

Womens virginity and fidelity sociology essay



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Compare and contrast the significance of the concept 'women's virginity and fidelity' between the Qing Dynasty and Contemporary China, with an attempt to analyse the causes of different attitudes and behaviours in these 2 different eras.

Abstract

This study focuses on the Chinese women's chastity, especially in the area of Virginity and Fidelity. The comparison and contrast between Qing Dynasty and Contemporary China is examined, with an attempt to find out what possible causes had led to the different perspectives on women's chastity.

Qing is regarded as an idol of women's chastity in the entire Chinese history. However, it seemed that the modern youth tend to care less about women's virginity and fidelity. Women seemed no longer devote their entire lives to serve their husbands and in-laws. Apart from the changes in the regions of culture, globalization, and education, the historical progress cannot be ignored as well as governmental policies

Introduction

With the emergence of the first sex museum for women in China, the perception of sex has begun to attract more attentions of Chinese people (China Daily, 2008). Meanwhile, the roles women played over centuries have vitally contributed to the historical progress of sex. Since ancient China, women are often regarded as a property of men in the patriarchal society (Jaschok and Miers, 1994). According to Marx and Engels (1985), a patriarchal husband "...sees in his wife a mere instrument of production of prostitution both public and private" (1848: 101). Nevertheless, accompanied by complex causes, women increasingly gain more rights and equalities in the relationship with men in contemporary China. That is, in comparison with the women's strict virtue in the old days of China, Qing Dynasty in particular, Modern Chinese women as well as men tend to be more open and unfastened to the idea of virginity and fidelity (Ko, Haboush and Piggott, 2003; China Daily, 2003; America Online, 1995; Zhou, 1989).

However, many have argued that the root of women's chastity is still solid to convert in China nowadays (People's Daily, 2003). There are two remarkable cases that emerged more lately, which to a great extent explain the conflicting value of women's chastity in modern China. A recent report (Richburg, 2010) demonstrated that there is a growing trend of "hymen restoration" of Chinese women, which they could return to the virgin by the surgical procedure. Similarly, a considered cheaper and easier way of being a "pretended virgin" is popular and well taken as well as the hymen restoration surgery. According to Gu (2011), the "artificial hymen" is appeared as a little piece of semi-transparent tissue that "you put this into

the vagina, it'll dissolve and expand. Have sex in about 20 to 30 minutes, and you'll 'bleed'".

As a modern Chinese woman, the movement of women's right draws my attention. I am particularly interested in the area of women's chastity, which on one hand is assumed to have a great progress in contrast to Qing dynasty. In regard to the factors that had brought to this evolution, it is hypothesized that apart from the ideological change of the significance of women's chastity, several effects such as the development of technology, governmental policies, education, globalization, and media have likewise led to the different attitudes and behaviours during these two different eras; and on another hand, it is believed that to a certain extent, the attitudes towards women's chastity in Qing dynasty have impacted on modern China.

As a consequence, I will focus on the comparison of the significance of the concept of women's virginity and fidelity in Qing Dynasty and Contemporary China, mainly by looking at the two periods of women: pre-marriage and post-marriage. Moreover, several major causes of different attitudes and behaviours in these two different eras will also be discussed respectively. Due to the limitation of time and condition, and the sensitivity of the research topic, the investigation is conducted inside the university campus. Four groups will be studied in order to see the differences between different genders and generations: UNNC girls, UNNC boys, their mothers, and their fathers. In addition, the research of Qing dynasty will be taken place mostly in the review of literatures.

Literature Review

The literature review will take the progress of the significance of the concept of women's chastity as a whole and continuing process. Thus, not only Qing dynasty and Contemporary China will be examined, the period (1900-2000) between Qing dynasty and Contemporary China is also important due to the fact that it had vital contributions to the development of women's right, which eventually led to the understanding of women's chastity in present China. The following reviews will be ordered generally according to the chronological sequence, and mainly focus on the Qing and the Republican China due to the limited recent researches on Modern Chinese women's chastity.

