Introduction

At the home of the bride, they weep and wail till Heaven resounds,
At the home of the groom, their property swells and grows by bounds.¹

Men fear to write and women fear to weep.²

These popular sayings from Pudong-Nanhui, a region on the coastal border of modern-day Shanghai, reflect local understandings of the importance of bridal laments, a little-studied folk genre performed before the socialist revolution across vast areas of China. The first saying encapsulates the view that bridal weeping and wailing at the time of marriage had a ritual or magical potency. In an act of cosmic resonance, the bride’s wailing would evoke a parallel response from Heaven.³ The more she wept and wailed, the more riches and property would flow to the home of the groom. The second saying alludes to the perceived commensurability of quintessential male and female talents. Men gained status from ‘performing’ literacy and writing, and women from ‘performing’ weeping and wailing. The usefulness of literacy in a society where the male pursuit of writing could win an official post is self-evident. What women gained from their performances known as *ku*, “weeping and wailing”, is much less obvious. Yet young women in this coastal region as well as their counterparts in the Chinese hinterland went to great lengths to master an elaborate verbal art form known as *kujia* or “weeping on being married off”.

Relatively little is known of the performative and ritual arts of Chinese women.⁴ In this study I will bring to light an ancient folk art now in decline but that was once a signal mark of female status, talent, and virtue across broad areas of China. Why did women feel obliged to lament in village communities in pre-modern China? Why was the practice not only tolerated but admired and praised? What did women seek to communicate through their rhetoric of grievance? In
seeking to explore these issues, I argue that in lament communities there existed a shared cultural framework in which female lamentation ‘made sense’ and was highly valued. Many decades after the decline of the lament genre, and in the absence of an ongoing performance tradition, it is not easy to interpret the significance of women’s laments in their original cultural context. Nonetheless, it is important to make the attempt. The ability to move an audience through a lament was perceived to be one of the most important symbolic skills that women possessed in many Chinese communities before the socialist era. In her discussion of the bridal laments of Jiangyong County, Hunan, Liu Fei-wen has argued that “bridal lamenting is the only formal occasion where a woman’s literary talent can be openly demonstrated and her voice publicly acknowledged.”

An understanding of the place of laments in Chinese culture promises to enrich our understanding of women’s social and performance roles, the gendered nature of China’s ritual culture, and the continuous transmission of women’s grievance genres from the imperial past to the revolutionary period and beyond.

**Laments and Female Grievance**

Studies on women’s performance traditions around the world have tended to focus on two main concerns. The first is to bring to light little-studied folk genres associated with women with a view to rendering visible a social group often marginalized or oppressed in their own society and ignored in mainstream scholarship. Around the world, laments are particularly associated with women. Female lament traditions include those of the Laymi Indians of Bolivia, Greek women, the Kaluli women of Papua New Guinea, the crying songs of the Untouchable women of India, the Araucanian women’s laments of Chile, the funeral laments of Irish women, and bridal departure songs in North India. There are occasional exceptions to the dominance of this genre by women—for example, the ritual wailing of Shavante Indians in Brazil, which is performed by both men and women. However, as Joel Sherzer observes, laments “are a woman’s genre, even in societies where both men and women perform them”.

A second concern is to understand the nature of the female grievances constructed in laments. Women’s oral traditions commonly focus on women’s complaints: for instance, the Indian ‘crying songs’ performed by low-caste women investigated by M. Egnor; the dukha (suffering) songs of Nepali women; the personal stories of suffering told by Paxtun women in Afghanistan; the wedding laments of Finnish-Karelian communities; and the narratives of personal sorrow embedded in Chinese Women’s Script compositions. Scholars interested in women’s oral arts often propose that their folk genres reflect resistance to or protest against patriarchal structures, or at the very least offer alternative under-
standings of key cultural values. Gloria G. Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold, for example, speak of women’s songs as examples of “ ironic and subversive commentaries” on patriarchal kinship roles and note that the songs contain “alternative representations of marriage and kinship”. As I shall discuss later, some Chinese scholars have interpreted Chinese lament traditions as examples of proto-feminist expression.

A different perspective is offered by those scholars who point to the limited nature of the resistance expressed by women in folk genres. Stanley Tambiah, for example, dismisses women’s performances of protest as “context-restricted rituals of rebellion”, and Lila Abu-Lughod criticises those who would romanticise women’s folk genres as examples of proto-feminist resistance to patriarchal norms. This latter approach has influenced Western studies of the oral culture of Chinese women. Anthropologist Cathy Silber, in a pioneering study on Women’s Script, has urged caution in romanticizing Women’s Script writings “as a discourse of resistance . . . against gender oppression”. Liu Fei-wen, in numerous studies, has given us a nuanced understanding of what women were able to achieve with the power of Women’s Script compositions. She demonstrates that Women’s Script wedding literature contained instructional material and hence served the purpose of socializing the bride along patriarchal lines. At the same time, the compositions contained an implicit reflection on and critique of this “male-defined value system”. In a further study, she argues that “Through literary expression, women were able to transcend the conditions of the ‘inner quarters’ and of the Confucian sancong ideologies.”

