

# Memorial Archways for Chaste and Filial Women in Xiangxi during the Qing Dynasty and Their Role in Shaping Women's Family Roles

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**Abstract:** *The memorial archway for chaste and filial women (Jiexiao Paifang) was a compensatory system in the feudal society for widows who remained unmarried after their husbands' deaths. Over time, this system evolved into an externalized means of controlling women. Yongshun County in Xiangxi was a typical settlement area for indigenous people (Tumin), and a considerable number of Qing Dynasty Jiexiao Paifang still remain today. The owners of these memorial archways were elite indigenous women. From the surviving Jiexiao Paifang, it is evident that these archways played a role in shaping the normative family roles of indigenous women. However, indigenous women were not entirely passive in the face of this system and feudal ethics. Instead, they utilized it as a means to realize their personal values and secure tangible benefits.*

**Keywords:** Memorial Archway for Chaste and Filial Women; Indigenous People; Family Roles; Women's Perceptions; Xiangxi

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## 1. Introduction

The chastity memorial arch is regarded as a symbol of feudal etiquette's control and harm to women. Due to the prominence of Confucianism and clan-based society in Han ethnic areas, chastity memorial arches are typically seen as a distinctive architectural phenomenon in specific Han regions and certain feudal dynasties. From the Yuan Dynasty to the early Qing Dynasty, Yongshun County in the Xiangxi Tumin Autonomous Prefecture was under Tusi rule. In the seventh year of the Yongzheng Emperor's reign (1729), the Tusi system was replaced by direct imperial rule, and Yongshun County was established (Qin & Han, 2007). The residents of this area are primarily descendants of the traditional Tumin people, which is the basis for the use of the term "Tumin" in this paper. In ancient China, this referred to an official position established in the northwestern and southwestern minority regions, held by local tribal chieftains on a hereditary basis. While the Tusi were obligated to provide tribute and military service to the central court, they retained their traditional governing structures and powers within their territories, enjoying a high degree of autonomy. As such, the Tusi system often resembled a "state within a state" in imperial China.

Etymologically, the term "Tusi" combines "tu", meaning "native" or "local-born," with "si", meaning "to administer" or "official in charge." Thus, Tusi originally signified a native functionary appointed to official duties, and by extension came to denote a local chieftain recognized as an imperial official (Peng, 2001).

The chastity memorial arch is an embodiment of the ethical idea of "family and state as a unified structure," and it represents a concrete manifestation of feudal rulers' control over women. The establishment of chastity memorial arches in the late Qing period within the Tujia community of Xiangxi suggests significant changes in the ethical views on women and family compared to the Tusi period (Peng, 2001). The causes of these changes and their resulting impacts are the focal points of this study.

As early as the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, records of chastity commendations can be found. After a long period of development, by the Yuan Dynasty, the court had essentially established a complete system of commendations and awards. The commendation system was given even more importance during the Ming and Qing Dynasties than in earlier periods, and the chastity commendations were mainly directed at "chaste wives" and "chaste women." As an institutionalized form of chastity recognition, the purpose was to uphold the ideals of "family, state, and world" and "supreme imperial authority" (Pang, 2020). It also materialized these practices, emerging as a system created to fulfill the needs of clan and traditional female roles. Through statistical analysis of 296 chastity memorial arches across the country, Ma Qin and Zhao Yuan found that the highest number of these arches were in the cultural regions of Wuyue, Minnan, and Bashu. In provinces with significant ethnic minority populations, such as Yunnan (excluding Deqin) and Guizhou, 21 chastity memorial arches still remain, primarily in hilly or mountainous areas, or in basin regions with strong internal clan organizations (Ma & Zhao, 2015; Sun, 2014). Chastity memorial arches were also very common in the Huizhou region during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Bian Rongrong argued that the prevalence of these arches was due to local family and clan interests, the feudal society's need to maintain control, and the strong support from Huizhou merchants for educational institutions (Bian, 2015). Therefore, the rise of chastity memorial arches is closely linked to the influence of Neo-Confucianism, the commendation system, and the clan system. As an ancient communication medium, the memorial arch spread the values of loyalty and filial piety, contributing to social stability and progress (Guo, 2014).

Historically, the residents of the Xiangxi Tusi area were recognized and recorded by the Qing court as "Tumin people." Thus, in this paper, the term "Tumin" is used to refer to the population during both the Tusi period and Qing rule. The research questions of this paper are as follows: (1) Which group within the Tumin community in western Hunan was primarily responsible for establishing chastity memorial arches? (2) Through what behaviors and means did these groups qualify for the establishment of chastity memorial arches? (3) What factors made these groups more likely to establish chastity memorial arches compared to other groups within the Tumin community? (4) What kind of female family role norms were shaped by the establishment of chastity memorial arches?

Because the subject of this research is difficult to quantify, a mixed research method combining literature review and field investigation is employed. Field research is used to identify the locations of the remaining memorial arches, observe, and measure their dimensions. Literature research is used to uncover the information behind the inscriptions on the chastity memorial arches and to explore the moral expectations and requirements for Tumin women set by the Tumin communities.

## 2. Sensory Data Presented by Memorial Archways in Yongshun County, Xiangxi, and Their Significance

In this study, "sensory data" primarily refers to objective information related to the memorial archways, such as their names, dates of construction, locations, and the individuals they commemorate. These data provide a direct and tangible means of understanding the historical context and broader social environment in which these archways were established.

