

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Becoming a nun in the absence of her husband: male migration and female religiosity in nineteenth-century China

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Abstract

This article investigates the impact of male migration on left-behind women in nineteenth-century Chongqing, focusing on the intersection among gender, migration, and religion. It analyzes the unintended consequences of failed male migration, in which the husband's failure to send regular remittances was prone to cause tremendous anxiety and financial difficulties for his wife. In the absence of strong male-centered kinship organizations, Chongqingese women exploited unorthodox options to support themselves. Buddhist monasticism proved appealing because it provided both a stable source of livelihood and an inclusive all-female space. However, female renunciation was controversial because it challenged state-sponsored patriarchal values. Returned husbands enlisted the state's help in revoking their wives' religious decisions. Paradoxically, for vulnerable women like concubines, nunhood proved an attractive option because it helped them obtain migration-triggered divorces on favorable terms. They strategically synergized the bodily practice of monastic celibacy with the discourse of female chastity to assure their estranged spouses of lifelong commitments to non-remarriage. By doing so, these women succeeded in receiving generous financial compensation. This study highlights how the combination of religion and translocality enabled women to renegotiate their positionality within the patriarchy.

Keywords: Buddhism; Chongqing; left-behind woman; male migration; nineteenth century; nun

Introduction

Migration, both domestic and international, has been an increasingly noticeable aspect of modern life. Like many human phenomena, migration was gendered. It has been widely noted that in countries where patriarchal ideologies are strong, men are far more likely than women to travel to another place.¹ Migration thus often results in split households in which husbands took up jobs in migration-receiving regions and their wives remain at home with their children and in-laws. For years, migration studies have tended to focus on male migrants at the expense of left-behind women.² Even though they do not directly participate in migration, left-behind women often play indirect (but equally vital) roles in facilitating male migration. Not only do they often provide initial travel funds for their migrant

¹De Jong 2000.

²As Tamara Jacka and Caroline S. Archambault have pointed out, the English term “left-behind” has the connotation that women are forced to accept the life of immobility and domesticity. If used uncritically, this term not only rules out a priori the possibility that women might actively choose to stay behind but also signifies a lack of agency on a woman's part. Being fully aware of its epistemological pitfalls, I adopt the term “left-behind” in this article because of its widespread usage in migration literature. Archambault 2010; Jacka 2012.

men, but they are central to sustaining the integrity of split households across time and space. In other words, left-behind women were essential to the maintenance of translocal families.³

Recently, scholars have begun to address this taciturnity by investigating the impact of male out-migration on the lives of left-behind women across national contexts, groups, and historical periods. A central concern that drives much current scholarship is how the absence of adult men changes women's roles and status in migration-sending communities. To answer the question, scholars have investigated various issues affecting left-behind women's socioeconomic lives, including their access to and control over financial resources, changes in the gendered division of labor, and new responsibilities they assume following their husbands' departure. The empirical evidence, however, has yielded a mixed picture. On the one hand, researchers underscore the emancipatory consequences of migration, arguing that the absence of husbands enables their spouses to assume more responsibilities and enhances their status within the family. Several case studies from various regions of the world like India, Arab countries, and Central America suggest that left-behind women become more active in areas such as household expenditure, agricultural work, wage labor, and interacting with government agencies. These changes thus point to women's increased decision-making power, which has the effect of undermining the patriarchal family system.⁴ On the other hand, many other scholars contend that such a notion of female emancipation is ill-conceived. Although women do take over additional responsibilities when their husbands leave, these responsibilities usually have limited structural impact on the deeply entrenched gender inequality in the family or society at large. For example, the women's presumed gain in decision-making or mobility is lost when their migrant husbands visit home or move back. The autonomy of women left behind is further restrained if they continue to live with their in-laws under the same roof. The seemingly empowering roles also tend to expose left-behind women to considerable anxiety since these roles do not conform to conventional gender expectations and are thus prone to generate family and social tensions.⁵

More recently, scholars have started to rethink the epistemic validity of using the conceptual framework of empowerment to study left-behind women's experience of male migration. A major contention is that such a framework runs the risk of representing women in non-Western and developing countries as simply "victims" of the patriarchal system who are unable to initiate meaningful change on their own. By overlooking the lived experiences of non-Western women, the imposed empowerment framework obscures their assertion of agency, as well as their negotiation with patriarchal expectations and constraints in the context of male migration.⁶ Moreover, the current debate is almost exclusively pre-occupied with the economic impact of male migration on left-behind women. Given that migration has multifaceted effects on migration-sending households and that the family economy is just one among many issues that women must face in their daily life, it is thus important to broaden the scope of our investigation to explore the heterogeneous consequences of male migration on women who stay behind.

Taking as my point of departure that "empowerment" proves to be an inadequate analytical framework to understand the complex impacts of male migration on women, this paper will investigate how left-behind women readjusted themselves to meet challenges posed by male migration in nineteenth-century China, a classic patriarchal society where power was transmitted along the patrilineal line and patrilocal residence was the rule.⁷ Unlike much of the existing scholarship, my

³According to Clemens Greiner and Patrick Sakdapolrak, translocality describe "socio-spatial dynamics and processes of simultaneity and identity formation that transcend boundaries." Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013.

In this article, I use the concept to help illustrate the unexpected social consequences of maintaining translocal families across distance.

⁴Brink 1991; Hadi 2001; Hugo 2001; Yabiku et al. 2010.

⁵Datta and Kumar 2011; de Haas and van Rooij 2010; Menjivar and Agadjanian 2007.

⁶Ahmed 2020; Archambault 2010; Rashid 2013.

⁷According to Deniz Kandiyoti, though patriarchal structures and values exist in much of the world, classical patriarchy can only be found in areas such as North Africa, the Middle East, and South and East Asia. In this conceptualization, it refers to "male domination, son preference, and restrictive codes of behavior for women, and the association of family honor with female virtue." Kandiyoti 1988.

study foregrounds the neglected role of religion in shaping left-behind women's opportunity structures.⁸ Until recently, there has been surprisingly little research on the intersectional impact of religion and migration on women.⁹ But as a few studies have noticed, women often turn to religion for emotional and spiritual solace when their husbands are away from home.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the modus operandi of how religion functions in the lives of left-behind women is still obscure. Too often it is presumed that religion acts as a conservative force by contributing to the maintenance of social stability within existing society, which has the consequences of limiting women's agency and perpetuating their subjugation to the male-centered social order. To deepen our understanding of the impact of religion on left-behind women, this article aims to address the following questions. Why do women turn to religion when they are spatially separated from their men? Does religion always help reinforce patriarchal gender ideologies and norms? If not, can religion act as a catalyst enabling women to question or even challenge the ideal of female behavior in a patriarchal society?

