

# **The Death of Woman Wang Study Guide**

## **The Death of Woman Wang by Jonathan Spence**

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## Plot Summary

"The Death of Woman Wang," by Jonathan D. Spence gives the reader an in-depth idea of life in a small county in Northern China, in the 1670s. The book is a historical reconstruction of T'an-ch'eng County, in Shantung Province. This is an area on the tributaries of the Yellow River, that is inland but not far from the sea. According to the preface, the author is led to study T'an-ch'eng County after finding out about the story of woman Wang, but this particular story only takes up a little more than twenty pages of the book. The author uses three main primary sources, amid many other secondary sources. One of these primary sources is the "Local History of T'an-ch'eng, by the Chinese scholar, Feng K'o-ts'an, who writes it in 1673, and has a large amount of information on the area. Feng, who writes this history, is described in the first chapter, "The Observers" and concentrates his work on the recurrent famines, banditry, and even an earthquake that devastates T'an-ch'eng County. Feng in his history work is blunt about the collapse of the population and cultivated land area in the fifty years before the work is written in 1673.

The second group of primary sources used by the author is the Memoirs and Handbook of Huang Liu-hung who is a magistrate, or judge, in the county, during the 1670s. Huang is also at times a character in the book and plays a significant role as a judge in the trial concerning the murder of woman Wang. The third primary source used is stories by the fictional writer P'u Sung-ling, who lives in an area outside but very close to T'an-ch'eng. P'u Sung-ling's stories occupy a substantial part of the book and give it a more lively and storybook quality. Sometimes the book reads like a collection of fictional stories, though its purpose is to be a historical reconstruction, and the book has extensive notes in the back of the book, and a bibliography.

The elements of T'an-ch'eng County life are described after initial general information. One issue is that of the land, its ability to feed people and the ability of people living on the land to pay taxes. There are also the special problems of the lives of widows, and their struggles to obtain income and raise children, especially sons. After extensive general observations about banditry in the county, the fourth chapter describes in fiction and from historical record, the crimes of a group of bandits and the struggle of honest people to stop their murders and thievery. Finally, in Chapter 5, through primary sources and stories, the rights of women in general are examined, which leads to the sad case of the death of woman Wang.



# Chapter 1, the Observers

## Chapter 1, the Observers Summary and Analysis

T'ang-Ch'en is a county in North-eastern China, in the province of Shantung. In July 1668 there is an earthquake that destroys much of T'ang-Ch'en city, the capital of the county and many people are killed. According to Feng K'o-t'san, who writes "The Local History of T'ang-Ch'en," this is just one in a series of disasters. Feng himself is a magistrate, but is fired from his position. He stays in town doing odd jobs that scholars can do, such as writing the "Local History." There are recurring famines in T'ang-Ch'en city and the surrounding county. Proverbs ironically refer to cannibalism. After the famine of 1641, there is an attack on T'ang-Ch'en city by a group of bandits. The nearby market town of Ma-t'ou is looted and destroyed, but T'ang-ch'eng is successfully defended. Soon however, the Manchus attack from the north and loot T'ang-ch'eng on their way to taking over China. In 1643 a Manchu army sacked the capital city and killed most of the officials and scholars. The loot from the area includes gold, silver, silk, domestic animals and other precious items, as well as hundreds of thousands of human beings that could be ransomed or turned into slaves. Huang Liu-hung, in his memoirs, documents the misery of the peasantry in T'ang-ch'eng. The grain storage facilities for different towns are abandoned, and the rich with private grain storage refuse to share their grain in time of famine.

Huang Liu-hung is an official who has passed his scholarly chu- jen examination, and is posted in T'ang-ch'eng County. He works hard to get the officials in Peking to lower the tax quota for the county and also, the number of men it must offer for forced labor. The Chinese Empire has to maintain a series of public works, such as clearing rivers of silt, maintaining and clearing the artificial, North-South Grand Canal, and maintaining roads and bridges. This infrastructure is maintained by forced labor or corvees. Huang writes that the morale of the people of the county is sinking. More and more men and women commit suicide. Huang feels it is necessary to publicly issue a statement about how evil and degraded are people who commit suicide. The people in T'an-ch'eng county often believe in ghosts. They maintain a shrine to the spirit Yu-yu, who when alive was a warrior and then a Taoist mystic. The great Chinese philosopher, Confucius is said to have connections to T'an-ch'eng. His beloved pupil, Tseng-tzu, settled in T'an-ch'eng county. Confucius is said to go to study with a noble of T'an.

P'u Sung-ling tells the story of what happens to him in the earthquake of 1668. He and his cousin are drinking wine inside a house and suddenly the table begins to rock. They realize there is an earthquake, and run outside. People have to stay outside, even if they are naked. Another story of P'u Sung-ling tells of the famine of 1640. Liu, who is with the police, meets a married couple that is threatened with starvation. The man tries to sell his wife, but cannot get enough money to survive from such a deal. Liu has pity on them, and gives them money so they can both buy food. In another story, the majority of an area's people rebel against the Manchu Emperor. When peace is restored, magistrates are told to slant decisions toward former rebel households, so



they do not rebel again. When a fox spirit is caught and thrown into a fire, even it shouts out that it claims to be from a rebel household. This is seen as very funny. In the next story, a woman makes medical prescriptions with the help of magical spirits. She seems to be a spiritual medium, but her real skills are in being a ventriloquist, in being able to make her voice seem to be coming from another place. In the next story, a woman who is a spirit medium, produces a voice that comes from behind a fan.

In the next stories, the characters make money through fantastic magical tricks. In the first magic story, a young boy is in a parade in a town. He sees a magician and his son approach leading government officials, and offer to do magic tricks. The officials ask that the magician bring them a peach. In an incredible trick, the magician sends his son into the heavens on a rope, and a peach falls down. The rope falls, and pieces of the boy's body follow to the ground. The magician solicits funereal expenses for the boy. Then, magically, the boy steps out of the magician's box. In the next story, a man falls asleep and dreams of a flowers in a garden that he has visited. Two lovely girls summon the man to the goddess of the flowers. The man is brought before the goddess in her palace. The goddess has the man write out a challenge to the Wind spirit, who bothers the flowers. The challenge is written and the man wakes up. Other stories by P'u Sung-ling are about scholars and ladies and their sexual affairs and adventures.