### i. Establishment and Distribution of Memorial Archways in Yongshun County

A number of *Jiexiao Paifang* (memorial archways for chaste and filial women) remain in Yongshun County. According to the *Yongshun County Gazetteer (Volume 10: Architecture)*, compiled during the Republic of China period, there were originally 17 such archways, including 15 *Jiexiao Paifang*, one *Zhenjie Fang* (chastity archway for virgins), and one *Lienü Fang* (archway for martyr women). Currently, only three *Jiexiao Paifang* survive, though one has collapsed, along with a single *Zhenjie Fang*.

The *gazetteer* records six notable archways with inscriptions, including:

- The Republican-era *Jiexiao Paifang* for Chen Shi, wife of Tan from Buer Gate (*Buer Men*).
- The Qing Xuanton-era *Lienü Fang* for Peng Shi, wife of Tan from Buer Gate.
- The Qing Guangxu-era *Jiexiao Paifang* for Gao Shi, wife of Du from Baila.
- The Qing Guangxu-era *Zhenjie Fang* for Peng Minggui from Yanbanpu.
- The Qing Guangxu-era *Jiexiao Paifang* for Fu Shi, wife of Xiang from Buer Gate.
- The Qing Guangxu-era *Jiexiao Paifang* for Zhang Shi, wife of Xiang from Buer Gate.

The last two archways were originally located in Cheping, Yongshun County, but were later relocated to Buer Gate due to the development of the local tourism industry and heritage preservation efforts. As a result, some of the textual inscriptions analyzed in this study come from historical records, while others are derived from previous transcriptions of the remaining archways (Bian, 2015; Duan, 2016; Qin & Han, 2007; Yu, 2010). Based on historical records and field investigations, *Jiexiao Paifang* in Yongshun County are primarily concentrated in Cheping and Buer Gate. Within Cheping, they are further clustered in Yanbanpu. Interviews with retired cultural heritage official Xiang Yuanquan revealed that Cheping was historically traversed by the ancient Tea Horse Road (*Chama Gudao*). This suggests that the establishment of *Jiexiao Paifang*—which honored women who remained faithful to their deceased husbands or committed suicide in chastity—served as a means of moral education, reinforcing social expectations regarding widow chastity and martyrdom (Lü, 2023). These structures functioned as public symbols of virtue, promoting the idea that widowed women should either remain faithful for life or even sacrifice themselves to uphold moral integrity (Lü, 2023).

In modern society, *Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism* is no longer dominant, and Confucian thought has instead been reframed as an intellectual and cultural heritage. As a product of *Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism* and the feudal political ideology of "family-state isomorphism," *Jiexiao Paifang* have lost their original function with the disappearance of the theoretical and social conditions that once supported them. Today, these archways serve as symbols of past oppression rather than moral exemplars. They have transformed from "positive models" of feudal society into "negative examples" and "evidence of women's suffering." As historical relics, they are now sites of public critique, used to reflect on past injustices while appreciating the progress of contemporary society. This transformation parallels their physical relocation—from ancient roadways, where they once commanded respect, to modern tourism sites, where they are viewed with critical hindsight. According to an interview with Chen Jinzhang, owner

of Qianzhou Lanyuan in Jishou City, *Jiexiao Paifang* that were established by imperial decree and strictly followed the *Jingbiao* (imperial commendation) system held significant authority in their time (Wang, 2008). Officials passing through such archways were required to dismount from their horses or carriages and pay formal respects, reinforcing the moral authority and ideological control these structures once wielded (Wang, 2008).

It is clear that the original locations of *Jiexiao Paifang* were often situated along main roads or other key transportation routes, allowing for easy viewing by passersby, officials, and other travelers. This placement was intended to maximize their propaganda effect, spreading the moral teachings they embodied (Duan, 2016; Zhou, 2023). The practice of officials kneeling and paying respects as they passed the archways further reinforced their authority in the realm of ethics and morality, solidifying the dominance of mainstream ideologies regarding women's virtues (Guo, 2014; Wang, 2008). The archways, positioned along major thoroughfares, thus became powerful tools for disseminating the concept of "feminine virtue" (*fude*) and instructing women on how to adhere to the prescribed roles of "feminine propriety" (*fudao*). To guide and admonish women on how to follow these moral expectations, the inscriptions on the archways played a crucial role in recording and transmitting the stories of women who upheld chastity and loyalty, ensuring their legacies were passed down through generations (Zhou, 2023). These inscriptions not only chronicled the life journeys of these women but also reflected the societal expectations of women's behavior and the values that underpinned these practices.

## ii. Statistical Data on the External Features of Jiexiao Paifang

Based on the remaining inscriptions on Jiexiao Paifang and the representative inscriptions recorded in the Republic of China Yongshun County Gazetteer, the following table displays information on the names of the archways, their owners, construction dates, and other external characteristics such as construction specifications for those archways with clear records.

