



A Study of Female Biographical Writing in Officially Compiled Huizhou Local Gazetteers during the Qing Dynasty—Focusing on the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer

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Abstract— *The Qing Dynasty witnessed a significant number of chaste and martyr women in Huizhou, and the biographical accounts dedicated to them in officially compiled local gazetteers expanded considerably. Among these sources, the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer stands out for its comprehensive content and particularly detailed and systematic categorization. An examination from temporal, spatial, and textual comparative perspectives reveals distinct characteristics in these biographies: a predominance of chaste widows, relatively fewer martyr figures, limited representation of talented women, and a pronounced degree of stylistic formulaism. Analysis of these patterns and features suggests that the prevalence of chaste and martyr women in Huizhou was closely linked to the prominence of female chastity ideals in the region. This phenomenon resulted not only from official promotion but was also reinforced by distinctive local cultural influences.*

Keywords— *Huizhou, officially compiled local gazetteers, female biographies*



I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, Huizhou has remained a prominent focus in Ming and Qing regional historical studies. The discovery and systematic compilation of a large number of Huizhou contractual documents have provided substantial source material for academic research on local societies during the Ming and Qing periods, particularly regarding social realities in Huizhou. Owing to their vast quantity and high historical research value, these documents are regarded as a major discovery in historical scholarship, comparable in significance to oracle bone

inscriptions, Han and Jin dynasty bamboo slips, Dunhuang manuscripts, and Ming-Qing palace archives. This has also given rise to a prominent field of study known as Huizhou studies. Since scholars such as Fu Yiling and Chen Xuewen pioneered research on Huizhou merchants, the scope of Huizhou studies has continuously expanded, with research areas gradually broadening. Nevertheless, the primary focus remains on the Huizhou merchant group, and related scholarly output has been remarkably fruitful. Notable works include Zhang Haipeng and Wang Tingyuan's *Studies on Huizhou Merchants*^[1], Wang

Zhenzhong's Ming-Qing Huizhou Merchants and Social Change in Huaiyang,^[2] Wang Zhenzhong and Liu Daosheng's Huizhou Documents and Research in Chinese History^[3], as well as their recently published Journey Between Huangshan and Baiyue Mountains^[4].

While research on Huizhou merchants is undoubtedly representative and typologically significant, studies on other social groups in Huizhou should not be overlooked. This is particularly true for research on Huizhou women, who constituted half of the local population and served as crucial domestic supporters behind the Huizhou merchant groups. This demographic significance, however, is not matched by the current level of academic attention they receive. Moreover, existing research outcomes remain limited, often scattered within broader social discussions on Huizhou or treated as subsidiary to studies on Huizhou merchants. Therefore, this paper centers on Huizhou women, utilizing the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer as its main source, to explore several issues related to the writing of female biographies in officially compiled Huizhou gazetteers during the Qing Dynasty, with the aim of contributing to the study of Huizhou women.

II. CLASSIFICATION OF FEMALE BIOGRAPHICAL WRITING IN HUIZHOU DURING THE QING DYNASTY

Four editions of the Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer compiled and preserved from the Ming and Qing periods exist, specifically those from the Hongzhi, Jiajing, Kangxi, and Daoguang reigns. Among these, the Daoguang edition is the most comprehensive in content and relatively well-structured in its compilation system, particularly in its richly detailed section on exemplary women (lienü zhuan). Therefore, this study focuses on the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer as the central text for analysis. By comparing it with other editions of the Huizhou gazetteer and with officially compiled local gazetteers from other regions, this paper aims to identify commonalities and distinctive features. In terms of content, the lienü zhuan in the Daoguang edition, like those in other versions and regions, revolves around a shared thematic focus: "filial piety, chastity, fidelity, and martyrdom" (xiao zhen jie lie). However, in terms of

compilation style, the lienü zhuan in the Daoguang edition exhibits unique characteristics compared to earlier versions.

Although the lienü zhuan in the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer shares similarities in thematic content with those from other regions and overlaps with earlier editions, it significantly expands the content and refines the classification system. For instance, the Kangxi Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer, compiled by Zhao Jishi and others, "did not distinguish between chaste widows (jiefu), faithful maidens (zhennü), or those who had or had not received state recognition; it merely noted the categories under each entry."^[5] In contrast, the Daoguang edition "divided the compilation into four categories: chaste widows, martyred widows, faithful maidens, and chaste martyrs, with filial wives, filial daughters, virtuous women, and talented women placed at the end. Those who received state honors and archways, official commendations, or who maintained their vows from youth for decades without recognition were all systematically arranged by category."^[6] This demonstrates that the lienü zhuan in the Daoguang edition placed greater emphasis on categorizing deeds by type. This change, on one hand, accommodated the sharp increase in the number of exemplary women in Huizhou during the Ming and Qing periods. On the other hand, grouping by category helped to highlight the moral themes intended for promotion, thereby enhancing the social edification function of the local gazetteer. Overall, the female biographies in the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer can be classified into four main types: Chaste Widows (jie), Martyrs (lie), Filial Women (xiao), and Talented Women (wen).