# Chapter 2, The Land

## Chapter 2, The Land Summary and Analysis

Huang, the magistrate tells a story, or a report, about a heavy snowfall in 1671, that freezes people to death in T'an-ch'eng. Yet, the snowfall is not a big enough disaster to lessen the tax burden to Peking, the capital of the Chinese Empire. Winter wheat and kaoliang (also known as sorghum) are the main crops here. Other crops grown are millet, soybean, and other vegetables and fruits. Farming can be difficult, since rain is sometimes too little or too much, causing flooding. Draft animals are used to plow, or else men have to do it. Human and animal wastes are used as fertilizer. The farmers are kept busy, first in October, when they are planting the winter wheat. Later, the soybeans are planted. The big pressure is to pay taxes to the central government. The population of T'an-ch'eng is also organized in the pao-chia system, which relates to maintaining public order, police functions and militia defense to deal with attacks by bandits.

Taxes are collected to maintain the important system of imperial roads that run north-south thru T'an-ch'eng county. Officials who travel on the roads and rivers have to also be given food and lodging. Horses and horse stables are also maintained as part of the Imperial communications at that time in China. Other taxes are in the form of the corvée or system of forced labor on Imperial infrastructure projects. Sometimes workers are sent to do forced labor 100 miles away. They often die or run away. At one point, T'an-ch'eng has to provide 40,000 males for forced labor, but this amount is reduced by the county's population falls due to war, bandits and other disasters. The Manchus, later known as the Ching dynasty, take over China in 1644. In the course of the fighting in which the rulers of China change, some towns lose 70-percent of their population. More people in T'an-ch'eng also are killed in the earthquake of 1668. Taxes are proportional to the number of people, so as the population falls, taxes are lowered. Tax on land is dependent on its productivity, which is measured on a scale from one to nine. For example, constantly flooded land has a low rating because of its low agricultural productivity.

P'u Sung-ling writes a story about some of these called "the Fighting Cricket." In the story, the naïve and uneducated head man of a village is required to supply excellent fighting crickets for a game, as part of the tax payments and is driven to the edge of suicide. Tax payments are generally much higher and cruelly enforced in the countryside than in the city, according to the magistrate Huang Liu-Hung. Soldiers in T'an-ch'eng city also participate in various seizing of goods and interference in tax collections, sometimes resorting to outright violence, rape and murder. Land ownership can be unclear due to fraud and also the change of the government to a new dynasty, the Ching, also known as the Manchu dynasty. There is much fraud reported by the magistrate Huang Liu-Hung through falsifying ownership and the quality grade of land, in order to cheat on taxes. Some land is owned by landlords out of the district, who use



this situation to also cheat on taxes. Disasters continue, such as locusts eating up crops and causing famine.

In this period of disaster, the story writer P'u Sung-ling writes a story of people who survive through their magical powers, in the story of the woman, "Hsiao-erh." In this story, two young people are in love, a girl named Hsiao-erh and a boy named Ting. Hsiao-erh's father joins the White Lotus rebellion. The boy Ting has been rejected as a suitor for the hand of Hsiao-erh by her father. Now, Ting joins the White Lotus rebellion, in order to be near his beloved Hsiao-erh. Meanwhile, Hsiao-erh learns magic from the White Lotus sect leader. Ting confesses his love to Hsiao-erh, and she agrees to run away with him, and marry him. The couple escape on magical kites and pose as refugees from the fighting. Hsiao-erh uses magic to make a rich bandit give the couple 1,000 taels in gold. They buy domestic animals and build a house, but are attacked by bandits. The bandits are stopped by magic and are made to apologize for their crimes.

The couple find and ransom their surviving nephew, after the war is over and the White Lotus sect is eliminated. The surrounding people become jealous of the couple and expose their connection to the White Lotus sect, and Ting is arrested. He is freed by a large bribe, but the couple must sell their things and move. Hsiao-erh and Ting move to a new town and set up a glass factory, making more money than ever. Hsiao-erh prays and makes it rain when there is a drought. When there is a famine, Hsiao-erh can feed people in the surrounding villages, since she has saved wild thistles that are edible, for many years that she makes available. This story by P'u Sung-ling shows the triumph of a young woman using magic and ingenuity over violence, drought and famine.

Unfortunately, the people of T'an-cheng county have no magical powers and have built no industrial facilities like the glass factory in the story, to help them survive recurring disasters. The Magistrate Huang, has difficulty in extracting unpaid taxes from the local noblemen and landlords. Huang tries to collect taxes from a local landlord named Liu T'ing-yuan, who refuses to pay his rightful tax bill. The landlord has many witnesses threatened and silenced. The two main witnesses, who are local officials are badly assaulted and thrown out of the county.



# The Widow

## The Widow Summary and Analysis

"The Local History of T'an-ch'eng," by Feng K'o-t'san, tells the story of widows who struggle to raise their children, particularly their sons, properly. Many widows work hard spinning thread and doing some farm work and are able to get one or more sons educated and able to pass their examinations. The biggest honor is when the widows' boys pass the provincial level chu-jen examination. P'u Sung-ling makes some jokes about these virtuous widows in his stories. In one story, an old widow is spinning thread and making clothes, when a beautiful young woman enters the widow's home. The young woman is beautiful and smells nice. There is an air of magic about her. The young woman says she has come to keep the old widow company. When the women go to bed, the old widow has a fantasy that if she were a man, she could enjoy the young woman's body. The young woman is able to read the old woman's thought and criticizes her.