Arch Name	Owner	Construction Year	Specifications
Qing Guangxu Era, Buer Gate, Xianqiao Zhang's Festival and Filial Piety Arch	Xiang Yang's Wife, Zhang	Guangxu 26th Year	Built upon imperial order
Qing Guangxu Era, Buer Gate, Xianqiao Fu's Festival and Filial Piety Arch	Xiang Kaiyi's Wife, Peng	Guangxu 32nd Year	Built upon imperial order
Qing Guangxu Era, Bailao Du, Gao's Festival and Filial Piety Arch	Mao Cai Gao Yunyan's Third Daughter, Gao	Guangxu 31st Year	Imperial order for commendation, built through collective fundraising
Republic of China, Buer Gate, Tan's Wife, Chen's Festival and Filial Piety Arch	Chen's, daughter of Chen Xueren, the Camp Commander of Guzhangping	Requested for commendation in the 21st year of Guangxu, but the arch was not built until the Republic of China period	Requested for commendation, and the arch was constructed as per the official order
Qing Guangxu, Yanbanpu, Peng Minggui's Virtuous Woman Arch	Peng Minggui, daughter of Gongsheng Peng Huiran	3rd Year of Xuantong	Submitted a petition for commendation, approved to build the arch, funded by local gentry and virtuous women
Qing Xuantong, Buer Gate, Tan's Wife Peng's Heroic Woman Arch	Tan Shenghongxun's wife, daughter of local student Peng Shaoming, Peng's third daughter	30th Year of Guangxu	Received commendation as per the rules, the Hongxun family built the arch

According to the table above, it can be observed that the majority of *Jiexiao Paifang* with inscriptions were constructed during the Guangxu to Xuantong years (Guo, 2014; Liu, 2019; Qin & Han, 2007; Wu, 2010). The earliest *Jiexiao Paifang* that can still be found and verified in the Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture is the *Jiexiao Paifang* for Mrs. Chen, the mother of Zhou in Qianzhou, Jishou City, which was built in the fourth year of the Tongzhi era, or 1864 AD. This means that, excluding the *Zhennv Fang* for Peng Minggu, which was constructed during the Republic of China era after being awarded the imperial commendation in the 21st year of Guangxu (1895), the *Jiexiao Paifang* that can be verified in Xiangxi Prefecture were mainly constructed between 1864 and 1911, with the Guangxu era being the peak period (Guo, 2014; Wu, 2010). The inscription on the *Jiexiao Paifang* for Gao Shi, wife of Du, from the Qing Guangxu era records: "In the 31st year of Guangxu, local gentry jointly requested commendations for three filial mothers: one for the wife of Xiang Liting, named Tong Anren, one for the wife of Ru Shi Du Yuting, named Tu Anren, and the third, this one for Du's mother, named Anren." However, it was then noticed that "Anren" referred to a feudal honorific title for women in imperial China, and the names of the women commemorated by the *Jiexiao Paifang* remained unknown (Guo, 2014; Liu, 2019; Qin & Han, 2007). The title of *Anren* was granted to wives of an official of the sixth rank in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Likewise, if the honorific was granted upon the mother or grandmother of the official of the sixth rank, the title would be "Tai Anren". Additionally, the inscription on the *Jiexiao Paifang* for Fu Shi, wife of Xiang, in the 31st year of Guangxu, states: "Within ten miles of our village, over the past decade, no fewer than ten women have been awarded for their chastity and filial piety," which indirectly supports this point (Wu, 2010).

### iii. Statistical Data on the Authors of the Archway Prefaces

The identity of the authors of the prefaces (or inscriptions) on the *Jiexiao Paifang* is often overlooked as a source of tangible information. After researching and summarizing the data, the identities of the authors of the archway prefaces are listed in the table below:

Arch names	Preface authors
Qing Dynasty Guangxu Era - "Buermen Xiang's Wife Zhang's Filial Piety Archway	Lu Long'ang Xu Anxing, National Academy Official Peng Shidi, Yongshun County Scholar, respectfully inscribed the plaque for Xiang's wife Zhang and Xiang's wife Fu.
Qing Dynasty, Guangxu Era: "The Moral and Chaste Monument for Xiang's Wife Fu at the Second Gate	First Preface Author: Qian Tang, Prefect of Yongshun, Hunan Xu Qi, Assistant Prefect Second Preface Author: Yang Changqun, Grain Scholar Third Preface Author: Xiao Kaishan, Graduate Lei Maode, Village Scholar Fourth Preface Author: Chen Erlic, Village Scholar
Qing Guangxu Yanbanpu Peng Minggu Chaste Maiden Arch	First Preface Author: Gongsheng (graduate of the Imperial Academy) Xiao Kaishan Second Preface Authors: Junxiangsheng (village scholar) Shou Zhi, Tian Ligui Yixiangsheng (local scholar) Wei Sheng, Zhang Yangjie Third Preface Author: Du Zhengzong

<p>Qing Dynasty, Guangxu Era, Bai La Du Wife Gao's Chastity and Filial Piety Arch</p>	<p>First Preface Author:          Wenlin Lang (Literary Rank), Acting Teaching Supervisor, Former Education Director of Ningxiang County, Changsha Prefecture, Lu Longang</p> <p>Second Preface Author:          Xiangsheng (local scholar) Tian Lige</p> <p>Third Preface Author:          The inscription is damaged, author information lost</p> <p>Fourth Preface Author:          The inscription is damaged, author information lost</p>
<p>Qing Dynasty, Xuanton Era, Buermen Tan's Wife Peng's Loyal and Chaste Woman Arch</p>	<p>County Magistrate of Laifeng, Tian Yinghuang</p>
<p>Republic of China period, the "Chaste and Filial Piety Archway for Mrs. Tan, wife of Tan" at the Buer gate</p>	<p>Hanlin Liu Fengbao</p>

