

## Introduction

In a letter to a friend, the eleventh-century Song dynasty Chinese statesman and poet Su Shi (1037–1101) tells of a story he has heard on the subject of infanticide. Su Shi's acquaintance has described to him the birth customs in one rural part of what is now Hubei Province: "As a rule, common folk there raise only two sons and one daughter. Anything beyond this, they kill. In particular, they don't want daughters. Because of this, there are few women and many old men without wives among the people." Su Shi continues his acquaintance's description of how infanticide is usually carried out: "The newborn child is drowned in cold water. Its own parents cannot bear it, so they usually close their eyes and turn their faces away. With their hands they press it down into the water bucket. After mewling for a while, it dies." The physical immediacy of this terse description leaps across the centuries and hits us hard. The water is cold, not merely tepid. Most of us have held or at least seen a newborn—such a tiny, delicate thing—and could never imagine what it would take to drown an infant with our own two hands. The helplessness of the newborn child in Su Shi's letter is amplified by the tiny, indistinct sounds it makes before dying. The description in Su Shi's letter—that the parents cannot bear it and must close their

eyes, turning their faces away—resonates with our most basic human instincts. When Su Shi heard this story, he writes, “I felt miserable. I could not eat.” His dejection is ours, melancholy shared.<sup>1</sup>

When I tell people my book is about the history of female infanticide in China, they usually widen their eyes and commiserate with me on what must be a depressing topic of study. By its very nature, infanticide is serious and compelling, but the challenge it poses for the historian stems less from its bleakness than from the taken-for-granted contours of its practice, persistence and meaning. Without yet having read this book, many readers will already associate the practice of female infanticide with China, or Asia more generally, based upon a steady stream of media reports about the severe sex ratio imbalances found in societies there.<sup>2</sup> Researchers have calculated an average sex ratio at birth in China of 118.06 males to 100 females, based on national census data from 2010, in comparison to ratios in industrialized countries from 103 to 107 males for every 100 females.<sup>3</sup> The magnitude of this imbalance has been attributed to a number of compounding factors, both new and old. Perhaps the most significant is the widespread use of modern technology in the form of ultrasound equipment for fetal sex identification and sex-selective abortion.<sup>4</sup> Another complicating factor is China’s One-Child policy, first announced in 1979, which, with a number of changing exceptions, has allowed urban couples of Han ethnicity to have only one child.<sup>5</sup> However, these recent technological and political innovations have merely amplified the effects of a long-standing societal preference for sons, derived from a traditional Confucian value system that still lingers in protean form.

Whether in its present or past, China seems to have maintained an exceptional relationship with the practice of female infanticide, one that has been continually reinforced through contemporary media reports and historical studies. Forty years ago, historian William Langer remarked that infanticide was “often held up to school-children as an abomination practiced by the Chinese or other Asians,” and mostly neglected in Western history.<sup>6</sup> Things have not changed much today. When I ask undergraduates in my Chinese history courses to list everything they know about China on the first day of class, rarely has a group failed to mention the practice of female infanticide. This result would be difficult to imagine in any other kind of history course, even though we can easily find examples of infanticide throughout Western history, from ancient Greece and Rome to medieval and early modern Europe to modern Britain, France, Germany and

the United States.<sup>7</sup> Anthropologists who have researched infanticide among primates have gone so far as to suggest that it has evolved as a *human* coping mechanism of maternal stress, not tied to any one culture.<sup>8</sup> Yet few ever learn, for example, that Great Britain suffered from its own infanticide panic in the mid-nineteenth century, fueled largely by concerns about moral disorder on the part of serving women in the lower classes, who were driven by shame or straitened circumstances to kill their illegitimate children.<sup>9</sup> Infanticide remains for most people a historical curiosity when it occurs in Western societies, not one of its historical fixtures, as it has been imagined for Chinese society. What accounts for this selective forgetting and collective remembering?