My approach to answering these questions is deeply influenced by feminist discussion of agency. Here my primary theoretical interlocutors are Deniz Kandiyoti and Saba Mahmood. The critical insight of their works is that women living in patriarchal societies often exercise power by overtly conforming to the established social order since any open confrontation would severely undermine their social status and well-being. According to Kandiyoti, it means that women need to bargain with patriarchy by learning to play by its rules.¹¹ Mahmood goes a step further by arguing that "agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms."¹² This theoretical reformulation of agency has thus shifted attention from an exclusive focus on women's resistance to relations of domination to their capacity for action that produces relations of subordination.

The feminist conceptualizations of agency – as the capacity to tacitly resist and inhabit hegemonic gender norms – are central to this article's argument. The following analysis will show how women took advantage of their husband's long-term absence from home to renegotiate their positionality within the family in nineteenth-century China. In this narrative, religion would play a hitherto little-recognized but vital role in empowering left-behind women to choose a way of life outside the patriarchal family. More specifically, I will focus on Buddhist monasticism in the article since the majority of my sources are concerned with Buddhist nuns. Nevertheless, joining the monastic order was an unorthodox option for women and was therefore prone to generate tension and controversy both within the monasteries and among the lay population at large. To justify their choice, left-behind women bargained with patriarchy by strategically reinterpreting orthodox gender values like female chastity in light of their new situation. By publicly professing to cling to patriarchal principles and inhabit norms of ideal womanhood, the women ultimately maximized their security and options for survival.

Setting: women and migration in Qing China (1644–1912)

In recent years, the large-scale internal migration in China has received global attention.¹³ However, despite the recent rapid growth of female migration, women are less likely than men to undertake

⁸In sociology, the concept of opportunity structure refers to the fact that there are certain structural factors affecting the availability of opportunity for people in a given society. Whereas some opportunity structures are socially and culturally legitimate, others are not. Taken together, these opportunity structures offer sets of rules that an individual is supposed to obey to attain social and cultural expectations of success. Meyer 2004.

⁹Although recently some scholars have made efforts to address the lacuna, they tend to focus exclusively on the influence of religion on migrant women. Quero 2016; Ramji and Marshall 2022.

¹⁰Datta and Kumar 2011; Shen 2012, pp. 110–14.

¹¹Kandiyoti 1988, 1998.

¹²Mahmood 2005, pp. 1–39.

¹³According to the 2020 census, nearly 376 million people lived someplace other than their hometowns, which many experts consider as the largest human migration in history. Qi 2019.

long-distance moves.¹⁴ These developments are far from unique to the contemporary era. In the Qing dynasty, the last imperial dynasty of China, the society had already become highly mobile as a significant portion of the population moved around the country or traveled abroad to seek better socio-economic opportunities.¹⁵ In addition, gender relations in Qing China were based on strong patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal principles that aimed to limit women's decision-making powers and restrict them to the domestic domain.¹⁶ Consequently, women in the Qing faced tremendous pressure to perform care work at home when their husbands migrated to other places to work.

Like what we have seen in many other parts of the world, male migration had a somewhat paradoxical effect on the lives of Qing women who stayed behind. On the one hand, male migration enabled women, especially those of elite backgrounds, to assume additional responsibilities, exert greater control over household resources, and become *de facto* family heads.¹⁷ On the other hand, male migration also posed numerous challenges that often negated any positive impact it had engendered. First, although male migrants' remittances were economically vital to their families, they were notorious for being unpredictable. The uncertainty of not knowing when they would receive remittances often rendered it difficult for left-behind wives to budget household expenditures over an unknown period. Consequently, women's dependency on the irregular flow of remittances often generated considerable anxiety – a problem that still haunts millions of left-behind women in the contemporary world.¹⁸ Second, in a society where female chastity had been enshrined in state legislation and internalized by many women, the long-term absence of migrant husbands engendered tremendous fear and anxiety among their left-behind wives.¹⁹ A woman, for example, could quickly become the subject of sex rumors simply because she ventured into the street too often or chatted with an unrelated man. As is the case among other groups in different historical contexts, such rumors could easily destroy women's reputations and even their personhood.²⁰ The two problems are, to a certain extent, intertwined, as the irregular arrival of remittances was likely to force women to seek sources of livelihood outside of the home, resulting in them becoming more susceptible to community gossip.

These challenges, however, did not affect left-behind women alone. For the migrant husband, the failure to become the breadwinner for the family and the slightest hint of his wife's infidelity could severely injure his manhood.²¹ To assuage their anxiety, migrant men first sought help from their immediate family members. The patrilocal nature of marriage meant that wives often moved to live with their in-laws, who in turn exerted tremendous control over their behavior and activity.²² Furthermore, male migrants could rely on their fellow villagers and clansmen (who were often the same group of people) to provide necessary economic support if they failed to send remittances on time. No less importantly, village and lineage elders often actively enforced moral codes of behavior by reporting the misbehavior of left-behind wives to their husbands or even taking it upon themselves to punish amoral women.²³ Under such restricted circumstances, as Madeline Hsu puts it, "women found it difficult to be anything but virtuous wives."²⁴

¹⁴Fan and Chen 2020; Jacka 2012; Wu and Ye 2016.

¹⁵Miles 2020, pp. 52–89.

¹⁶For a brief discussion of women's position in imperial China, see Rainey 2010.

¹⁷Mann 2008; Mazumdar 2003.

¹⁸Scholars have shown that in many developing countries like Egypt, Lesotho, and Morocco, wives of migrants often lead materially insecure lives owing to unreliable remittance transfers. Brink 1991, p. 207; de Haas and Rooij 2010, p. 54.

¹⁹Theiss 2004, pp. 177–91.

²⁰Menjívar and Agadjanian 2007, p. 1252; Wu and Ye 2016, p. 64.

²¹As Michael Szonyi has demonstrated, overseas Chinese males were deeply concerned about the sexual purity of their left-behind women in southeastern China. Such heightened anxiety can be discerned in widespread media coverage of sexual scandals involving left-behind wives in the early twentieth century. Szonyi 2005.

²²For example, it is not unusual to find that the wife living in the extended family is deprived of access to remittances as her migrant husband sends them directly to his parents. Kaur 2019; Lenoël 2017.

²³Hsu 2000, pp. 104–08; Miles 2017, pp. 164–9; Szonyi 2005.

²⁴Hsu 2000, p. 105. However, it is wrong to assume that Chinese women were always left behind by their husbands to take care of their families. As Melisa Macauley has recently shown, a small number of women from Chaozhou 潮州 (Guangdong)

The experience of women, however, was not monolithic. Until now, much of the literature on left-behind women in pre-modern China draws on materials (e.g., genealogies, family correspondence and reminiscences, and ethnographical works) produced in the southeastern coastal region where patriarchal lineage systems were well established and powerful.²⁵ It is no wonder that left-behind women living in such an environment usually had little choice but to conform to strict gender rules. But as recent studies have demonstrated, the household structure forms a key mediating factor affecting left-behind women's exercise of power and agency. In comparison with women who reside in extended households, women living in nuclearized households tend to enjoy greater autonomy and gain more control over family finances.²⁶ Following this line of logic, we can hypothesize that, in the Qing, left-behind wives who did not live with their in-laws could have more latitude to explore culturally unorthodox options such as pursuing a religious career. This tendency is likely to increase in regions where lineage organizations did not take deep root.

