Volume 24 Issue 37
Originally issued as D2



Global Journal of human-social science: D
History, Archaeology & Anthropology
Volume 24 Issue 2 Version 1.0 Year 2024
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

The Phenomenon of Chaste Women in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

By Ke Zhao

Introduction- The phenomenon of chaste women was a social phenomenon unique to the Ming and Qing dynasties. Chaste women refer to women who committed suicide after the death of their husbands. The concept of "chaste women do not change their husbands" received widespread attention in the late imperial period. Public opinion raised the emphasis on female chastity to an unprecedented level. The exponential increase in the number of female suicides in the Ming and Qing dynasties, both in official and local histories, undoubtedly reflects the far-reaching influence of the concept of chastity spread in society after the mid-Ming dynasty and the early Qing dynasty.

In my study, I focus on the phenomenon of chaste women between the mid-Ming Dynasty (1449-1644) and the early Qing Dynasty (1636-1796). While remarriage was tacitly permitted in the Song Dynasty, it became the subject of condemnation in the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

GJHSS-D Classification: *LCC: HQ1160*



Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:



© 2024. Ke Zhao. This research/review article is distributed under the terms of the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). You must give appropriate credit to authors and reference this article if parts of the article are reproduced in any manner. Applicable licensing terms are at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/.

The Phenomenon of Chaste Women in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

Ke Zhao

I. Introduction

The phenomenon of chaste women was a social phenomenon unique to the Ming and Qing dynasties. Chaste women refer to women who committed suicide after the death of their husbands. The concept of "chaste women do not change their husbands" received widespread attention in the late imperial period. Public opinion raised the emphasis on female chastity to an unprecedented level. The exponential increase in the number of female suicides in the Ming and Qing dynasties, both in official and local histories, undoubtedly reflects the far-reaching influence of the concept of chastity spread in society after the mid-Ming dynasty and the early Qing dynasty.

In my study, I focus on the phenomenon of chaste women between the mid-Ming Dynasty (1449-1644) and the early Qing Dynasty (1636-1796). While remarriage was tacitly permitted in the Song Dynasty, it became the subject of condemnation in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the concept of chastity, "a chaste woman does not change her husband," was given widespread attention by society and praised in official records and personal writings for women's chastity suicides.

II. The Qing Government's Sinicization Policy: The Jing Biao System

In Ming and Qing China, the family was a sphere for indoctrination and a sphere for state control. The family in Ming and Qing dynasties was not an independent private sphere but a moral and political unity within the society and the state. Within the institutional framework, women's activities were defined in the home. Their activities in the home were subordinated to the political control of ancient Chinese men, who "ruled the country and raised the family." The most obvious point in the perception of women in ancient China is that "men were superior to women." The source of this impression is the "three obediences and four virtues" advocated by Confucian ethics for women. The three obediences are described in the Book of Rites as follows: "A woman is obedient to her father and brother when she is young, to her husband when she marries, and to her son when the husband dies." This indicates the taming of the female as subordinates to the male in ancient times, and also implies a subordinate relationship between male and female in terms of the social division of labor. A daughter, her social status is subordinate to her father when she is young, and subordinate to her husband when she is married. The glorification of chaste women became an essential part of the Confucian morality of "three obedience and four virtues" propagated by the scholars and great scholars of the Ming Dynasty, Lv Kun, praised women who committed suicide for their dead husbands: "If a woman wants to live, they must lose your body. Not to donate the body can not fulfill the will." [1]

The preaching of chaste women was not only a moral ideal of individual scholars but also became a political policy at the state level. In the official history book compiled by Zhang Tingyu, "The History of Ming Dynasty: The Biography of Listed Women," the biographies of 265 chaste women of the Ming Dynasty are recorded in three volumes. The biographies of women are mainly divided into four categories: chastity, suicides, filial piety, and righteousness. Including chaste women's deeds in official history books demonstrates the Ming government's recognition and commendation of women's chaste behavior. In 1644, the Qing army entered China, the Manchu army occupied Beijing, the Qing Shunzhi Emperor succeeded the Ming Chongzhen Emperor, became the common emperor of the Manchu and Han Chinese, how to unify China with a huge territory became the first problem that the Qing Shunzhi Emperor needed to face. Within the Manchu has long been the custom of women dying for their husbands, in 1626, the Manchu chief Nurhachu died, 35-year-old Nurhachu's son Huang taiji forced Nurhachu's first consort Abahai martyrdom, Abahai was then forced to hang herself at the age of 37, after the death of the first consort Abahai, and there are two other consorts martyred[2]. After the Qing army entered China, the custom of Manchu women being buried with their husbands was integrated with the traditional Chinese Confucian morality of the "three subordinates and four virtues" of chaste women committing suicide for their dead husbands, e.g., For chaste women, the "Ching Shi Gao: Biographies of Women" is arranged in a way that women are divided into several sub-categories according to the manifestation of virtue. In the Qing

Author: *e-mail: kzhao28@ucsc.edu*

[1] Lv Kun. *Gui Fan*. Gu Wu Xuan Chu Ban She, 2015.
[2] Man Wen Lao Dang,juan 43,p392.

