呢(faan) 張灘屍席(ma) 無庇(jau) 我奴雲影(jau) 答在席邊(a)
 seung¹ sau² laai¹ maai⁴ lei⁴ (faan) jeung¹ taan¹ si¹ jek⁶ (ma⁴) mo⁴ bei³(jau⁶) ngoh⁵ no⁴ wan⁴ ying² (jau⁶) daap⁶ Joi⁶ jek⁶ bin¹ (nga⁴)

With both hands / I pull close this mat for the dead; / I keep my shadow / away from the edge of the mat

$\underline{3} \ 3 \ \underline{3} \underline{2} \ 1 \ \underline{6} \ \underline{6} \ \underline{1} \underline{2} \ 1 \ \underline{6} \underline{1} \ \underline{2} \underline{3} \underline{1} \underline{6} \ | \ 1 \ \underline{1} \underline{3} \ \underline{2} \underline{1} \ 1 \ 6 \ \underline{6} \ \underline{1} \underline{3} \ \underline{1} \underline{1} \ \underline{1} \underline{3} \underline{1} \underline{3} \underline{1} \ 1 \ 6 \ |$
 雙手(jau) 拉埋棉(jau) 瓦口(ma) 無庇(jau) 我奴雲影(jau) 答在瓦邊(a)
 seung¹ sau²(jau⁶) laai¹ maai⁴ min⁴ (jau⁶) nga⁵ hau² (ma⁴) mo⁴ bei³ (jau⁶) ngoh⁵ no⁴ wan⁴ ying²(jau⁶) daap⁶ Joi⁶ nga⁵ bin¹(nga⁴)

With both hands / I close the tiles; / I keep my shadow / in the shade of the tiles

Usually, a woman about to get married seldom exceeds the age of twenty; just like all the other young women she possessed youth, beauty, intelligence, and energy. On ordinary days, the young village women used to sing mountain songs and other folksongs in pure and clear voices. But on the day of the marriage, the young bride's voice would become husky after she had been singing and weeping for three days and nights. In her opening verse, she sang that she was a corpse lying on a mat. The images of death and decay made a mockery of the wedding ceremony that in the Chinese tradition symbolized marital fertility and celebrated the joy of life. Obviously, the words of the song did not fit well with the happy occasion. But as the performance of the lament was part of the marriage rites,⁶ the bride's kinsmen and her parents would not try to stop her. The bride was allowed to continue:⁷

$\underline{6} \ 3 \ 3 \ 3 \ 1 \ \underline{6} \underline{1} \ 3 \ 1 \ 2 \ 1 \underline{6} \ | \underline{2} \ 1 \ \underline{6} \underline{1} \ 3 \ 3 \ \underline{3} \underline{2} \ 3 \ 1 \underline{6} \ \underline{6} \ \underline{6} \ |$
 牙落(jau) 扎頭無扎今實(a) (a) 放鬆拾指(jau) 抖歡容(a)
 nga⁴ lok⁶ (jau⁶) jaat³ tau⁴ mo⁴ jaat³ gam³ sat⁶ (nga⁴) (nga⁴) fong³ sung¹ sap⁶ ji² (jau⁶) tau³ foon¹ yung⁴ (nga⁴)

Do not tie my hair / so tightly with your silk thread; / Release your fingers / so I keep up a happy face

$\underline{6} \ 3 \ \underline{3} \underline{2} \ 1 \ \underline{1} \underline{6} \underline{1} \ 3 \ 3 \ 2 \ 1 \underline{6} \ | \ \underline{1} \underline{2} \ 1 \ \underline{6} \ \underline{2} \ \underline{2} \ 1 \ 6 \ \underline{6} \ \underline{6} \ |$
 紅綠(jau) 絲線交(gam) 檢面(a) (我) 檢爭愁面(jau) 上頭完(a)
 hung⁴ luk⁶ (jau⁶) si¹ sin³ gaau¹ (gam³) gim² min⁶ (nga⁴) (ngoh⁵) gim² jang¹ sau⁴ min⁶ (jau⁶) seung⁵ tau⁴ yuen⁴ (nga⁴)

Red threads and green threads/are used to clear my face; /My sad face is being cleared, / the dressing of the hair is done.

The series of laments performed during the entire period of the marriage rites were elaborate, comprising several dozen or more, depending on the bride's capacity, and were arranged in a sequence that matched the sequence of the marriage rites. The laments were generally divided into four parts. When the bride first retreated to the sleeping loft above the reception hall, she sang the songs of “climbing up to the loft” (*shangge ge* 上閣歌) and “opening the mouth”

(*kaikou ge* 開口歌). These two songs were shorter in length, similar to a prelude to a suite; they proclaimed the start of the performance of the series of bridal laments. The second part of the performance lasted longest, up to three days and nights. The bride directed her songs to specific individuals or groups of individuals, such as her grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, brothers, aunts, uncles, sisters-in-law, and to the general audience of wedding guests. After three days and nights, at dawn on the fourth day the bride started the third part of the performance of laments. She sang the songs of “putting up the hair” (the excerpt above) and “leaving the loft” (*chuge ge* 出閣歌), while performing the rites of putting up her hair and leaving the loft. That was the day on which the bride actually moved away from her birthplace. Sadness and pain rose to such a height that the bride moaned about her own death. When the time for leaving came, she was carried to a sedan chair to begin her journey to the groom’s house. At the point halfway between her natal home and the groom’s house, the bride would be asked to throw away the white handkerchief that she had used to wipe her tears. There, the bride would sing the song of “throwing away a handkerchief” (*qijin ge* 棄巾歌) and the performance of the series of laments would come to an end. From this point in the wedding rites, the bride would no longer cry with her words.⁸

A marriage lament was composed of words, music, and cries, each interweaving with the other in the complex manner of performance.⁹ The crying voice was mediated by the lament’s melodic contour, forming a stylized wail sharply distinct from ordinary crying. In musical form the bridal laments were all similar, consisting of a single melodic contour using descending tones. The lower tone caused the last word of each phrase come to an end naturally with a sigh-like utterance (see, in the above lament, *a, ma* sung in the tune of *do la₁*). The single melodic line was repeated with variations determined by the demands of the text.

The role of words in laments deserves special attention here. On the one hand, words, as carriers of meaning, give substance to the more abstract expressive forms provided by music and crying, so that one could explain why one felt sad, what one cried for, and how one perceived suffering. But on the other hand, it is obvious that the meaning carried in the text of the lament was not as clear and straightforward as that carried in most ordinary speech. The text of a lament mostly took an elaborate poetic form, with metaphor, analogy, imagery, rhyme, and many other oblique uses of words. To scholars who study Chinese folk literature, texts of laments provide a rich source of material in the pursuit of linguistic beauty (see, for examples, ZHANG 1969; TAN 1990). The musical features of laments add up to create an impression of an artistic performance.

It should especially be noted, however, that the laments were not simply a static display of verbal artistry but were words actually used in Chinese

wedding rites to express the bride's feelings. This means that, along with the text and musical structures that have been found to be very skilful and artistic expressions of language, symbols of language were used pragmatically by the bride in her actual performance to make her feelings known. The two levels in the use of language, although different in nature, are not separate but interwoven in the multi-layered manner of the performance of a lament. It is here that some problems arise. It is noted that the oblique use of words that are used to enhance verbal artistry usually has a tendency to obscure real meaning. Laments are not simple spoken words used in ordinary speech, capable of giving clear and unambiguous meaning. While ordinary speech relies on relative clarity for efficient expression, laments derive their strength from their poetic vagueness. The matter becomes more complicated when one considers that laments sometimes had terrible words in them and that, as Rubie WATSON (1996, 125) has argued, the words could only be spoken in the special space created by wedding rites and singing. What, then, were the social tensions underlying the expression of a lament? Did Chinese brides really want their fate to be understood through laments? If so, in what way was the oblique use of words significant to a bride's endeavor to make herself understood, and how did such a use of language affect the potential to achieve mutual understanding? To seek possible answers to the above questions, we have to delve into the social context within which bride-daughters uttered their laments. Thus, the next section will delineate and analyze traditional Chinese marriage rites. A section analyzing bridal lament texts will then follow. Finally, the last section on the communicative features of a lament performance will respond to the above questions and deepen our understanding of the fate of Chinese women.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MARRIAGE RITES: PREPARING AN OBEDIENT WIFE

It has been widely recognized that the Six Rites and the Three Covenants¹⁰ were standard marriage customs throughout China (including Hong Kong before a modern marriage law was introduced in 1970). Chinese marriage rites were lengthy, complicated, and filled with esoteric meanings. To match the present objective of studying women and the meaning of fate, I shall not describe marriage rites in their entirety but concentrate on some features that serve to show how an obedient wife was being shaped by a series of wedding rites.