From the table above, it is evident that the authors of the inscriptions for the *Jiexiao Paifang* for women were at least scholars (*Xiucai*), meaning that the inscription authors were primarily male members of the *Shidaifu* (gentry) class. In the last entry of the table, the term “*Hanlin*” referred to an official post, originated from Tang dynasty, and lasting through Ming and Qing dynasties (Duan, 2016; Pang, 2020). Its core function was to provide the emperor with literary, administrative, and policy counsel. Members of the Hanlin Academy were typically the highest-ranking scholars selected through the imperial civil service examinations. The Hanlin Academy served as the emperor’s think tank, responsible for drafting imperial edicts, compiling official histories, and participating in the formulation of court rituals. It also functioned as a crucial training ground for senior officials within the imperial bureaucracy (Tian, 2015; Yongshun County Editorial Board, 1995). After the Qing Dynasty's Yongzheng era, when the "Tu Gui Liu" (replacing local chieftains with imperial officials) policy was implemented, the Qing court took two approaches to stabilize its rule and consolidate power. On one hand, the government used military force to suppress conflicts between the indigenous *Tumin* (local ethnic groups) and Han Chinese (Li & Duan, 2023; Lu, Zhang & Zhou, 1930). On the other hand, the Qing court infiltrated the *Tumin* society with *Confucian* values, particularly the concept of *filial piety*, to regulate family structures and reinforce the "family-state equivalence" ideology. To achieve this goal, the Qing Dynasty established official schools within the *Tumin* communities, which trained a group of scholars loyal to traditional Confucian values (Li & Duan, 2023; Zhou, 2023). These scholars had the ability and means to report the acts of chastity and virtue of women, and they used the deeds of these virtuous women to redefine and reproduce the behavior and moral norms for women under feudal rule. This reinforced the roles of women as "mothers," "protectors of the husband's family," and "educators of the next generation." It also transformed their actions, which were aimed at maintaining the family and ensuring its prosperity, into a form of "reward for chastity," emphasizing the ideal of *filial piety* and *chastity* (Yang, Shi & Wu, 2022). This approach downplayed the role of women in using their own intelligence and resources to ensure the family's safety and prosperity during times of chastity. It led to the rationalization and even the sanctification of the act of maintaining chastity, obscuring the agency of women who, in their efforts, actually contributed to the security and success of the family (Yang, Shi & Wu, 2022).

#### iv. Family Background of the Main Figures in the Qing *Tumin* Community’s *Jiexiao Paifang*

When analyzing the inscriptions on the *Jiexiao Paifang*, another point of interest is the family background information of the virtuous women commemorated. After further analysis of the family origins of the women honored by the *Paifang* owners, the author found that, aside from

the case of Zhang Shi, whose family background is not recorded, all other virtuous women, widows, and chaste women whose life stories are detailed in the inscriptions had fathers who were local scholars or part of the gentry. For example, the father of the virtuous woman Chen Shi was a military officer in Guzhangping. Although Zhang Shi's family background is unclear, it can be reasonably assumed that, in a society that valued the principle of “*matching families*” in marriage, Zhang Shi herself was likely from a prominent local family (Xie, 2020). Moreover, the family she married into—the Xiang family—had a solid reputation in the region. The Xiang family originally migrated from Chenzhou to Yongding, and then to the Changping area in Yongshun. Her husband was the only surviving male heir in his family, and while he was alive, the family was well-off (Guo, 2014). However, after the death of her husband's grandfather and parents, Zhang Shi was left with only her mother-in-law in the household. Therefore, although Zhang Shi's precise origin is unclear, the wealth and status of the family she married into strongly suggest that she was likely part of the local upper class. This analysis of the family backgrounds of these women suggests that many of the women honored in these *Paifang* were not from lower-class or commoner families but were instead part of the local elite, reinforcing the idea that the *Jiexiao Paifang* was a form of recognition not only for virtue but also for the status and societal position of the women and their families (Guo, 2014).

However, through studying the inscriptions, the author found that even though these virtuous women and widows did not come from humble backgrounds, their natal families did not appear to offer significant assistance in their requests for *Jing* (official recognition). Instead, their recognition seemed to stem from the actions they took in their husband's family to uphold filial piety and womanly virtues, which earned the admiration of their husbands and the respect of their descendants (Xie, 2020). In other words, women themselves did not have the qualification to request the *Jing*; it was only the male descendants or other male family members from the husband's side who had the right to request it on their behalf. This distinction highlights the patriarchal nature of the *Jing* system, where the recognition of a woman's virtue was not only contingent on her own actions but also heavily reliant on the approval of her husband's family, particularly the male members. Thus, while these women may have demonstrated great virtue, their ability to receive official recognition depended on the male-dominated structures of their husband's family and the patriarchal social order.

During the research process, the author discovered that some of the virtuous women and widows were closely related. For instance, the wives of Xiang, Zhang and Fu, were mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Additionally, Chen, the wife of Tan, was the grandmother of the widow Tan's daughter, Peng, and the inscription explicitly stated that her mother had also been a faithful wife after her husband's death. This behavior, encouraging the daughter to maintain chastity after the husband's death, was instilled by the virtuous widow Peng Mingguai (Liu, 2019; Lu, Zhang & Zhou, 1930). The influence between these virtuous women and widows, who shared close familial ties, was deeply ingrained and highly respected at the time. It served as a form of moral education for other women. This familial and moral influence gradually altered the expectations of women within the Tumin communities of western Hunan, subtly shaping their views on the roles women should play in the family. Over time, this led to a shift in how women were perceived and the behaviors that were expected of them within the family and community.