© 2024 Global Journals

dynasty, there were as many as 294 cases of chaste women who committed suicide because of their husbands. The call for female glorification and adherence to traditional Confucian morality became effective means for the new Qing state to control Han society. The Qing Yongzheng emperor also required the local state and county governments to create a collective "festival and filial piety shrine" for the chaste maidens as a token of recognition. [3]

III. The Writing of the Ming Survivors: the Unification of "Emperor - Subjects - Husband – Woman"

The stories of women who suffered both the death of their husbands and the destruction of the Ming state during the dynastic changes of the Ming and Qing were repeatedly written by Ming survivors after the war. The stories of women who suffered both the death of their husbands and the destruction of the Ming state during the dynastic changes of the Ming and Qing were repeatedly written by Ming survivors after the war. Suppose we relate the situation of chaste women to that of Ming survivors, in that case, we can conclude why chaste women were repeatedly written by Ming survivors - as mentioned earlier, in Ming and Qing China, the family, a sphere of indoctrination, was also a sphere of state and local control. The image of the chaste woman was often associated with "loyalty," as a chaste woman could commit suicide for her dead husband, while a loyal subject could die in battle for the Ming state. In the writing of the Ming survivors, the chaste woman was an alternative expression of Ming patriotism, a metaphor and moral ideal of loyalty to the overthrown Ming state.

Therefore, in the records of the Ming survivors, most of the chaste women died with their husbands, and the process of death was incredibly tragic. In Ming survivor Huang Zongxi's notes, he tells the story of a chaste woman named Cao, whose husband was Tang Zhitan. Soon after her marriage, Cao's husband died of an illness, and Cao decided to be buried with her husband. Her family rescued her. So, Cao secretly took the poison despite her family's resistance and began a hunger strike. After more than twenty days of hunger strike, Cao jumped into a pool of water to commit suicide, and her family rescued her. Cao was unable to die, so she began to eat again. Influenced by female poets who wrote poems on chrysanthemums, she began to recite poetry on plum blossoms to express her loyalty to her husband and was determined to die. Finally, on New Year's Eve, Cao Zhenni hanged herself next to her husband's coffin with a seven-foot-long cloth and dead. [4]As one of the Ming survivors, Huang Zongxi recorded Cao's suicide and visited her before her death. "Huang Zongxi, as a representative of the Donglin Party, was involved in the struggle against the Qing Dynasty, was imprisoned by the Qing army and eventually escaped, and insisted on opposing the ideological control of the Qing Dynasty. It is not difficult to surmise that Huang Zongxi's vigorous propaganda of Cao's suicide represents his nostalgia for the Ming government, rebellion against the Qing government, and political anxiety that his patriotic ambitions could not be carried out. Therefore, the image of Cao expresses Huang Zongxi's political ideals and metaphors in his writing.

Another example is the story of a chaste woman Wen, who died because of her fiance's death. The Ming survivor Xu Fang recorded the story of a chaste woman named Wen, who entered into a marriage contract with the Hua family when she was young, but the man soon became seriously ill and died. Wen insisted on going to Hua's house for the funeral but was opposed by her father, so Wen explained her wish to abide by chastity and fulfill her wife's obligations. After Wen arrived at Hua's house, she wept in front of her unmarried husband's coffin. Afterward, the Wen family took on the responsibility of raising her parents and the parents of the Hua family, abiding by etiquette and chastity[5]. From the life of Xu Fang, the author of the study, it can be found that Xu Fang highly praised Wen's behavior has a lot to do with his identity as a survivor of the Ming Dynasty. Xu Fang passed the official examination during the Chongzhen period of the Ming Dynasty. His father, an official in the Ming Dynasty, jumped into the river because of the Qing army's invasion. Before Xu Fang's father died, he told Xu Fang to live in seclusion in the mountains and forests and not be an official in the Qing Dynasty. The praise of Wen for never marrying and insisting on chastity is also a metaphor for Xu Fang's political proposition.

Another Ming survivor, Li Weizhen, recorded the story of a chaste woman named Cha, born in Zhejiang province, whose mother was a person of outstanding character and filial piety who once cut off her flesh for her mother's medical treatment. With such an education, Zha knew how to be obedient to her parents and obey her husband from a young age and studied the Book of Filial Piety and the Legend of the Lady. When she grew up and married her husband, Feng Rang Bo, Cha was determined to die after Feng Rang Bo died of an illness. One day, her house caught fire, and instead of fleeing, she waited for the fire to burn herself out to pay tribute to her husband. In her view, dying for her husband was the

[3] *Qin ding Da Qing hui dian shi li : [1220 juan, juan shou 8 juan*. China: s.n., 1899,P10414.