Another perspective, one that has influenced this study, draws from the known characteristics of oral traditions worldwide. Oral traditions are considered to be special forms of discourse such as epic poems, songs, chants, narratives, and proverbs composed in poetic language and transmitted over the generations within a community. More broadly, oral traditions refer to the transmission of knowledge systems, beliefs, and mythologies of the participants. They reflect collective, not individual, composition and contain material from an earlier era as well as modifications made by the current generation. It follows that the imagistic content does not reflect in a transparent way the social realities of the region at the time of performance. For the same reason, these genres should not be interpreted as acts of protest or resistance by any individual performer. In a lament community, for example, the expression of female grievance was a learned activity of women growing up in that region. Women acquired a repertoire of stereotypical poetic material and deployed it in line with the rules of the genre. Their performance was always limited by generic and social boundaries. The lamenting bride in China would protest being sent away from her natal home on marriage but would not protest the choice of partner or the notion of arranged marriage. Nor was she likely to resist the act of marriage itself. Her lament was not understood
as a form of marriage resistance but rather as an integral part of the ceremony of her departure.

In other words, the ‘authenticity’ of the grievance as expressed by any individual performer was in one sense irrelevant. The performer was simply carrying out the expected grievance genre of her region in the appropriate manner to achieve the desired social or ritual effect. Yet laments, sung in a repetitive melodic chant, had a hypnotic and powerful effect on both performer and audience. In fact, the lament could not be deemed effective if it did not lead to actual weeping and sobbing. It was not so much the rational ‘meaning’ of the lament as its enactment within the three-day period of the bride’s permanent departure from her natal home that imbued the lament with its dramatic conviction and fascination for the audience. The hyperbolic expression of female grievance was thus essential to its emotional power.

Nonetheless, the bridal lament could readily be adapted to convey a personal grievance. Jim Wilce has examined the case of a Bangladeshi woman who used the lament genre of her region to protest her mistreatment, thus causing embarrassment to her family. In the contemporary period, the Finnish-Karelian lament has been adapted to deal with the refugee experience of displacement. Elizabeth Tolbert notes that a lamenter can personalize her experience through “specific references to events, places, and persons, and through the manipulation of formal elements and the musical, textual, and emotive domains.” Liu Fei-wen has discussed in some detail how the local lament form was adapted by a woman of Jiangyong County to resist an arranged marriage organised by her mother. I shall discuss further cases where the lament is put to the service of individual grievance in Chapter 5.

In spite of its inherited, largely formulaic content, the Chinese lament is a folk genre of considerable artistry and sophistication. It opens a window to a world little seen by those immersed in China’s textual civilisation. There are probably no other forms of discourse in Chinese culture that present with such great clarity how illiterate Chinese women in the pre-modern period constructed the operations of kinship hierarchies, the marriage market that determined their destiny, and the shadow cast by the Chinese state even in remote rural communities. In laments, we hear the voices of women in terms unknown to more orthodox genres. For example, we can glean a girl’s understanding of the common practice of female infanticide (at one point she says her father should have killed her as an infant). We hear her perception of what it feels like to put on the red wedding veil that will blind her for the duration of her lengthy journey to the groom’s home (“I look like a speckled duck, not human at all!”). We also hear her curse the matchmaker in dramatic, ribald terms and complain vividly about the unjust treatment she expects from her new female kin (“their cold hard eyes”). She calls on her brothers to remember her and not abandon her. She alludes to tribute grain, the awesome
power of officialdom, and the avuncular kindness of the emperor. Through the bride’s use of metaphor and allusion, we gain a sense of how illiterate classes in pre-modern China understood, echoed, reinterpreted, or resisted key values of Chinese culture: the power of the household gods, a belief in the imperial system, awe of officialdom, the prestige of literacy and learning, the value of women’s labour, and the differential fates of men and women.