Some of P'u Sung-ling's widows are quite knowledgeable about law and business. In "Hsi-liu," the widow of that name struggles to raise her two boys. Hsi-liu is educated to read and write by her scholar father. Her parents force her to marry, and her new husband brings with him a son from a former marriage. The woman then gives birth to another son. Hsi-liu's husband dies at the age of 25, and she is left alone to raise her two boys. Hsi-liu has been running the family business affairs and is able to provide for the family, but she has problems with the boys. The older, Ch'ang-fu, becomes lazy and wants to play all the time. His mother beats him and finally forces him to go herd the pigs. Ch'ang-fu runs away but finally begs to be taken back and repent. Hsi-liu lets him become a student again, and he becomes a leading scholar. The younger brother, Ch'ang-hu, has difficulty learning to read. Hsi-liu has him beaten, and forces him to work in the fields. She tries to get him to be a peddler, but he gambles the money she gives him away. Ch'ang-hu later gets permission and money from his mother to go off with a band of merchants. He falls in with a prostitute, spends the money on her, and ends up in jail. The older brother, Ch'ang-fu, the scholar is sent by his mother to rescue the younger brother. Finally, Ch'ang-hu, the younger brother is truly repentant. He then becomes a successful merchant.

In Huang's "Local History," widows are pressured to remarry, so they are no longer a burden on their husband's extended family. Also, according to the Chinese legal code, when a woman remarries, she must return her dowry to her husband's family. Some women kill themselves rather than remarry, while others disfigure their face. The complex Chinese legal code can tempt others to attack and murder a woman and her son. In the story of Woman P'eng, the woman is left with a young son named Lien, who she is trying to have educated. She is harassed and looted by her husband's relatives. The husband's cousins scheme to murder the young son and then inherit the widow's property. The cousin's make up a story that the boy's father killed their father during the chaos of the Manchu invasions. The middle brother in the cousins drags Lien, the boy,





out of school and beats him to death. The killer hopes for leniency, because he claims to have killed the boy in revenge. Yet, his reading of Chinese law is wrong, and instead the killer is liable to be strangled to death on order of the court. Woman P'eng now has no male heir, and her husband's clan head nominates a new heir in a different branch of her husband's family. Chinese law is complicated, and one of the cousins kills the widow's son. The problem is that the widow has no rights at all, so the cousins think that by killing the boy they can get the inheritance of the woman's husband. The woman is just a stand-in for the rights of her son, until he becomes a mature adult. The cousins have a poor understanding of the law, which is not as convoluted and ridiculous as they hope.



# The Feud

## The Feud Summary and Analysis

P'u Sung-ling, the writer, tells the story of when he gets married. His father contracts a marriage for him when he is 10 years old to a girl of about the same age. A few years later, P'u Sung-ling marries the girl. The wives of his brothers are jealous of his new wife and harass her. Finally, the father is forced to divide up the collective family household for the sake of keeping the peace. P'u Sung-ling and his wife get only a small plot of land, a run-down cottage, and some stored grain. This sort of fight is reflected in the intense family and intra-family violence in the stories by P'u Sung-ling. In the story, "Ts'ui Meng," which translates as, the violent one, this man is named to reflect how tough and violent he is even as a child. Ts'ui Meng makes himself the law and uses his violent abilities to right what he sees as injustices. Ts'ui's mother thinks he is out of control and tries to stop him from his continued violence. Next door, a wife starves and tortures her mother-in-law. Since her husband secretly feeds his mother, the woman also turns on her husband. Then, one night, Ts'ui murders the woman with a knife. Ts'ui's mother somehow settles the business, and this includes giving the widower a slave girl as a new wife, but Ts'ui's mother knows that it is an unbearable situ. She gets Ts'ui to promise to change his ways. Shortly after, Ts'ui talks to a Taoist monk that his mother helps. The monk tells Ts'ui to make a strong friendship with a boy who is a refugee, and this may save Ts'ui's life when his crimes get out of control. Ts'ui adopts this young boy for a year, before the boy and his family move to another town.

Perhaps a few years later, Ts'ui and his mother are on a journey. They come across a man named Li who is being restrained and beaten. Ts'ui hears the story of how a nobleman cheated Li out of his wife in a gambling game and now is with her. Ts'ui is enraged by the story, but his mother stops him from doing anything. In a couple of days, Ts'ui sneaks out at night, and kills the noble wife-stealer and the stolen wife. Perhaps the wife is seen as guilty because she did not resist being stolen. A year later, Ts'ui's mother dies and Ts'ui admits that he killed the noble and the stolen wife. The husband of the woman, Li, has been put in jail, but is now released, and instead, Ts'ui is condemned to be executed. A high judicial official comes by to review sentences and it is none other than the boy that Ts'ui had befriended, now grown-up and an official. The official arranges to have Ts'ui put into exile, due to mitigating circumstances. Li goes with Ts'ui as his servant, and both return in a year or so. Ts'ui is careful of avoiding fights and Li helps him to do this, but a big local dispute erupts. A man named Wang is in an illicit relationship and kills his wife when she protests. Wang and his son are protected by corrupt officials. Then, Li, Ts'ui's friend, pretends to have a dispute with Ts'ui. Ts'ui has already taught all his physical and martial arts to T'sui. Li kills Wang and his son, and then runs away. Public order has collapsed in the area, due to a major rebellion, and soon Li is able to return home.

Bandits become a big problem with the lack of public order and security. The dead Wang's nephew starts up a new bandit gang. The gang attacks Ts'ui's house and



captures his wife. Li knows where the robbers hide out, and dresses like them in order to infiltrate the bandit's camp. He frees Ts'ui's wife, after diverting most of the robbers with flames that he ordered his servant to set in the hills. Ts'ui comes back and with his friend Li's advice, forms a band of villagers for mutual defense. The villager's team is able to surround the bandits in the hill and kill or capture them. Thereafter, Ts'ui leads a local defense unit and is able to protect the area from bandits.

