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THE VIOLENCE OF CLASSIFICATION AND ETHICS OF SUICIDE: A REFLECTION ON QIU JIN'S DEATH

Introduction

In 1907, Qiu Jin (1875-1907), a Chinese feminist revolutionary and poet, was beheaded by the Qing imperial government. How should her death be understood? Was it suicide, martyrdom, or revolutionary sacrifice? These are not merely classificatory questions, but ethical and epistemic provocations. To classify her death is to enact a form of power, which reduces historical singularity to moral typologies. We argue in this paper that the logics to classify deaths like Qiu Jin's are what Michel Foucault calls disciplinary knowledge: a form of power that regulates life by managing the meaning of death.[1]

Attempts to classify voluntary death often rely on frameworks such as biomedical ethics, sociological typologies, religious martyrdom discourse, or Confucian moral theory in East Asian context. While these paradigms offer valuable insights, they presuppose that death must conform to existing moral logics. This paper departs from that assumption. Instead, it examines how Qiu Jin's death exposes the limits of each classificatory scheme and compels us to ask what such schemes conceal.

Qiu Jin's death is particularly suited to this inquiry because it brings multiple ethical tensions into focus. First, she lived in a time of profound social rupture. The final decades of the Qing dynasty were marked by colonial pressure, nationalist awakening, and the breakdown of traditional norms. In Durkheimian terms, it was an anomic age, an era of normative

[1] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). Emile Durkheim similarly admits that it is hard to define suicides because "[n]ot only is their meaning so indefinite as to vary, from case to case, with the needs of argument, but, as the classification from which they derive is not analytic, but merely translates the confused impressions of the crowd, categories of very different sorts of fact are indistinctly combined under the same heading, or similar realities are differently named." See Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, ed. George Simpson, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1951), 41.

collapse that challenged the coherence of moral categories themselves.[2]

Second, her death was situated within the Confucian ethical landscape. Contemporary Confucian bioethics often focuses on tensions between *xiao* (family reverence) and *ren* (altruistic sacrifice, humanness, and goodness), particularly in debates over organ donation.[3] Qiu Jin, however, radicalized this tension. She embodied the Confucian dictum that "No scholar-official of noble intention or good person would ever pursue life at the expense of Goodness; some may even be called upon to give up their lives in order to fulfill Goodness" (*Zhishi renren wu qiu sheng yi hai ren, you sha shen yi cheng ren*).[4] Her "revolutionary sacrifice" thus raises questions not about whether to sacrifice one's body, but about what kinds of death may be deemed morally justified within and beyond Confucian paradigms.

Third, as readers will find from this paper, Qiu Jin's death cannot be disentangled from the entangled structures of gender and nationalism. She struggled not only as a patriot but also as a woman whose feminist aspirations collided with patriarchal expectations cloaked in patriotism. Yet, her revolutionary act was both a defiance of patriarchal subordination and a contribution to national salvation. It was a convergence that complicates any simple reading of her death as either suicide or sacrifice.

Finally, her case invites us to consider whether revolution itself operates as a kind of secular religion. Like religion, revolution can assign symbolic meaning to death, demand loyalty unto death, and transmute individual sacrifice into collective transcendence. In this light, Qiu Jin's death may be read not only as political persecution but also a revolutionary martyrdom that troubles the very boundary between secular and sacred.

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[2] Durkheim, *Suicide*, 201-239, 324-325.

[3] See: Mingxu Wang, Wen Zhang, and Xueliang Wang, "Principle of Family Consent in Organ Donation: Modern Application of Confucian Ethics," *International Journal of Chinese & Comparative Philosophy of Medicine* 6, no. 1 (2008): 51-75; Yao Fang, "Is Confucian Ethics an Ideological Barrier to Organ Donation? — Understanding 'The Body, Hair, and Skin, One Must Not Damage'," *International Journal of Chinese & Comparative Philosophy of Medicine* 7, no. 1 (2014): 11-20.

[4] Confucius, "The Analects," introduction and translation by Edward Gilman Slingerland, in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2005), 45.

Rather than seeking to resolve the question of why Qiu Jin chose to die, this paper examines why we want to resolve this question. Drawing on a Foucauldian understanding of classification as a product of power and knowledge is the means through which power is exercised,[5] we argue that the ethics of death cannot be disentangled from the politics of interpretation. Qiu Jin's death resists absorption into any single ethical tradition. Her death forces us to confront the limits of our moral taxonomies, and the violence inherent in our attempts to make death legible.

Historical and Cultural Context: Late Qing China and the Life of Qiu Jin

To understand the intricacy of Qiu Jin's death, it is necessary to briefly introduce the historical and cultural backdrops against which she lived. The final years of the Qing China (1840-1912) were marked by profound political instability. Internally, the empire suffered from fiscal collapse, domestic revolts, and separatist movements; externally, it was besieged by imperialist encroachment and a series of humiliating unequal treaties. In Hao Chang's words, the "Western expansion" on China had "two primary aspects": "the obvious one was the coercion and exploitation that Western nations imposed on China—imperialism. The other, a transformative one, was the variety of changes brought to China through contact with the West."[6] This duality provoked what he called an "intellectual ferment," leading many Chinese thinkers to turn away from Confucian orthodoxy toward Western institutions, ideologies, and technologies in a desperate effort to modernize the nation.[7] The result was not only political unrest, but also a deep epistemological crisis in identity, morality, and cultural legitimacy.