The first category is Chaste Widows (jie), referring to women who remained faithful to their husbands and refused to remarry. This group typically constituted the majority in the lienü zhuan. It is evident that such accounts were the most promoted theme by the authorities, serving as exemplars of the traditional Confucian precept that "the husband is the guide of the wife." The mass recording of these women's deeds in officially compiled gazetteers essentially aimed to instill chastity ideals into local society, thereby upholding the established social and familial order. This inherently

determined that the dominant female biographical writing could not emphasize the individual characteristics of the women themselves; their significance existed only in relation to their husbands and marital families. This is reflected in the primary identification of a woman as "wife of so-and-so." The brief accounts of their deeds predominantly describe their contributions to the family and their commitment to preserving chastity after their husband's death.

The second category is Martyrs (*lie*). The terms *jie* and *lie* are often combined, as *lie* shares the fundamental characteristic of *jie*—fidelity to the husband. However, *lie* represents an extreme form of *jie*, upholding "chastity" at the cost of one's life. This could mean resolving to follow the husband in death after his passing or choosing death to protect one's chastity during periods of warfare, banditry, or social disorder. Figures in this category often share two characteristics: first, compared to chaste widows, martyr widows typically had no sons, thus avoiding the obligation to raise children; second, such figures frequently appeared during dynastic transitions, where relatively disordered social conditions made women more vulnerable to being forced into martyrdom to preserve their chastity.

The third category is Filial Women (*xiao*), primarily referring to devotion towards parents or parents-in-law. Filial deeds were often interconnected with chaste conduct. The section on chaste widows in the Daoguang gazetteer also includes many accounts of women who, after their husband's death, remained chaste and diligently served their husband's elders.^[7]

The final category is Talented Women (*wen*), or *caiyuan*, referring to women gifted in poetry and literature. This category is relatively unique and received the least emphasis in officially compiled gazetteers, placed at the end after the aforementioned categories.^[8] The number of recorded individuals is also very small.

From the perspective of compilation structure, the *lienü zhuan* in the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer also shows a significant change compared to the Hongzhi, Jiajing, and Kangxi editions. It abandoned the earlier method of simple chronological organization, instead dividing entries first by region and then arranging them chronologically within each region. Huizhou was a

relatively stable political-geographical unit comprising six counties: Shexian, Xiuning, Wuyuan, Jixi, Yixian, and Qimen. The compilation of the *lienü zhuan* in the Daoguang edition was organized according to these six major regions. This was an innovation of the Daoguang gazetteer compared to previous versions. This method of organization made the geographical context of individuals clearer and the categories more distinct. Therefore, this can be regarded as a step forward in the writing of female biographies in Qing Dynasty officially compiled local gazetteers.

In reality, this progress benefited from the continuous practice of official gazetteer compilation over the years and the maturation of compilation philosophies. Simultaneously, the increasing number of exemplary women also drove changes in the compilation of local gazetteers. Similar changes appeared in gazetteer compilation from other regions during the same period. Large-scale, synchronous changes not only indicate a collective shift in official compilation ideology but also demonstrate that this change actually met the societal need for shaping and promoting specific female images at the time.

III. CHARACTERISTICS OF FEMALE BIOGRAPHICAL WRITING IN HUIZHOU DURING THE QING DYNASTY

The characteristics of female biographical writing in Qing Dynasty Huizhou are reflected in the *lienü zhuan* (Biographies of Exemplary Women) of the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer. Some of these traits were more pronounced in the Huizhou region, while others represent distinctive features when compared to other categories of records or to accounts from different dynasties. Therefore, these characteristics are not absolutely unique, yet examining them through the dimensions of time, space, and text remains necessary, as it aids in understanding the evolution and specific features of female biographical writing.