According to the memoirs of Magistrate Huang, a Wang family lived in southern T'an-ch'eng County and acted similar to the Wang gang in the preceding story. These Wangs escape to T'an-ch'eng after they were part of a suppressed rebellion. They buy a fortified farmhouse and get protection money and land by threatening people and committing crimes. A local farmer, Li Tung-chen becomes mad at the Wangs and steps over the adjoining Wang land boundary with his livestock. Wang K'o-hsi kills one of Li Tung-chen's pigs and then Li also insults him and calls him a gangster. In revenge, Wang K'o-hsi plots an attack. Note that Chinese family names come before the Chinese given names. A group of eight men under Wang K'o-hsi attack the Li home and kill Li the father and three of his sons. The surviving Li family members then plot revenge. First, the Li's try to file a criminal case against the Wangs, but the Wangs defy the law. Huang Liu-hung, the magistrate carefully plots a strategy to kill or capture the Wang gangsters. Huang recruits his trusted deputy, Yu Piao, and members of a family that have also been attacked by the Wangs, including one, Kuan Ming-yo. Huang's force is assembled and chases the Wangs out of their house and over the provincial border. In a fight Wang-K'o-hsi is killed while Wang-San is jailed. This story is interesting in that it shows the lack of strict justice in T'an-ch'eng County at the time. Keeping order is difficult, because often the criminals and bandits are as powerful and well-connected as government forces.



# The Woman Who Ran Away

## The Woman Who Ran Away Summary and Analysis

Women commit suicide when their husband is jailed, dies from illness, or even castrates himself. There is a strong impulse to maintain family honor, which cause both men and women to sometimes mutilate or kill themselves. A woman refuses to remarry after her husband's death and disfigures herself to avoid remarriage.

In the "Local History," women are listed who are considered virtuous. Some of these women, in order to be loyal to their husbands, commit suicide, rather than being raped by attacking soldiers. Many women face rape and death in the Manchu looting of T'an-ch'eng in 1643. In a similar situation, with a happier ending, P'u Sung-ling writes about a woman confronting rampaging soldiers. She offers herself to the soldiers, entices them, one by one, into a hole covered with bedding, and then sets the bedding on fire, burning them to death.

Women sometimes have affairs, but have to be careful to be discrete. In another P'u Sung-ling story, a woman has sex with a peasant in the grass. A scholar sees them, the man runs away, and the woman ends up going home with the scholar. Women have few rights and are bought and sold as concubines by rich men. Then there is a sad story by P'u Sung-ling, about a young woman who is lured into a relationship by a nobleman, promised marriage, and then is abandoned when she is pregnant and has a child. The woman and the child are abandoned by the young woman's father and the woman's lover, and the woman and likely the child, die. P'u Sung-ling writes another story, where a woman, due to some magical powers, avoids being victimized by a bad husband.

A man, Ts'ai, meets a young woman, Ts'ui-hsien, and her mother at a religious ceremony. He gets the mother to agree to give him the daughter in marriage, though the daughter suspects that he is man with bad habits. The mother and daughter go to T'sai's house and see there is nothing there, so they bring goods and food to make the new couple comfortable. Ts'ai only wants to drink and gamble, and is encouraged by a buddy to sell his wife, Ts'ui-hsien. The wife is able to read Ts'ai mind, after he acts badly, and agrees to be sold. The couple visits the wife's mother's house, which is huge and has many servants. Ts'ai is surrounded by the wife's mother and servants and is poked and attacked for his evil ways. Suddenly, Ts'ai finds himself falling down a cliff, while the house disappears. He is rescued and returns to his now empty house. He cannot do anything, becomes a beggar, and sells his house. Finally, he finds the man who told him to sell his wife, and stabs him. Ts'ai is sent to jail and dies there.

The next story is the real life story, recorded by Magistrate Huang, the death of Woman Wang, which is referred to in the title of the book. Jen is a poor man who marries woman Wang. Perhaps woman Wang had been an orphan that worked for Jen's father and is later married to Jen. After several years of marriage, woman Wang runs away with another man. They have several routes of escape, but ultimately the man



abandons woman Wang and she returns home. If the couple had gone to T'an-ch'eng city, which is eight miles from Woman Wang's home, there are many fugitives there who work cheaply, but they also could have been caught by the authorities. The couple could be prosecuted, since Woman Wang is committing adultery. However, the husband, under Chinese law, is only justified in killing his wife and her lover, if he catches them in the sexual act.

Once woman Wang is abandoned by her lover, she is in a totally desperate situation. There are a few jobs available to a single woman. Perhaps she could get a job as a nurse, or someone to watch children, or to do laundry. There are also brothels, or the chance of being taken as a concubine by a rich man. Instead, woman Wang returns to her hometown, where first she is sheltered by a priest in a Taoist temple. There she is seen by her neighbor Kao and then her husband, Jen. Jen accuses Kao of being involved with the woman, and Kao hits Jen. Soon, the Taoist priest and Kao bring the woman to her father-in-law, and she is returned to her husband. From November 1671 to sometime in January 1672, woman Wang again lives with her husband, Jen. Jen may have plotted revenge against her for her adulterous affair or he may have attempted to reconcile with woman Wang. Technically, under Chinese law, Jen is obligated to throw out woman Wang as an adulterer, but no one interferes or makes him do this. One night in the cold winter, the temperature is in the 20s Fahrenheit. For some reason, the couple quarrel, which the neighbors hear. Woman Wang goes to sleep and the author writes of her dream, in the manner of P'u Sung-ling as follows.

The dream is a surreal and symbolic dream. There are flowers and beauty, but there is also sickness. The woman sees a man who has been beaten, with a tumor sticking out of him. This could symbolize the man's jealousy and rage. The woman puts a ring around the tumor and tries to heal it. The woman sees arches and tall trees around a big building and a courtyard, and she is well-dressed and on a swing. She sees a lake and a man in a boat, and looks up at the stars. The woman feels safe and that her problems are resolved. Then the beautiful surroundings disintegrate. The man harasses and mocks the woman. People watch as she feels earth in her mouth and cannot breathe. The dream ends and woman Wang wakes as she is being strangled. She tears the sleeping mat and defecates. Jen takes her body outside, possibly to dump the body on his neighbor, Kao's doorstep, but he hears the village watchmen. Jen dumps the body of woman Wang in the snow.