Amid this crisis, traditional Confucian ethics continued to valorize *zhong* (loyalty) and *lie* (chaste martyrdom), particularly among imperial officials and women. Yet these ideals were increasingly co-opted by nationalist reformers who sought to remobilize ethical traditions for political purposes. Figures such as Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei emphasized the national importance of women's education, portraying uneducated and economically "unproductive" women as impediments to the

[5] Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980).
[6] Hao Chang, "Intellectual change and the reform movement 1890-8," in *The Cambridge History of China Volume 11, Late Ch'ing, 1800-1911, Part 2*, ed. John K. Fairbank and Kwang-Ching Liu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 274.
[7] Ibid.

nation's survival.[8] Liang argued that "the more advanced a nation's women's education is, the stronger the nation," even comparing idle women to "beasts" to underscore the urgency of reform.[9] Kang similarly linked women's ignorance to social decay, claiming that "a woman's need for education is even greater than that of a man; for human beings begin their lives with prenatal education, and the foundation is often laid by the mother's guidance. If a woman does not know how to learn, her nature cannot be cultivated, her mind cannot be broadened."[10] What appeared as feminist progress was in many ways a rearticulation of patriarchal utility in the language of national survival.

This redefinition of women's roles transformed the moral language surrounding death. Traditional narratives of chaste widowhood or filial suicide gave way to a new model of feminine virtue centered on political awakening, revolutionary sacrifice, education, and civic labor. While this shift ostensibly challenged Confucian gender hierarchies, it also reinstated them through a nationalist lens. As reformers and revolutionaries invoked female sacrifice to symbolize China's moral rebirth, women became both the subject and object of ethical reform, a symbolic terrain upon which modernity was to be constructed, yet on male-defined terms.

As nationalism intensified, the symbolic function of women expanded beyond domestic morality to become a metonym for the nation itself. As historian Dorothy Ko notes, when imperialist aggression intensified, the suffering woman became the symbol of the Chinese nation itself, raped and conquered by foreign male powers.[11] In this framework, the female body was imagined not only as a site of violation, but also as a vessel for redemption. Yet Ko also warns against the overrepresentation of women as victims, arguing that their image was often manipulated to legitimize the break from "old China" and to construct the new nation through their suffering.[12]

Susan Mann has a similar critique that early twentieth-century reformers portrayed Chinese women through a teleological

[8] Qichao Liang, *Collected Works of the Yinbing Studio [[Yinbing shi heji]*, ed. Zhijun Lin (Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Company, 1936), 37-38.
[9] Ibid, 43.
[10] Youwei Kang, "On the Suffering of Chinese Women: A General Discussion on the Removal of Gender Boundaries and the Protection of Independence [Qu xing jie bao duli: Zhongguo funu zhi ku zong lun]", in *The Book of Great Unity [Da tong shu]* ed. Xichen Zhang (Beijing: Ancient Books Publishing House, 1956), 126.
[11] Dorothy Y. Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-century China* (Stanford University Press, 1994), 1-3.
[12] Ibid.

narrative of emancipation, positioning them as living evidence of Confucian backwardness and thus as raw material for national renewal. In this reading, Chinese women were recruited into a progressive temporality that validated Western modernity and depicted Confucianism as static, feudal, and oppressive, echoing Hegelian critiques that viewed China as "a civilization without history."[13]

This logic culminated in literary and political representations of the "liberated woman" who must sacrifice herself for both gender emancipation and national salvation. In *Nora's Answer*, Guo Moruo cast Qiu Jin as China's revolutionary counterpart to Ibsen's Nora, writing: "In the general liberation of society, women must take up their rightful burden; for this task, they must not hesitate to give their lives."[14] The fusion of personal emancipation with collective redemption gave moral grandeur to women's deaths, but also blurred the line between voluntary death and normative sacrifice, as well as between feminist will and nationalist martyrdom.