To test the hypothesis, this article will focus on nineteenth-century Chongqing 重慶 in western China. The choice is deliberate for two reasons. First, even though it was an inland city, Chongqing emerged as a major entrepôt and trading center along the Yangzi River from the eighteenth century onward. Consequently, it attracted a myriad of laborers and merchants from other parts of the empire.²⁷ Meanwhile, the rapid commercialization of the local economy motivated many Chongqing residents to move around the country as itinerant merchants or laborers.²⁸ Therefore, Chongqing saw a profusion of split households because of male migration. Second, unlike the lower Yangzi and the southeastern coastal regions, Chongqing (and to a large extent Sichuan province to which Chongqing then belonged) never evolved into a lineage society. This situation was largely due to the devastating impact of the mid-seventeenth-century dynastic warfare that swept through this region, which, according to some accounts, killed more than 90% of the local population. During the eighteenth century, due to the state-sponsored migration policy, the local society received mass immigration from central China.²⁹ Nevertheless, since Chongqing and its adjacent areas were characterized by a mountainous topography, many immigrants did not resettle down as farmers, but instead found livelihoods as merchants, brokers, or transportation workers.³⁰ This peculiar historical trajectory has a significant impact on the local demographic pattern. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, family households in Chongqing were extremely small with an average of only 2.9 people per family, far below the country's average.³¹ In other words, women in Chongqing were more likely than their counterparts in southeast China to live in small-size families without strong oversight from lineages.

Finally, a word on the sources is in order. The research on the impact of male migration on the position of left-behind women remains haunted by a relative lack of empirical evidence. This problem certainly applies to pre-modern China. To address this challenge, this study will rely on a type of source that has largely escaped the attention of scholars in the field of migration studies, that is, legal case reports kept in government archives. The principal archival materials used here are the Ba County Archives.³² One tremendous advantage of legal case records, which contain a great deal of detailed information akin to ethnographic reports, is that they shed light on previous invisible

emigrated overseas during the nineteenth century. Even though the majority of them led conventional lives as wives, mothers, and daughters, a significant minority portion worked as prostitutes. Macauley 2021, pp. 217–44.

²⁵There is a rich body of scholarship on the formation and development of lineage organizations in southeast China; see, for example, Faure 2007; Szonyi 2002.

²⁶Desai and Banerji 2008; Lenoël 2017.

²⁷At the turn of the twentieth century, even foreign visitors widely acknowledged Chongqing's tremendous economic importance, viewing it as "the Lyons of China" or "another St. Louis." Little 1905, p. 75.

²⁸Wang 1989; Chen 2019, pp. 12–20.

²⁹Entenmann 1980; Liang 2014, pp. 76–8.

³⁰Smith 1988, pp. 49–50; Pan 2023.

³¹Wang 1989; Umeno 2008.

³²During the Qing dynasty, Ba County included the city of Chongqing, which served as the county seat as well as that of the Chongqing prefecture. The Ba County Archives (henceforth BX) is the largest existing county-level archival collection of

aspects of ordinary people's lives. As Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero have written in a different context, "the value of criminal records for history is not so much what they uncover about a particular crime as what they reveal about otherwise invisible or opaque realms of human experience."³³ Given that the majority of women in the pre-modern world were illiterate and had little chance to leave their own writings, legal sources are probably as close as we will ever get to their "voices."

Entering the nunnery in the husband's absence

Chinese women turned to nunhood under various circumstances. One dominant view, which is especially popular in mainland Chinese scholarship, holds that only women who were impoverished, chronically ill, widowed, or unmarriageable would consider the option of becoming a nun. In this regard, nunhood served as a last resort for women who were simply too miserable to survive in this world.³⁴ Also, according to many scholars, nunhood provided little relief for those already downtrodden women. Rather, these women had to endure additional miseries because of negative stereotypes associated with their religious profession.³⁵ Recent revisionist studies, however, go against such a dim view, arguing that entrance into the monastic life afforded women, especially those from elite backgrounds, a respected role other than that of mother and wife and an opportunity to achieve fame and publicity.³⁶ The following discussion further deepens our understanding of female religiosity in imperial China by foregrounding lower-class women's experiences and revealing the less-known context of male migration in shaping women's religious choices.

Legal documents from nineteenth-century Chongqing reveal that local women sometimes entered nunhood when their husbands were away from home for long periods of time. To illustrate this, take a look at the following case. In 1833, a group of government students and community leaders accused nun Guangtai of having an illicit sexual relationship with a monk. To defend herself, she submitted a counterclaim recounting the circumstances surrounding her entrance into the nunnery. Six years ago, when Guangtai was a sixteen-year-old laywoman, she married to a petty merchant. After a mere month of marriage, her husband left home in search of business opportunities elsewhere. In the subsequent years, however, he never returned home, thereby depriving his young wife of her primary source of livelihood. In the end, she had to return to her natal family. For five years, she lived with her mother without knowledge of her husband's whereabouts. At one point, she even pondered the option of remarriage but worried that no one would want to marry her. It was against this backdrop that she decided to become a nun in 1832.³⁷

There are three things noteworthy in the 1833 case. First, nun Guangtai framed her religious decision as a desperate wife's act of survival in the face of her husband's abandonment: because her husband had failed to perform his duty as the breadwinner, she had no choice but to start afresh after years of waiting. By sketching out her act in such a manner, nun Guangtai tapped into a broader world of litigation culture in which ordinary people deployed this type of last-resort argument to justify otherwise unorthodox activities.³⁸ Meanwhile, by emphasizing that she had maintained wifely fidelity toward her absentee husband for years, Guangtai also aimed to underscore her reputation as a chaste woman in court, thereby fending off the accusation of sexual immorality.

Furthermore, nun Guangtai's account unveils the often-neglected connection between nunhood and male migration. As her experience has indicated, migrant husbands' long-term absence from

the Qing period. Currently, the Archives are held at Sichuan Provincial Archives in Chengdu 成都, Sichuan. For more information about the Archives, see Karasawa et al. 2005.

³³Muir and Ruggiero 1994, p. vii. See also Sommer 2000, p. 26.

³⁴Cai 1996, pp. 13–21; Chan 1953, pp. 80–2; Lei 2006.

³⁵Lei 2006; Chen 2014.

³⁶Grant 2008; Gutschow 2004, pp. 1–19; Hsieh 2000.

³⁷BX 6-10-06555, 6-15-17252.