### 3. The Intrinsic Information Reflected in the Erected "Chastity and Filial Piety" Memorial Arches in Yongshun County

#### i. Statistics on the Stories of Chastity and Filial Piety Memorials

The construction of these memorial arches, which mostly took place in the late Qing Dynasty, occurred more than two centuries after the indigenous societies embraced "tu reformation" (integration into the imperial system) and "bathing in imperial culture" ("wanghua"). Therefore, these memorial arches, which appeared in clusters during this period, can be viewed as a result of the Tumin society's acceptance of "imperial civilization," leading to a closer alignment with Confucian culture in terms of marriage customs, the concept of chastity, and views on women.

The memorial arches with inscriptions, with their prefaces written by dedicated individuals, record the life stories of chaste women, heroic women, and virtuous women. These women are recognized for their chastity, heroism, and virtue, and their stories are deemed worthy of being elevated to the level of public commemoration (Liu, 2019; Lü, 2023; Qin & Han, 2007; Wang, 2008; Zhou, 2023). The following table presents these stories.

Archway Name	Memorial Story
<p style="text-align: center;">Qing Dynasty, Guangxu Era,            "Buermen" Memorial Archway for            Zhang, Wife of Xiang - Chaste and            Filial</p>	<p>Zhang married her husband, Xiang Yang, at the age of 15. When she was 20, her husband passed away due to illness, and at that time, Zhang was pregnant with an unborn child whose gender was unknown.</p> <p>During her pregnancy, she struggled with malicious neighbors and relatives. However, her method of resistance was to "silently pray and burn incense, hoping that the ancestors' spirits and the Heavenly Emperor would bless her to give birth to a son." She gave birth to a son, Xiang Kaiyi, whom she "taught well." After her son grew up, she arranged a marriage for him with a woman from a well-matched family, and he married Fu Shi as his wife.</p> <p>After her son married, he had a son with Fu Shi but passed away. Zhang discouraged her daughter-in-law from suicide, and together they raised the grandson, managing the household and "taking care of everything with propriety."</p> <p>The family gradually grew wealthier, and the grandson and great-grandson achieved academic success, making a name for themselves.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Qing Guangxu Era, No. 2 Gate,            Xiang's Wife Fu Shi's Chastity and            Filial Piety Arch</p>	<p>At the age of 20, she married Xiang Kaiyi, but at 29, her husband passed away. She attempted suicide but was dissuaded by her mother-in-law. Together, they focused on "managing family affairs internally and maintaining livelihood externally."</p> <p>Without other clan relatives to rely on, she and her mother-in-law carefully educated her son. "She upheld propriety with respect and treated others with virtue, always helping the poor and needy, especially in times of hardship."</p> <p>"As a widow, she received a commendation, and as a virtuous woman, an arch was built for her." In return for the filial piety of her daughter-in-law, her mother-in-law sought a formal commendation from the authorities. The local gentry also recommended her as a model of chastity, and a decree was issued to build the arch in her honor.</p>

<p>Qing Guangxu Period Bai La Du  Wife Gao Family Filial Piety  Memorial</p>	<p>Gao was married to her husband, Du Huishan, at the age of 15 and became well-known for her filial piety towards her parents-in-law.</p> <p>She lost her husband at the age of 19 and "attempted to follow him in death many times," mother-in-law.</p> <p>She adopted a son from her eldest brother, and when the child was five years old, she sent him to the family school, where she rigorously taught him, leading him to become accomplished.</p> <p>In managing the household, she "strived for frugality and economy." She would often assist the poor by providing them with money and grain, always making it a priority to help those in need. She was also eager to engage in good deeds in the village.</p>
<p>Republic of China Era Buermen Tan  Wife Chen Family Filial Piety  Memorial</p>	<p>Chen was married at the age of 16 and was regarded as "virtuous" due to her deep understanding of the Classic of Filial Piety and her devotion to her parents-in-law.</p> <p>After giving birth to three sons and three daughters, her husband passed away when she was 28 years old.</p> <p>While adhering to the principles of wifely virtue, she raised her children to adulthood. After they established their own families, she had a large household, with the greatest affection for her great-grandson, Tan Honglie. She passed away at the age of 78.</p> <p>After Tan Honglie graduated from the South City Academy, he went out to seek employment and further his studies. During this time, when asked, he shared with the examiners the story of his great-grandmother's chastity and filial piety. In the 21st year of the Guangxu reign, he formally requested a memorial, and "in accordance with regulations, the order was given to build the memorial tablet."</p>
<p>Qing Guangxu Era Yanbanpu Peng  Minggui Chaste Woman Memorial</p>	<p>Peng Mingguí's father passed away early, and her mother, remaining faithful to her late husband, raised her alone.</p> <p>She formed a betrothal relationship with a young man from the same village, Zhang Yangyu. However, the man passed away before their marriage. At the time, Peng Mingguí was 16 years old. After his death, she accompanied her mother to his funeral. After the burial, she swore to serve her fiancé's parents for the rest of her life.</p> <p>After serving her fiancé's parents for three years, the elderly couple, seeing that Peng Mingguí had grown older and was now a widow without anyone to care for her, persuaded her to return. Once back with her mother, Peng Mingguí swore to remain faithful to her late fiancé's memory, pledging to never remarry.</p> <p>Despite multiple attempts by her uncles to persuade her to remarry, Peng Mingguí remained steadfast. Her uncles admired her resolve and built a small pavilion for her, using pine and cypress wood for the beams and columns.</p> <p>Peng Mingguí lived in the small pavilion, supported by her uncles, for ten years. She passed away around the age of 30 due to illness.</p>
<p>Qing Xuanton Era Buermen Tan  Wife Peng Family Loyal Woman  Memorial</p>	<p>Peng was married to her husband in the 24th year of the Guangxu era (1898). The following year, she died in devotion to her husband. She was 16 years old at the time of her death.</p>