This book attempts to answer that question by breaking down the naturalized and eternal relationship between female infanticide and Chinese culture and reconstructing that association instead as a product of historical processes of the nineteenth century. It takes as its explicit focus the changing *perception* of female infanticide in Chinese history, rather than its *practice*. Why make such a distinction in the first place, and why focus on the former, not the latter? There are two reasons for this choice, one pragmatic and one philosophical. The pragmatic reason for framing this book as a study of the perception of female infanticide in Chinese history is that this is the story that available historical sources are most prepared to tell. In spite of his sadness, Su Shi, like so many other Chinese male elites, had never himself witnessed an act of infanticide and had nothing in the way of firsthand experience of the social phenomenon he was so driven to write about. This was because female infanticide in late imperial China most often took place in the initial moments after the sex of the child was determined at birth, within the closed confines of the family and the even more narrowly constrained female sphere of childbirth. As a hidden social practice, it is almost never addressed in written sources by those who were most directly involved in its practice: mothers, midwives, mothers-in-law or other female relations. It is quite rare to find detailed records of actual cases of female infanticide in China involving real, historical persons; instead, we have a plethora of secondhand evidence that reveals much more about general attitudes and perceptions of infanticide on the part of the men (and it was almost always men, whether Chinese or foreign) who were doing the writing.

But there is an even more compelling philosophical reason to study the shifting perceptions of infanticide in Chinese history, rather than conceiving

of it as a coherent practice. This is the only way to disrupt familiar, shop-worn narratives about the continuity of female victimhood in China from the premodern era to the present, and to introduce the possibility of historical change. Without diminishing the seriousness of the problem of excess female mortality in either the Chinese present or past, I want to reframe our understanding of this issue and widen the space between an infant girl's birth and death, so that this moment encompasses more than mere expressions of condemnation and regret. Existing historical studies of female infanticide, shaped in no small part by our contemporary understanding of the problem as a matter of victim gender and enumeration, tend to pose two questions: Why have girls been the primary victims of infanticide in China? And what has been the prevalence of female infanticide there? Although answers to both questions are essential for a basic understanding of female infanticide in Chinese history and require more elaboration in the following text, they also tend to underscore the identification of the problem as an unchanging cultural phenomenon, arising out of gender bias or profound parental indifference.

Historical studies that explain why girls were the primary victims of infanticide reinforce the idea of an unbroken lineage of antifemale attitudes in China, from the earliest dynasties to the present day.<sup>10</sup> Typically, such surveys open with lines from early canonical texts such as the *Shijing* (ca. 1000–600 BCE), a book of odes that contains a stanza celebrating the birth of a son while denigrating the birth of a daughter, or *Han Feizi* (ca. 280–233 BCE), a classic of political philosophy that includes the first Chinese historical reference to the practice of killing a daughter.<sup>11</sup> These lines demonstrate the long-standing undesirability of a daughter as opposed to a son in the early records of Chinese history, prompting treatment ranging from general neglect to intentional death. A brisk march through other textual references from subsequent dynasties often follows, with few distinctions made along the way between past and present practices. At times, the span of more than two millennia may occupy no more space than a single footnote, invoking references to female infanticide from both the third-century BCE *Han Feizi* and a 1983 news story taken straight from the headlines of the *People's Daily*.<sup>12</sup>

Broadly speaking, the prevalence of female infanticide in these studies is ascribed to the Confucian stress on the importance of having a son, which has manifested itself in a variety of ways. The well-worn Chinese phrase “to place emphasis on men and to slight women” (*zhongnan qingnü*) serves as

shorthand for this pervasive system of patriarchal and hierarchical gender notions. One of the central concepts of Confucian filial behavior was the continuance of the family line through male progeny. Sons would remain in the natal home, supporting parents in their old age and observing the proper mourning rituals after their death. A daughter, on the other hand, was in this schema nothing but a financial and emotional burden. Even raising her to maturity required using a family's scarce resources, to say nothing of the bridal dowry she would need upon marriage, when she would leave her natal home for good to join her new husband's family.<sup>13</sup> Within this nexus of gender hierarchy and economic pressures, late imperial Chinese families faced with the birth of an unwanted daughter often opted for the nearest and most efficacious of solutions—a bucket of cold water, as Su Shi describes.