³⁸Sommer 2015, pp. 23–54.

home could pose severe economic difficulties for their wives since women generally had limited earning opportunities outside the home. Moreover, the fact that she turned to her natal family for help indicates that her husband's agnatic family was either unwilling or unable to support her, suggesting a tenuous kinship connection between her and her husband's agnatic family. In addition to financial difficulties, we should note that left-behind women were susceptible to sexual harassment and trafficking in their daily lives.³⁹ In this regard, nunhood offered an attractive alternative since it provided a stable source of income based on religious donations and performance of ritual services, and a relatively secure all-female environment.

Finally, the 1833 case highlights that women's turn to monasticism was by no means straightforward or inevitable. It was taken after deliberate calculations and weighing different choices. To begin with, nunhood was not the only option providing women with secure livelihoods. A competing alternative, as nun Guangtai had once considered, was remarriage. So why did Guangtai prefer nunhood over remarriage? According to her own explanation, it was due to a lack of suitors willing to marry her. Nevertheless, marriageable women like Guangtai were in high demand in Qing China due to the increasingly skewed sex ratio, which meant that in areas like Chongqing a significant percentage of men could not possibly marry.⁴⁰ What discouraged male suitors from marrying a left-behind woman like Guangtai was a deep-seated concern that her husband would return home one day and claim his wife back. For example, in an 1852 case, a petty merchant called Yao Qiyou left home to conduct silk business in Luzhou 瀘州, a county about 150 miles northeast of Chongqing. During his absence, his wife, woman Yang, descended into poverty and ultimately "had nothing left to eat" (according to Yang's testimony in court). In the end, she got married to another man. Apparently, Yao's kinsmen did not intervene to oppose Yang's remarriage. After more than five months of absence, Yao finally came back. After finding out what had happened, he filed a lawsuit against woman Yang and her new husband.⁴¹

As the 1852 case has revealed, men who married left-behind women thus ran the risk of becoming entangled in often time-consuming and costly lawsuits launched by returned husbands.

Similarly, remarriage was problematic for the woman as it potentially embroiled her in a tug-of-war between two husbands. Once she remarried, it could be virtually impossible for her to either walk out of the second marriage and reunite with her returned first husband or continue to live with her second husband with little opposition from the first. If remarriage posed significant legal obstacles, nunhood, in contrast, provided a relatively convenient means for women to support themselves while retaining as much flexibility as possible to cope with the problematic situation caused by returned husbands. The crucial institutional arrangement that helped women achieve such flexibility was voluntary laicization (*huansu* 還俗). Although scholars like Holmes Welch suggest that voluntary laicization was rare among Chinese Buddhist monastics, as I argued elsewhere, it was more routinely practiced at the local level than previously thought.⁴² Therefore, in case of their absent husbands' return, nuns could choose to return to secular life on their own initiative. In this regard, nunneries served as a kind of stopover for women who struggled to make ends meet when their migrant husbands failed to send remittances regularly.

But women who intended to enter the monastic order often encountered an institution that was reluctant to accept them. Monastic authorities generally adopted an adamant stance against a *laissez-*

³⁹Theiss 2004, pp. 192–5.

⁴⁰As Sommer has documented, due to a shortage of marriageable women, unorthodox marriage practices such as polyandry became far from unheard-of among lower-class people in Qing China. Sommer 2015, pp. 55–85. During the Qing, a wife could choose to get remarried if her husband was absent from home for an extended period of time. Guo and Yizhuang 2005, p. 315.

⁴¹BX: 6-20-04993. A similar kind of dynamic runs through a 1765 case. In this case, a husband left home without returning for five years, leaving his wife in severe financial difficulties. Being unable to support herself, she eventually married another man. Once again, once he returned home, the first husband brought a complaint against her and her second husband. Sichuan sheng dang'an guan comp. 1991, p. 188.

⁴²Chen 2020–2021; Welch 1967, p. 334.

faire attitude toward female ordination.⁴³ For example, a set of sixteenth-century convent rules authored by the prominent Buddhist master Yunqi Zhuhong 雲棲祿宏 (1535–1615) stipulate that if the resident nun casually allows someone to remain and join the monastic order, she would be fined and expelled from the nunnery.⁴⁴ Nuns' reluctance to accept left-behind women is evident in the following case. Woman Liu married an itinerant merchant called Chen Xuechao. At the beginning of 1827, he left home for business. Since then woman Liu had not heard from him. Lacking any source of income, she struggled to support herself, let alone raise their young daughter.⁴⁵ By the end of that year, the two had plunged into abject poverty. Their neighbor later testified that they “dressed in ragged clothing and begged on the street.” In such a desperate situation, woman Liu approached abbess Zhaoshun, imploring her to accept them into her temple. Her choice of Zhaoshun was not random: it turned out that they were sisters. Nevertheless, Zhaoshun still turned her away in a cold manner. Ultimately, woman Liu moved to the city and married herself to a cotton merchant there. To everyone's surprise, after more than one year's disappearance, Chen came back in 1828. Somehow Chen's mother told him that Zhaoshun “had cajoled his wife into becoming a nun” (*taohong chujia* 套哄出家). Chen soon made his way to Zhaoshun's temple, demanding his wife back. He made a big scene in the temple and harassed the abbess, which provoked her to file an accusation against him.⁴⁶

Nun Zhaoshun's tumultuous experience underscores the latent risk of accepting the left-behind woman into the convent. Even though she rejected woman Liu's plea on the spot, woman Liu's visit to her temple still made the Chen family believe that nun Zhaoshun must have lured the woman into becoming a nun. During the Qing, the deceitful and lustful nun had become a stereotypical figure in both official and popular discourses. Oftentimes, nuns were depicted either as active sexual agents who did not abide by monastic rules or as go-betweens facilitating the formation of illicit sexual rendezvous among laypeople.⁴⁷ Consequently, it would not take a leap of faith for the Chen family to transplant it out of its original discursive context and fixate it upon an individual being (i.e., Zhaoshun). Thus, the discursive stigmatization of nuns rendered them vulnerable to criticism and attack in real life.⁴⁸

Meanwhile, the unspoken fear that the returned husband could revoke his wife's religious decision and (forcibly) take her home likely explained nun Zhaoshun's seemingly cold attitude toward her sister. Such a deep-seated concern is most explicitly revealed in vernacular literature.⁴⁹ Take the example of a tale included in a sixteenth-century collection, *Gujin lütiao gongan* 古今律條公案 (Old and New Crime Tales Categorized by Statute). In this story, woman Wang and her husband unexpectedly met a group of bandits on the road. Her husband was murdered then and there, but she somehow escaped and wandered about the countryside. In the end, she found a convent and met its abbess. The following conversation between the two captures the nun's anxiety as she encountered a woman of dubious background.

The abbess: “Your lady, where do you come from? Why do you end up in my convent early in the morning? Do you run away from home and desert your husband?”

⁴³The history of female ordination in imperial China is complicated. When Buddhism was first introduced to China, the monastic order was composed exclusively of males. Chinese monks initially resisted the ordination of women. It was not until the mid-fourth century did the first Chinese nuns get fully ordained. In the following centuries, a robust female monastic order developed in China and then spread to other East Asian countries. This situation is in sharp contrast to what has happened in the Theravada tradition where female ordination had discontinued since the fifth century and did not revive until the twentieth century. Heirman 2011; Tsai 1981.