## ii. Types of Commendation Stories

Based on the above table, we can categorize the commendation stories of chaste women as follows:

- a) After the husband's death, the chaste woman must take on the responsibility of raising and educating male offspring, and these male children, once grown, are expected to achieve a certain social status through education.
- b) If the chaste woman is surrounded by malicious neighbors or relatives, her response will always be "to persuade with virtue" and "to conduct herself with propriety." There are almost no instances where the chaste woman uses wit to counter or confront those threatening her family or her own interests. Her approach tends to be passive and not aggressive.
- c) As a reward for the chaste woman's filial piety and chastity, her male direct descendants will achieve social standing through her education, and the family will flourish, prosper, and grow. This prosperity, however, often pertains to the family she married into.

As for the stories in the heroic women (烈女) and virtuous women (贞女) arches, the general patterns can be summarized as:

- a) In the case of heroic or virtuous women, their husbands either die or pass away before marriage. These women would either die in devotion to their husbands or remain faithful to their memory, never marrying again after their husbands' deaths.
- b) A woman who maintains chastity will prioritize honoring her husband's parents over her own. These women often receive material or social rewards for their actions.

From this, it is clear that both the chaste women's arches and the heroic and virtuous women's arches present women who perfectly embody the feudal values and moral standards of the time, as defined earlier in the text.

## 4. The Female Family Role Norms Shaped by Chaste and Filial Piety Arches in the Tumin Community

From the analysis of the commendation stories on the chaste and filial piety arches, we can further infer that by the late Qing period, the establishment of these arches in the Tumin community was shaping new family role norms for women within the community.

### i. Women gradually fixed in the family environment

Although the ethnic segregation of "Han people shall not enter the Tumin community" continued from the time of the Tusi Peng Shichou and the Ma Chu dynasty's establishment of the copper pillar in Lixi Prefecture, until the "Reform of Tusi System," the indigenous society did not remain completely disconnected from the Central Plains dynasties (Li & Duan, 2023). On the contrary, as time passed, the interactions between the two sides became increasingly closer, and as a result, the indigenous society gradually became embedded within the Chinese civilization system, beginning to progressively adopt the values of the Central Plains dynasties.

At least since the Yuan Dynasty, the indigenous society, particularly at the higher levels of the Tusi society, began to establish closer connections with the Central Plains dynasties. Starting from this period, the Tusi actively responded to the imperial court's call to promote Confucianism and establish educational systems (Tian, 2015). During the Ming Dynasty, the Central Plains dynasty implemented compulsory Confucian education in the Wuling indigenous communities, forcing the Tusi, local officials, and their children to learn Han culture. As a result, a number of outstanding poets emerged from the Tusi families (Tian, 2015).

After the Ming Dynasty's establishment, the Tusi system was further perfected. The imperial court made specific regulations regarding the rights and duties of the Tusi, clearly defining the relationship between the court and the Tusi as that of ruler and subject, while promoting Confucian education to foster cultural identity (Peng, 2001). According to the regulations on the rights and duties of the Tusi, indigenous Tusi were required to comply with the court's frequent mobilizations, the most famous of which was during the reign of Emperor Jiajing of the Ming Dynasty. The Tusi of Yongshun, Peng Yinan, responded to the imperial call to go to Jiangsu and Zhejiang to resist the Japanese pirates, achieving "the first military merit in the Southeast." At the same time, the Tusi dynasties also actively fulfilled their tribute obligations, and the ties between the Tusi and the Central Plains dynasties became increasingly close, with the influence of Central Plains culture and values becoming more evident (Li & Duan, 2023; Peng, 2001).

However, due to the fact that this was still the period of Tusi rule, Han people and indigenous people were still in a relatively isolated state. The traditional marriage customs and the inertia of family role distribution within indigenous society remained significant. Confucian teachings, education, and values were also limited to the children of the Tusi and local officials, without spreading throughout the entire indigenous society (Chang, 2023). As a result, indigenous women still enjoyed a relatively free status when it came to marriage and divorce choices, with marriage and family constraints on women being relatively weak. However, the indigenous elite groups, already influenced by Confucian values, were determined to align indigenous family structures more closely with the feudal society of the Central Plains, and their intentions to do so could not be ignored.

After the "Reform of Tusi System," the Qing government, upon establishing new prefectures and counties, promptly set up government schools such as the prefectural schools, county schools, and charitable schools (Lu, Zhang & Zhou, 1930). A number of academies were newly established or renovated, and state-run education developed rapidly. This large-scale government-run education system provided the indigenous society with more elite intellectuals well-versed in Confucian Han studies. The ranks of indigenous scholars and gentry quickly expanded, and compared to the period before the "Reform of Tusi System," they gained much stronger influence in shaping social order. They became the absolute driving force behind the restructuring of indigenous family order.

Through their efforts, the position of women within the family was clearly defined, and the values of the "woman's path" were affirmed and widely accepted by society. This also provided a template and standard for the role women should play within the family. The so-called template and standard included: 1. Although there was no explicit regulation forbidding women from remarrying after their husband's death, society encouraged women to remain faithful to their husbands and did not support remarriage; 2. During the period of widowhood, women were expected to dutifully serve and care for their husband's parents, strictly adhering to the rituals of filial piety; 3. Generally, women who were widows already had children by their deceased husbands, so they were expected to raise and educate their children during the mourning period. As the children grew, the widow was also expected to take on the role of her deceased husband, arranging marriages for her children that were socially appropriate; 4. Widows were required to strictly follow the principles of the "woman's path" during this period, constantly keeping in mind the separation of the sexes ("men and women should have great caution") and restricting their activities to the inner quarters of the home. Based on this, they were responsible for managing household life and finances (Wang & Ji, 2023).