There were different kinds of marriage in traditional Chinese society. For example, in one form, immature girls, called "little daughters-in-law," were brought into their prospective parents-in-law's house to look after their child husbands. In another, girls got married as concubines. Other forms were the marriage of widows; men marrying into the homes of their fathers-in-law; and the marriage of a deceased person in a posthumous wedding. These forms of

marital union had long existed and were widely practiced, but they were simply variants of the standard kind of marriage described below. This was the form in which a virgin girl was married to a man as his primary wife. She would pass the rest of her days in her husband's house, assuming the duties of a wife, daughter-in-law, and then mother, under the care and surveillance of her husband's kin.¹¹ The practice of this primary marriage had a special importance in terms of its psychological impact on the Chinese people. I shall outline some of the ways in which it is important before proceeding to delineate the actual practice.

The bride had to be a virgin. Primary marriage meant to transform an immature girl into a woman and potential mother. It denoted a Chinese girl's initiation into adulthood. The most important ceremony to symbolize this change was the dressing of the bride's hair. On the day of the wedding, the bride was given a ritual bath and had her hair combed in the style of a mature woman. This ceremony was preceded by a period of seclusion, during which the bride was to live alone and prepare herself for the new environment and experiences ahead. The most critical event was the moving of the bride from her natal village to that of the groom. The natal village was probably the only place the bride had ever known since her birth. Therefore, to her, marriage meant being moved into a new and unknown world. For the groom, marriage also meant his initiation into adulthood. The rite of dressing his hair was simpler than that of the bride. The groom had to kneel before the family altar and then have a cap placed on his head by his father. After marriage, he would start his own family and remain living in the same place.

Romantic love between two individuals did not form the basis of a traditional Chinese marriage (see YUEN, LAW, and HO 2004, 37–38). As a cultural norm, a valid marriage resulted from what Chinese people spoke of as a “parental order.” This idea did not merely mean that the parents of two families came to an agreement about the matching of their son and daughter, with the two children being required to accept their parents' proposal. It also included the idea that, on the metaphysical level, the agreement achieved had to be in accordance with heavenly intention. There were ritual methods to check heaven's consent to a proposed match, and every successfully matched pair was thought to be a predestined marital union. As heaven's confirmation of parental choice granted almost absolute validity to a marriage, Chinese people considered it right and believed it to be their responsibility to resign themselves to anything unpleasant that emerged from the marriage.¹²

Marriage meant more than the union of a boy and a girl; in a political sense it implied the successful absorption of an “alien” member into the groom's family (FREEDMAN 1979a, 262; HKMH 1986, 16). To the groom's parents, the taking in of a new daughter-in-law added a new member to the total labor force of the family. The new wife was expected to bear children as quickly as possible to continue

the family line. No doubt the groom's family benefited from making a marriage. But the gain also presented potential threats to the family. After marriage, the bride and groom would establish a new conjugal unit. Once the bride became a wife, she had the right to monitor her husband's share of the family property. Her status would rise when she became the mother of a son; her power to control would be highest when she became a widow in her old age. It was clear that the taking in of a woman would disturb existing power relationships within the groom's family. So the groom's family was anxious to make the in-coming bride shift the focus of her loyalty from her natal family to her parents-in-law's, or at least encourage her to display obedience to them. This aim was obvious in the marriage rites conducted in the groom's house. The bride's natal parents, on the other hand, also foresaw the things that their daughter would experience in the new family, since that was the fate the great majority of Chinese women were to follow. Chinese parents who had daughters readily assumed the responsibility of bringing up and handing over an obedient girl for their affines. Doing so also upheld the family's face. These preparations were reflected in the marriage rites performed in the bride's natal house.

With the above background, we can look at several rites performed in a Chinese wedding. Marriage rites began with matchmaking. As mentioned earlier, there was a general assumption that marriages were made in accordance with heavenly intentions. When the parents of two families considered their children to be suitable partners in marriage, a matchmaker was called upon to collect the girl's horoscope and take it to the boy's family. The girl's horoscope was placed on the ancestral altar for three days to examine its compatibility with the boy's data. During that period, the absence of inauspicious omens, such as the sudden death of domestic livestock, quarrels between the boy's parents, and the breaking of crockery, would mean initial approval. The boy's family then sought the advice of a geomancer who was an expert at measuring the compatibility of horoscopes. If the result of the diviner's calculations favored the proposed match, the matchmaker would be called upon again to bring the boy's horoscope to the girl's family. Then came the turn of the girl's family to consult an expert diviner. If the divination was also favorable, the two families would hold that the proposed match was preordained and the two young people were allowed to meet with their parents attending the meeting.

The doctrine of preordained marriage gave the matching of a boy and a girl a spiritual basis; on it turned, in principle, the need to arrange a match with awe and respect. In actual practice, people's interpretation of heavenly intention could, however, hardly be separated from astute calculations concerning the social and economic advantages that might be obtained through a proposed matching. Within the three days that the horoscopes of the proposed marriage partners were placed on the ancestral altar, the so-called absence or

presence of inauspicious omens was entirely subject to the parents' interpretation. Sometimes there were manipulations that could easily produce artificial inauspicious omens such as the breaking of crockery. When a diviner was consulted for advice and paid, the parents were quite capable of getting the answer they wanted (FREEDMAN 1979a, 261). The parents could always influence the result. Sometimes they manipulated material symbols to support certain interpretations. Sometimes they simply influenced the diviner's speech. Not infrequently, a proposed match that was thought to be beneficial to the family would be backed up by an earthly interpretation of heavenly intentions.

At the meeting of the prospective bride and groom, the parents of the two parties negotiated the terms of betrothal. Through the matchmaker, they exchanged documents, fixed the date for presenting engagement gifts and the wedding day, and made an agreement on the betrothal gifts. On the specified date for the betrothal, the boy's family would send to the girl's family substantial gifts in the form of money, food, poultry, wine, and clothing. Upon receiving the betrothal gifts, the girl's family and the girl herself would agree to abide by the marriage agreement. A contractual relationship between the boy's and girl's families was then formally established. After one or two days, the girl's family would send the bride's dowry to the boy's house.

From the negotiations to the exchange of gifts, the bride and the groom were mere observers, seeing their parents and the matchmaker conduct the whole series of ritual activities that confirmed a marriage contract. When the wedding day approached, the two young people would come to the fore as the principal actors. They were to prepare themselves for a sacred union. The dressing of their hair was a significant rite at this stage, symbolizing the initiation of the two youngsters into adulthood. For the bride, in particular, the ceremony was preceded by a three-day period of seclusion, during which she was to retreat to a loft above the reception hall of the house to prepare herself for the new environment and unfamiliar faces she would encounter following her marriage. As a custom of virilocal marriage, parents used to find a marriage partner for their child from another family of a different lineage; usually the affine chosen would be a family living in a remote village. To the bride, the moment before her transfer was shadowed by the anticipation of dislocation and the rupturing of old relationships.¹³ During the period of her segregation, the bride wept and sang laments. The performing of the bridal lamentations started the moment the seclusion period began (with the song of "climbing up to the loft," continued for three days and nights, and then accompanied the elaborate rites that would be performed on the wedding day.

At dawn on the wedding day, a "good luck woman" climbed up to the loft and arranged the rite of dressing the bride's hair. The bride was to take a hot bath containing an infusion of pummelo leaves in order to cleanse herself of evil

fortune. After that, she put on new underwear and sat in front of a pair of burning dragon-and-phoenix candles. There, the bride had her facial hair removed, face powdered, and hair combed up to produce the clear hairline of a mature woman. The bride then came out of the loft. This marked the end of the period of seclusion and signaled the bride's departure.