⁴⁴Eichman 2019.

⁴⁵Even in the contemporary era, it is often challenging for left-behind women to rear children on their own. Brink 1991, pp. 207–08.

⁴⁶BX: 6-11-08821.

⁴⁷Goossaert 2008; Yü 2020, pp. 218–39.

⁴⁸Chen 2022.

⁴⁹It is a truism that literary works do not necessarily reflect social reality at large. However, they can serve as indicators of a society's shared values, stereotypes, and fears. Ko 1994, pp. 104–06.

Woman Wang: “I come from Zhenzhou. Because my uncle obtained an official appointment in Huainan, he thus took the whole family to the new post. Unfortunately, my husband died on the road. Then I was purchased by a salt merchant called Yang Zai as concubine. His primary wife, however, was jealous and ferocious. She beat me to such an extent that I could not stay any longer. Recently we were returning home via boat. When the boat arrived at this place, she ordered me to fetch a set of goblets to celebrate the Mid-Autumn festival. I accidentally dropped one into the river. She thus wanted me to death. I took advantage of her tight sleep to escape. So that is why I end up here.”

The abbess: “So you deserted your husband and ran away from home. However, I am a person dedicated to religious cultivation. If I allow you to stay, I will incur trouble myself when your husband tracks you down. How dare I let you reside for a long period?”⁵⁰

As the exchange has illustrated, the abbess first suspected that woman Wang came to her nunnery after escaping from home. After hearing her explanation, the abbess worried about possible trouble ahead. Because she did not obtain her husband’s approval, he had every reason to take her back home. That could be a nightmarish scenario for the nunnery. Given that nuns were customarily portrayed as being good at deceiving virtuous laywomen in anticlerical literature, the husband was likely to hold the abbess accountable for his concubine’s disappearance. As nun Zhaoshun’s experience has suggested, an angry husband could easily disturb the temple’s tranquility and even pose a serious threat to its resident nuns’ safety. To reduce such risks, the nun was thus hesitant to take a woman who failed to obtain explicit assent from her husband into the nunnery.

In sum, women sometimes joined the monastic order after their husbands had been absent for an extended time. As the local society became increasingly mobile in Qing Chongqing, more and more men left home to search for employment or business opportunities in other places. Even though male migration aimed to improve the family’s economic situation, it was a venture full of uncertainty. Not infrequently, migrant husbands failed to send remittances regularly, leaving their stay-behind spouses in a precarious situation. The prevalence of small-size families and the relative dearth of lineage organizations in Chongqing further aggravated local left-behind women’s economic woes as they struggled to obtain financial support from their husbands’ kinsmen. But, on the other hand, this peculiar demographic profile likely granted local women significant leeway to explore culturally and socially less-orthodox ways of life.⁵¹ Some women thus chose to enter the nunnery both due to its promise of financial and personal security and to the relative ease of returning to secular life in case their husbands returned. Nevertheless, the very flexibility that left-behind women enjoyed could spell trouble for the institution that accepted them. Because their religious decisions never acquired their husbands’ consent, they were thus prone to be contested, sometimes violently, when their husbands returned home after a long time. The inherent uncertainty, plus widespread anticlerical discrimination, thus gave nuns pause when they encountered women who sought to become nuns in the absence of their husbands.

“Deserting the husband”: woman’s narrow path to renunciation

As the conversation between woman Wang and the abbess has hinted, a woman’s attempt to enter the convent without her husband’s knowledge was understood by contemporaries as an act of “wifely desertion” (*beifu* 背夫). Running away from one’s husband was a grave crime in the Qing because it not only challenged the ideal of female submission but also subverted the family, the grassroots institution upon which the state based its power. According to the Qing code, “if the wife on her own turns her back on her husband and runs away, she will be punished with 100 strokes of the heavy bamboo,

⁵⁰Chen 1992, pp. 114–15.

⁵¹Unlike the popular characterization of Chinese women as submissive, Chongqingese women were famous for assuming a more assertive role in the husband–wife relationship. There is a local idiom called *pa er duo* 耙耳朵, or “soft ears,” depicting a henpecked husband. Gunn 2006, p. 147.

and the husband may, as he will, marry her off or sell her.”⁵² The criminalization of wifely desertion and the harsh manner in which it was punished demonstrated that the state was deeply concerned about upholding the ideal of wifehood. Once married, a woman was bound to her husband’s family and was virtually unable to walk out of the relationship on her own. The imperial law thus protected the family’s integrity by penalizing those who threatened the domestic order. Despite harsh punishment, wifely desertion was a widespread social practice in the Qing, especially among the lower strata. Not infrequently, commoner women, after having entangled in extra-marital affairs, ran off with their lovers with the hope of fulfilling their needs for affection and improving their material condition.⁵³

The charge of wife desertion thus shrouded a married woman’s embarkment on a religious career with an aura of illegitimacy. Conversely, as the following case will illustrate, it also meant that a nun could easily be susceptible to the accusation even if she had joined the monastic order for years. In 1818, a group of local elites filed a lawsuit against nun Yongxing for benefiting herself at the expense of public welfare. At the center of the dispute was whether Yongxing had prevented the plaintiffs from extracting building stones from a quarry adjoining her nunnery. To support their accusation, the plaintiffs denounced Yongxing as “not a good type” (*fei shanlei* 非善類): not only did she establish pledged kinship with numerous laymen but they also congregated at her temple day and night. This claim thus played on the popular image of the convent as a den of vice in which illicit sexual intercourse took place.⁵⁴ To further signal the accused’s amorality to the magistrate, the plaintiffs stated that Yongxing had a husband, Yang the Seventh, a petty merchant living in Chongqing city. They asserted that she had “deserted her husband” to become a nun. The magistrate took the accusation seriously and ordered yamen runners to bring Yang for investigation. He admitted that “nun Yongxing is my wife. She did not get along with me and left home to become a nun in her middle age. Since then, I have had no contact with her.” Even though Yang did not detail the circumstances surrounding the estrangement, one may gauge that his itinerant lifestyle as a merchant played a role. Yongxing, like other women we have examined previously, likely turned to nunhood when her husband conducted business away from home.⁵⁵

This case thus exposes the nun’s vulnerability to the accusation of “wifely desertion.” Nun Yongxing’s opponents employed the criminally inflected term “deserting the husband” to characterize her entrance into monastic life. By doing so, they attempted to delegitimize her nunhood by questioning its crucial precondition, that is, her husband’s approval. As a married woman’s turn to Buddhism challenged key premises of the Confucian family order and gender norms (e.g., women’s presumed subordination to men and women’s bondage to family and marriage), the claim that a woman ran away from home to become a nun was damaging enough to warrant the attention of the law. Nuns’ vulnerability to the charge of “wifely desertion” also derived from women’s difficulty in initiating divorce on religious grounds.⁵⁶ If a married woman attempted to initiate divorce because of her spiritual needs, she could run afoul of the authorities and end up being severely punished.⁵⁷

⁵²Jones trans. 1993, p. 134.