## ii. The Efforts of Indigenous Women to Play Their Family Roles

According to role theory, when an individual attains a corresponding position in society, other members of society expect that individual to perform a series of behaviors that align with their status and fulfill the corresponding duties. The series of behaviors an individual exhibits to meet these expectations is referred to as role-playing. Based on the previous analysis, at least during the late Qing period, the roles indigenous women were expected to play in the family were not much different from those of ordinary Han women. The roles women played in the family could generally be divided into three categories: "a wife loyal to her husband," "a good mother who nurtures her children and takes on the responsibility of their early education," and "a caregiver and servant to her in-laws" (Chang, 2023).

In order to play the role of "a wife loyal to her husband," the behavior of showing fidelity to the deceased husband was expected, which often meant remaining a widow and not remarrying after the husband's death. In extreme cases, this could lead to practices such as widow sacrifice. For instance, Xiang's wife, Fu, was persuaded by her mother-in-law to remain faithful and observed widowhood alongside her mother-in-law, Zhang. Similarly, Du's wife, Gao, was persuaded by both her mother-in-law and her own mother to stay faithful and observe widowhood. If a woman lost her husband after already having children, she was expected to remain a widow, as in the cases of Zhang, wife of Xiang, and Chen, wife of Tan (Tian, 2015; Xie, 2020). There were even more extreme examples, such as when a couple was engaged, and the man died due to illness or other reasons before marriage; in such cases, the woman might either sacrifice herself or remain unmarried for life. An example of a woman who committed widow sacrifice was Tan's wife, Peng, while a woman who chose to remain unmarried for life was Zhen Nü, Peng Minggu.

Raising children and providing early education became a common responsibility for almost all widows. Typical examples include Zhang, wife of Xiang, and Fu, wife of Xiang, and their mother-in-law-daughter-in-law relationship. Zhang, in a situation where she was isolated and surrounded by hostile neighbors, single-handedly raised her son, Xiang Kaiyi. During his upbringing, she taught him to tie his hair and study classical texts, and as he grew older, he began receiving further education from external tutors (Chang, 2023; Yang, Shi & Wu, 2022). Fu, after the death of her husband Xiang Kaiyi, was persuaded by her mother-in-law Zhang to abandon her intention to commit suicide in order to stay faithful. Together, they raised and educated their children. "When it came to teaching reading, she was extremely strict and never showed any leniency. The same applied to the education of her daughters." Eventually, "her son, who was still in his youth, had already been honored with the title of Great Master of the Grand Sect, and was appointed as a supplementary disciple, excelling in both literary and moral conduct (Yang, Shi & Wu, 2022). Her daughter was also praised for her virtuous and graceful character."

The care and service of the husband's parents, particularly the mother- and father-in-law, was another important role for women, especially illustrated by the examples of Zhang and Fu. After the death of her husband, Fu, during her widowhood, used her mother-in-law as a model of conduct. She "frequently asked for her mother-in-law's guidance" and "served her widowed mother-in-law with filial piety, offering sweet and nourishing foods, always mindful of her needs, and skillfully managing her affairs to win her affection." When Zhang established a filial piety memorial after receiving imperial orders, she praised Fu's filial devotion to her grandmother, expressing deep gratitude for Fu's care and attention (Wu, 2010). She predicted that Fu, like herself, would eventually receive formal recognition for her virtue.

Additionally, in order to further demonstrate their exemplary character, both Zhang, wife of Xiang, and Fu, wife of Xiang, are recorded as having provided aid to impoverished fellow villagers and neighbors. The inscriptions on their memorials read, "The woman upholds herself with 礼 (ritual propriety) and treats others with 德 (virtue); during times of scarcity, the poor and needy often rely on her to light the fire" (Qing Guangxu era, Xiang wife Fu's Filial Piety Memorial). Similarly, the inscription for Zhang states, "She guards leisure with 礼" (Qing Guangxu era, Xiang wife Zhang's Filial Piety Memorial). Furthermore, Tan's wife, Chen, is noted for being rarely seen in public during her widowhood, adhering strictly to the principles of the "woman's path" (Chang, 2023; Tian, 2015; Xie, 2020) This demonstrates that, during their widowhood, women not only followed the "woman's path" but also protected themselves by restricting their activities to the internal family space, the inner chambers. Occasionally, they might leave the household to manage family finances, but overall, their presence in external social or public spaces was rare.

### iii. How Exemplary Role-Players Receive Filial Piety Recognition and Awards

Due to the nature of the filial piety and chastity memorial system, which requires women to remain faithful after their husband's death and give up the right to remarry, the court would reward those who excelled in this role. However, in order to receive such rewards, women had to perfectly adhere to the court's recognition system, and also have the connections and ability to make the court aware of their virtuous actions. Only when the court learned that a particular woman in a certain area had remained faithful after her husband's death, raised her children to adulthood and success, strictly followed the principles of the "woman's path," cared for her in-laws, and even had the means and noble character to assist the local community, would she receive the corresponding compensation after giving up the right to remarry.