2. 1 Qing Dynasty

The traditional concept of chastity is tightly linked to the ideology of patriarchy. As a property of men in the patriarchal society, women's value was merely to breed the progeny and to satisfy men in sexuality. In order to assure the purity of the blood, the strict demand on chastity was therefore emerged. The traditional chastity devoted itself to two sections: 'virgin' before marriage, and 'be faithful to one's husband unto death' after marriage (Li, 2006; Zhou, 2003).

As the ideology of cultural expression and the foundation of the family system in imperial China, Confucianism is generally the essential ideology of female virtue in Late Imperial China. Particularly the concept of filiality (xiao) and fidelity (jie) have had great impacts on Qing Dynasty (Ko and Haboush and Piggott, 2003). A good example is the foot binding in Qing which

according to Mackie (1996), the actual purpose was to ensure women's fidelity. The so-called chastity cult, a way for women to demonstrate their ultimate moral responsibility to the patriline into which they married, was in the position of domination in Qing by honouring two female virtues: purity, similar to fidelity (jie), and martyrdom (commonly regarded as lie). Jie mainly referred to absolute fidelity and sexual purity to one husband, in which women remained their lifelong devotion to serve the husband's family. Compared to jie, lie was more towards the absolute commitment to fidelity and sexual purity often end up with death or suicide by the expected requirement of self-sacrifice. That is, there were usually merely two choices, both ending in misery for women or even young girls at the period: pain in death or suffering in life (Ko and Haboush and Piggott, 2003).

However, in contrast of the widespread phenomena in early Qing which promoted both martyrdom and fidelity, the idea of fidelity seemed to be more preferable since the mid-Qing due to the expanded acceptance of filiality to husband's parents. Namely, widows were encouraged to fulfil their primary obligation- to serve parents-in-law and to raise the heirs (ibid). Yet, many had chosen to follow their husbands in death after accomplishing their expected duties (ibid). Theiss (2004) argues that women's chastity was often related to the human dignity in terms of "being a person". In other words, majority of them found themselves no longer being a person in which they were offended even via slight harassments such as flirtation. As a consequence, numerous women were recorded chastity suicide during Qing.

That is, women's self-awareness to the concept of chastity would lead to the path of decease (ibid). Except for the initial desire which was aiming to

reveal a woman's morality and humanity as a woman (Theiss, 2004; Ko and Haboush and Piggott, 2003), there were other existing 'outside' factors that have indirectly resulted in women's chastity. On one hand, governmental policies such as encouragement, promotion, and punishment were considered as the principal elements of the flourish of chaste women in Qing Dynasty (Ko and Haboush and Piggott, 2003). For example, the penalty for women who commit adultery was way severe than for men (Brown, 1952). On the other hand, social pressure as well as education also impressively affected women's behaviours. In addition, widows might earn particular advantages, social respects and family honour, for instance (Ko and Haboush and Piggott, 2003).

Apart from the possible causes that Ko and Haboush and Piggott (2003) discussed, Theiss (2004) further extends the range of potential motivations leading to female suicide in Qing. Firstly, family's attitude was crucial. The husbands or family members, especially in-laws, who refused or failed to report and express the outrages such as the issues of sexual harassment on the women's behalf due to two major reasons: family reputation and the threat from offenders, to a large extent led to the desperation of women. As a result, they usually turned to seek death. Furthermore, it is widely believed that fictions and dramas to some extent had driven women into the faith of supernatural revenge. For example, becoming ghosts assured them to have power to return and punish those who had harmed them (ibid). Moreover, by rewarding as chastity martyrs might lead to the damage of harasser's family reputation (ibid).

Nonetheless, it seems that the idea of women's chastity might have been over-emphasized by historians. Theiss (2004) accentuated that despite Qing Dynasty's well-known chastity cult, not every woman was a fan of the female chastity. Plenty of women carried on adulterous affairs for years without the concern of their reputation. Additionally, according to her study, most rape victims including those who suffered extreme violence or gang rapes did not commit suicide (ibid).