⁵³Paderni 1995, pp. 1–32.

⁵⁴*Zhiwen lu* 咫聞錄 (Records of Limited Information), an early-nineteenth-century literary collection, contains such a tale. A young student visited a nunnery and then found himself captivated by its resident nuns’ beauty. When he made a pass at them, the nuns, instead of feeling offended, responded enthusiastically. After they entertained him lavishly in a drunken orgy, the course of events takes a sharp left turn. The nuns incarcerated the intoxicated student in a secret cell and forced him to satisfy their boundless sexual needs day and night. In the end, the nuns’ sexual demands utterly exhausted him and left him on the verge of death. Yongne Jushi 1999, pp. 95–6.

⁵⁵BX: 6-04-03781.

⁵⁶In general, the husband could divorce his wife for seven legally recognized causes: barrenness, wanton conduct, neglect of the husband’s parents, loquacity, theft, jealousy, and chronic illness. Nonetheless, the law had provided a much more limited list of causes for the wife to apply to the court for the dissolution of her marriage: if her husband had deserted her for a prolonged period, seriously injured her (to the extent, say, of breaking a tooth or a bone), forced her into illicit sex, or tried to sell her to another man. Huang 2001.

⁵⁷In March 1876, *Shenbao* reported that a rural woman in Hunan Province became estranged from her husband due to economic difficulties. She demanded a divorce from time to time. At his wits’ end, the husband turned to the court for help.

The above discussion casts light on the difficult path to religious renunciation for left-behind women. First of all, the accusation of “wifely desertion” indicated that women had to secure at least a minimum degree of permission from her husband prior to her initiation of a religious career. Furthermore, since there was an underlying tension between the state-sponsored normative wifedom that centered on the patriarchal family and the monastic career as an alternative to that ideal, a woman could not use spiritual pursuit as an excuse to divorce her husband. Consequently, a wife-turned-nun had to continue to justify the legitimacy of her ordination under the watchful eyes of the local community and imperial officials. It meant that when a dispute emerged, the nun’s adversary could strategically deploy the charge of wifely desertion to facilitate litigation against her. The restricted path to monastic life particularly concerned left-behind women who had to make decisions without their husbands’ presence. Then it begs the question of how women legitimized their otherwise tension-ridden choice of renunciation. As the following section will show, women who intended to become nuns could strategically reinterpret the dominant discourse of female chastity to gain justification for their decision.

Nunhood and the cult of female chastity

Throughout the imperial era, the most consistent and influential discourse defining women’s gender roles and behaviors was that of female chastity. Nevertheless, its specific manifestation tended to evolve over time. Since the Song dynasty (960–1276), the discourse increasingly emphasized the virtue of women who used their economic resources (usually dowry) to support their husbands’ families and refused to remarry after the death of their husbands. During the Qing, the state also played an active role in promoting widow chastity, making it ever more prestigious and more attractive for women to emulate it.⁵⁸ From women’s perspective, the emphasis on the widow’s lifelong refusal to remarry somehow resonated with the normative lifestyle of nunhood that entailed an equally lifelong vow to celibacy, as both underscored a strong commitment to sexual purity and bodily integrity. Thus, we come across cases in which a wife or fiancée chose to become a nun after the death of her husband or fiancé.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the Buddhist community also promoted the idea that nunhood offered widows a powerful means to preserve fidelity and counter the pressure of remarriage.⁶⁰ Consequently, there was a widespread belief that nunhood “provided a widow a convenient way to maintain chastity in a safe and supportive environment.”⁶¹

Nunhood, however, was not only attractive to widows. Given that marriage was almost a universal experience for Chinese women, unmarried women could appropriate the discourse of female chastity to resist the tyrannical pressure to get married and vindicate the otherwise unconventional choice of religious renunciation. The following case is illuminating. In 1870, a middle-aged woman called Liang Jingfu, after refusing to marry for years, ultimately persuaded her family to allow her to become a nun. The Liang family then spent a substantial amount of money (400 taels) in purchasing a temple on her behalf: she could now rely on income generated from leasing the temple-owned agricultural land to support herself for the rest of her life. For the sake of preempting any possible rumors, her family pleaded with the magistrate to issue an official placard to ensure the legitimacy of woman Liang’s

The magistrate had the woman summoned. In court, she implored the magistrate to grant her a divorce so that she could pursue religious cultivation at the nunnery. To dissuade her from doing so, the magistrate ordered a pig castrator to extract her sex organ to ensure her body’s “purification of any sexual desire.” The woman was horrified by such a prospect and begged pardon, insisting that she “will never dare to harbor any thought of taking monastic vows.” “Xianling panan,” *Shenbao*, 31 March 1876.

⁵⁸Elvin 1984; Lu 2008, pp. 129–66; Theiss 2004, pp. 25–38.

⁵⁹Li 2014, p. 242; Lu 2008, p. 63.

⁶⁰Probably one of the most well-known examples was the fifth-century nun Chaoming. According to her biographical sketch kept in the *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 (Biographies of Eminent Nuns), “when she was twenty-one, her husband died, leaving her a widow. A neighbor sought to marry her, but she vowed not to allow it. Therefore, she left the secular life and took up residence in Venerating Seclusion Convent.” Tsai trans. 1994, p. 84.

⁶¹Hinsch 2020, p. 123.

unorthodox move. To win official support, they portrayed her religious pursuit as a way to “preserve chastity” (*shouzhen* 守貞).⁶²

Conversely, nunhood enabled married women to renegotiate their marital status through the embodied adoption of monastic celibacy that invoked the discourse of female chastity. The larger context here is the negative impact of male migration on marital stability. Research conducted in a variety of cultural and historical contexts demonstrates that male migration increases the risk of marital dissolution, as spatio-temporal separation greatly aggravates the challenge of arranging family life translocally.⁶³ In Qing China, male migration was likely to generate similar marital stress. Nevertheless, given that it was virtually impossible for women to initiate a divorce, they had to be creative if they wanted to get out of an undesirable marriage. As the following discussion will illustrate, a woman who intended to do so strategically deployed the discourse of nunhood to persuade her husband to grant her a divorce. No less importantly, by assuring her husband of her adherence to lifelong sexual abstinence, she had a better chance to negotiate a separation settlement favorable to her interests.