Qiu Jin emerged from within these social and symbolic contradictions. Born in a gentry family deeply immersed in Confucian learning, she had an unusual childhood: she went to school alongside her brothers, practiced calligraphy, rode horses, and trained in martial arts during a period when women were prohibited from these masculine activities.[15] Her parents, descendants of literati lineages, were said to be upright and frugal, and Qiu Jin was proud of their principled conduct.[16] This upbringing imbued her with a deep attachment to Confucian ideals of loyalty, righteousness, and self-cultivation. Yet, like most girls of her time, she was eventually pulled back into traditional gender expectations: upon reaching maturity, she was expected to master embroidery and assume the role of a domestic woman.[17]

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[13] Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 3-7.
[14] Moruo Guo, *Collected Works of Guo Moruo [Guo Moruo quan ji]*, vol. 12 (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1959), 198. Translations are the authors' own.
[15] Yi Lin, *A Chronological Biography of Qiu Jin, the Heroine of Jian Lake, in the Qing Dynasty [Qing jianhu nuxia Qiu Jin nianpu]* (Taipei: Taiwan Commercial Press, 1985), 9.
[16] Jin Qiu, "The Six Six Private Vehicle [Liu liu si cheng]", in *Selected Historical Materials of Zhejiang in the Xinhai Revolution [Xinhai Zhejiang shi liao]*, ed. Zhejiang Province Xinhai Revolution History Research Association and Zhejiang Provincial Library, (Zhejiang People's Publishing House, 1981), 381; Yunshan Zheng and Dehe Chen, *A Biography of Qiu Jin [Qiujin ping zhuan]* (Henan: Henan Education Press, 1986), 192.
[17] Qiu, "The Six Six Private Vehicle", 380-382.

Her arranged marriage to Wang Tingjun, "a money-stained silk-pants dandy" in her eyes, only reinforced her growing dissatisfaction and stifled her ambitions.[18] These experiences catalyzed her awakening, and she went to Japan where she absorbed revolutionary thought and began developing a political and feminist critique of Chinese patriarchy and imperial rule. Upon her return to China, however, she was appalled by her compatriots' apathy toward the nation's crisis, lamenting in her poem *Song of Expelling Demons from China (Zhina zhu mo ge)* that her compatriots were "as if half-dead, with no heart, no mind, no courage."[19] This indignation fueled her determination to act. She composed poetry, organized clandestine networks to overthrow the Qing government, published essays, and spoke out for women's emancipation. Qiu Jin soon became an icon of her time and an example of what a revolutionary woman could be.[20] In 1907, after a failed uprising, she was arrested by the government. Despite torture, she refused to betray her comrades and faced her death fearlessly.[21] She was thus described as the first Chinese figure to combine revolutionary activism with women's liberation.[22]

As we will discuss in this paper, her death was interpreted variously as heroic martyrdom, national sacrifice, and tragic suicide, but we argue that it embodied all and none of these readings. Her end was a dense symbolic act at the intersection of Confucian virtue, nationalist urgency, and feminist resistance. Against these cultural and historical backdrops, Qiu Jin's death emerges not as a singular event, but as an ethical and symbolic knot, one that demands a reexamination of agency, classification, and the violence of moral judgment.

Modern Biomedical Ethics and Ambiguous Definition of Suicide

Modern biomedical ethics typically categorize voluntary death in terms of "killing" and "letting die." These classifications are evaluated through core ethical principles such as respect for

[18] In her letter to her elder brother, Qiu Jin criticized her husband and reflected on how her marriage hindered her intellectual ambitions: "Had I been fortunate in finding a perfect match…could I not have advanced my studies over these seven or eight years? My reputation would not be what it is today; I surely would have distinguished myself and brought honor to our parents and brothers. But I encountered this scoundrel; there is no benefit to be had from him. Instead, the daily vexations have wearied my mind. Even though I now enjoy some repute, how could I not feel ashamed when I examine my heart?" See: Jin Qiu, "Zhi Qiuyuzhang shu [Letter to Qiu Yuzhang], no. 4," in *Qiujin quanji jianzhu [The Complete Works of Qiu Jin with Notes and Annotations]*, ed. Changhai Guo (Changchun: Jilin People's Publisher, 2003), 426.
[19] Qiu, *The Complete Works of Qiu Jin with Notes and Annotations*, 397.
[20] Lin, *A Chronological Biography of Qiu Jin*, 66-113.
[21] Ibid, 136-38.
[22] Ibid, 138.

autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and the relief of suffering.[23] In ordinary language, "killing" refers to a causal intervention that brings about death, while "letting die" describes a deliberate withholding of treatment such that illness or injury causes death. However, as Beauchamp notes, "[t]he meanings of 'killing' and 'letting die' are vague and inherently contestable. Attempts to refine their meanings likely will produce controversy without closure."[24]

When we narrow the scope to suicide, the conceptual challenges remain. In his essay *Suicide*, Beauchamp emphasizes that "some conceptual difficulties [are] involved in correctly classifying a case as suicide or non-suicide."[25] While suicide is commonly understood as an intentional self-destruction, gray zones abound: martyrdoms that could have been avoided, refusals of medical treatment with the intent to die, risky political action, coerced self-destruction, and ritual or sacrificial deaths that resist clear classification.[26] These cases question whether suicide is purely about intention, or whether it requires a morally legible motivation. Beauchamp argues that when coercion overrides choice, the death is not considered as suicide because it does not allow for autonomy. As he puts it, "[t]he act is intended, but not freely intended."[27] But how to understand acts that are neither coerced nor purely autonomous, but historically compelled?

