A number of scholars have studied the cult of widow chastity in Ming and Qing China. Weijing Lu has made an important contribution to that scholarship by focusing on the cult of the faithful maiden, those betrothed women whose fiancés died before marriage but who nevertheless maintained lifelong chastity or in some cases committed suicide to join their “husbands” in death. Lu challenges the assumptions of many modern Chinese scholars who saw faithful maidens as unwitting victims of oppressive Confucian ideology. Instead, she argues that faithful maidens were active agents of their own fate, using Confucian ideals to assert their own values against their natal families and their in-laws, and in doing so, helped shape the intellectual agenda of Ming-Qing Confucian male scholars. Her point is well taken, though self-denial and self-destruction are, it might be added, relatively constrained forms of agency.

In more detail than anyone heretofore, Lu explores the cultural, political, and social contexts in which the faithful maiden cult took shape in the late Ming and early Qing periods. She highlights the importance of “Confucian honors accorded to moral behavior, the cultural glorification of extraordinary deeds, the beliefs in an afterlife and destiny rooted in Buddhism and popular religion, the patrilineal family system, the didactic female education, and the institution of child betrothal” (p. 13) as crucial elements in fostering the cult. Lu draws on a wide array of primary sources, including the poetry of faithful maidens, government jingbiao records (imperial testimonials for exemplary moral behavior), local gazetteer poems on and biographies of faithful maidens, Confucian ritual texts and essays debating the propriety of the cult, and works of drama and fiction that dramatized and popularized the cult. I wish she had included a more explicit review of earlier scholarship on widow suicide because she is eminently qualified to assess it.

In part I, Lu attributes the rise of the chaste maiden cult in the late Ming and early Qing period to many factors, including the Ming fascination with extremes of moral behavior, a conservative Confucian reaction against the perceived moral decline of society, and a growing fascination with moral heroism in response to an age of political conflict and disarray. The Ming collapse and Manchu conquest in the 1640s exacerbated these trends and led many male Confucian scholars to express ever-greater admiration for chaste maidens who went so far beyond the call of duty as to commit suicide. In an ironic twist, even Qing collaborators came to praise chaste maidens in order to prove their own virtue and to gloss over their own failures to live up to the standards of these young girls. The eighteenth century witnessed a dramatic expansion of government rewards issued to the families of chaste maidens, particularly in the prosperous southern Lower Yangtze Valley and in Guangdong. The relative concentration of the cult in these areas suggests to Lu that female literacy and lineage status competition in the south may have helped stimulate the cult.
Lu’s most original contribution comes in part II, in which she examines the family dynamics and the emotional and psychological factors in suicides by faithful maidens, and in the decisions of some to maintain lifelong chastity, sometimes after performing spirit marriages with their deceased fiancés. Here we have detailed examples of young women who defied their parents, and in some cases their in-laws, in committing suicide or maintaining lifelong chastity. Lu argues that they took such extreme actions of their own accord, although such behavior far exceeded the demands of propriety, and that they could have easily found a suitable marriage match. I think “virgin widows” were not necessarily desirable marriage partners, but Lu demonstrates that most parents and in-laws saw suicide as extreme and unnecessary. Faithful maidens who chose lifelong chastity were seen as morally powerful, and they had legal rights to represent their fiancé’s family and to inherit property. Some adopted sons who protected them in their old age. Others were supported by funds established by sympathetic local literati. Some faithful maidens maintained close ties with their natal families, and some remained with them or moved back to their natal families after their parents-in-law passed away.

In part III, Lu reviews the ideological debates among male Confucian scholars in the Ming and (mostly) Qing period, and she illuminates the profound ambivalence of Confucian literati toward the cult. Significantly, even those who condemned the extreme action of suicide as unnecessary at best, and a violation of ritual propriety at worst, felt moved to honor the strength of will, character, and determination of the young women in question.

Weijing Lu has written an admirably engaging and illuminating study of the chaste maiden cult in Ming-Qing China. She convincingly demonstrates that the young women subjects of this cult helped shape late imperial Chinese culture in profound ways.

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Most China historians have tended to dismiss the nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries as allies of Western imperialism who disparaged Chinese culture. Although much of this criticism is well deserved, there were several notable exceptions. James Legge and W. H. Medhurst acquired a knowledge of Chinese culture that enabled them to translate exceptionally difficult texts. Jessie Lutz’s book Opening China makes a strong case for adding Karl Gütlaff (1803–51) to this select group.