The bride was carried on the back of the "good luck woman" to reach the reception hall of the house. A circular sieve was placed on the floor. The bride was to step into it, then, standing there, dress herself in the traditional bridal wedding costume of red jacket, green skirt, and a pair of new red slippers. After ceremoniously prostrating herself before the ancestral tablets and to her parents, the bride was carried to a red sedan chair that was waiting to take her away. Sitting inside the sedan chair, the bride was taken to the groom's house under the escort of a procession of musicians. At the halfway point, the wedding procession would stop for a moment. Here, on the symbolic boundary of her birthplace, the bride threw away a white handkerchief and sang the last of her laments (the song of "throwing away a handkerchief").

From the moment the bride emerged from seclusion to her arrival at the groom's residence, the bride's feet should not touch bare earth. She was either carried on a mature woman's back or walked on covered ground. The sedan chair was sealed in by heavy curtains and held aloft for several hours during the journey. It is apparent that, from her birthplace to the groom's village, the bride was in transit. But, on a more fundamental level, a virgin who was leaving her natal home for the groom's house was, so to speak, in a state of suspense, belonging to neither family (see FREEDMAN 1979b, 292; R. WATSON 1996, 121; BLAKE 1978, 31). Chinese wedding rites assumed that the bride who experienced a break with old ties in marriage would be nourished by new ones to be established in her husband's family. And yet, in reality, as a wife and even as a producer of lineal descendants, she could never be a complete member of the new family in the same way as her husband and son could (R. WATSON 1996, 121). From the day the bride entered her husband's family until she died, she remained fundamentally an outsider with a different surname and whose transferred loyalty was always viewed with suspicion. It was not surprising, therefore, that the rites of receiving the bride to be conducted in the groom's house emphasized the training of bridal obedience.

When the bride arrived at the groom's house, she was treated ritually to cleanse her of the harmful influences adhering to her. The bride was to step over a stove containing glowing charcoal to be purified by smoke. She was then instructed to step over a saddle placed on the threshold. "Saddle (*an* 鞍)" here represented "tranquility (*an* 安)" because the words had the same pronunciation. This meant that the bride was assured of protection by the groom's family. On the part of the bride, as a stranger coming to settle there, she was made

to promise to preserve the tranquility of the family. After that, the bride and groom were brought to jointly perform the ceremony of worshipping heaven and earth held in the open air or in front of the windows. They kneeled in front of an altar that was put up especially for the occasion. Following this, the couple was expected to worship the ancestors, offer tea to the bride's parents-in-law, and bow to each other.

After the grand banquet, the newly married were brought to the bridal chamber where teasing games started. In the few hours before the couple's bedtime, wedding guests were permitted to act in ways that were otherwise forbidden. Sexuality was granted open expression. The groom's relatives and friends came to tease the bride with idle remarks. Despite her embarrassment, the bride was not to complain. The ritual teasing was to test her character and endurance. In the Chinese view, the calmer the bride appeared in the ritual teasing, the more she would be praised for her promise in securing domestic harmony.

At dawn on the second day, the bride was brought to worship her husband's ancestors in the ancestral hall. There, she kneeled and made obeisance to senior members of her husband's family. After receiving a title given by her parents-in-law, the bride became a member of the family. On the third day after the wedding, she visited her natal family. If the bride had successfully proven her virginity on the wedding night, the groom's family would present the bride's parents with a roasted pig, which was then cut and distributed to their relatives and friends. The bride's parents would consider it a matter of the utmost disgrace if there were no roasted pig. This visit marked the completion of the marriage rites.

BRIDAL LAMENTS:

CHINESE DAUGHTERS ARTICULATING FEELINGS TOWARDS MARRIAGE

Bridal laments were songs of woe sung by a bride from the moment she was secluded in the loft to the point at which she stepped across the symbolic boundary of her home village. To a Chinese daughter, marriage meant the dramatic change of leaving her home village for that of the groom's. In the old days when transport involved traveling on foot or hiring sedan chairs, going on a long journey was not an activity that ordinary peasants could easily afford, especially the poor. In the eyes of the parents-in-law, a dutiful wife and good daughter-in-law would not be one who always asked for leave to visit her natal home. A married daughter could not frequently return to see her natal parents. An exception was the visit paid to the bride's natal home three days after the wedding, regarded as part of the formal wedding rites. Other exceptions were the occasions associated with the death of the bride's parents (TAN 1990, 196). In Chinese custom, it was the duty of a married daughter to come back and sing laments for her dead parents at funerals. One can see then, that marriage for a Chinese daughter

meant a separation from her family. Her destination was a completely strange place where she knew she would be little more than a female servant burdened with endless duties and perhaps unreasonable trials (BLAKE 1978, 30). Expressed in the bridal laments, therefore, were the bride's feelings and thoughts aroused by the impending departure.

We shall see that the Chinese wedding portrayed by the bride in the text of the lament was in sharp contrast with that described in the last section. The last section focused on the making of an obedient wife and on the ideas of pre-ordained marriage, marital fertility, fidelity, domestic harmony, and enhancing the social position of the family. In a sense, the traditional Chinese marriage rites described were much more in line with the Confucian ideals generally held by the Chinese people. In this section, however, the resentment felt by Chinese daughters and their resistance comes to the fore. Bridal laments offered the personal commentary of Chinese daughters on marriage (BLAKE 1978, 17). They conveyed a variety of messages, sometimes subversive, sometimes not, and sometimes oddly vague. The Chinese brides perhaps did not so much mean to negate the meaning of marriage shared by the entire community, but their voices of difference somehow presented a vision that had been left out of the collective view.

Before I describe and discuss bridal laments in detail, it would be better to add a word on the sources of my material. Of the published accounts available to me, ZHANG Zhengping's collection (1969) of Cantonese bridal laments offered the most meticulous recording of the texts of laments. It is a study of the folk literature of rural Hong Kong. From the first song "climbing up the loft" to the last song "throwing away a handkerchief," a total of forty-three bridal laments were recorded (ZHANG 1969, 36–64). The collection also includes the singers' explanation of the meaning of the sung text and Zhang's own survey of Chinese literature, which offered references to the literary allusions used in the laments. Other published accounts are mostly collections or research reports written by Western anthropologists—Sai Kung Hakka bridal laments (BLAKE 1978), Tsuen Wan Hakka bridal laments (JOHNSON 1984, 91) and the bridal laments of the boat people of Tai O (ANDERSON 1975). Unlike Zhang's collection, which was recorded in Chinese, most of the laments recorded in the reports of the above mentioned anthropologists were presented in English only.

It has been suggested that, compared with the bridal laments of the Hakka and boat people, which are full of expressions of personal bitterness, Zhang's collection contained songs in a more filial and submissive mode, very much in line with Confucian sentiments (JOHNSON 1988, 139). It might well be that the bridal laments of the Cantonese lacked the kind of individuality so vividly expressed in those of the Hakka and boat people. But if we view the matter another way, the filial mode of the Cantonese laments could be a sharp reflection of the difficulties

facing Chinese daughters. The bride felt bitter, but was not quite able to give vent to her potentially subversive sentiments in a straightforward way. Unleashing one's feelings with restraint reflected the deep suffering of Chinese daughters. A close examination of the Cantonese laments would therefore reveal the suffering of Chinese daughters in a deeper way. On this basis, the personal feelings elaborated in the laments of the Hakka and boat people served to supplement the restrained Cantonese style; this might help us unravel what had been held back.

A further note should be added on the language that is to be used here in presenting the texts of lament: English translations of Chinese songs sometimes sacrifice literalness in Chinese grammar and phrasing for a smooth reading (ANDERSON 1975, 15). To avoid any misunderstanding resulting from the translation, I am going to provide the original Chinese version whenever available. Thus, bridal laments from Zhang's collection will be presented in both Chinese and English,¹⁴ and those from the accounts of the anthropologists will be presented in English only.