Yet if we look to the past without privileging infant sex as the primary reason for infanticide in China, we can see that in earlier dynasties, such as the Han (206 BCE–220 CE), there was a wide range of reasons for infanticide, including inauspicious births or deformities, family circumstances, general poverty and, indeed, infant sex.<sup>14</sup> During the Song dynasty (960–1279), economic reasons, such as general poverty and excessive head taxes, were still most commonly cited for not raising both girls and boys.<sup>15</sup> An infant's sex seems to have become the definitive motive for infanticide in China only by the late imperial period, or the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, when female infanticide seems to have predominated and male infanticide was discussed only as a rare exception to the rule.<sup>16</sup> This transformation over the millennia is borne out by changes in Chinese terminology for infanticide. In the Han dynasty, the most common Chinese terms referred to the non-gender-specific abandonment of children, including “to cast out/abandon an infant” (*qi ying*), “to not raise a child” (*bu ju zi*) or “to not care for a child” (*bu yang zi*).<sup>17</sup> These broad terms encompassed behaviors that might lead to infant death but did not necessarily indicate the act of killing itself, which was referred to explicitly by the less common term, “to kill a child” (*sha zi*). Up through the Song dynasty, the term “to not raise a child” (*bu ju zi*) was still most commonly used.<sup>18</sup> By the Qing dynasty, however, the most commonly used term for infanticide was “to drown girls” (*ni nü*), which specified not only the sex of the victim but also the method of disposal.

Demographic studies, which attempt to determine the incidence of female infanticide within specific Chinese populations, comprise a second common historical approach to the problem. We need to recognize first of

all that calculating the rate of infanticide for any population, let alone a historical one, is neither easy nor precise. As a hidden demographic event, which most societies do not openly record, the incidence of infanticide can be approached only through indirect methods. In one of the most extensive studies of the prevalence of infanticide in late imperial China, James Lee and Cameron Campbell draw upon the vital statistics from some 80,000 individuals found in the household registries of one village in Liaoning Province, all descendants of the Qing military-administrative banner system and estimate that “between one-fifth and one-quarter of all girls born” there from 1774 to 1873 were victims of infanticide.<sup>19</sup> In a separate study, Lee and his colleagues estimate that “as many as one-tenth of daughters” were killed in the Qing imperial lineage in Beijing from 1700 to 1840.<sup>20</sup> As Lee and his coauthors elsewhere note, these are “indirect estimates from incomplete data,” relying on extrapolations using models developed for European populations.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, they conclude that infanticide in late imperial China was a rational form of postnatal family planning, which, alongside a variety of other active strategies for fertility control, serves to debunk Malthusian notions of unchecked Chinese population growth.<sup>22</sup>

In the absence of other historical contexts, however, their estimates inadvertently reinforce the notion of late imperial Chinese parents as barbarically indifferent toward their own offspring, an attitude another scholar has described as “rational to the point of being ruthless.”<sup>23</sup> To lend some perspective to these estimated rates of infanticide in China, it is helpful to compare them with estimated historic rates in other world regions. Although contemporaneous European and American rates of infanticide were almost certainly lower than the estimated rates for these Chinese populations, neither was the practice unknown.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Thomas Coram established London’s first foundling hospital in the mid-eighteenth century “to prevent the frequent murders of poor miserable infants at their birth” and “to suppress the inhuman custom of exposing new-born infants to perish in the streets.”<sup>25</sup>

Although rates of infanticide were probably lower in Europe, rates of newborn abandonment there were still shockingly high. John Boswell’s groundbreaking study of the history of child abandonment in Western Europe makes clear just how widely this related practice occurred. In eighteenth-century France, the average rate of known abandonments in the city of Toulouse ranged from 10 percent to 25 percent, and in Paris, it ranged from 20 percent to 30 percent. In Lyons, approximately one-third of all registered

births resulted in abandonment. The fate of children in Italy was no less alarming: in eighteenth-century Milan, the rate of abandonment ranged from 16 percent to 25 percent, and in early nineteenth-century Florence, the rate of abandonment rose to a high of 43 percent of all registered births.<sup>26</sup> Although abandoning a child to a foundling home may seem to us now less outwardly cruel than infanticide, it by no means guaranteed a child's life. In the absence of adequate nutrition and medical care in these institutions, child mortality rates were extremely high. Thirty to forty percent of the children in the St. Petersburg foundling hospital, one of the best of its kind, died within six weeks of arrival there, with fewer than a third reaching the age of six. Of the 4,779 infants admitted to the Paris foundling hospital in 1818, a total of 2,370, or more than half, died in the first three months.<sup>27</sup> Certainly abandonment and infanticide are not the same practice, and one could well argue that their rates should not be compared. But this is more of a moral or philosophical issue regarding parental intent, and less of a distinction with regard to ultimate outcomes for unwanted children.