Qiu Jin's death dramatically exceeds the assumptions underlying biomedical ethics. These conventional frameworks presume a clinical or therapeutic setting, where the motivation for voluntary death arises from physical suffering, psychological despair, or existential loss of agency. Qiu Jin was not seeking an end to suffering. She died not from disease, nor at the hands of a physician, but as a revolutionary executed after a failed uprising.

Reconsidering Durkheim's Typology of Suicide

In the wake of her death, Qiu Jin's image was widely circulated in poems, novels, and political essays.[28] These representations enshrined her as a martyr and a feminist non-conformist for

[23] Beauchamp Tom L. and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics,* Seventh Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[24] Ibid, 175.
[25] Tom L. Beauchamp, "Suicide," in *Matters of Life and Death*, 3rd ed., ed. Tom Regan (New York: Random House, 1993), 71.
[26] Ibid, 72.
[27] Ibid, p74
[28] In addition to Moruo Guo's *Nora's answer*, see also: Guo Changhai, Li Yabin, *A Study of Qiu Jin's Life* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 1987), 61-79.

national rebirth. While intended to honor her, such portrayals also risk aestheticizing her death, flattening its complexity into a redemptive narrative that effaces her ambivalence within an anomic period. While biomedical ethics approaches suicide through individual suffering and clinical intervention, sociological theorists have sought to understand it as a sui generis social phenomenon. Among these, Emile Durkheim's *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* remains foundational. Written at a time when suicide was becoming an object of statistical and institutional inquiry across Europe, Durkheim's work attempted to detach suicide from moral judgment and individual pathology. Instead, he offered a theory grounded in degrees of social integration and regulation.

Durkheim famously defined suicide as "all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result."[29] This definition deliberately avoids psychological or moral terms, privileging action, knowledge, and causality. He acknowledged the difficulty of classification: "Not only is [suicide's] meaning so indefinite as to vary, from case to case, with the needs of argument, but… we risk distinguishing what should be combined, or combining what should be distinguished, thus mistaking the real affinities of things."[30]

The analytical core of *Suicide* lies in Durkheim's rejection of "individual" or "extra-social" causes, including mental illness, heredity, climate, or neurological degeneration, as explanatory variables. These factors, he argued, lack the systematic correlation necessary to account for suicide rates across societies. Instead, he posited that "at each moment of its history, therefore, each society has a definite aptitude for suicide."[31] Suicide, in this sense, is not merely the act of a person but the symptom of a collective state. It is a "social fact" sui generis: something that emerges from the moral texture of society itself, capable of being studied like crime, marriage, or economic exchange.

To systematize this "social fact," Durkheim identified four types of suicide. Egoistic suicide occurs when an individual is insufficiently integrated into collective life and the socially isolated.[32] Altruistic suicide results from excessive integration,

[29] Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, edited by George Simpson, translated by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, [1897] 1951), 44.
[30] Ibid, 41.
[31] Ibid, 48.
[32] Ibid, 152-170, 171-216.

when individuals sacrifice themselves for the group, as in cases of religious martyrdom or military deaths. Anomic suicide emerges during periods of social deregulation, such as economic collapse, political revolution, or personal dislocation, when moral norms are weakened.[33] Finally, fatalistic suicide, briefly noted, describes individuals subjected to oppressive regulation, whose futures are "pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline."[34]

This typology has proven enormously influential, offering a structural lens for understanding patterns of suicide across cultures and historical periods. Its great strength lies in shifting the analytical gaze away from individual pathology and toward collective configurations, but it also reveals significant limitations. While Durkheim himself cautioned that he was not concerned with the individual cases but with explaining the society, we still must ask: if categorization cannot be reasonably applied to any individual, does its statistical significance truly exist? Let alone the fact that the academia has long discussed the "ecological fallacy" in Durkheim's research.[35]

It would be methodologically unfair to fault Durkheim for not accounting for the ethical intentionality of individual cases like Qiu Jin's. It must be acknowledged that Durkheim's project was never intended to explain the deaths of particular individuals, but to understand how social structures generate statistical regularities in suicide rates. From this vantage point, to criticize his typology for failing to capture the ethical complexity of individual cases like Qiu Jin's may seem methodologically misguided. Yet, sociological typologies carry classificatory power that shapes how societies interpret and govern individual deaths. If actual cases, upon close examination, do not comfortably fit into these types, one must ask whether the categories themselves reflect reality or are products of power.

We argue that Qiu Jin was not a statistical anomaly to be folded into any topologies. Her death resists incorporation into any one of Durkheim's four types. She was not socially isolated in the egoistic sense. Despite her unfortunate marriage, after she followed her husband to Beijing, she came into contact with a number of progressive women, including Wu Zhiying, who

[33] Ibid, 217-240.
[34] Ibid, 276.
[35] Frans Van Poppel and Lincoln H. Day, "A Test of Durkheim's Theory of Suicide—Without Committing the Ecological Fallacy," *American Sociological Review* 61, no.3 (1996): 500.