Portraying the Resentment of Wang Zhaojun

In the marriage laments collected by Zhang, there was a message that contained a direct reference to the ancient Chinese political practice of "peace through marriage (*heqin* 和親)."¹⁵ This was the story of Wang Zhaojun 王昭君, a maid in the imperial palace of the Han dynasty, who was sent across the border to marry a prince of an uncivilized tribe. Over and over, the bride portrayed marriage as a form of forced tribute to the barbarians and bewailed her imprisonment in the enemy's territory.

To her mother, the bride sang:

投水自沉何日會，
空將苦況歎新鳳，
可憐三攝藍關湧，
父母膝下無永奉，
好似昭君出塞歸胡國，
誰收骸骨葬古賢，
...

急於星火誰來救，
誰去他鄉救女流，

Into the water I sink.
Will we ever meet again?
Futilely the new bride
her bitter fate laments.
Up springs the Blue Pass [meaning, the Pass of Death],

thrice with tears I see.
 My parents I will
 never serve again.
 Like Zhaojun leaving her country,
 marrying to a foreign land.
 Who will gather the white bones
 and bury the virtuous ancient ones?

...

Be hasty as the spreading fire,
 rescue me would he?
 Who would travel afar,
 a mere woman to save? ... (ZHANG 1969, 40-41)

To her aged grandmother, the bride sang:

聞得你孫兒身受困，
 你突來巧計到房間，
 借問鄉紳有乜英雄將，
 點兵提領出戰場，
 從何咁久唔救孫兒難，
 五內含冤點敢彈，

Learning that your grandchild
 was under siege,
 Conjuring a trick
 into my room you came.
 But what valorous generals does my elder have?
 What soldiers and commanders to the battles could she send?
 How could you save your grandchild
 from misfortune?
 Oh, such immense misfortune
 and grief I dare not speak of.... (ZHANG 1969, 37)

“Peace through marriage” had been a political strategy customarily used by the ancient imperial court to maintain peace and harmony with border tribes. Among the many women who were sent off to serve such a political purpose, Wang Zhaojun was one of the few whose story was recorded in historical accounts and presented in the classical sung poetry of the Han period (206 BC to 220 AD) as “Zhaojun’s Resentment.” Wang Zhaojun was framed by a palace painter and the Han emperor mistakenly chose her to be the one sent off to marry the barbarian prince. She was escorted out of her homeland, married the prince and, when she died years later, was buried in the foreign land.

Through laments, the bride announced that she felt the same bitterness as Wang Zhaojun. “Peace through marriage” was a political contract made between rulers of two parties. Once the contract was made, both parties assumed responsibility for keeping their promise. The Han emperor had to hand over a Han maiden to the barbarian prince and, upon receiving the Han daughter, the barbarian prince kept his part of the bargain and did not wage war against the Han. The giving and taking of a daughter contributed to national reconciliation. The Cantonese bride who sang wedding laments knew the story of Wang Zhaojun and learned about the contribution made by her ancient sister. It might well be that the family as a whole benefited as a consequence of the exchange involved in the marriage, but being the one who was chosen to make great sacrifices, the bride cried out, beseeching her brother to come and save her.

To her brother, she sang:

于今豆蔻如禍端，
把我和番效杏元，
...

兄要早施良計議，
救妹離危脫災非，
免我終朝長嗟氣，
...

賢兄千祈施計策，
早平遼寇滅胡番，

Treated like pests nowadays
are the young bean pods;
To pacify the barbarians,
like Xingyuan [i.e., Zhaojun] I was sent.

...

My brother
please conjure up a good plan soon.
Save your sister from danger,
deliver her from misfortune.
So I won't have to
Grieve and sigh all day long;

....

My virtuous brother
you must contrive a way;
Defeat the bandits at the border
and wipe out the foreign barbarians. (ZHANG 1969, 44–45)

The bride's pleas to be rescued were made over and over again, and were directed to specific individuals or groups of individuals—brothers, sisters, kinsmen, and so forth. Although the requests were made repeatedly, a real rescue was not expected. The singing bride and her audience knew that marriage began with the betrothal, which created the tie of affinity, and which could only be broken by mutual consent or by the death of either one of the marriage partners. There was a tacit mutual understanding between the bride and her audience. It was not the actual request but the emotional tone of the lament that really counted. Thus, the bride's brothers, sisters, and kinsmen simply listened and took no real action to "save" her.

To her father, mother, and other senior members of the family, the bride did not make a direct request to be rescued. The message was conveyed in an indirect way. As shown in the previously cited laments, the bride told her mother and grandmother that her fate was similar to that of Wang Zhaojun. She then inquired as to where to find the heroes who would come to save her. Before her mother and grandmother, who were her intimate family members, the bride inquired, in desperate tones, whether any of her kinsmen were brave enough to come to her rescue. In a way, this indirectly put her family members in an embarrassing position. Every time the bride repeated her inquiry or her hidden blame, her mother, grandmother, and the others could say nothing because, as a ritual, no interruption was normally permitted during performance of a lamentation.

The father was the figure of authority in the family. It was the duty of a Chinese daughter to obey her father. As stated previously, parental order was linked with heavenly intention in marriage. Therefore, Chinese daughters faced two authorities, both earthly and heavenly. There did not seem to be any moral source from which disobedience to a father could be justified. A Chinese daughter was accustomed to showing respect and filial obedience to her father.

While parental order represented the ethical basis of a Chinese marriage, the role of matchmaker was basically pragmatic and functional, to help settle the considerable complications arising from the negotiations between the two prospective affines. Both parents and matchmaker played a significant role in Chinese marriage. The latter was not a member of the bride's family. The bride did not blame her parents for her misery; rather, the matchmaker, as an outsider, was near at hand to bear the brunt of her complaints (FREEDMAN 1979a, 263). In Blake's account of Hakka bridal laments, there were songs cursing the matchmaker. Below is one of them:

My matchmaker,
 You have such feeling;
 By the roadside lie dog feces,
 They are all eaten.

My matchmaker
 You are so full of feeling;
 By the roadside lie dog feces,
 With which your teeth are cleaned! (BLAKE 1978, 26)

In another song, the bride likened the matchmaker to a “death broker” (BLAKE 1978, 26).

For the Hakka, there was in particular a custom of “beating the matchmaker” (HKMH 1986, 60–61). The matchmaker was to be beaten by the bride’s sisters/friends before she could successfully carry the bride to the sedan chair. In a sense, the matchmaker served as a broker in a marriage (FREEDMAN 1979a, 262; BLAKE 1978, 25). It was her business to provide information for clients about whose grown-up children were available for matching and how different families could be matched in terms of their social and economic status. For every successful match, she would receive a commission. To increase her chances of success, a matchmaker might manipulate or even distort information. Stories were disseminated of matchmakers who had deceived their clients by matching them with a handicapped partner (FREEDMAN 1979a, 262). It was not surprising, therefore, that the Chinese bride feared the risk of deception.

Cantonese bridal laments spoke of the misery of Wang Zhaojun or contained messages relating to the forced transfer of the bride to a man from a barbarian race and land. Here and there, in her songs of woe the bride equated her fate to that of Wang Zhaojun. The palace painter had deliberately drawn a bad picture of Wang Zhaojun so that the king chose her as the one to be sent abroad. Upon knowing the truth, the emperor could not but keep his promise to hand over Wang Zhaojun to the barbarian prince. To the bride, that was somewhat similar to her father’s obligation to send his daughter to the groom’s house. The palace painter’s frame-up was reminiscent of the risks of being deceived by a matchmaker. So we see, in a lament to her brother’s wife, the bride protested that she was being trapped by a frame-up (*zao jianji* 遭奸計) (see ZHANG 1969, 49). The frame-up referred to things that happened in two worlds, the narrated world and the real world. The two worlds were not separate but interwoven in the text of the lament. When the Cantonese daughter sang about the frame-up, she was in a way protesting against the things the matchmaker had done. Cantonese daughters were willing to submit themselves to parental order but, quite certainly, not in the same way to the matchmaker.