In 1783, after her husband’s death, a Chongqing woman surnamed Qin chose to become the concubine of Xu Yiren, a sojourning merchant from Macheng 麻城 County (located about 700 miles east of Chongqing). The union speaks to two common phenomena at the local level. First, as mentioned above, Chongqing attracted a massive flow of immigrants from neighboring provinces during the eighteenth century. Among all the places from which immigrants came, Macheng stood out and supplied a disproportionately large number of them.⁶⁴ Thus, Xu’s migration experience was by no means idiosyncratic. Instead, he followed a well-established migration route from his hometown to Chongqing. Second, Xu’s practice of taking a local woman as a concubine fits the general marriage pattern of male migrants in the Qing. During their extended stay in the host society, resourceful migrants, despite getting married in their hometown, often formed sexual relationships with local women, a phenomenon that persists till today.⁶⁵ Therefore, it is quite common to find a sojourner who simultaneously had a primary wife in his native place and a concubine in the area where he conducted business.

In 1788, after years of sojourn in Chongqing, Xu, like many other migrants, decided to return to his home community in Macheng. For woman Qin, however, the forthcoming trip epitomized nothing but an abrupt physical dislocation. Soon, she reported that she was “sick.” Apparently, she did not want to move with him. After intense negotiation, she persuaded Xu to provide her with a substantial amount of money: thirty taels of silver and twenty thousand copper cash.⁶⁶ In return, she agreed to become a nun in Chongqing. For an unspecified reason, the agreement was not fulfilled. Woman Qin instead accompanied Xu to Macheng in 1789. Nevertheless, she had a strained relationship with her mother-in-law. After the two made a scene in the village, Xu finally decided to end the relationship. He agreed to pay woman Qin 240 taels and sent her back to Chongqing.

The two, however, continued to cross paths in the following years. First, Xu moved back to Chongqing for business again. Then, in 1791, woman Qin approached him to see if he could help her through financial difficulties, giving her fifty taels so that she could be a nun for the rest of her life. After woman Qin’s repeated requests, Xu reluctantly gave her twenty-two taels. Nevertheless, one year later, woman Qin reached him once again, asking for more money. To bolster her claim, she asserted that she received tonsured at a local temple. But this time Xu refused to offer any help, which provoked her to file a lawsuit against him in court.⁶⁷

⁶²BX: 6-30-14496. Similarly, in the Qing, Chinese Christian women used the discourse of female chastity to justify their taking of the vow of virginity in the eyes of their non-Christian neighbors. Menegon 2009, p. 317.

⁶³Caarls and Mazzucato 2015; Landale and Ogena 1995.

⁶⁴Rowe 2007, pp. 59–60.

⁶⁵Macauley 2021, pp. 217–44; Miles 2017, pp. 170–5; Xiao 2014.

⁶⁶It is estimated that a laborer’s average monthly wage stood at around one tael by the end of the eighteenth century. Theoretically, one tael was worth 1,000 cash, even though the actual exchange rate could vary significantly from year to year. Wu and Dagang 2017.

⁶⁷Both sides presented conflicting versions of events during the court session, leaving the magistrate uncertain about what had happened. Since the file is incomplete, we do not know the case’s conclusion. BX: 6-01-01791, 6-01-01803.

This convoluted but fascinating case calls our attention to several things. First, on several occasions, woman Qin invoked the discourse of nunhood to justify her request to obtain monetary support from her (former) husband.⁶⁸ Regardless of her religious sincerity, she believed that nunhood provided a legitimate cause first to secure a divorce and then to demand financial support from her husband. To substantiate her claim, woman Qin even resorted to the bodily religious practice of tonsure. The unspoken rationale is that religious renunciation connoted a lifelong commitment to non-marriage, thereby undergirding her intention to maintain chastity and safeguard her husband's reputation despite the divorce. In other words, although they were separated, the woman would behave like a widowed wife to ensure that her body would not be taken by another man. Consequently, the woman believed that the husband needed to compensate her to maintain an exclusive claim to her body. To a certain extent, one may argue that the concubine monetized the discourse of chastity to secure financial aid. The discourse of nunhood somehow functioned as a surety to guarantee the woman's fulfillment of chastity in the years to come.

Furthermore, woman Qin's experience also exposed the underlying tension between the concubine and the male migrant's left-behind primary wife. Even though the conflict took place between the concubine and her mother-in-law in this case, such a clash often occurred between a concubine and a primary wife. From the latter's perspective, the former was an outsider because of her sexuality and her geography, both of which posed threats to her position in the family. To maintain her status and to compete for her husband's affection, a wife often remained aloof if not hostile to a concubine.⁶⁹ The tense relationship between the two was so well known that a jealous wife who tortured her husband's newly acquired concubine had evolved into a stereotypical figure in Qing vernacular literature. Not uncommonly, we come across stories in which a concubine was forced to commit suicide due to long-term abuse at the wife's hands.⁷⁰

The concubine's situation became particularly precarious after the husband's death, as the wife could easily expel her from home. As the following case will reveal, to protect herself from the wife's jealousy and support herself in a safe environment, the concubine could also choose nunhood as a means to display her enduring loyalty toward the deceased husband and, no less importantly, secure her claim over his inheritance. Nun Yuangui, before joining the monastic order, was purchased by a wealthy merchant called Liu Xinlin as a concubine in 1822 when he conducted business in another city. By then, Liu already had a wife (i.e., woman Liu) in Chongqing, but the two had a strained relationship. Therefore, when he moved back to Chongqing, he lived with the concubine in the city, whereas woman Liu took up residence with their two sons in the countryside. In fear of his wife's jealousy toward the concubine, Liu made special arrangements for the latter in his death will. First, the concubine would receive 300 taels to "maintain widowed chastity" (*shoujie* 守節). To ensure that the concubine would not remarry, Liu entrusted his brother-in-law to invest the money in a money-lending business and to use its interest to support her. Moreover, the concubine would retain the right to continue to live in the urban house. Finally, woman Liu and their two sons would take his remaining property.

Merchant Liu passed away in 1824. His last wish, however, was not well honored. Woman Liu took away the concubine's belongings and attempted to force her to remarry. Given that the concubine's adherence to widow chastity was the precondition for her entitlement to Liu's inheritance, we can interpret the wife's effort as a strategy to disinherit her. To secure her property, the concubine launched a lawsuit against woman Liu in 1825. Although she won the case, she could still not retrieve her belongings from woman Liu. At the end of 1826, the concubine took a surprising move and chose to become a nun. She then took the bequeathed money (300 taels) from Liu's brother-in-law and used

⁶⁸Given that woman Qin used the term "this little woman" (*xiao furen* 小婦人) – the standard legal designation of a married woman – rather than "nun" (*ni* 尼) to identify herself during the court session, it meant that by then she still retained the lay status.

⁶⁹Ebrey 1993, pp. 217–34; Hsieh 2014, pp. 41–94.