would later become one of her closest confidantes.[36] Nor was her death an act of altruistic conformity or a surrender to anomic confusion, as we have seen from her deliberate resistance against the Qing government and the patriarchal social system. Moreover, fatalistic suicide does not adequately describe her case. She was committed to saving China from colonization rather than simply embracing martyrdom. When the local government prepare to arrest her, the county magistrate Li Zhongyue ordered his soldiers not to shoot women. At that moment, Qiu Jin was standing on a rooftop in a long robe, which made her look like a man. Hearing the magistrate's words, however, she removed the robe, revealing her gender. Consequently, the soldiers ceased firing, and she escaped immediate harm.[37]

In this sense, Qiu Jin's death functions as a limit case for Durkheim's typology. It compels us to confront what Durkheim's sociology leaves out: individual agency, historical intentionality, gendered resistance, and political will. To classify her death within Durkheim's model is therefore not only inadequate but also politically and ethically misleading. The very logic of typology rests on subsuming diverse lives into abstract categories that deny each life's specificity. This returns us to the broader concern of this paper: that to insist on classifying every voluntary death, even from a sociological distance, is to risk misunderstanding it, or worse, foreclosing its meaning. As with biomedical ethics, we are not only contending with conceptual boundaries, but also with the quiet violence of frameworks that presume the intelligibility of death in advance.

Martyrdom and Politics of Voluntary Death

The question of whether Qiu Jin's death should be classified as suicide or martyrdom exposes the instability of these very categories, too. To an extent, she displayed many features of martyrdom: She embraced death as devotion to the salvation of China, her execution was framed as sacrifice by the then-major newspapers, and she was enshrined as political and moral exemplar. However, martyrdom has been a contested site of meaning even since the very inception of Christianity.

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[36] Lin, *A Chronological Biography of Qiu Jin*, 32.

[37] Chen Zhengkuan, "Shandong Past Events: Qiu Jin and the County Magistrate Li Zhongyue from Anqiu [Shandong wang shi: Qiu Jin yu Shandong Anqiu ji xianguan Li Zhongyue]," Qilu Evening News, February 6, 2007. The report, published in a major local newspaper, was based in part on historical materials compiled and published in 1935 by the Kuomintang Shandong Provincial Party History Compilation Committee with authorization from both Qiu Jin and Li Zhongyue's family.

Two frameworks help illuminate this martyr-like quality. The first is to understand revolution as a form of secular faith, one that gives collective meaning to death, sanctifies sacrifice, and redeems history through violence. Within this political imaginary, Qiu Jin appears not as a suicidal radical, but as a believer whose death functions as redemptive witness. The second draws from Confucian ethics, particularly the idea that "some may even be called upon to give up their lives in order to fulfill Goodness."[38] However, the category of martyrdom itself is not neutral and invoking martyrdom also means engaging with a category shaped by Christian theology and colonial modernity.

As Hao Chang observes, the "Western expansion" into China brought not only imperial coercion but also "transformative" conceptual change.[39] Categories like "religion," "martyrdom," and even "Confucianism" was restructured under Western epistemologies. This encounter provoked what he calls an "intellectual ferment," during which many Chinese thinkers reinterpreted tradition through imported lenses.[40] Consequently, Confucianism became a "religion"; revolution, a form of belief; and voluntary death, a site of moral meaning production.[41] Yet, to call Qiu Jin a martyr is not to impose a Christian template onto a colonized China, but to highlight the ways in which modernity reconfigured how death is classified and remembered. Her case offers not conceptual clarity, but a challenge: to see how the politics of meaning shapes our ethical responses to voluntary death.

In premodern Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions, what modern discourse would label "suicide" was, in many ancient cases, recorded and revered as "martyrdom." According to Arthur Droge and James Tabor's interpretation of *The City of God*, however, all forms of self-killing, even those motivated by religious devotion, were condemned by Augustine as violating the divine prohibition against murder.[42] Even those who sought to die for God did so wrongly if they acted with intentional agency over their own death. From this point onward, the Western theological tradition increasingly distinguished suicide from martyrdom: only imposed death for religious motivations

[38] Confucius, "The Analects," 45.
[39] Chang, "Intellectual change and the reform movement," 274.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, "Introduction," in *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, ed. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 2-3.
[42] Arthur J Droge and James D Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity*. 1st ed (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992).

could be considered as martyrdom. Or put it differently, all chosen deaths are not martyrdoms.

While the conception of martyrdom has a Western theological origin, this theological legacy continues to shape contemporary discourse, even in secular contexts.[43] When we ask whether Qiu Jin's death was martyrdom or suicide, we often unconsciously rely on the Augustinian distinction: was her death imposed or chosen? Was it morally redemptive or ethically suspect? Qiu Jin's life and death complicate any attempts to classify her within religious categories.