What should strike the modern reader, then, is less the particular cruelty or indifference of late imperial Chinese with regard to their children than the immensity of the social problem of unwanted children all over the world, both in Europe and in China. The practices of infanticide and abandonment can be understood, as Sarah Blaffer Hrdy suggests, as part of a spectrum of responses to deal with unwanted children, in eras without reliable forms of contraception or abortion.<sup>28</sup> It is safe to assume that the death of a young child, under any circumstances, was a far more common event in late imperial China and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe than it is to us. As William Langer has remarked, "Modern humanitarian sentiment makes it difficult to recapture the relatively detached attitude of the parents towards their offspring. Babies were looked upon as the unavoidable result of normal sex relations, often as an undesirable burden rather than as a blessing."<sup>29</sup> Demographic explanations of infanticide alone, in other words, can do little to illuminate its most critical human dimensions.

If we wish to move beyond an undifferentiated past of Chinese gender discrimination and barbarity, then we need to frame our central question in a radical, new way. Instead of taking the historical relationship between female infanticide and Chinese culture as a given, in this book I place it at the very center of my investigation, asking, "Just when and how did female infanticide become so Chinese?" What exactly do I mean by this? In the pages that follow, I argue that female infanticide *became Chinese* in the imperialist

context of the late nineteenth century, when it was immutably transformed from a local, moral, philanthropic issue into a cross-cultural, political, scientific issue of international concern. Female infanticide had been practiced in China well before the nineteenth century, of course, with Chinese historical records to prove it. But never would those early observers have considered it to be a uniquely *Chinese* problem, somehow reflecting deficiencies peculiar to Chinese culture. Throughout much of the Ming and Qing dynasties, female infanticide was perceived by Chinese male elites as a regrettable but localized “vulgar custom” (*lousu*), occurring in different parts of the empire and particularly widespread in the provinces south of the Yangtze River. Chinese sources were written for Chinese audiences, and by and large their major purpose was one of persuasion, to urge others to refrain from killing their newborn children. This mode of understanding was oriented toward local communities and local practices.

It was only in the mid-nineteenth century, after China emerged battered and bruised from its defeat at the hands of Great Britain in the Opium War (1839–42), that female infanticide was reframed as a totemic cultural marker of China writ large, in Western sources written primarily for Western audiences. Western traders, diplomats and missionaries, eager to come to China for the gain of both profits and souls, generated all manner of information about the country and its inhabitants for foreign consumption, and often referred in their writings to the Chinese practice of infanticide. Imperial relationships of power in the nineteenth century meant that this mode of understanding was inherently comparative, giving China its proper (inferior) place in the world civilizational pecking order. Moreover, it was these Western representations of the problem of female infanticide, rather than Chinese interpretations, that would go global, shaping impressions of China in the outside world. By the early twentieth century, the notion of infanticide as a particular Chinese problem had also spread within Chinese society, embedded within a reformist discourse aiming to mitigate its negative impact on the composition and size of the nation’s population.

Within this framework of shifting perceptions, one point bears repeating: nineteenth-century Chinese did not require the tutelage of Westerners, or what one contemporary author has called a “moral revolution,” to bring about an understanding of the abhorrent nature of the practice of female infanticide or to implement institutional solutions to the problem.<sup>30</sup> Chinese texts condemning the practice and philanthropic agencies attempting



to ameliorate it predated the arrival of Westerners in China by many centuries. More significantly, almost every single extant late imperial Chinese source on the subject of infanticide was written to urge others to refrain from the practice.<sup>31</sup> This is not to say that all late imperial Chinese uniformly felt the practice was wrong; many Chinese obviously did commit infanticide, regardless of what was written publicly about it. Still, it is important not to leap to the conclusion, as did many nineteenth-century Western writers, that the abundance of Chinese sources *against* infanticide should be taken as evidence of its prevalence. The abundance of nineteenth-century Chinese sources against infanticide indicates, first and foremost, precisely just that: the publicly acceptable attitude toward infanticide, at least for literate male elites, was one of condemnation, not approbation. However widespread the incidence of female infanticide in China may have been in practice, in other words, historical voices almost always spoke out against it. Su Shi's melancholy is an important part of the story.

