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The Social Uses of Female Virtue in Late Ming Editions of *Lienü Zhuan*

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

THE SOCIAL USES OF FEMALE VIRTUE IN LATE MING EDITIONS OF LIENÜ ZHUAN* Katherine Carlitz Toward the end of the sixteenth century, the Confucian reformer Lu Kun examined feminine morals and found them wanting. The rich were decking themselves in pearls and silk, ancient teachings forgotten, while the songs of village women were fit for the whorehouses! Buoyed by his usual confidence, however, Lu was certain he could make women once again a credit to their parents, husbands, and sons. In his 1591 preface to *Female Exemplars* (*Gui fan*), he explains that while women are unlikely to read the ancient books on feminine virtue, which are difficult and dull (he dislikes them himself), they will be drawn to his new collection of model lives. It includes pictures to whet the reader's interest and glosses to help her pronounce and understand

difficult words. His appended commentary will spur her to emulate the examples.¹ Lu Kun did not particularly trust his female audience. He was one of the most censorious of Ming writers on women, turning to the metaphor of dikes or floodgates (with its menace of disaster) when he urged the necessity of ritual barriers between the sexes.² His strategy was to coopt the evil tendencies of the day, as he had done before in writing instructive songs for women, children, and the poor of his own lineage.³ Women reading *Female Exemplars*, or singing the songs he had written for them, would be too happy *I would like to acknowledge a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies in 1987-88, which allowed me to begin the research on which this paper is based. ¹The assertions all paraphrase Lu Kun's 1591 preface to *Gui fan*. While the preface speaks of singing voluptuous songs, later in *Gui fan* (juan 1:82b-83a) Lu criticizes teaching girls to write songs, which have no place in the idealized didactic curriculum he outlines in juan 1:82b. *Shen yin yu* (SY):43. Lu often uses the metaphor of flood control when discussing how "the people" (min) are to be governed. ³The songs are *Zong yue ge* (Lineage Compact Songs), for lineage; *Xiao er yu*, *Nu xiao er yu*, and *Xu xiao er ye* (Children's Songs, Female Children's Songs, and More Children's Songs) for children; and *Gui jie* (Precepts for the Women's Quarters) for women. They are contained in *Lu zi yi shu*, 1827. *Late Imperial China* Vol. 12, No. 2 (December 1991): 117-152 © by the Society for Qing Studies 117-118 Katherine Carlitz and busy for the idle pursuits so inimical to their moral development.⁴ But books have a life of their own, and as commerce and connoisseurship increasingly shaped late Ming literary taste, changes in the medium were starting to affect the message. Despite the novelty Lu Kun claimed for *Female Exemplars*, it was actually one of many contemporary expansions of the famous didactic text, *Biographies of Notable Women* (*Lienü zhuan*), by the Han author Liu Xiang (B.C. 80-9). Keeping Liu Xiang's text more or less intact, these variant editions added new biographies from more recent history down to the compilers' own day. With the early seventeenth-century flowering of woodblock illustration, these Ming editions became more and more beautiful, and their illustrations more and more dramatic, sometimes even blurring the boundaries between Confucian fidelity and romantic love. The same illustration, with only minor changes, could represent a girl longing for her lover or a virtuous widow refusing remarriage. What did all these books look like to their readers? Did the blood spurting from the arm of a widow who had chopped off her hand remind them of the blood spurting from the neck of a decapitated general, in the printed dramas Lu Kun deplored? The Ming-Qing cult of the virtuous widow is well-known, but did the packaging of women's virtue as a commodity result in ethics as entertainment? After a brief discussion of Ming publishing and Ming ideals of feminine virtue, I will examine a group of illustrated editions and expansions of *Lienü zhuan*, in the light of prefaces, publishers' book lists, reprint histories, and the...

THE SOCIAL USES OF FEMALE VIRTUE IN LATE MING EDITIONS OF LIENÜ ZHUAN¹

Katherine Carlitz

Toward the end of the sixteenth century, the Confucian reformer Lü Kun examined feminine morals and found them wanting. The rich were decking themselves in pearls and silks, ancient teachings forgotten, while the songs of village women were fit for the whorehouses! Bused by his usual confidence, however, Lü was certain he could make women once again a credit to their parents, husbands, and sons. In his 1591 preface to *Female Exemplars* (*Gai fan*), he complains that while women are unlikely to read the ancient books on feminine virtue, which are difficult and dull (he dislikes them himself), they will be drawn to his new collection of model lives. It includes pictures to whet the reader's interest and glosses to help her pronounce and understand difficult words. His appended commentary will spur her to emulate the examples.²

Lü Kun did not particularly trust his female audience. He was one of the most censorious of Ming writers on women, turning to the metaphor of dikes or floodgates (with its menace of disaster) when he urged the necessity of ritual barriers between the sexes.³ His strategy was to coopt the evil tendencies of the day, as he had done before in writing instructive songs for women, children, and the poor of his own lineage.⁴ Women reading *Female Exemplars*, or singing the songs he had written for them, would be too happy

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² These assertions all paraphrase Lü Kun's 1591 preface to *Gai fan*. While the preface speaks of seducing voluptuous songs, later in *Gai fan* (juan 1:82b-83a) Lü criticizes teaching girls to write songs which have no place in the idealized didactic curriculum he outlines in juan 1:82v.

³ *Shun pin yu* (8YY)-43. Lü often uses the metaphor of flood control when discussing how "the people" (*ren*) are to be governed.

⁴ The songs are *Zong pin ge* (1.1 songs) (Imperial Songs), for Prince; *Xiao er ge*, *Nü zao er ge*, and *Xu zao er ge* (Children's Song, Female Children's Songs, and Male Children's Songs) for children; and *Gai yu* (Precepts for the Women's Quarters) for women. They are contained in *Gü xi yi shu*, 1827.

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