**Oral Traditions and Communities**

In the months before marriage the bride-to-be mastered the imagery and poetic formulae of the type of lament sung in her village. In so doing, she came to understand her place in the social order of her community and her role in the marriage exchange. The Nanhui lamenter communicated strong and powerful ‘messages’, even though these were collective rather than individual and always bounded by the regional tradition. This brings us to the relationship between a folk genre and its society of origin, one of the most fundamental issues in the field of oral traditions. In a seminal study dealing mainly with Africa, Jan Vansina has examined the relationship between narratives and epics dealing with past events and the recuperation of historical realities. He argues that oral traditions “are congruent with the society to which they belong” and, further, that “every traditional message has a particular purpose and fulfils a particular function, otherwise it would not survive”. In *Oral Tradition as History*, he puts forward a range of methodologies to assess the historical value of accounts dealing with the past. These include interpreting oral traditions as an expression of the identity of the group within the institutional framework of its performance; defining the extent to which the oral genre is conservative or allows for innovation; assessing the variability of the tradition over time; and understanding the role of formulized language in creating a useful mnemonic within which the repertoire can be transmitted. Concerning the vexed issue of ‘meaning’ in oral genres, Vansina calls for an analysis of “the literal meaning” and “the intended meaning”. The latter works through rhetorical tropes and imagery. Intended meanings are unstated but are apparent to the audience, although possibly not to an outsider. The generic expectations, the form and content of the genre, also need to be appreciated, together with the expectations of the receiving community. The “culture-bound” nature of the genre can thus be defined through its customary performance conventions. One can deduce meanings from seeing how the ‘messages’ of a genre are used and who benefits. Traditions can serve to justify existing conditions or to aid one side in a dispute. Individual performers can have their own agendas, which need to be assessed. Above all, the message expresses the culture of its people: “Culture can be defined as what is common in the minds of a given group of people.”
Since Vansina’s pioneering study, scholars increasingly argue that the relationship between folk genre and society is more complicated than simply that of ‘congruence’. The notion of congruence has been replaced by notions of debate, negotiation, and contestation. Margaret T. Egnor, for example, in her study of the “crying songs” of the Untouchables in Tamil Nadu focuses on the ‘message’ of the songs in terms of the agenda and life strategies of the women performers. Noting that the crying songs project a grievance to a person of higher status than the performer, she concludes that these songs “protest not only the personal suffering of the singer, but the rules of hierarchy themselves”. Oral traditions are seen to actively construct the collective identity of a ‘folk community’. Joyce B. Flueckiger, in studying regional variants in epic traditions in India, notes that the variant enacted by women performers in Chhattisgarh reflects the relatively favourable status of women in this region and their strong participation in labour. The relationship between genres in multi-ethnic communities and their often contrasting attributes has led to the notion of ‘ethnic genres’ taking their place with a system of genres and reflecting particular communicative modes.

In the study of folklore or folk ethnography, performance refers to the form, content, enactment, reception, and verbal art of folk genres. However, in recent decades notions of performance have been applied to a wide range of fields in historical, ritual, identity, literary, and gender studies, to the extent that it has become customary to talk of “culture as performance”, in the words of Peter Burke. Historians now analyse the ‘performances’ of honour or nobility in literate societies; feminist scholars investigate ‘performances’ of masculinity or femininity and anthropologists and historians the ‘performance’ of emotions in culturally specific contexts. Notions of power and inequalities in these cultural performances have been given an impetus by the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly his idea of the “habitus”, the unconscious dispositions that govern everyday life. Habitus involves the “regulated improvisation” of human activity within the cultural “scripts” employed by the individual without conscious reflection. An investigation of the social conditions under which these unthinking activities are performed allows for a nuanced understanding of the ‘meaning’ of transmitted, collective practices and the power relationships that lie behind them. In the words of Bourdieu, “It is because subjects do not strictly speaking know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know.”

This study of women’s bridal laments in China will draw both on the idea of oral traditions as works of verbal art belonging to a collective transmission (Bauman 1977) and on the notion of women’s folk genres as the cultural enactment, reproduction, and creative negotiation of gendered hierarchies within a patriarchal society. In learning, mastering, and then performing the lament repertoire at the liminal time of marriage, the bride enacted a transformation of her identity.
from daughter to wife. Also, regional traditions could be flexibly adapted to local and individual conditions. In the case of Nanhui laments, the bride can conjure up her specific location, its topography, architecture, and objects of material culture to create a sense of “my place” that resonates with her audience (Chapter 1). Further, she can decide to either curse the matchmaker or praise her, depending on how pleased she feels with the marriage arrangement (Chapter 4). The bride can select imagery relating to the dowry and bride-price as applicable to her circumstances and level of satisfaction. She can sincerely thank her kinfolk for adding to her trousseau or subtly imply they did not add enough (Chapter 4). New imagery is added as circumstances change; for example, Western objects became part of the bride’s dowry and hence of the lament material by the late nineteenth century (Chapter 1). In the Pearl River delta, women could use their laments to voice a specific grievance to the point of leading to friction within the community (discussed in Chapter 5). In this way the individual performer is involved in neither resistance nor compliance but in a process of debate and negotiation of contested cultural values.

Nanhui people believe that men aspired to write and women aspired to weep. In what sort of social and gender configuration are these two ‘performances’ perceived as analogous? In order to begin to respond to these questions, we need to understand the Nanhui lament within its broad socio-economic context, the gendered division of labour, kinship and marriage formations, as well as the characteristics of the bridal lament as an aspect of orally transmitted culture, its typical repertoire, generic conventions, and performative characteristics. To do justice to this project I will need to draw on a range of perspectives: those of ethnography, orality and literacy, social history, and performance traditions.