# The Trial

## The Trial Summary and Analysis

After the death of woman Wang, Jen and his father walk to the county seat and accuse the man, Kao, of having an affair with woman Wang and then killing her. T'an-ch'eng city is about 8 miles from their home. Jen claims that Kao came to his house holding a knife and that woman Wang went with him. For some reason, Kao's wife, Ts'ao is also waiting for the adulterous couple. Kao and his wife are arrested, according to the account of Huang, the magistrate. On the second day of the trial, Kao is brought to court and admits that he hit Jen two months ago when woman Wang was discovered, but is innocent of the murder. It is soon shown that Kao has an alibi, because at the time that he is sleeping, his wife was talking to the men in the town watch. Kao and his wife are released and instead Jen and his father are jailed. The next day, Huang goes to see Jen's house and notes that the sleeping mattress is ripped and there is a pile of dried human waste. Woman Wang's body is examined, and it is obvious that she was strangled. Finally, in the morning, Huang reconstructs the crime to Jen and has Jen confess his guilt. Jen is to be beaten severely, which may cause his death, and if he survives, must wear a cangue, a kind of sign of his guilt around his neck for a period of time. The full severity of Chinese law is not enforced, in that Jen has a reasonable chance to survive his beating.

The fact that woman Wang runs away and commits adultery is used to somewhat lessen the judgment against her husband, Jen. The reader sees again that a woman, in this case, who is dead, is judged more harshly than a man, her killer. There is still a certain fear of the ghost of Woman Wang. To placate her ghost, woman Wang is ordered to be buried near Jen's home in a good coffin, and in a respectful manner. Kao, who is well-to-do, is made to pay the burial expenses, in part as punishment for unjustly hitting Jen, in his time of crisis.



# Characters

## Huang Liu-hung

Huang is a magistrate in T'an-ch'eng County, stationed in T'an-ch'eng city. Huang is a Chinese imperial official who has passed his Confucian examinations and is posted in T'an-ch'eng. He realizes that T'an-ch'eng is a poor area, where the population has been decimated. Huang tries to have the tax burdens of people cut, especially in areas where farming has ceased to function. He tries to collect taxes from rich landowners, not only from poor farmers. Huang is fearful that many people in T'an-ch'eng are committing suicide because life is so difficult. In some ways, he is compassionate, but he is also a product of the often unyielding Chinese official system of Confucian ideals and ethics. He is often overwhelmed by the corruption and arrogance of the rich, and the despair and degeneracy of the poor. He sees couples meeting and having affairs in abandoned temples, and women giving men their enameled ornaments, which to him is like the actions of a common prostitute. Huang is the judge and the gatherer of evidence in the trial concerning the murder of woman Wang. Huang's memoirs are one of the key primary sources used by the author to make a historical reconstruction of this small county in 1670s China. Huang is also the organizer of actions taken against the gangster Wang family, as described in Chapter 4, "The Feud."

## Feng K'o-ts'an

Feng is described as a holder of the highest Confucian honors in passing the most senior examinations. He is the author of a primary source, the "Local History of T'an-ch'eng." His life is, nevertheless, unsuccessful, and he falls into poverty. He is sent to T'an-ch'eng to be an imperial magistrate, but is fired after a couple of years for incompetence. Feng's book, the "Local History" supplies the clearest and bleakest descriptions of life in T'an-ch'eng. Feng is described in the first chapter, "the Observers" and also has a lively interest in the superstitions and folklore of T'an-ch'eng. Though Feng's material is used throughout the book, he is not mentioned as a character after the first chapter.

## P'u Sung-ling

P'u Sung-ling is a writer from an area near T'an-ch'eng, which is also in Shantung province. His stories add a major dimension of liveliness to the book. P'u Sung-ling is married and often has difficulties concerning quarrels with his extended family. This is reflected in his stories, which feature often fatal rivalries within extended families. P'u Sung-ling writes stories where the poor and widows often solve their problems, but need magical powers to be successful. Despite the crushing famines and disasters described by him, P'u Sung-ling also writes on the conflict between strict Confucian rules for society and people who defy these rules to obtain pleasure. His characters are



sometimes successful in having illicit affairs. Other characters, such as girl Tou, in Chapter 5, are destroyed by a nobleman who abandons the girl by adhering to the strict class system of China in the 1670s. P'u Sung-ling's stories are also used by the author as a model for his composition of a dream of woman Wang, before her death by strangulation.

## **Woman Wang**

Woman Wang, though the subject of the book's title, is not well-known as a person. She marries and after a few years, runs away with another man. This adulterous couple is unable to find a place to live, or perhaps woman Wang's lover tires of her. Woman Wang returns to her home and her husband Jen, despite the danger she knows that this places her in. This leads to her murder by her husband a couple of months later.

## **Jen, Husband of Woman Wang**

Jen is woman Wang's husband. He takes her back after she returns from an adulterous affair, but ends up killing her not long after. Jen may have wanted to reconcile with woman Wang, though Huang the Magistrate makes the hypothesis that he plans to kill her as soon as she returns.

## **The Magician**

The magician is a character in a P'u Sung-ling story in Chapter 1. He and his son perform amazing tricks while retrieving a peach from an orchard in heaven.

## **Goddess of the Flowers**

In a story, in Chapter 1, the Goddess of the Flowers asks P'u Sung-ling's help. She needs him to write a challenge in Chinese calligrapher, to the spirit of the Wind, challenging the Wind to a fight, because the Wind has been disturbing the flowers.

## **Hsiao-erh and Ting Tzo-mo**

Hsiao-erh and Ting Tzo-mo are characters in a story in Chapter 2. They fall in love as children. The girl, Hsiao-erh acquires magical powers as a member of the White Lotus sect. She is pursued by the boy, Ting, who gets her to leave the White Lotus rebellion, and marry him. Hsiao-erh does magical feats, like getting the couple to fly away on kites, and also shows much business ability and intelligence.