First, there is a predominance of chaste widows (*jiefu*). A high proportion of chaste widows in the *lienü zhuan* is a common phenomenon across all officially compiled local gazetteers, determined by the dominant official ideology, inevitably resulting in varying degrees of

commonality. However, this phenomenon is more pronounced in the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer compared to other regions. Taking Shexian County as an example, chaste widows account for over ninety percent of the total entries across all eight major categories. In terms of absolute numbers, the Daoguang gazetteer also records more chaste widows than gazetteers from other regions. This particular phenomenon was influenced by Huizhou's distinctive geographical and socio-cultural characteristics, which fostered a more prevalent cult of female chastity and fidelity, leading to a higher number of chaste widows. The specific connections behind this will be elaborated in the following section.

Second, there is a relative scarcity of martyr widows (*jielie*). This scarcity is relative to the number of chaste widows. The reasons are twofold: firstly, the extreme nature of martyrdom lacks universality; secondly, society at the time did not actively promote such drastic acts. Although martyrdom was emotionally stirring and could more sharply highlight the virtue of chastity, its excessive promotion could lead to other social problems, such as leaving young orphans and elderly in-laws without support. Consequently, accounts of chaste widows often include details where the widow initially intended to follow her husband in death but was persuaded by others to consider her children and parents-in-law, ultimately choosing a life of chaste widowhood instead. In fact, the inclusion of such details served to subtly advise women that, under normal circumstances, they should prioritize chastity widowhood over martyrdom.

Third, there is a notable scarcity of talented women (*caiyan*). This scarcity is also relative to the first two categories, but the numbers for talented women are even more extreme. The Daoguang gazetteer records only one talented woman from Shexian County, with no such entries for the other five counties. The category of talented women is most closely linked to female education. However, this scarcity should not lead to a denial of female education in Huizhou during the Ming and Qing periods. On the contrary, as a region deeply influenced by Zhu Xi's Family Rituals, Huizhou placed considerable emphasis on female education. Hu Zhongsheng, after analyzing numerous Huizhou genealogies, concluded that "Huizhou, renowned as a land of propriety and

righteousness, under the permeation of Confucian culture, particularly valued education. Women, especially those from the upper classes, generally received a good education."^[9] In reality, some Huizhou women did receive relatively good education through various means. However, these opportunities were primarily privileges of upper-class women; the vast majority of lower-class women lacked such access. Furthermore, even for upper-class women, the focus of education was on texts like the *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, *Analects*, *Classic of Filial Piety*, and *Admonitions for Women*. Cultivation of literary talent and poetic skill was never the mainstream of female education, so those truly qualifying as "talented women" were indeed a minority. Nevertheless, this is not the primary reason for their extreme scarcity in the *lienü zhuan*. Even if not mainstream, some upper-class Huizhou women achieved proficiency in arts like poetry, so the solitary example of Huang Kexun seems anomalous. Considering the social context, the main reason lies in the fact that the official ideology's requirements for core female virtues did not prioritize literary talent ("wen") but rather emphasized chastity, filial piety, and loyalty. Consequently, the gazetteers did not devote significant space to shaping the image of talented women, focusing instead on promoting the deeds of chaste widows to achieve their stated goal of moral transformation.

Fourth, there is a pronounced phenomenon of formulization. Compared to the Hongzhi edition of the gazetteer, female biographical writing in Qing Dynasty Huizhou exhibits severe formulization. Both in the recording of deeds and their expression, highly formulaic and homogenized patterns emerged. From the perspective of highlighting the intended themes, this phenomenon is understandable. However, the primary cause was likely the relaxation of state restrictions on commemorating women during the Ming and Qing periods, especially from the mid-Qing onwards, leading to a sharp increase in the number of exemplary women. This forced compilers of official gazetteers to adopt selective and abbreviated forms of recording, eventually resulting in the batch recording of individuals with similar deeds, often merely noting the woman's native place under the entry "Wife of X, née Y" without further details. This formulization might be loosely compared to that seen in Sui-Tang period stone

inscriptions. Both prioritized the need for thematic expression over highlighting the individuality of the women, akin to what Hu Zhongsheng described as emphasizing "the Confucian ethic of the husband as the guide of the wife and the kinship consciousness of the mother's status being determined by the son."^[10] Similarly, inscriptions on chaste widow arches in Huizhou also show this trend, often recording only numbers without names due to the vast quantities. While this type of formulization can create a sense of distortion for researchers, it centrally reflects the ideological priorities of the ruling elite of that time.^[11]