[4] Huang, Zongxi, and Naiqian Chen. *Huang Lizhou wen ji*. Di 2 ban. Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 2009, P127.

[5] Xu, Fang, Shuhui. Huang, and Xiaofeng. Yin. *Ju yi tang ji*. Di 1 ban. Shanghai Shi: Hua dong shi fan da xue chu ban she, 2009,P301.

© 2024 Global Journals

right thing to fulfill Confucian morality. Later, Cha's son rescued her from the fire, but she finally died of a hunger strike when she waited for her husband's funeral. [6]In another epitaph composed by Li Weizhen, Li recounts the story of a chaste woman named Cheng, who married her husband Wang Liang Peng at the age of sixteen and died a year later, so Cheng also died on hunger strike. In her epitaph, Li Weizhen praised Cheng for her courageous act of dying with grace, and he believed that only heaven could have given Cheng such courage. [7]As one Ming survivor, Li Weizhen was a defender of the Confucian tradition.

IV. Chaste Women in the Lineage: Mother-Son Relationship

The analysis of the relationship between mother and son in gazetteers will help us to understand the historical background of the phenomenon of chaste women.

Wu Guolun once recorded the story of a chaste woman surnamed Feng, who was only twenty-two years old when she married her husband, Zhang Kong, who then died. Feng then raised her two sons and her husband's parents alone and remained a widow for 64 years, and eventually, her lineage prospered[8]. Wu Guolun then wrote a particular epitaph in praise of Feng. In the framework of the interpretation of "widowhood and offspring rearing" and the historical background of dynastic changes, the widowhood of a chaste woman was as great as that of a loyal ruler and was praised by the literati in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

In the gazetteer of Huizhou in the Ming and Qing dynasties, there are a lot of records about chaste women, such as the gazetteer of She county[9], which contains 16 volumes, and the biography of chaste women accounts for 4 of them, reflecting the large number of chaste women in Huizhou. In the Huizhou gazetteers, it is discussed that many Huizhou women did not remarry because they belonged to elite lineages, and even if their husbands died, Huizhou women as mothers of sons enjoyed a high status in the lineage.

For example, Xu Fang, a Ming survivor, once wrote a biography for a widowed woman named Huang, who lived in Huizhou for more than 50 years. Huang was of noble birth; she had been filial to her parents since she was a child and was proficient in ancient female craftsmanship. She married Wang Xuan, a native of Xiuning, Huizhou, at sixteen, but her husband died when she was less than thirty. The husband's younger brother adopted his son to Huang as her son, and Huang took great care to raise the son, honor her husband's parents, and manage various household chores at home. After the death of her husband's father, Huang, as the eldest daughter-in-law, took on the burden of taking care of the entire lineage so that everyone in the family respected her[10].For another example, in the case of Wang Duo in the Huizhou local gazetteers, his mother raised her son, Wang Duo, independently after her husband's death, educated him, and let him take the imperial examination. Her son Wang Duo eventually passed the examination and became a famous scholar in the southeast.[11]

V. Conclution

In summary, the chastity of women in the Ming and Qing dynasties can be explained from the level of the Qing state by the implementation of the national system of Jing Biao and the adherence to traditional Confucian morality, and from the level of the Ming survivors, the narrative of the Chaste Maiden contains a record of the Ming survivors' insights into the country's turmoil during the Ming and Qing dynasties, their memories of the Manchu invasion of the Central Plains, and allusions to their own allegiance to the Ming dynasty and their mockery of those who surrendered to the Qing dynasty. On the lineage level, the chaste women's chaste behavior is praised, and encouraging them to "keep their widows and raise their offspring" is as great for the lineage as the act of loyalty to the emperor, and was praised by the literati of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

[6] Li, Weizhen. *Da mi shan fang ji : 134 juan, mu lu 2 juan (120)*. Jinan: Qi Lu shu she, 1997.
[7] Li, Weizhen. *Da mi shan fang ji : 134 juan, mu lu 2 juan (120)*. Jinan: Qi Lu shu she, 1997.
[8] Wu Guo Lun,Fan Zhen Dong Xu Gao,juan2.
[9] Shi, Guozhu, and Chengyao Xu. *She Xian zhi*. Tai 1 ban. Taibei Shi: Cheng wen chu ban she, 1975.
[10] Xu, Fang, Shuhui. Huang, and Xiaofeng. Yin. *Ju yi tang ji*. Di 1 ban. Shanghai Shi: Hua dong shi fan da xue chu ban she, 2009,P305.
[11] Duan, Yucai, and Zhenfang. Xue. *Qing dai Hui ren nian pu he kan*. Di 1 ban. Hefei: Huang Shan shu she, 2006, P721.

© 2024 Global Journals