

1.5 Commentary on the suicide of Miss Zhao

Mao Zedong, 16 November 1919

The parents of Miss Zhao arranged for her to marry a wealthy widower, the son of an antiques dealer. Miss Zhao objected to the proposed match and also complained that the groom was old and ugly. Seated in the bridal sedan chair, she slit her throat with a razor on 14 November 1919. Within two days Mao published the following.

When something happens in society, we should not underrate its importance. The background of any event contains the multiple causes of its occurrence. For example, the event of a 'person's death' can be explained in two ways. One is biological and physical, as in the case of 'passing away in ripe old age.' The other goes against biological and physical factors, as in the case of 'premature death' or 'unnatural death.' The death of Miss Zhao by suicide belongs to the latter category of 'unnatural death.'

A person's suicide is determined entirely by circumstances. Was it Miss Zhao's original intent to seek death? No, it was to seek life. If, in the end, Miss Zhao chose death, it was because circumstances drove her to this. The circumstances in which Miss Zhao found herself included: (1) Chinese society, (2) the family living in the Zhao residence on Nanyang Street in Changsha, (3) the Wu family of the Orange Garden in Changsha, the family of the husband she did not want. These three factors constituted three iron nets, which we can imagine as a kind of triangular construction. Within these triangular nets, however much Miss Zhao sought life, there was no way for her to go on living. The opposite of life is death, and so Miss Zhao was obliged to die.

If one of these three factors had not been an iron net, or if one of the iron nets had opened, Miss Zhao would certainly not have died. (1) If Miss Zhao's parents had not used excessive compulsion, but had acceded to her own free will, she would certainly not have died. (2) If, while exercising compulsion, Miss Zhao's parents had allowed her to put her point of view to her fiancé's family, and to explain the reasons for her refusal, and if in the end her fiancé's family had accepted her point of view, and respected her individual freedom, Miss Zhao would certainly not have died. (3) If, even though neither her own parents nor her husband's family could accept her free will, there had been in society a powerful segment of public opinion to back her, and if there had been an entirely new world to which she could flee, in which her act of flight would be considered honourable and not dishonourable, Miss Zhao again would certainly not have died. If Miss Zhao is dead today, it is because she was solidly enclosed by the three iron nets (society, her own family, her fiancé's family): she sought life in vain, and finally was led to seek death.

Source: Mao Zedong, 'Miss Chao's Suicide'
In S. R. Schram, ed., *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings, 1912-1949*, Vol. 1
(Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1992), pp. 421-2