Laments in Chinese Culture

In Nanhui, the bride began lamenting on the third day before her permanent departure from the natal home. She was watched appreciatively by an audience that included her immediate family, female relatives, villagers passing by, and local girls eager to learn the art from direct observation. In the months before marriage, the bride needed to master each stage of the lengthy performance, from the sung ‘dialogue’ with her mother, to formalised thanks and farewells to each member of her family, as well as thanks to the local female ritual specialists and the matchmaker. As in other oral traditions amongst illiterate peoples, the bride would master by observation and practice a poetic repertoire of easily memorised verbal formulae passed down within her local region. In lament performance, she would chant or sing the repertoire, manipulating the content, tone, and imagery to suit her particular needs. Singing slowly in a simple dirge-like tune, the bride would regularly
break down into tearful sobs and be comforted by her audience. In words of protest rarely seen in the refined tenor of Chinese textual civilisation, she would rail at the injustice of women being sent off in marriage and protest the more favourable treatment of her brothers and the way she was being ‘sold’ in marriage. Her often histrionic language appeared to violate norms of feminine docility, but her articulation of grievance was accepted as a daughter’s natural expression of sorrow and filial love upon her permanent removal from the natal home.

In many areas of rural China before the communist revolution, this expression of grief and protest was an integral part of the ritual and folk performance culture of the region. Lamenting formed part of a girl’s socialisation. The young Nanhui girl would learn snatches of laments while weeding cotton or working on cotton textiles with the other women. When her time came, she would seek out an admired practitioner to learn the repertoire. The bridal lament was only the first type of lament to be learnt. In the course of her lifetime, she would also master funeral laments (kusang, or “weeping at the funeral”). The thanks and farewells made to her parents on departure at marriage would thus be matched by similar ritual farewells to them at death. Through kusang she could also ritually care for the souls of her husband and his parents. It was only in the twentieth century, when the imperial examination system was abolished and literacy was advocated for both men and women, that the art of lamentation became not a hallmark of female intelligence and talent but a sign of backwardness and victimisation.

By the late twentieth century it was only the so-called minority peoples in Chinese space who still possessed living lament traditions. In particular, the Tujia people of the upper Yangzi, a people of ambiguous ethnicity, have a rich lament tradition that has been transmitted to the present day. In the West, the best-known Chinese laments are those of the Pearl River delta and Hong Kong New Territories in the southern periphery of China. These traditions have been investigated by anthropologists C. Fred Blake, Elizabeth L. Johnson, and Rubie S. Watson. The lengthiest study of Chinese bridal laments is by Tan Daxian, who observed firsthand the bridal laments of the Dongwan region in the Hong Kong New Territories and collected transcripts and secondary sources on laments throughout China and Taiwan. Tan’s study is the most comprehensive available, but he was not able to take advantage of the largest corpus of bridal laments now available in transcription, those of Nanhui in the lower Yangzi delta. In the Nanhui corpus we can see, for the first time, the full complexity of the Han Chinese bridal lament, which was performed at various stages during the three-day ritual of departure.

As I discuss in Chapter 5, lament traditions across China share many commonalities. The lament performance is carefully segmented, with the bride performing different types of laments depending on whom she is addressing and the stage reached in the departure ceremony. Lament material is tuneful and poetically
patterned, but practitioners generally refer to their performance as *ku* (weeping and wailing) rather than singing (*ge*). Laments are always performed in the spoken language of that region. Each local tradition has its own formulaic poetic content and is closely reliant on the distinct songs and poetic traditions of its home region. The Nanhui laments, for example, relate to the songs known as *Wu ge* or songs of the Wu (lower Yangzi) area. All known lament traditions convey a similar burden of female grief and protest, although this is expressed in diverse ways. Little is known of the history of laments as the genre was largely unrecorded in historical accounts. However, as I will argue here, the known corpus appears to relate both to ancient wailed performances in north China and to women’s singing traditions found south of the Yangzi.

In the twentieth century women’s laments became one of the ‘backward’ practices scorned by revolutionaries. The devaluing of the ‘superstitious’ practices of ‘ignorant’ women began in the May Fourth era from the 1920s, when Chinese intellectuals called for the overthrow of Confucian practice and the adoption of Western-style modernity. In his famous novel *Family* (*Jia*, 1931), Ba Jin scoffed at the women who carried out histrionic wailing on the death of the family patriarch. He notes that the women guests who came to ‘help’ combined impassioned sobs with pouring out their own grievances (*Jia*, chap. 35, p. 397). This is a common feature of funeral laments, as women blend mourning for the deceased with complaints about the hardships of their own life. In *Family*, the act of lamentation is perceived as women’s work: “The men and women each did their own job. Three or four women relatives were called on to stay by the deceased and lament (*ku*)”.55 The narrator is also very clear about the point of the weeping and wailing: “everyone was busy using the deceased to maintain their face”.