In summary, the biographical writing about women in the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer's *lienü zhuan* section exhibits four distinct characteristics during the Qing dynasty. First, chaste widows (*jiefu*) numerically dominated these records to a far greater extent than in other regions, a phenomenon closely linked to Huizhou's unique geographical and cultural environment and the profound influence of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. Second, martyr widows (*jielie*) were relatively scarce. This scarcity stemmed both from the extreme nature of suicidal chastity and from the official stance, which discouraged such acts to avoid social problems like orphaned children and unsupported elderly parents. Third, records of talented women (*caiyuan*) were exceptionally rare. Although female education in Huizhou was relatively widespread, influenced by Zhu Xi's Family Rituals, its curriculum focused primarily on moral indoctrination. Cultivation of literary talent was not mainstream, and official ideology prioritized promoting chastity and filial piety over literary accomplishment. Fourth, the biographical writing displayed a high degree of formulization, manifesting as narrative templates and content homogenization. This was an inevitable consequence of the Qing state's relaxed regulations for commemorating women, which led to a sharp increase in the number of recorded exemplars. Its essence was the reinforcement of the ethical norm that "the husband is the guide of the wife" through standardized writing. Collectively, these characteristics reflect the ideological imperatives of the Qing state in shaping the image of women through local gazetteer compilation. While this process somewhat obscured historical complexity, it

provides crucial textual evidence for researching contemporary gender ideologies.

IV. REASONS FOR THE PREVALENCE OF THE CHASTITY CULT AMONG WOMEN IN HUIZHOU DURING THE QING DYNASTY

The large number of women recorded in the *lienü zhuan* of the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer is a significant reflection of the prevalent female chastity cult in Qing Dynasty Huizhou. The reasons for this phenomenon relate both to vigorous promotion at the state level and to various regional characteristics of Huizhou. Official advocacy provided an essential overarching direction, while regional characteristics represented an expression of local initiative, requiring deeper exploration of the unique local traits of Huizhou.

During the Ming and Qing periods, to meet the needs of social control, the state promoted and honored individuals such as filial sons, obedient grandsons, righteous husbands, and chaste wives throughout society. The early Ming Hongwu period stipulated: "Commoner widows who lost their husbands before age thirty, maintained their resolve, and did not remarry after age fifty shall have their family's corvée labor obligations exempted."^[12] The early Qing had similar regulations. Furthermore, after the Daoguang period, the Qing dynasty further lowered the threshold for applying for state honors, aiming to maintain local order and foster a social atmosphere that esteemed chastity and filial piety, thereby upholding moral norms. To achieve this, besides granting reputational recognition, the authorities also provided economic incentives. Such substantial reputational and material rewards not only increased the number of chastity arches commemorating clan women but also significantly strengthened the ideology of female chastity and martyrdom.^[13]

As official publications, local gazetteers were inevitably guided and influenced by mainstream state ideology, and Huizhou was no exception. The preface to the *lienü zhuan* in the Daoguang Huizhou Prefectural Gazetteer explicitly begins by stating, "Now the state's rites and teachings are widely disseminated, and people esteem moral integrity and chastity,"^[14] revealing a strong

emphasis on propagating Confucian norms and clear political direction. Therefore, it can be said that the language, narratives, and other aspects of female biographical writing in Qing Dynasty Huizhou were constrained by the promotion of official mainstream ideology. However, this also resulted in very clearly articulated themes. Coupled with supporting systems and policies, this ultimately contributed to the prevalence of the female chastity cult in Huizhou.

While the influence of official advocacy was widespread, its reception varied across regions due to differences in culture, geography, and customs. As mentioned, the female chastity cult in Qing Dynasty Huizhou was more pronounced than in some other areas. Interpreting this phenomenon requires attention not only to the macro social context of official promotion but also to the specific micro-level characteristics of Huizhou itself.

Since the Tang and Song dynasties, Confucian ethics underwent continuous secularization. After the Southern Song, Neo-Confucianism, which vigorously promoted feudal morality, became the official mainstream. Huizhou had deep connections with Neo-Confucianism. The founders of the Cheng-Zhu school, Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi, as well as its great synthesizer Zhu Xi, all traced their ancestral origins to Huizhou. Consequently, Huizhou earned the titles "Birthplace of the Cheng Brothers and Zhu Xi" and "Land of Neo-Confucianism." One characteristic of Neo-Confucianism was its emphasis on the lineage, promoting living in clan-based communities and strengthening kinship ties to maintain authority and local social order. Thus, the lineage atmosphere in Huizhou was particularly strong.^[15]

The organization of local lineages was both a social direction advocated by Neo-Confucianism and a social manifestation of its normative influence. As crucial grassroots units for implementing Confucian teachings, the organizational strength of lineages directly affected the process of secularizing these teachings and disseminating ritual norms downward through society. The prevalence of the female chastity cult in Qing Dynasty Huizhou was also linked to its well-developed lineage social structure. Robust lineage organizations further facilitated the penetration of Confucian moral teachings, leading to stricter ritual constraints on women. Dense lineage

networks and a strong lineage atmosphere subtly but persistently reinforced the chastity ideology among women, as their behavior represented not merely themselves but was often tied to their lineage's honor. The pressure of public opinion within and between lineages was a factor women had to consider for their survival. Of course, lineages also provided support to women who conformed to their behavioral standards.