Born into a literati family and raised with the privileges of male education, Qiu Jin nonetheless encountered the harsh gendered constraints of a patriarchal society. Her marriage to a man she considered intellectually and morally inferior led to deep personal disillusionment, expressed in verses like "Better to be like Lady Ming, who went beyond the frontier in sorrow, yet left behind a green mound that still faces south [towards China]."[44]

In invoking the figure of Lady Ming (Wang Zhaojun) a Chinese woman famously married off to a foreign country for diplomatic reasons, Qiu Jin not only laments the misfortune of being bound to an unworthy husband but also reclaims a classical image of feminine sacrifice. Her use of this allusion suggests a layered consciousness of gender: she expresses grief in terms legible within a traditional female register yet simultaneously imbues that grief with a heroic nationalism. Just as Lady Ming's unfortunate marriage became a symbol of loyalty to the empire, Qiu Jin anticipates a revolutionary martyrdom to elevate her own fate. In this sense, the line does not merely mourn a failed marriage. Instead, it prefigures her own death as a sacrificial offering to the nation.

Moreover, her comparison to Lady Ming signals an unresolved tension in Qiu Jin's gender identity. At this point in her life, she still voiced herself as a woman within a literary tradition of female lamentation. And yet, in projecting Lady Ming's death as dignified and monumental: "at least she left a tomb," she anticipates the transformation from private pain to public symbol. The melancholic tone of the verse is thus not passive but anticipatory: it sketches a horizon in which suffering is transfigured into political meaning. The anticipation that after

[43] See: Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
[44] Qiu, *The Complete Works of Qiu Jin with Notes and Annotations*, 28. English translation is the authors' own.

death, her tomb might be remembered as Lady Ming's, suggests Qiu Jin's desire for martyrdom as well as a desire for recognition.

Her disillusionment with traditional femininity, coupled with her exposure to modern revolutionary thoughts, made death not simply a fate but a medium of expression. In this sense, her death was not a retreat into despair but a deliberate act. As such, it cannot be classified cleanly as suicide or martyrdom, neither in sociological terms nor in inherited theological distinctions. Classical Christian thought, from Augustine onward, drew a hard line between condemned suicide and venerated martyrdom. But Qiu Jin's death resists this binary. She actively pursued death; she refused to flee or hide; she anticipated execution as the price of commitment. Yet her act was neither nihilistic nor purely self-willed. It was tethered to an ethical and political horizon larger than herself.

As Droge and Tabor note, in antiquity the "voluntary death" was not debated in a context without martyrdom.[45] The ancient world lacked our modern taxonomies. Some deaths, especially those for a cause, blurred the line between suicide and sacrifice. Qiu Jin belongs to this liminal space. Her death cannot be properly understood through Christian moral frameworks that require the subject to be either divinely ordained or entirely autonomous. As she once lamented: "Let us ask, how many of the two hundred million women are groaning and curled up under the tyranny of men? Seeing the same women trapped in the hell of suffering, yet never hearing a single helping hand."[46] Her death was a cry where no helping hand arrived—a performance of revolt and a call for collective awakening.

Thus, Qiu Jin's death stands not only as a challenge to Western religious classifications, but as an interruption in the entire logic of ethical intelligibility. If martyrdom is praised because the subject dies for a higher cause, and suicide is condemned for its self-originating will, then Qiu Jin unsettles both: she died for revolution, but she chose to die. Her act was symbolic, but not mythic; sacrificial, but not redemptive in any stable theological sense. Her death troubles not only biomedical and sociological classifications, but theological ones as well.

To impose upon her death the language of "martyrdom" or "suicide" is thus not merely a mis-categorization. Instead, it is an erasure of her agency. These terms attempt to render legible a death that was, by its very design, illegible to dominant moral

[45] Droge and Tabor, *A Noble Death*.
[46] Qiu, *The Complete Works of Qiu Jin with Notes and Annotations*, 457-458.

grammars. In this sense, Qiu Jin's death does not fit within our frameworks but exposes their limits.

Confucian Ethics: Sacrificial Death and Moral Justification

Although the three frameworks offer powerful tools for analyzing voluntary death, they are not sufficient for understanding a figure like Qiu Jin, who lived and died within a culture shaped by Confucian ethics. Born in the late imperial China, Qiu Jin inhabited a society where moral life was structured around Confucian ideals of virtue, duty, and relational responsibility. At the same time, the encounter between China and the West precipitated an intellectual crisis that forced a rethinking of traditional values. In this context, Confucianism was not merely a moral tradition, but also a site of ethical contestation and reinterpretation. To understand the moral logic of Qiu Jin's death, then, we must first examine how Confucian thought conceptualizes voluntary sacrifice.

Before deriving normative conclusions from Confucian scriptures for contemporary bioethics, it is worth recalling that Confucius himself underscores the limits of human agency in the pursuit of ethics. In the *Analects*, he remarks: "Whether or not the Way is to be put into action is a matter of fate. Whether or not the Way is to be discarded is also a matter of fate."[47] Here the *Way* (*dao*) is both a moral guideline and the very enactment of ethical life in the world. We argue that the point of Confucius is a recognition that the success or failure of ethical projects depends on conditions beyond any single agent's control. Epistemically, this suggests that all bioethical positions are historically situated articulations rather than timeless deliverances of the tradition.[48] There is no trans-cultural, ahistorical "Confucian bioethics" waiting to be retrieved. Consequently, we do not ask whether Qiu Jin violated or conformed to any Confucian norms. Rather, we examine how people reinterpreted Qiu Jin's death and her virtues, amid nationalism and emerging feminism.