In the early years of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, village lamenting became less and less prevalent. A short story by Zhou Libo, first published in 1957, reflects the promotion of new wedding practices and the banishing of the old. Zhou writes approvingly of an exemplary wedding ceremony in a Hunan village. The dowry and wedding meal are appropriately frugal, the bride boasts of her labour skills, and the groom, who is in charge of village stores, exits briefly during a boring wedding speech to check on the pigs. Very few of the old customs remain, but a gaggle of girlfriends of the bride continue the former practice of eavesdropping on the bridal party from the other side of the wall. The conversation turns to the relative merits of arranged as opposed to ‘free’ or love marriages. The leading cadre, who has been called on to officiate at the marriage, recalls how in the township of Jinshi the bride’s family bring in a large number of people to ‘weep’ on her behalf. He continues: “In Jinshi there are men and women who perform weeping on marriage for families. They are professionals specializing in this trade. When they begin weeping, they give one example after another, all very rhythmical and measured. It sounds like singing songs and is wonderful to
As he finishes speaking, he hears the bride’s girlfriends giggling beyond the wall. In this story the contrast between the sounds of weeping in ‘feudal’ China and the robust laughter of women in the ‘new’ China is central to the intentions of the author.

Laments were only rarely investigated by enthusiasts in the Chinese folklore study movement of the 1920s and 1930s. The Japanese invasion and civil war put an end to this movement in the 1940s. After the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, bridal laments, along with other “feudal” traditions, were frowned upon and gradually fell away. New marriage practices allowing free choice in marriage undermined the very basis of the grievance behind bridal lamentations—the ‘enforced’ sending away of a daughter to marry a man from another village. The international isolation of socialist China and internal political movements also made it impossible for Western anthropologists to investigate the Chinese countryside before the ascendancy of Deng Xiaoping in late 1978. For this reason, lament traditions on the Chinese mainland have rarely been studied in depth, although most contemporary mainland Chinese studies of Chinese marriage refer briefly to the former practice of *kujia.*

Even in the New Territories of Hong Kong, by the mid-twentieth century wedding songs were beginning to disappear as a living tradition. Nanhui brides began to cease lamenting with the advent of the ‘civilised marriage’ (marriage based on Western forms) in the early twentieth century, and the tradition virtually died out in the early socialist period of the 1950s. The transcriptions of Nanhui laments preserved today derive, not from bridal performances, but from the repertoire of elderly practitioners who were called upon to recall the laments learned in their youth.

Chinese scholars like Tan Daxian argue that laments constitute a powerful critique of women’s condition under “feudalism” and “patriarchy”. Citing the famous formulation of Mao Zedong, Tan declares: “If one examines the entire content of lament songs, the central core is...condemnation of thousands of years of ‘the four ropes’ of feudalism, namely religion, political power, kinship power and the rights of the husband...”. Jiang Bin, one of the few Chinese scholars to have investigated the laments of the lower Yangzi delta, concurs with the standard Chinese view that laments reflect women’s resistance to feudal patriarchy. He further declares that bridal lamentations are a residual custom from the ancient practice of “marriage by capture” that is assumed to have taken place at the transition from a matrilineal to a patrilineal society. According to this line of reasoning, the latter-day lament genre reflects the historical resistance of ancient women to the terrors of “marriage by capture.”

Western anthropologists who have studied Chinese laments have also noticed the anomalous ‘oppositionality’ of this genre of female complaint in a strongly patriarchal society. However, they tend to conclude that the social function of the lament is to accommodate contradictions and strong emotions at a point of
transition for the young woman. Anthropologist Fred Blake has argued that the lament was a form of cathartic expression within a context that tolerated or even approved of this form of expression. Laments are “the licensed expression of the bride—in some sense they constitute her personal commentary on the rites”. Elizabeth Johnson, in her study of the Hakka women’s funeral laments from Kwan Mun Hau in Hong Kong’s New Territories, notes that their laments are essentially solitary performances, in contradistinction to the collective ancestral rituals of the men. In spite of the implicit criticism contained in laments, they do not threaten male concerns and for that reason are tolerated or even considered appropriate. Essentially, laments are an expressive genre where “individual grievances could be publicly and poetically expressed”. In her more recent study of the same region, Johnson notes that women’s songs and laments “were women’s only legitimate means of vocal expression in public contexts” and, further, that “laments offered a vehicle for individual self-expression through which a woman could make public her private grievances”.

Rubie S. Watson, who has investigated the laments of Ha Tsuen in the Hong Kong New Territories, concentrates on the social dimension of local laments and accompanying marriage rituals. She argues that these rituals serve to transform young girls into married women and to express the ambiguous emotions and divided loyalties of brides as they leave their natal home. Fertility is found to be an important concern. The older women of the village served as ritual instructors of young girls and presided over the marriage ceremonies: “It is their job to empty the bride-daughter and to reconstruct her as a fertile wife”. Women used laments to carry out their duties to both their natal and their married families in order to achieve a feminine version of the Confucian virtue of filial piety. Watson thus concludes that laments are not the product of “an autonomous female realm”, nor could they be called “oppositional”. Instead, laments provide an opportunity for women to reflect on “the contradictions inherent in their own lives as daughters, friends and wives”.