Yet it is also undeniable that cross-cultural interactions with Western texts and people in the nineteenth century played a pivotal role in changing the nature of Chinese discourse on female infanticide, shifting it from a concern with karmic rewards and retributions for individuals to a concern with its effect on the national population. In other words, the lives and bodies of newborn Chinese infant girls would come to mean something new and distinct in the early twentieth century when compared to the nineteenth, and this shift did not occur in a cultural vacuum. Dipesh Chakrabarty has described European thought as both "indispensable and inadequate" to explain the trajectories of varied modern histories in India, and these adjectives apply equally well to the nineteenth-century transformation of ideas about female infanticide in China.<sup>32</sup> The effects of these cross-cultural interactions, too, were varied—some were explosive and immediate, and others were gradual and piecemeal. At no time, however, were nineteenth-century Chinese cultural interpreters only passive recipients of Western influence; they engaged in acts of meaning-making in contradictory and unpredictable ways, selecting, adapting, adopting and vehemently rejecting different Western notions related to the practice of female infanticide.

Although the actual space between the birth and death of an unwanted Chinese daughter in the nineteenth century may seem to us all too brief, the meaning of that same short life could encompass yawning gaps in perception

when refracted through the lenses of gender, culture, geography and religious beliefs. This book traces the shift in the perception of female infanticide in China during the nineteenth century, as it moved from Chinese historical contexts to Western ones, in what can be imagined as a series of ever-wider concentric circles of concerned adults surrounding a Chinese infant girl. When we expand our vision of female infanticide in Chinese history to encompass more than just the sex and number of its infant victims, we see that a newborn daughter was always surrounded by a wide array of historical actors interested in her fate: the mother, midwife, mother-in-law and other female neighbors or relations; male Chinese scholars and officials; foreign missionaries, diplomats and traders living in China and even European schoolchildren half a world away.

In Chapter 1 we begin with the example of the woman Ye (1567–1659), who drowned her first daughter immediately after birth, and consider the various factors that influenced such a decision. Here, gender is used not simply as a pretext for selecting female over male infant victims, but as a category of analysis to examine the complex and conflicting roles of many different women, including the mother, midwife, mother-in-law, other female relations and even the ghost of the unwanted daughter herself, in determining the outcome to this moral quandary.

Chapter 2 moves outward, to the circle of concerned Chinese men who were not privy to the intimacies of the birth chamber but still advocated the prevention of female infanticide in the wider public, through philanthropic endeavors within their communities. Female infanticide was most frequently described in male-authored Chinese texts as a deplorable local custom, and managed on a local or regional scale. Our guide in this chapter is Yu Zhi (1804–74), a little-known country schoolteacher, who devoted himself to the practice of good works and the improvement of moral behavior at all levels of society. Exhorting one's fellow man not to commit female infanticide was but one small part of a typical portfolio of mid-nineteenth-century philanthropy, especially in the aftermath of the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64).

The next two chapters of the book detail how Western writings shaped the perception among worldwide audiences that female infanticide was a totemic marker of Chinese society. Chapter 3 examines the writings of Western travelers, amateur scientists, diplomats and missionaries, such as the French Jesuit priest Gabriel Palatre (1830–78), who had no access to the inner lives of Chinese families yet were intent on gathering different types of

evidence regarding the prevalence of infanticide in China. The exact meaning of such evidence, which notably included visceral encounters with dead infant corpses, was hotly debated, since the precise cause of death could never be discerned. Even when original Chinese texts and images generated by native male scholars were copied and translated for Western audiences as authentic proof of infanticide, the resulting message had more to say about the visual exoticism of Chinese culture and language than about the social practice of infanticide *per se*.

Chapter 4 takes the concern with Chinese infanticide to its widest global audience, that of nineteenth-century Euro-American Catholic school-children, who were galvanized into humanitarian action by the pontifical charity the *Oeuvre de la Sainte-Enfance* (Holy Childhood Association). The charity, which was originally established in 1843 to support overseas missionaries in their rescue and redemption of heathen Chinese children through the sacrament of baptism, enjoined Catholic children around the world to make regular contributions to aid this cause, deploying images and texts that promoted the idea of widespread infanticide in China. The *Sainte-Enfance*'s annual tally of infant souls saved was an important marker of the growing worldwide success of the organization.