## **Kao**

Kao is a neighbor of Jen and woman Wang. He hits Jen and is later accused of killing woman Wang. He seems to be a more prosperous man than Jen, and there is some sort of dispute between the two men. Later, he is made to pay the cost of woman Wang's burial.

## **The Old Widow**

The Old Widow is a character in a story in Chapter 3. She spends her time being virtuous and spinning thread for a living. When a young woman comes to keep her company, the old widow cannot help having a fantasy of how she could enjoy the young woman's body, if she were a man, which is not a very virtuous thought.

## **Hsi-liu**

Hsi-liu is a widow in a story in Chapter 3, who raises two boys. She is forced to be very brutal in order to get the boys to behave properly and make something of themselves.

## **Ch'en Kuo-hsiang and His Two Brothers**

Ch'en Kuo-hsiang and his two brothers are characters in a story in Chapter 3 that plot against their second cousin, the boy Lien, and his mother, a widow. Ch'en Kuo-hsiang ends up murdering the boy, to try to grab his inheritance. This is not successful because Ch'en Kuo-hsiang is charged with a capital crime.

## **Ts'ui Meng, the Violent**

Ts'ui Meng, the Violet, is a man in a story in Chapter 4, who feels compelled to stop injustice and avenge crimes. This almost gets him killed, but later he leads the local militia against bandits.

## **The Wangs, the Wang family, Wang bandits**

The Wangs are a bandit family in Chapter 3, that loot other households of T'an-ch'eng, until they are stopped by a militia lead by Magistrate Huang.

## **Nan San-fu**

Nan San-fu is a nobleman in a story in Chapter 5. He starts a secret affair with girl Tou, a peasant. Later, he abandons the girl to her death when she has a child.

## **Ts'ai**

Ts'ai is a man in a story in Chapter 5, who marries a girl above his social status. His wife tolerates him until he attempts to sell her. Then, his evil ways are publicly criticized and his life collapses.



## Objects/Places

### M-a-t'ou Market

Ma-t'ou Market is the main market town in T'ang-ch'eng County. There goods are brought in by road or by river transportation, and also taxed. Taxes are collected on goods such as cloth, wine, salted goods and tobacco, though the merchants are said to chronically underpay their taxes.

### T'an-ch'eng County

T'an-ch'eng is a county in north-eastern China and part of Shantung province. It is one of the tributary rivers to the Yellow River. T'an-ch'eng is a very poor area in China and is described in the 1670s. Small farmers struggle growing wheat and sorghum (kaoliang) and soybeans. Other crops grown in the region includes peaches, cherries, turnips, greens, onions and garlic.

### T'an-ch'eng City

The capital and administrative center of the county is called T'an-ch'eng City. Tax collections are coordinated from here as well as magistrates, who decide legal cases.

### Fox Spirits

Fox spirits are described in a story in Chapter 1 and in other places in the book. They are mischievous spirits of foxes that can take over the body of a human being, and need to be exorcised.

### Ming Dynasty

The Ming dynasty is the Chinese Imperial dynasty that rules China from Peking, until it is ousted in 1644.

### The Manchus, or Ch'ing Dynasty

The Manchus, or Ch'ing dynasty come to power in China when they takeover Peking in 1644. Before then, the Manchus are a northern people who often raid China.



## **Confucius, Confucianism**

Confucius is the great teacher of China, who is active around 520 BC. His writings and those of his followers such as Mencius created a system of moral philosophy called Confucianism. This is the basis of Chinese law and a guide to proper social relationships.

## **The Shu and I Rivers**

The Shu and I rivers are tributaries of the Yellow River, which empties into the ocean.

## **The**

The "Local History of T'an-ch'eng" is written work by Feng K'ots'an. It has lots of details on life in T'an-ch'eng. For example the "Local History" has descriptions of the lives of virtuous widows, who struggle to raise children and are loyal to their late husbands.

## **The White Lotus Sect**

The White Lotus Sect is a Buddhist sect that practices magic. Many people from T'an-ch'eng join the sect, which later rebels against the government in the 1620s. Most of the people in the White Lotus sect are killed.

## **The Chinese Legal Code**

The Chinese Legal Code is a strict code based on Confucianism. Its many laws on social relationships are frequently in practice ignored. For example, a man and a woman in an adulterous relationship could be sentenced to a punishment of 100 blows, each.

## **The Taoist Temple of the Three Forces**

The Taoist Temple of the Three Forces is a small temple in Kuei-chang, the home of woman Wang. There, a priest lives and woman Wang seeks refuge there.

## **The Sleeping Mat**

The sleeping mat is a new mat that woman Wang's husband Jen buys for them when she returns. It is ripped when Jen strangles woman Wang.

## **The City God's Temple**

The City God's Temple is where Jen and his father are chained and enticed to confess. Earlier, Huang the Magistrate makes a prayer in this temple to stop a locust plague.



# Themes

## The Poverty of T'an-ch'eng

T'an-ch'eng County is a civilized society, with organized economic activity, houses with rooms, taxation, a central government and a system of law. Yet, the massive poverty of the majority of its inhabitants is evident. From historical record, a much large population lived in the county fifty years before 1670, and was able to farm a much greater area. Now, in the 1670s, as reported by Magistrate Huang, the population tends to feel like the world is coming to an end, and needs to be publicly reassured that civilization is continuing. Maintaining an area in the face of natural disasters can be difficult, but what is even worse is the level of fighting. Rebellions and banditry are recurring features of life in T'an-ch'eng and Shantung Province.

Below the level of outright organized murder and looting, the richer part of the population is often engaged in looting the large rural population. There is very little manufacturing in T'an-ch'eng County, with only several kinds of cotton and silk cloth produced there. The main occupations of the urban populations in T'an-ch'eng City and Ma-t'ou are handling trade in agricultural and other commodities, and government administration. The farmers pay taxes at a higher rate than city dwellers. Money changers use a number of tricks to increase the looting of farmers when they come into the city to pay taxes. These taxes, though a heavy burden, are necessary to help maintain the roads and waterways for trade in China. The combination of famine and wars, on top of constant to cheat the farming population, drives these people into desperation. There are proverbs about it being better to eat members of ones own family, rather than have the entire family line die out. A story by P'u Sung-ling illustrates this, where a man tries to sell his wife and cannot make enough money to survive in this way.