It is argued that even though some women were willing to stay chaste after their husbands' death, the facts of financial problem often brought them back to reality and accept the remarriage. Sommer (2000) points out that the chastity was indeed unaffordable for many widows in Qing. They usually were willing to remarry quickly in the attempt of collecting enough capital to liquidate the debts of her former husband, or even to finance his interment. In other words, a widow might trade herself with the bride-price to her new husband in order to settle outstanding debts before the marriage. However, it is not guaranteed that those widows with property which left by their deceased husband could follow their willingness for being a chaste widow. In fact, they might provoke the envy of in-laws those who wanted to take over the property, and often were forced to take the arranged remarriage.

Before the Xinhai Revolution, Chinese women only played a very marginal role (Lu, 1993), due to the reason that, as Raphals (1998) claimed, " They were eternally oppressed, powerless, passive, and silent". Yet, influenced by Western cultures and revolutions, a group headed by Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and Tan Sitong were gradually awakening to the issues of gender equity in the late Qing. They challenged the traditional idea of chastity and

yearned to change the roles women played at the time. Their attentions were mainly focused on the campaigns of women's education and the freedom of marriage (Zhou, 2003; Chen, 2001).

2. 2 The 20th Century

After Xinhai Revolution, the Confucianism was remained popular for a short period under the support of the Northern Warlords. Similar to Qing, the behaviours of chaste women were highly honoured and promoted by the government and society, until the first meaningful women's movement in Chinese history- May Fourth Movement (Chen, 2001; Zhou, 2003). It brought up the new concept of women's chastity, which is under the condition of the true love, and the equality between the sexes (Li, 2006). Influenced by the "Sex Revolution" at the period in the Western World, intellectuals such as the famous scholars LuXun and HuShi, severely criticized the traditional view of chastity in 3 ways: morality, love, and governmental policies (Chen, 2001). Firstly, LuXun (1918) claimed that it is immoral to demand women's chastity. "Fidelity and martyrdom are the malformed moralities that aim to oppress and befool women", he clarified, "Women and Men are equal...morality is meant for both men and women...men cannot require women for things they don't even do". Hushi (1918) also pointed out that it is immoral to ask women to obey the chastity while men were allowed to be involved with concubines and prostitutes.

Secondly, chastity could not be considered as an existence without love. As HuShi pointed out, chastity was an attitude between husbands and wives; it is willingness rather than a compulsion. Thus, he indicated that for the

women who do not love their husband, usually were the victims of arranged marriage, it is not their obligation to follow the fidelity and martyrdom for their un-chaste husbands. In addition, Hushi also questioned women's behaviour of committing suicide after being raped. He argued that they did not break their chastity and dignity because the rape is occurred by force not willingness. As a result, he suggested that the society should not look down on the raped women, and respect the brave performance of those people who married un-virgins or as un-virgins.

Thirdly, it was brutal and inappropriate for government to promote chaste women. It is suggested that it is a widow's interest to preserve chastity or remarry, others should not intervene (Chen, 2001). The May Fourth indeed to a great extent enhanced the progress of women's chastity, however, due to the limitations of Chinese history and society, the New Chastity was merely accepted by several radical intellectuals. Although it seemed that there were minority of women got rid of the traditional chastity, the majority, and even to the entire society were still affected by the traditional chastity. During the era, the New Chastity was barely theoretical rather than practice (Chen, 2001; Li, 2006). Apart from the contributions from the open-minded scholars, globalisation, media, and mass-culture indirectly helped to bring women's chastity to a new level. For example, the widespread of the translated books which were originally written by foreigners such as the Japanese author Akiko Yosano (1878–1942) and her work (Chen, 2001).

After the May Fourth Movement, more attentions were paid on women's liberation. Since the establishment of the Republic China, significant efforts were made by Chinese government in improving women's status. Through

legislations, more legal rights in education, marriage, and property were offered for women (Zhou, 2003).