Folklorists and anthropologists, working with women who were themselves lament practitioners, have told us much about the social function of laments and how to interpret the rhetoric of grievance. They have demonstrated that laments allow for the expression of grief and protest in socially acceptable ways, and for the bride to express filiality towards her natal family. Anthropologists argue that the female grievances so expressed did not seek to subvert the established order and thus were not oppositional, but functioned rather as a ‘licensed’ contribution to the expressive culture of the region. However, these earlier studies have little to say about why laments take the form that they do and why they appear to be an integral part of the folk performance of certain communities. This is no doubt due to the limited and fragmentary nature of the material available in transcription, which rarely permits an overview of a complete lament cycle from any one
region. In addition, all Western studies to date have concentrated on the Hong Kong New Territories region. This study, taking advantage of recent transcriptions from Nanhui, is the first Western study of laments from the Chinese heartland territory of Jiangnan, centered on the lower Yangzi delta.

Laments and Ritual Power

One aspect that has been muted so far in discussion of the function of laments is their possible ritual or exorcistic nature. It is very difficult to establish data proving definitively the ritual nature of laments. Very few literati in imperial times showed any interest in the oral genres of illiterate rural women, and the bridal lament is no longer performed as a living tradition amongst recognised Han Chinese communities. Yet, as I argue here, there are various indications in the kinds of popular sayings given at the beginning of this chapter, in folk legends about the origin of bridal laments, in the words of practitioners in many regional traditions, in ancient forms of magical performance known as 庐 (weeping and wailing), and in the folk beliefs surrounding the dangers of marriage, that point to a ritual or exorcistic function for bridal laments. I was first alerted to this possibility when an elderly woman whom I met in Shuyuan, Nanhui, told me that the purpose of her bridal lament was to “weep and wail until the noxious vapours went away” (kudiao huiqi). Scholars investigating the Pearl River delta lament form have occasionally noted the same phenomenon. Blake, citing the local folklorist Chang Cheungiping, observed that the Hong Kong laments he studied “invoke good fortune for the bride’s family, obtain luck for the bride and expel noxious influences from the neighbourhood”. Eugene Anderson, who translated one lamentation-type song from amongst the “Talking Songs” (wedding songs) of Hong Kong boat women, noted that these songs were attributed an auspicious or “magical” power.

If laments were held to have an exorcistic power, if histrionic wailing could chase away the evil spirits of misfortune and bring on good fortune, then one can understand why women in these communities were obliged to lament. If laments fulfilled an important ritual role of protecting the community, then a woman’s mastery of lament performance could be perceived as commensurate with a man’s mastery of writing. Both literacy and lamenting involved the arduous acquisition of a disciplinary skill that provided their performers with powerful techniques to exercise ritual control, bolster their personal status, and safeguard the community.

Studies of women’s ritual power have noted that ritual efficacy is an important marker of prestige and serves to ameliorate extremes of patriarchal subservience. Mary Elaine Hegland, in her study of the rituals of Pakistan Shi’a women, believes that women use these rituals to preserve “an oblique, undeclared contestation
against their subordinate position in a harshly patriarchal society”. On the other hand, Tracy Pintchman, in her study of Indian Kartik ritual worship, notes that the women concerned do not challenge “conservative tradition” but use ritual worship to “reinforce” their roles as wives and mothers. Denied the forms of conspicuous asceticism deemed appropriate for males, women have constructed their own rituals and in this way enhanced their “prestige and influence” and sense of personal worth. In similar fashion, Mary Hancock has argued, in her study of Hindu women’s ritual, that ritual forms can ‘hail’ an individual as a worthy member of a particular social category, class, or caste.

In my own explorations of the Chinese lament, I have gradually arrived at the view that women in Nanhui, and possibly other lament communities in China, were obliged to learn to lament because the genre played an important role in ritually preserving the community at the dangerous time of transition that takes place at marriage and death. In other words, the bridal lament, at least in some traditions, was considered a form of verbal sorcery, not simply as a ceremonial song or a song of consolation. Lament performance was held to be efficacious in exorcising the forces of evil and bringing on a tide of favourable fortune. From this point of view, laments are one of the informal exorcistic activities commonly performed by Chinese women and a rare example of the visible exercise of ritual power by women in a male-dominated society. This ritual role was so important that women sought out lament practitioners to master as much of the lament repertoire as they could in the months leading up to their marriage. From childhood they observed lament performances of other women in their village in preparation for the performance that would mark their own passage to adulthood. In this way laments became a significant marker both of maturity and of female talent within their community. But they were more than just perfunctory ritual performance. In this study I have paid careful attention to what the women seek to communicate through their laments. Their goal was to induce both performer and onlookers to feel sorrow to the point where they would break down into tearful sobbing. If Heaven did not resound with the cries of weeping and wailing, as in the local saying, then the lament would not be ritually efficacious and the performer would be considered to lack talent. The verbal artistry of the lament, the strength and plausibility of the grievance, as well as the skill of the enactment, were thus integral to the emotional and ritual power of the lament.