## The Role of Women and their Rights

Women have few rights in China of this period. A man can sell his wife, and rich men can buy extra women and concubines for their use. Houses of prostitution are rampant and are located not only in the cities, but in the rural countryside as well. Due to rampant wars and rebellions, as well as disease and famine, many men die early, and widows are responsible for raising children including sons. In order to raise their children, women are allowed to take control of their dead husband's property. This situation has to continue at least until the woman's sons reach maturity and can take control of the household. Widows must continue to make a living and also raise their sons. This is extremely difficult, with many women adopting the Confucian ideal of spinning yarn and making clothing in their homes at all hours, to somehow make a living.



As in the story of the widow His-liu, in Chapter 3, it takes all of the strength and cunning of a widow to discipline boys and make them do what is necessary to make a living and prepare for life. Boys tend to not listen to their mothers, since China at this time is generally a male-run society. In the case of woman Wang, she wants to leave her husband but finds that it is impossible to do so. She runs away with another man, but they apparently cannot find a place to live or jobs to make a living. When woman Wang returns to her husband, she has a cloud of disgrace hanging over her, and is shortly after murdered by her husband.

## The Chinese Legal Code

China at this time is a society ruled by law. Scholars pass a series of examinations in order to become Imperial officials. To pass these tests, men must have studied Chinese classics by Confucius, Mencius and other writers, for many years. Chinese legal code in general, tries to be humane and just, but can often become too complicated. Instead of stating general principles, it often spells out intricate details and punishments. Different crimes, such as adultery, are assigned a number of beatings, which may or not be fatal. The magistrate who administers the beatings may purposely have them given with the intention of killing a person, or given in order to be light and not cause too much damage.

There are provisions in the Chinese legal code that allow a person to kill another person in the heat of anger, after the other person commits a specified crime, but only immediately after. This is illustrated in the case of woman P'eng, which is given in Chapter 3. A widow is responsible for raising a boy, named Lien. She tries to fulfill her husband's intentions by sending the boy to school. She is targeted by the Chen brothers, the boy's second cousins, who plot to steal the widow's property. They think that they can kill the boy, and claim that they kill him to fulfill revenge, because they claim that his father had killed their father. Then, they will inherit the family's property. This complicated scheme of murder and revenge is actually not allowed under the Chinese legal code. The legal code allows revenge killings only in the immediate time after a killing, in the heat of passion, not over a dispute, real or imagined, that goes back years. Likewise, in the case of woman Wang, the husband would be allowed to kill her if he catches her committing adultery with another man, but not days after. So, Jen, the husband is punished for murder, yet is seen to have mitigating circumstances.



# Style

## Perspective

The author, Jonathan Spence, has written extensively on the history of China, and uses many Chinese language sources. Apparently the author did research which led him to the sad story of the death of woman Wang. The author was inspired to create an historical reconstruction of T'an-ch'eng County, where the drama of woman Wang occurs. At this time, China has contact with the West, but still sees itself as the Middle Kingdom, the center of the world. The author reconstructs that world, which with its recurrent wars and disasters, is one of precarious existence for the people of T'an-ch'eng County. The author shows that despite this difficult life, there is still much of interest in Chinese life at this time.

Scholars study questions of justice and proper social relations, though their recommendations are more often ignored than put into practice. China is still able to fascinate the reader, with its infrastructure, roads, bridges and the Grand Canal. It is a complex society to run and maintain. When the Manchus, a warlike people, take over China, they quickly adopt Chinese ways and institutions. In the world of T'an-ch'eng County, the author is fascinated with the complex laws, social institutions, the writing, and story-telling. Yet, there is no progress in T'an-ch'eng and things are getting worse, as the population declines. There is the ongoing tension of the happier world of P'u Sung-ling's stories as oppose to the harsh reality of daily life. Despite the inefficiencies and failures of the Chinese Empire, the author remains fascinated by the life there, and tries to convey this sense to the reader.

## Tone

The overall tone of the book is one of impartiality and interest in painting a picture of a small county in China, before the full impact of the West is felt there. What gives the book its interest and charm is the factual descriptions of life in t'an-ch'eng County and Shantung Province, as compared with the magical world of the stories of P'u Sung-ling. In the stories of P'u Sung-ling, which are scattered throughout the book, characters solve problems and fight for justice. Often the storybook characters are successful, as in the struggles of the girl Hsiao-erh and her husband, and are able to meet life's challenges. Sadly, the reader compares these characters with what happens to people in real life, who even when they face challenges, usually have less clear results. In the story in Chapter 4, Ts'ui Meng is successful in mastering himself and defending his area from bandits. When Magistrate Huang fights bandits in real life, he has success, but nevertheless he is unable to seize the bandits' loot to benefit the bandits' victims.

The reader is shown the ideal triumph of the woman, Ts'ui-hsien over her worthless husband Ts'ai, in Chapter 5, while the case of woman Wang is ends in a much sadder fashion. Woman Wang tries to escape a husband that she does not want to be with, but





instead is forced to return to him and after a short interval, is murdered. Under the Chinese legal code, she is considered a criminal. From a standpoint of strict justice, her husband should receive the full penalty of being a murderer. Instead, Jen receives a sentence of blows that he has a reasonable chance of surviving. He can then regain his full freedom after a short period of wearing a sign of disgrace, the cangue. The book generally maintains a tone of melancholy sadness, in which harsh reality falls short of the ideals of justice, progress and fairness.

## Structure

The book, "The Death of Woman Wang" is divided into five chapters, plus an epilogue. The book also has extensive notes, where page by page, facts that are mentioned in the text are given a source or further explanation. Though the three main primary sources are in Chinese only, in the bibliography, other secondary sources are given that are in English.