Was there really a frame-up as insinuated in the song of woe? Not necessarily. In her laments, the bride did not mean to claim that her utterance referred to what had happened in the real world. The symbolic fact was entrusted to imply the singer’s subjective feelings and how she perceived her life circumstances. Through the use of symbolism, the bride was making a metaphorical challenge

to what had been arranged for her; was what the matchmaker said entirely true? If not, then the non-problematic marriage arrangement might be in question. Of course, all knew that it was only an imagined situation that was being alluded to in the songs. No one would expect to have discussion of this matter, for it was pointless to discuss the truth of a metaphorical description and, in fact, the ritual context did not mean to offer space for such activity. In a sense, the bride might truly have doubts about the marriage arrangement, but she did not mean to reject it. Rather, paradoxically, it was through showing her doubt of whether the marriage had been properly arranged that the bride expressed to the audience her unswerving devotion to parental order. It is not easy to understand this kind of behavior. Certainly it was not irrational, but it was also not rational in the ordinary sense. If we attempt to explain this behavior, we cannot but go back to the process by which Chinese daughters were socialized. It was part of their moral training to cultivate a profound obedience to their father, whether right or wrong, or whether the experience was pleasant or unpleasant.

Self-Deprecation and Moaning her Death

There were brides who absconded. In such a case, it was the matchmaker's duty to bring her back and to ensure that she could finally be given to the groom's family. As for those who were successful in running away before marriage, rarely would they be able to come back to their home again, because few parents could bear the disgrace brought about by their daughter's violation of a marriage agreement. So when a Chinese daughter chose to escape from marriage, she had to prepare herself to be completely cut off from her family. On the other hand, the majority of Chinese daughters who steadfastly fulfilled their promise to marry also had to sever their connection with their family, but not as completely as those who had absconded. As mentioned earlier, on special occasions, such as the formal visit paid to the bride's natal home three days after the wedding or the death of a parent, a married daughter would visit her natal home. On ordinary days, this kind of visit was subject to the permission of her husband and parents-in-law. It was not surprising, then, that most of the songs sung during the period of seclusion expressed the bride's sadness at having to be separated from her family, with which she shared a common bond of flesh and bone.

To her father, the bride sang:

今天割斷茨梁草,
教我奴點捱窮困

Today, my father cuts the tall lush grass.
How am I to live in poverty? (ZHANG 1969, 39)

Most Chinese women enjoyed their early life when they were living with parents. As a child raised by her parents, a Chinese daughter was given care and attention even though she occupied a lower place than sons. She had to do farm work and perform domestic duties, but the workload was never more than she could manage and she was given enough food to eat. This might not be the case after marriage. The husband's family might not be poor economically. The so-called "poverty" referred to in the lament was the life she anticipated leading in her husband's household compared with life in her natal home. The bride knew that a daughter-in-law was usually treated as little more than a handmaiden. This made the bride cherish even more the experiences of her early life. The bride referred to herself as "the tall lush grass," showing gratitude to her father's effort in bringing her up and providing her with good living conditions. But at this point, she cried that she had to be cut from the nutrient-rich soil and also from her own body. The experience of being uprooted brought a psychological pain that could not be easily borne. Bridal laments gave vent to the singer's pain and suffering caused by marriage.

Quite interestingly, to express this feeling to her father, the bride reversed the subject, saying that it was her respectful father who suffered pain and loss as a result of his daughter's marriage. In the succeeding verse, the bride on the one hand acknowledged her father's goodness in nourishing her, while on the other hand cried because her father grieved and gained no profit from bringing her up:

松柏抵寒千百轉，
養女浮化斷爹腸，
養女因由難定性，...

For years the pines and the cypresses
have withstood the cold;
For the daughter who is coming to nothing
my father grieves.
Why raise a daughter who is useless
one can hardly say... (ZHANG 1969, 39)

It was not the Chinese custom, nor was it considered right to express individual sentiments. Where an individual's feelings are expressed, they have to be done so through a reference to other matters. The cry is not just a tactic but expresses true feelings because, as previously mentioned, this was part of the manifestation of profound obedience; she regretted her failure to continue providing filial services to her father. The bride denigrated herself as "coming to nothing" and as being "useless."¹⁶ It was the intensity, firmness and unswerving

attitude of filial loyalty that gave such poignancy to the bride's sense of self-deprecation. In a song to her brother, the bride expressed her inferiority to him:

日字人王我兄會旺,
房中出戶往向方,
賢兄賺錢巴結娘親,
高台難望我添香,
我兄白花生在園林接,
接接酬勞慰母深恩。
白花生在飄搖朽,
風吹向打唔穩陣,...

Likened to the sun and kings,
he who prospers will be my brother;
From the room, out of the house,
where will I go?
Money will my virtuous brother earn
and my mother's love deserve.
For my parents will not see
the incense that to them I burn.
My brother is like a white flower
that grows and flourishes in a garden;
Incessantly he serves and pleases
my mother to whom he owes his gratitude.
I am like a white flower that grows
on a swaying branch,
Beaten by wind and rain;
unsteady.... (ZHANG 1969, 47)

The bride was entirely cognizant of her status as a transient in the household, in contrast with the degree of investment made in the future of her brothers' domestic household. For sons, permanent members of the family, the future expansion in land and houses was anticipated. They were perceived to be long-term sources of support for the family. In contrast, daughters were taught early that they were "goods without profit," and that they ultimately belonged to "somebody else's family." The contrast between the white flower growing in a garden [that is, sons] and that growing on a swaying branch beaten by wind and rain [that is, daughters] was obvious enough. Sons represented continuity and prosperity, while daughters were destined to endure transience, lack of anticipation, and irrevocable rupture (CROLL 1994, 198–212). In a culture where an individual sought to affirm the meaningfulness of his or her existence through social connections and a recognized role/status, a transient existence and the

anticipated rupture of ties could have a demeaning effect on individuals. The bride-daughter's self-denigration or sense of inferiority was therefore not particularly surprising. This self-image was represented in an extreme form when Chinese women used the highly derogatory terms such as "dead-fated person" or "stinking-fate person" to refer to themselves in funeral laments (JOHNSON 1988, 145).

The bride's separation at marriage was like a death; it was an utterly irrevocable break from her natal family and her own past. A number of bridal laments were punctuated by images of death. In a song to her brother's wife, the bride said that she was going to the shadowy regions of purgatory (ZHANG 1969, 52). Before the end of her seclusion, the bride sang the song of "putting up the hair," with an opening verse in which she called the mat she used to sleep on as the "mat for the dead" (NDC 1994, 151). The same song ended with a curse, saying that she was going to wear the green mourning dress for the groom's family (NDC 1994, 151).

In Zhang's collection of Cantonese bridal laments, the image of death recurred here and there; sometimes implied by one or two words and sometimes by a sentence. The Hakka bridal laments expressed the image of death in a much more elaborate and direct way, unfolding what was kept restrained in the Cantonese laments.

As in the Cantonese custom, the Hakka bride was to cleanse herself of evil fortune by taking a bath. This was to be the bride's last bath before her actual transfer to the groom's family. In a lament, she linked it with her first step into the yellow river, which was the symbolic boundary between life and death:

The tips of my poor fingers strive
 To sever the old ties;
 To sever the old—
 And to seize the new;
 But to seize new ties
 Is to cross the yellow river;
 Crossing the yellow river
 My heart is not yet dead;
 But once across the yellow river,
 My feelings will be extinguished. (BLAKE 1978, 21–22)

The bathing rite was designed to purify the bride and to protect her from evil. But, through the laments, she expressed her personal interpretation, portraying it in the image of her lonely voyage to death:

If the yellow river is not crossed,
 The heart can never rest;

But to approach the yellow river,
 The heart is sorely distressed;
 As the foot steps into the river water,
 Each step sinks further in;
 Only I can feel
 How the heart does throb;
 As the foot steps into the river water,
 Each step goes deeper in;
 Only I can know,
 How much the heart does grieve;
 What course does this yellow river follow?
 Its waters seem so vast and vague;
 But only I can feel
 How the bowels are severed. (BLAKE 1978, 22)

Standing on the symbolic bank of the yellow river, the bride was in a state of fear and trembling. She might drown on the way. But life was not within her grasp. There was no turning back. It was the force of fate that escorted her there on the border of the river. And the other shore was an unknown place. But the bride still had to take a step forward. In this state of suspense, the bride's soul could not rest until she had crossed the river. It was the anticipation of an inner peace on the other shore that caused the bride to take her courage in both hands and risk stepping into the unknown.