In the final chapter, Chapter 5, we consider the various consequences of these different perceptions of female infanticide back on the ground in China, tracing their effects into the early twentieth century. On the one hand, most nineteenth-century Chinese audiences staunchly opposed the claims of Catholic missionaries who vied for the right to gather and baptize unwanted Chinese children, accusing them instead of kidnapping and killing children for occult purposes. The most notorious episode involving such rumors was the Tianjin Massacre of 1870, where twenty foreigners, including ten nuns, were killed by a rampaging Chinese mob convinced of their mistreatment of children. The outright violence of the outcome, though, has obscured the political stakes of the conflict: the Tianjin Massacre revealed an early proto-nationalist stance on the issue of female infanticide and unwanted children in China, articulating a keen desire to find Chinese, not foreign, solutions to these problems. On the other hand, even as many ordinary Chinese overtly rejected the presence of Western missionaries and their religious notions regarding the practice of infanticide in China, other Chinese active in treaty ports gradually absorbed Western secular ideas about science and women's rights, adapting them to suit the expectations and needs of Chinese audiences. These gradual adaptations,

found in the pages of new nineteenth-century treaty port newspapers, eventually paved the way for the widespread acceptance of population as the scientific measure of the nation's health and strength in the early twentieth century, when the life of each girl child was seen as essential for China's survival as a nation on the international stage.

The overall trajectory of this nineteenth-century history of female infanticide has much in common with that of other totemic markers of Chinese culture, such as judicial torture, disease or footbinding, which were fetishized within Western texts and images as repulsive markers of Chinese barbarity, grotesqueness or exoticism. Scholars have begun to historicize Western impressions of these other social phenomena, interrogating their meaning, representation and reproduction, thereby reconfiguring their rhetorical power. Timothy Brook, Jérôme Bourgon and Gregory Blue, for example, have argued that the Qing judicial punishment of "lingering," whereby a condemned criminal was put to death, then dismembered and sliced into pieces, should be understood as another kind of capital punishment within a fixed range of judicial procedures, rather than some extraordinary and diabolical torture concocted by Oriental despots.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, Larissa Heinrich has examined the trope of China as the "sick man of Asia," detailing how Chinese images of smallpox inoculation, among other examples, acquired their own "afterlife" in their migration to a Western context, transformed into etiological proof and enduring as images of diseased Chinese bodies.<sup>34</sup> Dorothy Ko has argued that images of Chinese women's unbound feet, which circulated as photographic curiosities of treaty port China in the nineteenth century, were always already inflected as grotesque for new Western audiences, laden with meanings they never had for Chinese.<sup>35</sup>

All of these hyperbolic nineteenth-century Western impressions of Chinese cultural practices shared the same corporeal space of the body, which, as Brook and his coauthors suggest, has always been "the most emotionally compelling site of cultural difference."<sup>36</sup> Western impressions of the "Chinese body"—as feminized, eroticized, weakened, diseased, impoverished, tortured, insensible or long-suffering—literally took shape in photographs and postcards marketed to foreign tourists in the nineteenth century, featuring, for example, a woman's tiny, unbound foot, an opium smoker's wasted countenance or a torture victim's mutilated corpse.<sup>37</sup> Nineteenth-century foreign missionaries and travelers to China tried to depict the infanticide in a similar, corporeal way, invoking the innocent, diminutive bodies of unwanted Chinese children, deserving of pity and in need of rescue.

Compared to other phenomena, however, the problem of female infanticide could never be so easily represented: at its heart it involves not bodies but their unyielding absence. A newborn infant girl was one of the most invisible members of late imperial Chinese society, by dint of both her gender and her biological immaturity. Her existence could all too easily disappear from both real life and the historical record. In the end, this is the fundamental reason why writing a history of female infanticide in China is at once such a delicate and difficult enterprise: how does one render the outlines of a body that is barely seen or articulate the sound of a voice that is barely heard? Nineteenth-century Chinese and Western advocates alike tried their hardest to fill in this profound gap by giving both voice and form to unwanted female infants in numerous elaborate and imaginative ways, hoping to make their intended audiences sit up and take notice, to see what was otherwise an invisible problem. In this book, I suggest a rather different approach, following the example of Orpheus in chasing his elusive Eurydice, the elemental shade. If we always fixate on the blank space at the center, where we would most expect to find the missing daughters of Chinese history, we will never do more than mourn their absence. Only by turning our attention away from the center can we ever hope to catch a glimpse of their brief existence, reflected in the pale light of those who always surrounded them.

*A note on the text:* All references to a Chinese individual's age in the following pages are given in *sui*, numerically one year older than the Western equivalent in years. All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.