The Communist Party of China (CPC) has brought women's status to a new level after their victory in 1949, especially under the Mao regime. Mao promoted the equal rights and personal dignity between sexes, and contributed to 3 important revolutionary changes for women: the Marriage Law of 1950s ensured the freedom of marriage and divorce; the Election Law of PRC of 1953 granted women's right to vote as well as men; and the equality of rights between men and women in terms of possessing or inherit property. It is believed that the by 1958, 16 million Chinese women were able to read, while before 1949, only 10% of women were literates. Furthermore, CPC encouraged women to participate in social production, which women gained more capitals in both economic and social aspects (ibid). It is also worth mentioning that prostitution and concubine have been out of law since the CPC came to power (ibid). Consequently, with the basic conditions, Chinese " Women's awakening consciousness" began to play as an important role in the post-Mao era (Li, 1994: 299). In addition, Zhou (2003) stated that another pre-condition of women's liberation is the financial independence of women, in which they had no longer need to fully rely on their husbands.

People's Republic of China (PRC) gradually shifted their concentration from the outer effects to the inner effects in the respect of women's liberation. According to Zhou (2003: 69), the Fourth World Conference on women's right was hosted by China in 1995. It includes "... the rights to freedom of thought, conscience religion and belief, and participation on the basis of equality in all

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eliminate all forms of discrimination against women; promotes women's economic independence; and ensure women's equal access to economic resources, including science and technology, vocational training, information, communication, and markets".

Zhou (1989) presents the dilemmatic situation for young women in the area of virginity and premarital sex in China in the late 1980s. Although the traditional views placed a high value on female virginity and deprecate premarital sex, young people now seem to have more opportunities to explore both love and sex, with the introduction of the new idea of romantic love accompanied by the growing social acceptance of close interactions between women and men. According to Zhou's research in 1985, which has taken place in China, most of the young men had claimed their expectation of a virgin wife. Moreover, in rural China, nearly all the male and female peasants came to an agreement that in a love relationship, virginity was still considered to be the most valuable treasure for women. Nevertheless, the rate of premarital sexual intercourse was increasing rapidly in the present China in spite of still-existing traditional values. Several reasons can be considered for the further understanding: social acceptance, education, and the support of young men's parents. It was agreed that most women have experienced the psychological pressures of a great dilemma in the selection between remaining a virgin and satisfying their boyfriends, but increasingly, women surrendered their resistance to the strategically emotional persuasion of their boyfriends (ibid).

In terms of extramarital affairs which are popular nowadays in China, Thompson (1984) declared that either mere emotional or sexual involvement

with someone other than one's spouse can be counted as extramarital affairs. According to Schwartz and Rutter (1998), all perspectives on gender differences in sexuality were divided into two dichotomized groups: traditional versus feminist. Traditional biosocial theories who reifying the biological distinctions between men and women, attempt to justify men's promiscuous behaviours: by maximizing the partners in order to inseminate the possible largest amount of women, men can somehow show their masculinity; whereas women would maximize their births for the purpose of holding onto the relationship. In opposition of the traditional perspectives, it is asserted by feminist perspectives that sexuality discrepancies between the genders are socially constructed. In this point of view, similar to men, women will tend to maximize their partners if the conditions allow them (ibid).

2. 3 Contemporary China

In Li's work (2006), she divides the present views of chastity in China into 3 categories: love-ism, utilitarianism, and hedonism. Firstly, love-ism chastity, which was first brought up during the May Fourth Movement, means sex with the motivation of love. A research about the reasons of premarital sex, which organised by in 2004, mainly surveyed on the contemporary Chinese youth (age 20-30), in which most of them went to the universities. The result shows that for the women who had premarital sex experiences, 31. 1% of them indicated that they did it in order to enhance the love in relationships, while 24. 8% and 28. 6% for the purposes of curiosity and 'want to keep their boyfriends' respectively. Other 15. 5% were claimed to have other reasons.