Confucianism does not offer a unified concept of "suicide" as modern bioethics does. Instead, it privileges moral acts such as sacrificing yourself for the good virtues and sacrificing life to preserve righteousness. Mencius wrote: "Of services, which is

[47] Confucius, "The Analects," 43.
[48] This epistemic claim parallels the insights of the Quentin Skinner and his Cambridge fellows, who believe that there are no timeless truths, and emphasize the historically and culturally contextual nature of normative statements. See: Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3–53.

the greatest? The service of parents is the greatest. Of charges, which is the greatest? The charge of one's self is the greatest. That those who do not fail to keep themselves are able to serve their parents is what I have heard. But I have never heard of any, who, having failed to keep themselves, were able notwithstanding to serve their parents."[49] Here, "keeping oneself" refers to preserving one's body and moral character because one's body is a gift from one's parents and a vessel of filial duty. Mencius believes that to injure the body or to compromise virtue would be to undermine the very foundation of filial service. This means that actions which damage the body, or even end one's life, cannot in themselves fulfill virtue; only when life and body are preserved can moral obligations such as filial service be sustained. For Mencius, the body is never one's private possession but always embedded within relations of filial and moral responsibility.

Another well-known maxim Confucius dictated in *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence* states: "Your physical person with its hair and skin are received from your parents. Vigilance in not allowing anything to do injury to your person is where family reverence begins."[50] Traditionally, this was taken to mean that any injury to the body constitutes a failure of filial duty, since the body is not privately owned but entrusted by one's parents. Yet, Confucius also affirmed the opposite principle that "some may even be called upon to give up their lives in order to fulfill Goodness."[51]

Read together, these sayings reveal a core tension within Confucian ethics: the body must be preserved out of filial reverence, but it may also be sacrificed when higher moral principles such as *ren* demand it. Rather than a contradiction, this tension illustrates the hierarchical ordering of Confucian values, where filial piety establishes the baseline of moral life but remains subordinate to the fulfillment of virtue. More recent scholars of Confucian bioethics have drawn on this hierarchy to reinterpret Confucian doctrines in light of modern practices such as organ donation. They argue that acts of bodily sacrifice may still be ethically justified if they realize *ren* and serve the good of others. [52] That is, organ donation can be understood as an extension of ren, since it preserves life and

[49] Mencius, *The Works of Mencius*, trans. James Legge (New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1970), 309. The original Chinese version is "Shi shu wei da? Shi qin wei da. Shou shu wei da? Shou shen wei da. Bu shi qi shen er neng shi qi qin zhe, wu wen zhi yi. Shi qi shen er neng shi qi qin zhe, wu wei zhi wen ye."
[50] Confucius, *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence*, 105.
[51] Confucius, "The Analects," 45.
[52] Wang, Zhang, and Wang, "Principle of Family Consent in Organ Donation;" Fang, "Is Confucian Ethics an Ideological Barrier to Organ Donation?."

benefits others, thereby fulfilling the broader moral purpose of Confucian ethics.

This prioritization of moral values over the body is nonetheless bounded by a pragmatic concern for life. For example, in *The Classic of Family Reverence*, Confucius cautioned against excessive mourning after parents' funerals:

"After three days they break their fast in order to teach (jiao) others not to harm the living on account of the dead and not to threaten life through a lack of restraint. This is the policy laid down by the sages. Mourning must not exceed three years to make it clear to the people that they must find closure."[53]

This passage occurs in a discussion of mourning rites, where the length and intensity of ritual practice risk undermining the mourner's health. By prescribing the resumption of eating after three days, the text establishes a limit to filial grief: the ethical responsibility to honor the dead must not be pursued at the expense of the living. In other words, Confucian ethics recognizes that the continuity of moral life requires the preservation of living bodies. Family reverence is therefore always conditioned by the Confucian concern for life, which conditions ethical continuity.

While recent Confucian bioethics makes the tradition more flexible and socially responsive, it still tends to define virtue relationally through kinship or social roles. Qiu Jin's death presses a different question: what follows when an agent invokes Confucian virtues while only partially conforming to familial or social expectations? Her willingness to die was animated not by filial duty or patriarchal endorsement, but by a modern reconfiguration of righteousness oriented toward national salvation and feminist emancipation. Family members did not wholly approve of her radical path; yet at critical junctures they offered limited consent or material help. For instance, Qiu Jin's husband did not want her study abroad but on the eve of Qiu Jin's departure for Europe, he went to visit their Japanese friends and requested them to take Qiu Jin to Japan and take good care of Qiu Jin.[54] Moreover, when the Qing government began arresting revolutionaries and Qiu Jin's natal

[53] Confucius, *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence*, 116.
[54] See the memoir of Qiu Jin's Japanese friend Shigeko Hattori. According to Hattori's recollection, she was then residing in Beijing, and on the eve of Qiu Jin's departure, Qiu Jin's husband, Wang Tingjun, made an unexpected visit to request that Hattori take Qiu Jin to Japan and take good care of her. Quoted in Nianchi Zhang, "Society Section: Important Corrections to the Historical Facts of Qiu Jin's Studying in Japan [Qiu Jin liuxue Riben zhong yao shishi bu zheng]," in *Mianbi Ji [Facing the Wall Collection]* (Hong Kong: Chinese Academic Review Press, 2008).

family was not well-off, her mother still agreed to her request and provided financial support for her revolutionary activities as well.[55] Qiu Jin thus inhabits Confucian language but redirects its telos from familial roles to a nationalist and feminist horizon.

