

Vacillating between Private Sentiment and Social Obligation: The Transmission of the Meng Chiang-nü Story

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Abstract

Around 550 B. C. , a general of the army of Ch' i齊, Ch'i-liang杞梁 was killed in a battle. The King of Ch' i tried to express his condolences to Ch' i-liang' s widow when he saw her on the road. Ch' i-liang' s widow declined, because ritual prescribed that people should mourn and pay respect to the deceased in their residence, not on the road. This incident was recorded in *Tsuo-chuan*左傳, but the widow remained nameless. The same story was recorded in *The Book of Rites*禮記 with the addition that describes the widow' s weeping as showing her deepest sorrow. Her deed was again recorded in *Biographies of Women*列女傳 compiled by Liu Hsiang劉向. In this edition, Ch' i-liang' s widow chooses to drown herself after her husband' s death, for she has no father, husband or son to depend on. In even later versions of the story, the storytellers give her the name of Meng Chiang-nü孟姜女, and her husband becomes a conscripted worker of the Ch' in government, who was sent to build the Great Wall and died of exhaustion. Meng Chiang-nü leaves her family behind and travels across the country to look for her husband. When she is informed of his death after the long journey, she cries so hard that her voice shakes the Wall and causes it to fall.

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There are many different versions of the Meng Chiang-nü story with proliferating details on the main characters. How the story is told in different time-periods shows interactions between the text and the social conditions of the audience. Storytellers may not be fully aware of the social changes, but when they rearrange the text, the outcome reflects the contemporary views of how the tensions between private needs and public good are to be handled. It also reflects views of how to balance rituals and human emotions.

This work first discusses the emphasis on the balance between abiding by ritual and expressing emotions in the early versions of the story. Then, it goes on to analyze how the story has been told in later times from the following aspects: the attributes of Meng Chiang-nü and her husband as persons and as members of their family, the relationship between the couple, how storytellers justify Meng Chiang-nü's leaving her parents behind to set out for her journey, how they justify the fall of the Great Wall, and how they end the story with a remedy for the couple and the audience. From this analysis, this work tries to explain what may have resulted in the continued popularity of this story. It also tries to answer the question of how a couple that values private needs over the public good could win approval and sympathy from a general audience, and why the importance of the construction of the Great Wall could be diminished to a totally unjustified brutal act of a tyrant.