During the Ming and Qing periods, Huizhou merchants developed rapidly, forming a major nationwide merchant group, and the commercial atmosphere in Huizhou intensified. The Daoguang gazetteer mentions numerous examples of men leaving home for trade. The long-term absence of large numbers of Huizhou men meant many women became the mainstay of their individual households. This situation also created a more pressing practical need in Huizhou to reinforce the ideology of female chastity. The absence of men from the household, in another sense, drove local lineages to utilize the power of ritual teachings and morality to strengthen control over women. Under the long-term influence of this atmosphere, increasingly more Huizhou women consciously embraced the path of chastity and martyrdom, resulting in the frequent appearance of exemplary women and numerous chastity arches, which ultimately became distinctive regional symbols of Ming-Qing Huizhou.

The prevalence of the female chastity cult in Huizhou during the Qing Dynasty resulted from the interaction between state institutions and regional culture. At the national level, both the Ming and Qing dynasties systematically promoted ideals of female chastity and filial piety through commendation systems and policy incentives such as corvée exemption and the erection of memorial arches, thereby incorporating female virtue into the system of social control. That these institutions had a particularly pronounced impact in Huizhou stemmed from the region's unique cultural foundations. As the birthplace of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, Huizhou developed a highly organized lineage society that reinforced Confucian discipline through ancestral halls and clan regulations, intimately binding women's personal conduct to familial honor. Concurrently, the subsistence pattern of Huizhou merchants, characterized by prolonged trading expeditions, created an objective need to reinforce female chastity

norms to maintain family stability. This social ecology, shaped by both lineage ethics and commercial requirements, facilitated the deep penetration of official ideology, ultimately producing the exceptionally prominent cult of female chastity in Huizhou. Historians must recognize the power dynamics operating behind such representations, while also using these formulaic texts to examine the complex interactions between institutions, ideologies, and social structures in traditional society.

V. CONCLUSION

In summary, Huizhou women were significant contributors to Huizhou culture and vital supporters behind the large Huizhou merchant groups. They "accumulated initial commercial capital for Huizhou merchants and provided a consolidated home base for those trading far from home." Not only did they generate capital for their families through handicraft production such as weaving and embroidery, but they also assumed comprehensive responsibilities—caring for the elderly, raising children, and managing family assets—while their husbands were away on business, thereby becoming the cornerstone of family stability. Although these economic activities and domestic contributions warranted thorough documentation, within the writing framework of officially compiled local gazetteers, their identities were reduced to singular moral symbols.

There is no doubt that Huizhou women made multifaceted contributions to the development of the Huizhou region, yet their significance and diversity were not adequately reflected in the female biographical writings of contemporary official gazetteers. Compilers of these gazetteers, guided by specific ideological imperatives, established an evaluative framework for women centered on "chastity, fidelity, filial piety, and martyrdom." This system rendered women's value entirely contingent upon men and their patrilineal clans, resulting in distinctly formulaic characteristics in biographical writing. The life experiences of diverse women were compressed into similar narrative templates, effacing the particularities of individual lives and ultimately producing a rigid image of womanhood. While this mode of writing diminished historical richness, it successfully constructed a

set of behavioral paradigms aligned with feudal ethical standards.

When contextualized within their historical setting and viewed from the perspective of feudal moral promotion, this writing strategy was undoubtedly successful. By subsuming the diverse lived experiences of women into a unified moral narrative, gazetteer compilers effectively reinforced societal expectations and norms for female conduct. These biographies served not only as instructional texts for women's edification but also, through their form as local knowledge, participated in shaping the cultural identity of the Huizhou region. Today, despite their limitations, these texts provide a unique window into understanding the living conditions of Huizhou women during the Qing dynasty. Beneath the surface of formulaic narratives, we can still glimpse women's agency and survival strategies within specific historical constraints. Therefore, it is essential to adopt a dialectical approach to the issues surrounding female biographical writing in Qing dynasty Huizhou gazetteers—acknowledging their value as historical sources while maintaining a critical awareness of the power relations embedded within these writings.

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