A common defense of family-based decision-making (e.g., Wang et al.) holds that familial consent more faithfully reflects a person's will within a Confucian culture.[56] Descriptively, this may fit some idealized cases; normatively, it is fragile as a universal rule. Qiu Jin's life is instructive: even where she received assents from her families, her revolutionary aspirations and death were not the family's project but her own. Moral proximity is not moral equivalence: endorsement by intimates does not transfer authorship of the act, nor does it convert individual commitment into collective ownership.

This distinction matters for contemporary bioethics. Even when individuals and family agree about organ donation, the family's assent does not by itself constitute the subject's moral intent; at most it corroborates it. If Confucianism prioritizes *ren* over *xiao*, the decisive question is not whether a consensus exists, but whether the act instantiates the agent's orientation toward virtue as she understands and authors it. Qiu Jin's case shows that relational endorsement can accompany, but cannot replace, autonomous moral authorship.

At first glance, Qiu Jin's death appears to fit the archetype of "giv[ing] up their lives in order to fulfill Goodness."[57] Yet the *ren* at stake is not the conventional, hierarchy-preserving *ren* for father, husband, and ruler. Rather, it is a rearticulated virtue forged in feminist defiance and anti-imperial nationalism. From a classically trained literati woman who also practiced martial arts, to a disillusioned wife in a constraining marriage, she reframed righteous death from serving patriarchal order to liberating those women subordinated by it. She thereby contests the assumption that Confucian virtue is exhaustively relational in a familial sense; instead, she redeploys its language to authorize a civic, emancipatory end.

Qiu Jin complicates Confucian ethics from within. Her death resembles the tradition's praise of dignified self-sacrifice, yet it does so under a transformed moral horizon. If Confucianism privileges virtue over life, she will ask the question: whose virtue, and defined by whom? Her case marks the point where

[55] Lin, *A Chronological Biography of Qiu Jin*, 69-70.
[56] Wang, Zhang, and Wang, "Principle of Family Consent in Organ Donation."
[57] Confucius, "The Analects," 45.

relational moral vocabularies meet their limits before an agent who refuses to be fully defined by the roles these vocabularies presuppose.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This paper has examined the death of Qiu Jin through a critical engagement with multiple ethical and classificatory frameworks. In each case, we found that existing models struggle to account for the ethical complexity, political intentionality, and symbolic meaning of her death. Rather than conforming to any singular typology, be it "suicide," "martyrdom," or "sacrificial death," Qiu Jin's act resists definitive categorization. Her death exposes the conceptual instability of these categories and calls into question the universal moral assumptions they presuppose.

Importantly, this analysis recognizes that the very acts of interpretation and of assigning ethical meaning to Qiu Jin's death, are themselves intervention shaped by power.[58] In that sense, even this paper's effort to critique classification risks participating in what it seeks to expose: the regulation of death through language and theory. Yet such self-reflexivity is not a reason for silence. On the contrary, to interpret Qiu Jin's death demands that we ask how knowledge about death is produced, legitimated, and circulated. She has been remembered as a martyr, a feminist, a nationalist, and a tragic heroine. Each of these roles reflects broader discursive investments, shaped by institutional, ideological, and cultural forces. The instability of her legacy is not a failure of meaning, but evidence of its political and ethical charge.

By foregrounding the indeterminacy of Qiu Jin's death, this paper calls for a more genealogical approach to death ethics, one that does not seek to resolve ambiguity, but to trace its emergence. Future research may investigate how moral categories like "suicide" and "martyrdom" came to acquire their current meanings through religious, legal, medical, and philosophical discourses. Such a project would not only deepen our understanding of how death is made intelligible across cultural contexts but also reveal the power structures

[58] Michel Foucault shows that categories such as "madness" emerge not as neutral descriptions of reality but as boundaries that help to constitute what counts as "reason." See *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, [1965] 1988). In a related way, Judith Butler observes that once "heterosexuality" is institutionalized as the norm, other forms of desire appear less as parallel variations and more as marked deviations. See *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 77.

embedded in seemingly universal ethical vocabularies. Finally, this analysis gestures toward a broader ethical imperative: to resist the temptation of moral closure. If we are to engage responsibly with deaths like Qiu Jin's, we must remain attentive to their singularity, their historical situatedness, and their challenge to classificatory thought.