From the Ming dynasty to the late Qing period, the system of recognition and rewards for filial piety and chastity gradually evolved, with the threshold for recognition continuously lowered, the scope of recipients expanding, and the procedures for receiving recognition simplified (Pang, 2020). With the development of the system, by the Guangxu period, the criteria for awarding filial piety and chastity recognition to women had been relaxed. In terms of the length of time a woman was expected to remain faithful after her husband's death, the requirement was initially set in the sixth year of the Kangxi reign as "remaining faithful until the age of fifty if the husband died before the age of thirty." This was later relaxed by the fifth year of the Yongzheng reign, when women who were over forty and had been widowed for more than fifteen years could be awarded according to the usual practice (Bian, 2015; Pang, 2020). By the fifty-seventh year of the Qianlong reign, the criteria for eligible women expanded to include "those who had committed crimes punishable by death or exile"—as long as they had remained faithful to their deceased husbands and had not remarried, all women were eligible for recognition. Therefore, in theory, as long as an indigenous woman married, her husband died due to illness or an accident, and the woman did not remarry until the age of forty, strictly followed the principles of filial piety and chastity, raised the children from her marriage, and cared for her husband's parents, she could be awarded recognition if she lived past the age of forty.

In the late Qing dynasty, a relatively complete set of procedures for applying for filial piety and chastity recognition included the detailed public announcement of the regulations for awarding such recognition to widows and virtuous women. For instance, the process involved the submission of actual cases of virtuous widows, chaste women, and filial children, which were then reviewed by the local officials in the Bureau of Chengzhou County, including village leaders and clan heads, who were responsible for ensuring that the facts were accurately

presented and delivered. Following this, the county officials would verify the cases and report to the provincial governors, who would then confirm the cases and issue official approval (Lu, Zhang & Zhou, 1930; Xie, 2020). The key to this process was ensuring that relevant institutions were made aware of a woman's acts of fidelity and chastity, and that there were sufficient resources to support the later verification process. Additionally, outside of the imperial court's recognition, families of these virtuous women would build memorial arches (牌坊) to honor their devotion. For ordinary families, applying for such recognition was a considerable financial burden—not only in terms of time but also social connections and money. Applying for the recognition of a chaste or filial woman essentially became something that only families with substantial resources and connections could afford. As a result, the women who successfully received recognition for their virtue were often supported by large families, which is why the surviving memorial arches are predominantly found in families of the local gentry class.

## 5. Conclusion

From the analysis above, we can see that in Yongshun County, Xiangxi, the phenomenon of filial piety and chastity memorial arches was concentrated among the gentry elite groups within the local indigenous society.

(1) Women born into the indigenous elite group are more likely to receive moral education related to chastity and fidelity. At the same time, family members, especially older female relatives such as mothers, will affirm and positively view the behavior of maintaining chastity and fidelity. For example, the mother of the virtuous woman, Peng Minggui, remained faithful after her husband's death and raised her child. Similarly, the chaste woman Chen Shi received education in female morality from a young age and deeply identified with these values. After her husband's death, she adhered to these standards of behavior. This conscious education allows women to internalize external moral standards as their own duties and to follow them earnestly. Moreover, by the late Qing period, compared to previous historical periods, the standards for awarding the title of filial piety and chastity were lowered, the scope expanded, and the process simplified, leading to the widespread appearance of memorial arches in the late Qing era. As a result, many women in the indigenous society of Yongshun County received these awards during the Guangxu period.

(2) Only upper-class families had the conditions to receive orthodox moral education. For instance, Chen Shi, wife of Tan, had the opportunity to read works such as "Neize" and "Nüjie" because her father was a military officer. We should also acknowledge that, similar to the indigenous society period, indigenous people used state order language to elevate their political status in local society. Women were not entirely passive in the system of filial piety and chastity memorial arches.

(3) In a society where the path to upward mobility and self-realization for women was strictly controlled, the system of filial piety and chastity memorial arches became one of the few ways for women to realize themselves and gain social status. It was a practical way to achieve both material and social rewards for their families and themselves. This explains why Zhang Shi, wife of Xiang, actively sought the opportunity to have her daughter-in-law receive a memorial arch after being awarded one herself. Similarly, Peng Minggui, due to her fidelity, received praise from local gentry uncles and earned material rewards like a small pavilion of pine and cypress.

(4) In general, the large number of filial piety and chastity memorial arches in the indigenous society of Xiangxi at the end of the Qing dynasty can be attributed to two factors. On one hand, the Qing court relaxed the restrictions on applying for the recognition, lowering the standards. On the other hand, after the "Gaitu Guiliu" policy, the resources of the indigenous society were further developed, with economic development and social wealth increasing. At the same time, the indigenous society was integrated into the larger Chinese community, and the elite scholar group expanded due to the growth of government education. The expansion of the local scholar group brought the values and ethics of the entire indigenous society closer to those of the central dynasty. These scholars, responsible for guiding the indigenous people to accept "royal civilization" and reproduce feudal values, proactively selected individuals who embodied these values and reported them to the court. After receiving the approval of the court, they would formalize, polish, and spread the virtuous deeds of these women. As mentioned earlier, the title of "chaste woman" and the behavioral standards behind it were one of the few viable ways for women to improve their social status. Therefore, women actively conformed to these standards and presented their lives as chaste widows to the scholars, who would process them. In this sense, indigenous women, who played the roles of good wives, filial daughters-in-law, and excellent mothers after losing their husbands, were discovered by scholars and reported to the court, together creating the surviving memorial arches of filial piety and chastity.

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### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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