The Bridal Laments of Nanhui

The Nanhui lament cycle investigated here derives from the tradition that circulated in the 1920s and was in turn passed down from that prevalent in the late nineteenth century. In this study I have taken advantage of the printed transcrip-
tion of one ‘entire’ lament cycle representing all the stages of the lament in this local tradition. The lamenter was a woman called Pan Cailian, whose performance was recorded by cadres of the Nanhui Culture Bureau in 1982 and 1984. According to family member and cadre from the Nanhui Culture Bureau Pan Wenzhen, a first attempt was made to transcribe her laments in the 1960s. However, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), these documents were burnt as examples of the feudal “Four Olds”. It was only in the early 1980s that an attempt at official recuperation became possible. Pan’s taped laments were ultimately transcribed and published by China Folk Arts publication house. Shanghai scholars of local oral arts Chen Qinjian and Jiang Bin believe the lamentations of Nanhui are amongst the most complete of Han Chinese kujia cycles continuing into the mid-twentieth century.

Pan Cailian was born in 1907, so at the time of her taped performance she was in her seventies. She had passed away before the occasion of my first visit to Nanhui in 1994, but I was able to meet and interview family member Pan Wenzhen, who had assisted in the recording of Cailian’s laments. Pan Cailian had been singled out by the culture cadres as a particularly good practitioner who could recall a relatively full cycle of lamentations. She had been reluctant at first to perform funeral laments because she had lost too many family members and feared bringing on bad luck. It was considered extremely unlucky to sing a funeral lament for a member who was still alive. Similarly, with the wedding laments, as a married woman with three sons, she felt very distant from the circumstances of a bride departing her natal home. However, once she began, she was able to recapture much of the emotion she had felt as a young bride. Because the opening segment of lamentations involves both the mother and the daughter, another elderly practitioner, Zhang Wenxian, was invited to perform the role of mother while Pan played the part of the bride.

Pan was characteristic of Chinese women lamenters in that she was illiterate and from a poor rural family belonging to “the sands people” of coastal Nanhui. She had learnt her repertoire of laments and folk songs from a local village woman. At the age of twenty she was married to a man who smoked opium and gambled, practices that led to the gradual impoverishment of the family. Forced out of her home, at first she stayed at the home of her saosao or elder brother’s wife, but later on resorted to living in a lean-to dwelling on the landlord’s estate. She gave birth to three children but had no means to keep them and they were adopted by other families. The laments analysed here are thus those of an elderly woman whose marriage ended in disappointment and lifelong poverty. In her elicited performance, she re-created the fears and anticipations of those dramatic days when she stood on the verge of womanhood, her fate yet to be determined.

The Nanhui lament corpus extant today in published transcription derives from a living lament tradition that took shape within the highly commodified
society of Jiangnan, the richest region in China, at the denouement of the imperial era. In coastal Jiangnan, women’s labour in the spinning and weaving of cotton textiles was a fundamental aspect of the cash economy and critical for household survival. Census statistics indicate an acute imbalance of the sexes in Nanhui and a general shortage of marriageable women in the first half of the nineteenth century. The foundational repertoire of the Nanhui lament corpus known today was almost certainly formed prior to the mid-nineteenth century and reflects to a large extent the preoccupations of that time, including the competition for women in the marriage market and the value of the female body as site for procreation and cotton production. Extra imagery based on images of the ‘foreign’ was added to the repertoire during the colonial period. By the time of the birth of Pan Cailian in 1907 a new era of industrialization had taken firm hold in Shanghai, and rural women from outlying areas flocked to work in urban cotton mills. However, the new industrialization did not loom large in the world of Pan Cailian and her coastal community, which lay outside the orbit of Shanghai. For this reason her repertoire, learnt in the 1920s from a neighbour, does not reflect the momentous changes of the early twentieth century in the regions adjacent to Shanghai.

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The bridal lament is a conventional genre with a collective authorship, but what the bride said differed from place to place and mattered deeply to her community. Each regional tradition was carefully crafted to capture the specificities of that region. In the case of the laments of Pan Cailian, the repertoire projects a deep sense of how women understood the social order to be constituted. The Nanhui bride, in seeking to express a grievance that would resonate deeply with her audience, articulated an identity for the community to which she belonged. Drawing on the linguistic and imagistic resources of the repertoire, she constructed an imaginary of place that defined her coastal community as impoverished but resilient and stoical, with a robust contempt for “the white-faced” people of neighbouring townships. This local identity was articulated through a complex duality contrasting the wealthy pojia (home of the mother-in-law) with the impoverished niangjia (home of the bride’s mother). The bride weaved back and forth imaginistically between the impoverished people living in reed huts by the coast to the tiled roofs and long eaves of residences in local towns. In this way she harnessed social antagonisms in her native area to the cause of her own rhetorical grievance. This antagonism was ameliorated by the unstated aspiration underlying the dualistic imagery, namely the goal of hypergamous marriage: a poor family seeking to marry their daughter into a wealthier one. For many Nanhui brides this was probably more myth than reality. Unlike the majority of Chinese women of the late imperial era, these coastal women did not practice footbinding. Their “big” or natural feet were a marker of low status and an impediment to marrying upwards.
In most cases they were destined to be married off to men of similar social condition. As I argue here, the lament imagery is rooted in goals of social mobility that were rarely met in practice but remained a powerful aspiration for “the people of the sands” in spite of their affected scorn for the well-to-do.