There were no expressions in the lament indicating that the bride was trying to negate the meaning of crossing the river. However violently the Hakka bride cursed the matchmaker, and however terribly she mocked the groom's home as the shadowy regions of purgatory (BLAKE 1978, 27), she had never cognitively denied the validity of that transfer. As revealed in the laments, the bride was fully aware of her own fear; on the other hand, she was entirely cognizant of the significance of the passage. Finally, she forced back her personal feelings and chose to move forward. The choice that was made denoted that the bride had accepted the arrangements that had been made for her. In a sense, the acceptance was the bride's affirmation of the communal consensus on what was good, desirable, and worthwhile.

"OBEDIENCE" REVIEWED

"Obedience" is the thread running through the previous two sections. In the section on traditional Chinese marriage rites, I delineated how people's actions were governed by ritual rules. "Obedience" manifested itself in the way Chinese people followed the rules of the marriage rites. It produced a kind of social order

that was founded on two levels of identification. On the first level, different individuals identified the validity of the same set of ritual rules and did what was required. On the second level, different individuals identified each other's role in a marriage and observed each other properly doing what was required. Thus, we saw the "matchmaker" smoothing out the negotiations between two prospective affines, the "parents" making decisions on a proposed match, and the "daughter" and "son" carrying out "parental orders." There was a tacit consensus that the observance of ritual rules formed the basis of a valid marriage. On this level, all of the participants were equally required to follow the same set of ritual rules. But on another level in which the elaborate marriage rites were conducted, we saw that the participants were not doing things on equal terms. This led us to see more clearly the disadvantageous position of Chinese daughters.

As shown earlier, performers of different roles in a marriage were quite capable of advancing their personal interests within the special space created by the ambiguous meaning of ritual practice. An obvious example was the space within which parents could make heaven or the paid matchmaker speak as they desired. Similarly, the matchmaker was capable of manipulating information so as to increase the chances of making a successful match. It was never clear which one benefited most from the marriage, but all of the parties involved were, in different degrees, capable of obtaining benefits from the specific role they played in the marriage. There was, however, an exception—the bride was the person with the least control over circumstances. From the moment the period of seclusion began, the bride began to lose the status of a daughter. Before the consummation of the marriage, the bride had not yet acquired the status of a wife. In a culture where personal power was lodged in one's social ties and recognized status, the Chinese daughter who was devoid of status was prey to submission. The rite of "teasing the bride" that took place within the few hours before bedtime was an obvious example. The bride should not make complaints or reveal any sign of bad feeling towards the teasers, for the rite was a public test of the new daughter-in-law's obedience. In a sense, we can say that the bride lost her voice to perfect obedience. It was also by this perfect obedience that she showed her affirmation of the tacit consensus.

In the section on bridal laments, I delineated how the bride lifted her voice through the performance of laments. That was an outburst of feeling in the period from her seclusion to the point at which the bride left the symbolic edge of her home village. As just mentioned, the bride who was devoid of status in this period was prey to being dominated. This period could be further divided into two phases. The first was from the beginning of the period of seclusion to the point at which the rite of "putting up the hair" was performed on the actual wedding day. The second phase was from the rite of "putting up the hair" to the point at which the bridal sedan chair left the symbolic edge of her home village.

The first phase was a period of three days and nights, during which the bride lived alone in the sleeping loft. The second was about half a day, during which the most significant rites preceding and accompanying the bride's actual transfer were performed. It is worth noting that it was only in the second phase that the bride did, and was observed doing properly, what was required. In the first phase, it should be noted that, she was offered ritual protection in seclusion, being left with a relatively free space during which no external demands were imposed.

It is in the first phase that the bride was allowed to express her feelings of loss, separation, and dislocation through laments. As the lament unfolded, we saw that the bride expressed her doubts about the way that the marriage had been arranged. The doubts raised sometimes appeared to be negating marriage. On the other hand, the bride still identified with the idea of marriage; the use of Wang Zhaojun, a historic heroine, as her symbolic point of reference implied such an attitude. The moaning of her own death expressed most dramatically and deeply the personal tensions the bride was experiencing. Death is normally irrevocable. So frightening was the experience of marriage that the imagery of death would be a severe criticism and denunciation if expressed in ordinary speech. But the bride also spoke of her anticipation of an inner peace after "death," implying that there was in her mind the hope of a better future, a better life after "death." Against the contradictory background of a Chinese daughter's cognizance of the difficult life of a daughter-in-law, the bride was in fact displaying a profound identification with what her community had arranged for her. The profundity of identification did not simply mean a small or large degree of identification but a kind of identification resting on human struggles between fear and hope, doubt and faith, and then, finally, the taking of an affirmative position on the communal consensus. The bridal laments described in the last section reflect the obedience of Chinese daughters. But the obedience there was different from that in the section on traditional Chinese marriage rites. Instead of simply following ritual instructions in silence, the Chinese brides voiced in public their personal tensions, displaying a gap in the communal consensus and then filling it. If the section on traditional Chinese marriage rites displayed the Chinese daughters' perfect obedience, then the section on bridal laments displayed, so to speak, their counterpoint obedience.¹⁷

THE LAMENTATION AND ITS COMMUNICATIVE FEATURES

At the beginning of this paper, I mentioned that the marriage lament was composed of words, music, and crying, each interwoven with the other in the complex manner of performance. As a means through which the bride could express her feelings before her departure, the bridal lament was meaningful. In an earlier

section, I described in detail the texts of the laments and delineated some of the core messages that they conveyed. There is little doubt that words are a kind of language symbol that is capable of expressing thoughts and feelings in a clear and straightforward way. They differ sharply from other kinds of language symbols. A piece of music performed with a deep and lyrical tune, or a simple act of wailing, for example, also expresses a person's sadness; perhaps, the aesthetic and emotional force they embrace is more capable of intensifying the message evoked. But it is never clear what the substantive rational content of the feelings is unless there are words. Words make it possible, at the cognitive level, for the audience to comprehend what exactly makes a person feel sad, how he or she evaluates the circumstances that cause his or her unhappiness, and other reasons for explaining a person's sadness. Both Steven FELD's concept of "wept thoughts" (1990) and K. M. TIWARY's "wept statement" (1978, 25) imply that there are rational elements in the performance of a lament. The performance of a lament placed felt thought at center stage, articulated simultaneously with well-organized sentences, making it possible for the audience to know what was in the mind of the crying woman. As stated earlier, texts of laments were pervaded with oblique uses of words, such as metaphors, analogies, images, and rhymes, most of which induced ambiguities in the message of the lament. No one could rely on his or her interpretation of the meaning of the metaphorical language. In the ritual context, people of different roles in a marriage might receive different messages from laments. Among the brides, there might be a commonly shared interpretation of a lament text but it was also possible that they might view the texts differently. It seems that it was not the exact meaning but the emotional tone of the performance of the lament that really counted in the context of the ritual.

If this was really the case, why were marriage laments not performed using only a few sung words, with more emphasis placed on the stylized crying and its related melodic tune? YEE's study (2001) of the wedding laments of the Tujia women in western Hubei province of China could be considered as such an example. However, as shown in the earlier section, the texts of the Hong Kong bridal laments were indeed rich in substantive content and had meaningful multi-layered messages. There is no doubt that words played a significant role in the performance of the laments of Hong Kong Chinese brides.¹⁸ There was also little doubt that the performance of a lament was an expression of the Chinese bride's intense emotional request for understanding and sympathy; words helped to make explicit the grounds for the emotional request. The reasons could not be expressed in a clear and straightforward way, as this might be regarded as offensive to the bride's parents and other kin members. A good daughter should never complain, but display obedience to parental orders. Rubie Watson suggests that, by framing her words to a ritual and melodic tune, the bride saved herself from

the condemnation that would surely follow if the same feelings were expressed in ordinary speech (WATSON 1996, 127). Similarly, I want to suggest that the oblique uses of words, besides being a display of verbal artistry, formed part of the Chinese bride's strategy of communication to make inexpressible messages expressible. In what follows, I will look into some features of the structures of the lament that might serve the bride's communicative intention.