⁷⁰Wu 1995, pp. 149–50.

it to purchase a temple at nearby Jiangbei Subprefecture 江北廳.⁷¹ If woman Liu had tried to use remarriage to render the concubine ineligible for the inheritance, we can interpret the concubine's renunciation as a counter-strategy to cement her inheritor status. Nunhood theoretically disqualified her from remarriage, demonstrating her fulfillment of widow chastity. It was this implied reasoning, I believe, that convinced Liu's brother-in-law to hand the money over to nun Yuanguì.⁷²

This case is worth our attention as it unveils the uneven impact of male migration on left-behind women. On the one hand, merchant Liu's migration significantly improved the family's economic prospects. He reaped handsome profits from his transregional business operations (as indicated by the sheer number of properties listed in his death wish). His wife was thus likely to lead a materially comfortable life at home. On the other hand, financial comfort did not guarantee a harmonious marital relationship. The long-term separation had taken a heavy toll on the two's marriage, which only got worse when Liu took a concubine. The conflict between woman Liu and nun Yuanguì further complicates our presumption of left-behind wives as a homogenous group. On the one hand, as an outcome of male migration, the concubine was viewed by the wife as a threat, with the potential to disrupt her position in the family. On the other hand, the widowed concubine faced a more precarious situation as she had to defend herself against the wife's resentment and struggled to make a claim for her husband's inheritance in a legal system that did not recognize her property rights.⁷³ To defend her interest, the concubine, like the wife, had to cling to the discourse of widow chastity.⁷⁴ To resist further pressure to remarriage, she strategically took the vow of celibacy to prove her adherence to lifelong sexual abstinence, thereby achieving the goals of obtaining the deceased husband's property and empowering her position against the wife.

Conclusion

This article brings a unique perspective to the study of the gendered impacts of migration. While recognizing the importance of economic concerns that have dominated most recent scholarship on the subject, this article contributes to the ongoing reflection by focusing on the nexus between gender, migration, and religion. Qing China underwent increased commercialization which profoundly transformed many aspects of people's lives. In a commercially bustling place like Chongqing, as a growing number of men from various socioeconomic backgrounds sought to earn livelihoods away from home, women had to envision a life without male presence at home. Whereas scholars have generally emphasized the positive impact of male migration on the economic prospects of migrant families at an aggregated macro level, this study shifts the analytical focus to the unintended consequences of failed male migration on left-behind women at an individual micro level. The migrant husbands' failure to send regular remittances was prone to cause tremendous anxiety and financial difficulties for their wives. Due to limited female employment opportunities, nunhood became an attractive option for some left-behind women because it provided an all-female environment and a stable source of livelihood.

How do we understand left-behind women's religious choice as a form of female agency in a classical patriarchal society like Qing China? First, we can view women's turn to monasticism as a sign of augmented autonomy resulting from male migration. The long-term absence of husbands gives women more decision-making power, enabling them to explore ways of life that did not fit into

⁷¹The temple had landed endowments, allowing the nun to obtain a stable source of rental income.

⁷²BX: 6-13-13564. The struggle between nun Yuanguì and woman Liu, however, was not over yet. In 1827, woman Liu accused nun Yuanguì of stealing her personal belongings. After multiple complaints were filed, the legal tug-of-war between the two women ended with an out-of-court settlement.

⁷³Conceptualized as a piece of purchased property and deemed morally inferior, the concubine had a vulnerable position in her husband's family. As Hsieh Bao Hua has pointed out, for many concubines, economic pressure to remarry "could be greater than the value of moral reputation." Hsieh 2014, pp. 76–7. For a more thorough discussion of the concubine's property rights in the imperial era, see Bernhardt 1999, pp. 161–95.

⁷⁴Scholars have argued that due to competition between in-laws and widows over family property, the latter often used the discourse of chastity to establish their control over deceased husbands' inheritance. Sommer 2000, pp. 166–209; Waltner 1981.

normative womanhood. In this regard, female renunciation posed a severe threat to the patriarchal family system as it led to the disintegration of split households and consequently defeated the very purpose of male migration. Whereas migrant husbands could rely on clansmen and villagers to constantly monitor and control their wives in the southeastern coastal region, and they were far less likely to achieve this goal in nineteenth-century Chongqing where family size was small and lineage organizations did not take root. This contrasting experience thus highlights the heterogeneity of women's experience of male migration in one country setting.

Because of its departure from normative female behaviors, women's choice of nunhood was inevitably controversial. What was most detrimental to an aspirant nun was the criminal accusation of wifely desertion. Underlying the charge was the tension between the state-sponsored normative wifehood that intended to bind women to the patriarchal family and the monastic career as an alternative to that ideal. For the left-behind wife, the legitimacy of her renunciation was inherently damaged by the impossibility of soliciting consent from her migrant husband. More often than not, a nun's adversaries employed the charge of wifely desertion, regardless of its veracity, to facilitate their lawsuit against her. Indeed, even an experienced nun could still get embroiled in such litigation. In addition, if migrant husbands resurfaced after a long-term absence, they often went to convents to demand their wives-turned-nuns back. Facing so many risks prompted nuns to take a cautious stance toward left-behind women's requests to join them. By doing so, they unintentionally undergirded the dominant patriarchal ideology that aimed to confine women to domestic family life.

Left-behind women who intended to join the monastic order thus faced the daunting task of justifying their unorthodox move. I argue that they strategically appropriated the orthodox discourse of female chastity to legitimize their religious pursuit. In the late imperial era, the state's promotion of female chastity was to prevent women from living outside the patriarchal family system and to enjoin them to remain faithful widows after their husbands' death.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, because of the dynamic malleability of the discourse, women, even those from lower-class backgrounds, were able to reinterpret it to their own interests.⁷⁶ Instead of emphasizing the apparent incompatibility between the family-centered discourse of female chastity and the monastic renunciation of this world, women integrated the two into a mutually supportive framework: female chastity legitimated women's entrance into the monastic order, whereas nunhood provided the means to embody and advance the virtue of female chastity. In this interpretive framework, a left-behind woman's embrace of monastic celibacy was not primarily to fulfill her personal religious need; instead, it was to protect her chastity in her husband's absence. What facilitated the integration was the multivalence of female chastity as it connoted both faithfulness to one's husband and sexual abstinence, the latter of which resonated perfectly with the popular understanding of nunhood. Most significantly, women with particularly vulnerable positions within the household (e.g., concubines) used the integrated discursive framework to buttress their position against their husbands and their families. In these cases, nunhood helped the women openly preserve the ideological edifice of wifely chastity. But ulteriorly, it served their own financial interests which were often trumped in a patriarchal society like Qing China. In this regard, as Kandiyoti and Mahmood have described in different contexts, the left-behind women exercised their agency by not resisting external forms of domination publicly, but rather by actively inhabiting hegemonic social norms and values. This study highlights how the combination of religion and translocality enabled women to renegotiate their positionality within the patriarchy.

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⁷⁵Sommer 2000, pp. 166–209; Theiss 2004, pp. 25–38.

⁷⁶Similarly, as recent studies on female literacy have shown, elite women in the Qing exploited the intrinsic ambiguity in Confucianism to pursue literary talents and establish female networks that challenged the ideals of female unworthiness and women's seclusion. Ko 1994, pp. 1–26.

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