Another dominating theme is that of the bride’s increasing sense of her own value and self-worth as she grows from a young girl to a mature woman. Her value is constructed through a complex poetics of the marriage market and through notions of heroic female labour. The bride traced a life trajectory that perceived the female infant as valueless and expendable; the young bride as desired but with her capability for labour as yet unproven; and, finally, the mature married woman as a paragon of female labour, a matriarchal figure who wields significant influence in her marital home. In direct address to the parents, the bride acknowledges that her parents have chosen to raise her even though she was a girl, thus giving her a certain value at birth. Now that she has reached puberty, her true market value will be rendered visible to the local community through the public display of her dowry. She exhibits a strong curiosity about her exact market value, as determined by the value of the bride-price and dowry. For the bride, the language of the marriage exchange was nothing other than the language of the marketplace. Her appropriation of the language of market rationality implicitly offered a powerful critique of the canonical version of marriage, which sought to mask the commercial transaction that lay behind the taking of a woman in patrilocal marriage.

Bridal laments need to be understood both within their specific social context and within the conventions of their generic tradition. For this reason I have divided this study into two parts to reflect my dual concerns. Part I deals specifically with the bridal laments of Nanhui and is the first such study in English of the lament in this region. In order to acquaint the reader immediately with the world of the lamenting bride, I start with “Imagining Jiangnan”, a reconstruction of the social order as constructed in the lament cycle of Pan Cailian (Chapter 1). Pan Cailian was subjected to the same patrilineal kinship system as Han Chinese women in China generally. Yet in “Imagining Jiangnan” we enter into a world seemingly governed by women, where marriage is not so much the exchange of a woman’s body between two patrilines as the transfer of a daughter from one ‘mother-home’ to another, that is, from the home of her mother (niangjia) to the home of her mother-in-law (pojia). The two chapters that follow aim to throw light on the historic, social, and economic factors that have shaped the Nanhui lament repertoire and the bride’s distinctive interpretation of the Chinese kinship system. Chapter 4 returns to the Nanhui lament form, this time to demonstrate how the bridal lament was performed in the staged context of the wedding ceremony. This chapter also treats in detail the impassioned but often contradictory ‘messages’ expressed by the lamenting bride. In Part II, I seek to place bridal
laments within the history of performance genres involving weeping and wailing in China and in comparative perspective with other regional lament traditions across Chinese space (Chapter 5). This comparative and historical survey, once again the first attempted in English language scholarship, lays the foundation for the analysis of the ritual function of laments as a gendered performance in Chinese culture (Chapter 6). Appended is a translation of excerpts from the lament cycle of Pan Cailian, allowing the Western reader to understand the various stages of the lament cycle and glimpse the rhetorical power of the lament within its ceremonial and ritual context.

What is the origin and history of the Chinese bridal lament? In Chapter 5 I argue that the lament form known today in south and coastal China originated from the conflation of two ancient traditions: on the one hand, performances of weeping and wailing known as *ku* prevalent in the Yellow River region in antiquity; and, on the other hand, a tradition of dialogic and choral singing known south of the Yangzi. Ancient performances of weeping and wailing had gendered attributes and were understood to reflect female virtue and talent. In cases of injustice or extreme filiality, weeping and wailing could so move the heavens that a miracle would be performed. Over time, this performance tradition blended with popular beliefs in the dangers of female pollution and the need to exorcise these at the point of marriage. In this way the belief arose that exemplary lamenting could mitigate the disasters attendant on the bride’s departure.

In the revolutionary era, the ancient traditions of women’s performed grievance were harnessed to ‘turn over’ village women to the cause of communism and gender equality. In the process, the once valued lament genre became a sign of the abject, victimised woman of the past and thus was consigned to the dustbin of history, only to re-emerge in Chinese scholarship of the 1980s as a valued gem of ‘proto-feminism’ or, on the other hand, as an exotic custom of non-Han Chinese ‘minorities’.

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Why are Chinese bridal laments worth a monographic study? The Chinese bridal lament is a vibrant example of a richly imaginative oral art that evoked intense emotions in its participants. It deserves to be better understood and to take its place within world lamenting traditions. The study of women’s oral and performance culture in China also allows us to pose questions about the position of oral traditions within the edifice we have come to call “Chinese popular culture”. Traditional oral arts contain in formulaic and aesthetic form a crystallization of the ‘commonsense’ wisdom of a social group or community, and offer insight into how the community organises kinship relations and social hierarchies or interprets key cultural values. Local oral traditions encode diverse and sometimes
contrasting adaptations of the dominant culture and its hegemonic cultural values. Women’s oral arts provide us with a rare glimpse into how the Chinese world was constructed by illiterate Chinese women and how they resisted or adapted to structures that constrained them. In short, orally transmitted culture provides a powerful way of understanding the contested, heterogeneous nature of Chinese cultural practices, together with their folk rationalisations and interpretations, from the late imperial to the early modern period.