First of all, we look into the musical structure of lament. As stated at the beginning of this paper, the musical forms of bridal lament were all similar, consisting of a single melodic contour using descending tones. This single melodic line was repeated with variations determined by the demands of the text. Below is an excerpt of the song of "putting up the hair" (*shangtou ge* 上頭歌). Note the similarity of the melodic lines of every two verses:¹⁹



(a) 紅紙(jau)出頭 日書 蓋 面 (a) (a)日書 蓋面(jau)有相 逢(a)

(nga⁴)hung⁴ji² (jau⁶)chut¹tau⁴ yat⁶sue¹goi³ min⁶ (nga⁴) (nga⁴)yat⁶sue¹goi³min⁶ (jau⁶)mo⁴seung¹fung⁴(nga⁴)

A piece of red paper is on my head,/the paper with my horoscope covers my face;/ Covered by the paper,/I will never see my folks again



(a) 洗嘜(jau)著紅 兼(jau)著 綠(a) (a)通身 著綠(jau)孝呼人(a)

(nga⁴)sai²mak⁶ (jau⁶)jeuk³hung⁴gim¹ (jau⁶)jeuk³luk⁶ (nga⁴) (nga⁴)tung¹san¹ jeuk³luk⁶ (jau⁶)haau³foo¹yan⁴(nga⁴)

Why does one dress / in red and green? / Why not all in green / and cry out to the dead?

A somewhat basic structure of the melodic tune, omitting sliding pitches and musical ornamentation, is as follows:



Bridal laments only involved a few musical notes; "la₁, do, mi" were the three basic notes repeatedly sung. It is worth noting that, when singing, the bride was not accompanied by any musical instrument. The melodic tune was entirely the product of the voice of the bride, that is, the rise and fall of the pitch of her voice in uttering words with a certain degree of stylization. In other words, the tune was a piece of vocal music in which the uttering of words created the contour of melody. Thus, we see in the above excerpt an interesting feature that the tones of the spoken words generally matched "la₁, do, mi." Patrick Hase

observed that if the texts of the lament as composed did not quite fit the melodic tune, then the melodic tune would merely be bent to fit the words (HASE 1990, 22). We also see in the above excerpt that auxiliary words (see *jau, a*) were sometimes used to fill the space where a word did not fit the tune. The primacy of words over music was obvious (HASE 1990, 20). As a matter of fact, this characteristic was not exclusive to bridal laments. Words are also very important in other types of Cantonese songs such as mountain songs, *nanyin* 南音 (a kind of Cantonese singing narrative) and *yuequ* 粵曲 (Cantonese operatic songs). A technical term in ethnomusicology used to describe such a characteristic is *yi zi hang qiang* 依字行腔, meaning “the performance practice of creating the vocal melody by following the tonal inflections of the syllables in the lyrics” (CHAN 1991, 363). The aim is to *lou zi* 露字 (display the words) so that the audience is able to clearly hear what is being sung. It is important to note that, to display the words is not a general feature of ritual music in the Chinese context. Daoist chanting, for example, does not display the words, for the sung or spoken messages are directed to the gods and spirits, not to man; the aim here is to communicate with non-human subjects in the other world.²⁰ Thus, the characteristic of displaying the words in bridal laments shows that, in contrast, the performance of the lament pre-supposed a communicative intention directed to the human world, in particular the bride’s family and the members of her kin.²¹

It was fairly natural for the Chinese bride to have the intention of communicating in her performance of the lament. Before her actual transfer, the bride expressed her feelings of loss and dislocation, seeking the understanding and sympathy of her family and kin. It is worth noting that the bride’s family and kin could not comprehend her feelings without an understanding of the reasons on which her feelings were based. In other words, understanding the reasons accounting for the bride’s feelings formed the basis for understanding the bride’s feelings. And yet, as mentioned earlier, the reasons might be seen as offensive to her parents and other kin members if expressed in a direct and straightforward way. It was at this point that the bride was in a dilemma—whether or not to make clear her reasons. In actual practice, either option related to how the words were used. Finally, we saw that it was the oblique use of words that appeared in the texts of the laments. Perhaps we can say that the communication strategy of performing the laments was somehow the middle way, to make the sound of the words clear but simultaneously to make ambiguous the reasons that could be clearly expressed by words. In a sense, the oblique use of words had concealed the rational contents embodied in the bridal laments, but, quite paradoxically, the bride seemed to be relying on such ambiguity to maximize the space available to her for speaking out.

Ambiguity in the bridal laments was not something unpleasant. Taking the form of poetic expressions, bridal laments were well received as a kind of folk

art, appreciated by people for their literary beauty. There were in laments, for example, vivid descriptions of the bravery of some historical heroines and good descriptions of the beauty of nature. Metaphor, analogy, and imagery reconstructed what happened in the real world. The result was a blurring between the real and the unreal, and the shifting of frames, which was marked by contrasting the features of different worlds. The quaint flourishes of style and literary quotations combined to create an impression of an artistic performance. Thus, we see that marriage laments of Shanghai and Nanhui were expected to show the bride's "talent" (see TAN 1990, 112; McLAREN and CHEN 2000, 208). It is interesting to note that when the audience appreciated the poetic style of the use of language they had to simultaneously receive the things being described as facts in the laments, for the real and the unreal were not separate but interwoven with each other in the genre of the lament. It might be that the audience did not accept the truth of the things being described. But they were at least brought to encounter the re-constructed reality that aimed to portray the bride's sorrowful fate at the time of the performance. Also, significantly, the audience was brought to recognize the emotional significance of the things being described by the bride. Therefore, the more refined and elegant the style of language used, the greater the appreciation of the audience, and the higher potential of the lament to gain the recognition of the audience.

It should be noted that this does not mean to suggest that Chinese bride-daughters fully grasped the communication strategies embodied in the structures of the lament and used them in a conscious manner. This was probably beyond the capacity of the illiterate and generally simple-minded Chinese village women. As laments, Chinese bride-daughters simply followed the custom and sang the weeping songs, not fully aware of laments' features and structures. I try to suggest that the communication strategies were not something consciously made by any one individual Chinese woman; they were pre-existing structures available for Chinese brides to use according to their own cognizance. Perhaps those who were able to compose texts of laments, either on the spot or in other places, were those more able to understand the structures.

It has been mentioned that the use of poetic language blurred the boundary between the real and unreal, bringing to the audience the re-constructed reality that portrayed the bride's suffering. Again, this does not mean to say that Chinese village women had the intellectual capacity to make a clear distinction between the different levels of reality and then skillfully blur the boundary in order to produce a certain effect. Some might have had such an idea in mind but perhaps most had not. It is, however, worth noting that Chinese daughters of the same village or a wider territory actually learned a similar set of texts of lament, which was part of what we generally call oral tradition. For the majority of village women who were denied access to formal education, oral transmissions of

songs and stories, together with rituals and theaters, were the means through which learning could take place (JOHNSON 1988, 139–40). Chinese daughters, in learning and practicing, shared the things described in the laments. In a sense, the blurred boundary between the real and unreal in laments could be, as said before, a strategy to bring the audience to recognize the bride's sorrowful fate. And, in another sense, the blurred boundary could also truly reflect how Chinese daughters viewed the world. Chinese daughters were not cognitively confusing the real and the unreal, facts and stories, past and present. They knew that Wang Zhaojun was a woman who belonged to the remote past and that the tall lush grass belonged to nature, neither obviously belonging to the present reality. It was apparent, then, that for Chinese daughters, what had happened in the past or things occurring in nature were not something unrelated to the world in which they were living, but served to explain and justify what was happening to them. Things that showed themselves as facts were assumed to be right and there did not seem to be any point of reference beyond concrete life or contexts that could serve as criteria by which Chinese daughters could evaluate the circumstances of their lives. From the perspective of the present study, this constitutes the predicament of a woman's fate in traditional Chinese society. Individual feelings of sadness had indeed forced Chinese daughters to make utterances, breaking the silence embraced in a tacit consensus, but they could not provide Chinese daughters ground on which to claim their right to make direct rational evaluations of the social world, including the condition of their own lives.