The first Chapter sets the tone of the recurrent disasters of T'an-ch'eng County and the documentation on this county available from the 1600s. Chapter 2 gives more information on taxes and land usage in T'an-ch'eng County, and a more in-depth look at stories by P'u Sung-ling, with their clever characters that often have magical powers. Chapter 3 begins to focus on the theme of the rights of woman in pre-modern China, focusing on the special problems of widows that have to bring up sons. This begins with a sly joke on the myth of the virtuous widow, and then goes on to more serious stories on how the wits of the widow Hsi-liu are required to get her sons to behave properly. The 4th Chapter focuses on the myth and reality of the fight of honest people to obtain justice and defend themselves from criminals and bandits that are running around all over Shantung province and T'an-ch'eng. The 5th Chapter finally takes up the sad case of the flight, return and finally the murder of woman Wang.

The Epilogue details the trial and verdict of the murder case. Another feature of the structure of the book is the alteration of descriptions of life in T'an-ch'eng, with the stories of P'u Sung-ling.

## Quotes

Perhaps it was because of his melancholy experiences in T'an-ch'eng that in the brief essays with which he introduced several of the economic sections in the "Local History" Feng wrote so frankly about the miseries of the area, the poverty of its people, and the general inability of the local gentry to help alleviate that misery.

P. 3, Chapter 1, The Observers

As Huang Liu-hung found when he came to T'an-ch'eng to serve as magistrate in 1670, the people's problem was one of basic survival- physical and moral- in a world that seemed to be disintegrating before their eyes.

P. 9, Chapter 1, The Observers

The people of T'an-ch'eng claimed to know the exact spot where Confucius had sought the advice of their viscount twenty-two hundred years before- just inside the north gate of the magistrate's current office compound- and the place was honored with a temple, while a more public plaque in front of the yamen announced the general location.

P. 18, Chapter 1, The Observers

"At which one of the foxes in the bottle shouted out, 'But I am from a rebel household.' None of those who heard this could hold back his laughter."

P. 23, Chapter 1, The Observers, story of P'u Sung-ling

The most important cause of the ongoing financial crisis in T'an-ch'eng stemmed from its geographical location on the eastern one of the two main roads to the south.

P. 40, Chapter 2, The Land

In T'an-ch'eng, Huang Liu-hung had found, the landlords used six major types of deception to lower their land tax assessments.

P. 47, Chapter 2, The Land

But, when there was a great famine in Shantung, and people began to eat each other, Hsiao=erh took out these leaves she had saved, mixed them with grain, and gave them to the starving.

P. 56, Chapter 2, The Land, story of P'u Sung-ling

The girl said, "If you are not having reckless thoughts, why were you wishing that you were a man?"

P. 61, Chapter 3, The Widow, story of P'u Sung-ling

Brought before the official, Ch'ang-hu was not allowed to testify but was put in fetters and beaten until he was nearly dead and then thrown into prison.

P. 68, Chapter 3, The Widow, story of P'u Sung-ling

P'u Sung-ling had little faith in local officials' ability to handle situations of this sort, and the moral of the following story about Ts'ui Meng was merely that such violence must



ultimately be controlled by the individual's will; if channeled for the good of the community there was then a hope that it might ultimately help to make up for the officials' neglect and enable the local villagers to protect themselves.

P. 79, Chapter 4, The Feud

The clause ran: "All those who kill, whether with premeditation, deliberately, in the course of burning their house, or while committing a robbery, three persons from the same family (none of whom were guilty of capital crimes), or who dismember another person, shall be executed by the lingering death; their property shall be made over to the surviving family of the deceased;

P. 98, Chapter 4, The Feud

Two Mongol soldiers seized her and prepared to rape her, but she said to them, "How can I do such a thing in the presence of others?"

P. 103, Chapter 5, The Woman Who Ran Away, story of P'u Sung-ling

The couple needed somewhere to hide, for by the mere act of running away from her husband, woman Wang had become a criminal in the eyes of the law.

P. 120, Chapter 5, The Woman Who Ran Away

If it was hard for the two of them on the run, it must have been a nightmare for woman Wang after her lover abandoned her a short time later and left her alone on the road.

P. 123, Chapter 5, The Woman Who Ran Away

He stands before her in his ragged clothes, the snot is dribbling down his face, he smiles at her. "Does the pretty lady love me?" he asks. He hits her.

P. 131, Chapter 5, The Woman Who Ran Away



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss women's rights. In modern society, women have the right to divorce, and not to be punished by their husbands. These rights are not held by Chinese women in the 1670s. What rights do Chinese women in T'an-ch'eng have?

Discuss the rule of law. The rule of law is often considered a basic requirement of a civilized society. In T'an-ch'eng, at least on paper, there is the rule of law. Does this law operate in a fair manner in reality?

Discuss poverty. Poverty in T'an-ch'eng has many causes. Earthquakes occur, rivers flood, locusts eat crops, there are wars and there are famines. Are these factors controllable and is there a reasonable effort to control them? Are there attempts by government officials and the wealthy to control the spread of poverty?

The Chinese Legal Code is very strict in the control of social relations and marriage. Illicit sexual liaisons are prohibited and adultery is punishable by blows. Is this a realistic model for society, or does this create too much tension between reality and socially desirable ideals?

Discuss rural versus urban life. In T'an-ch'eng in the 1670s, farmers are made to pay more taxes and are forced to pay high taxes. Money changers have to change their copper cash to silver and they are also cheated. Why is this so?

Crime, banditry and rebellions are a frequent occurrence in Shantung Province during this era. Discuss the measures of the local and imperial governments to control such violent outbreaks. Are these counter measures effective?

Discuss class differences. Is China of this time a strict class society or is there mobility between classes? What role does the Confucian examination system play in giving opportunities to intelligent boys of all classes?

In the story of Nan San-fu, in Chapter 5, this nobleman falls in love with girl Tou, a peasant. Despite this love, Nan rejects the girl when she has a child and plans to marry a woman of a higher social rank. What does this tell the reader about Chinese society?