NOTES

1. For a detailed discussion of the research methodology on the indigenization of social inquiry in the study of Chinese behavior, see YUEN, LAW, and HO 2004, 89–94, 201–15.

2. James L. WATSON (1988) and Evelyn S. RAWSKI (1988) offer very insightful discussions on the performative and ideological domains of rituals.

3. The word “counterpoint” used here was inspired by a series of studies of Chinese ritual music compiled in YUNG, RAWSKI, and WATSON 1996.

4. There is no information on where and when exactly the tradition of marriage laments began in mainland China. But Tan Daxian has presented evidence showing that marriage laments had already become popular in the Guangxi region during the Southern Song period (early twelfth century) (TAN 1990, 98). According to Zhang Zhengping, marriage laments had already been popular in rural Hong Kong before the Ch'ing dynasty started in the sixteenth century (ZHANG 1969, 31, item 11).

As the marriage lament custom of Hong Kong ceased over thirty years ago, all the quotes I list in this paper come from published sources and thus the present study is basically a reinterpretation of these published lamentations. Yet, as will be mentioned later, I did visit an old village woman, aged over sixty, who demonstrated how to sing a lament that was published in a book. I also made a tape of the woman's singing. The musical core presented in this paper is based on the tape recording obtained from that visit.

5. The song of “putting up the hair” presented throughout this paper (including the excerpt quoted in the text) was originally a lament recorded in a book published by the North District Council (Hong Kong) (see NDC 1994, 151). I visited the old woman mentioned in note 4 whose name was listed under the song and invited her to demonstrate how to sing the lament. The text of this song presented throughout this paper is a transcription of the lament recorded during that visit. The musical score presented here is a simplified version of the transcription done by Chuen-fung Wong, a student of ethnomusicology.

6. C. Fred Blake argued that bridal laments were not part of the formal rites; they were not obligatory and they only served as the licensed expression of the bride that in some sense constituted her personal commentary on the formal rites (BLAKE 1978, 16–17). Elisabeth L. JOHNSON stated that her information was not clear on this point (1988, 149). Tan, in his study of marriage laments in many parts of China, argued that laments were an indispensable part of the marriage rites; any bride who was unable or not quite able to lament would be criticized as foolish by her relatives and visiting guests (TAN 1990, 94). I am inclined to Tan’s view. In what follows, we shall see that the different ritual acts in marriage were in some way paralleled by laments.

7. The song quoted in the text is taken from the source mentioned in note 5.

8. Elisabeth Tolbert described Karelian women singing death laments as women who “cry with words,” as opposed to men who merely “cry with the eyes,” which means to cry in the ordinary sense. “Crying with words” is the ritualized crying of lament. See TOLBERT 1990, 81.

9. This description is not exclusive to the Hong Kong Chinese bridal laments studied here. Wing-yu YEE (2002) described the wedding laments of the Tujia women in western Hubei Province, China, as composed of weeping, song and speech. Elizabeth TOLBERT (1990, 81) described the Karelian death lament as “a particularly striking example of the interplay between language, music and emotional expression, occurring as a fluid mix of speech, song and weeping.” As further stated by Tolbert, this description is similar to descriptions in other anthropological studies, such as “tuneful weeping” (TIWARY 1978), “sung/texted/weeping” (FELD 1982), and “ritual wailing” (URBAN 1988). For a brief discussion on the ancient Chinese interpretation of the nature of weeping songs, see LI 1995, 7–9.

10. The Six Rites and Three Conventions formed the basis of traditional Chinese marriage practice. The six rites consisted of the steps to be followed: sending gifts to make a proposal, asking for the girl’s name, sending news of favorable divination, presenting wedding gifts to the girl’s family, fixing a wedding date, and meeting in person. The Three Conventions were written documents to be exchanged between the boy’s family and that of the girl’s: the contract of marriage, the receipt of betrothal money, and the deed for the delivery of the bride.

11. This is what Maurice FREEDMAN called the standard kind of Chinese marriage (1979a, 260). Freedman described and analyzed this basic model of Chinese wedding in two papers (1979a: 255–72; 1979b: 273–95). He stated that the large number of descriptive studies on marriage rites reveal a great constancy over the whole of China in the practice of primary marriage. In reading Freedman’s works, I was surprised that his materials were so similar to the traditional Hong Kong Chinese wedding rites delineated in a book produced by the Hong Kong Museum of History (HKMH) in 1986. The primary source materials of the latter study are field reports, interviews, and relevant historical works. Also, in my reading of the main anthropological research on Hong Kong villages, I found that the recorded marriage rites of local villages were not significantly different from those described by Freedman. Thus, I am on firm ground in stating that Freedman’s basic model of the Chinese wedding can be incorporated into the Museum’s study to produce a better picture of traditional

Hong Kong Chinese weddings. I therefore readily acknowledge my indebtedness to the above two studies for the materials they have provided for the description appearing in this section.

12. FREEDMAN (1979a, 262) suggested that while the doctrine of predestined marriage relieved Chinese people of a frightening burden of responsibility, fate helped to reconcile them to its failure. I share his view but think that it is an inadequate explanation. Chinese people have a concept of fate; but not of fate in a purely metaphysical or transcendental sense. For a culture in which self-understanding secures its basis on interpersonal relationships and social status, the concept of fate cannot be clearly understood if adequate consideration is not given to the dimension of social relationships, especially that between parents and children. Thus, I emphasize the concept of “parental order” here.

13. See also E. CROLL’s insightful analysis on Chinese daughters’ experience of discontinuity (1994, 198–212).

14. All of the English translations of the bridal laments selected from Zhang’s collection appearing in this paper were the work of Choi-wan Cheung, with some modifications by me.

15. In Zhang’s collection, ten out of the forty-three wedding laments mentioned the story of Wang Zhaojun or contained messages relating to the forced transfer of the bride to the barbarian race. The use of literary allusions based on the story of Wang Zhaojun is frequent in Zhang’s collection, but, quite surprisingly, Rubie WATSON does not mention the allusion in her study (1996), although she says that she has used Zhang’s collection as the main source of data for her research. Perhaps the omission is inadvertent. But it is worth noting that the use of literary allusions is very popular both in Chinese folk and intellectual literary traditions. This style of expression invites readers and audience to grasp the deeper meaning implied.

16. Elizabeth L. Johnson has suggested that the use of personal pronouns or highly derogatory terms of belittlement was a form of self-deprecation, employed as a type of reversal, contradictory to “the fact that a basic theme of the laments is the assertion of the singer’s rights and merits” (JOHNSON 1988, 145).

17. The counterpoint traditions represent a dimension to folk cultures that is dramatically at odds with the dominant value set. As W. F. Wertheim has described it, “In their most embryonic shape, those counterpoints only manifest themselves under disguise. In more primitive societies they most appear as tales, jokes and myths, which give expression to the deviant sets of values. . . . [The contrary set of values expressed in an institutionalized form] is not merely an individual expression of protest against an over-rigid cultural pattern, but a group protest which has a certain sociological meaning” (WERTHEIM 1974, 109). For discussion of this counterpoint concept and the counterpoint traditions, see W. F. WERTHEIM 1974, 105–110; James C. SCOTT 1977, 16–21; YUNG, RAWSKI, and WATSON 1996.

18. Patrick HASE says, “Villagers did not clearly distinguish poems from songs: whether the poems were read or sung made little difference—in either case it was the words which mattered” (1990, 20).

19. The musical example quoted in the text comes from the source mentioned in note 5.

20. Chuen-fung Wong, personal communication.

21. In their recent study, Anne McLAREN and CHEN Qinjian (2000) emphasize the exorcist nature of the bridal lamentations of Nanhui. The Nanhui interlocutors believe in the efficacy of the sung lamentations in sending out harmful influences. In the bridal lamentations of rural Hong Kong, there is, however, no evidence showing a strong belief in the magical power of lamentations, nor is there a clear intention of directing messages to the gods and spirits. The blessings and the curses, and the voicing of grievance and suffering

presented here are more aptly understood within the cultural context of a belief, though shaking, in the Confucian ideals of womanhood.

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