From the research it is obvious that love-ism chastity is the mainstream concept of chastity nowadays in China (Zhou, 2006).

Secondly, utilitarianism chastity is usually referred to the sex for benefits, such as the social phenomenon of prostitution and concubine (ibid). Thirdly, in regard of hedonism chastity, sex is often involved with either the physical or the psychological pleasure, or both. In the contemporary society, hedonism chastity is more likely the performance of simply physical pleasure (ibid). A recent study emphasizes that among the 40% of netizens who had experience on cyber love, nearly half of them did it on the purpose of one night stand (Xu, 2005).

There are 4 main causes of the 3 categories of chastity. In the first place, the highly promotion of socialist market economy not only has vital contribution on the economy, but also in the area of politics, ideology, and morality. On one way, the commodity economy leads to the arousal of the sense of equality, which challenges the traditional idea of chastity, and women start to chase personal happiness. Therefore the love-ism chastity emerged. On another way, the commodity economy also arisen accompanied with hedonism and mammonism which directly link to the hedonism chastity and utilitarianism chastity (Zhou, 2006).

Secondly, the rapid development of technologies, particularly the medical technology, popularizes the ways of contraception, and makes the abortion safer and more convenient. Hence, the concerns about illegitimate child were reduced, and eventually provide advantages for hedonistic sex. Women seemed to be the best beneficiary, which the pregnancy once was one of the

most fears to have premarital sex. As a consequence, women can pay more attention on love rather than physical elements, which to some extent promote the formation of love-ism chastity (ibid).

Culture aspect is probably one of the most essential factors. Although it seems that the traditional perspectives of chastity had lost its position in present society, however, in rural areas, villages in particular, it is still prevails. Moreover, the modern culture affects the modern youth in the way that they think it is their right and choice to choose their lifestyle such as cohabitation. Additionally, the Western culture such as the idea of 'sexual freedom' and 'sexual liberation' break the mysticism of sexuality, and attempt to achieve the sexual equality. Thus, the viewpoint of sex is changed. For the modern youth, love is not only spiritual and material, but also physical. Sex is certainly a part of love, and it aid to promote love. It is therefore nonsense to limit the sex. More importantly, it is believed by the youth that premarital sex is a positive behaviour in which it is a vital path to know a person and helping to make decisions on selecting the partner for life (ibid).

Last but not least, social control gives the green light to the multiplex conceptions of chastity. For example, the Marriage Law forbids the married people cohabit with others. Nevertheless, it is lack of the specific explanation on penalty and punishment. Laws can be such unfastened about extramarital cohabitation, do not even have to mention about premarital cohabitation and one night stand (ibid). Furthermore, in the present days, people care less about the things which not related to them, especially in the beneficial way. In this case, the shortening of social opinion looses the social

psychological stress and reduces the restraint of people's behaviour. In addition, the morality in China has change notably on the impact of the West (ibid). A relatively recent survey based on 2063 undergraduates in 18 universities in Shanghai, shows their attitudes on premarital cohabitation: 89. 5% in total believe that it is 'understandable if the motivation is love', and 'it is inappropriate to over concern other people's issues'; while only 9. 2% of them think that it is 'a moral degenerate' (Xu and Wang, 2002).

Methodology

In order to facilitate the research and discover more information on this area, two methodologies were utilised for different purposes. Literature analysis is applied through literature reviews, aiming to find out the significance of the concept of Chinese women's chastity in Qing dynasty, since the era is too remote to be testified. In the meantime, questionnaires were set up in attempt to study the perception of women's virginity and fidelity in contemporary China. Additionally, both literature analysis and questionnaire are included in order to better understand the condition and situation of women's chastity the 20th century, mainly Republican China.

The questionnaire is probably one of the most effective means to testify the hypothesis which was mentioned in the introduction, and to find out some other interesting information relevant to the topic but which is not anticipated in the early stages. Regarding to the sample of research, 140 surveys were required in total which divided by genders and generations. On one hand, 70 UNNC undergraduate students, 35 females and 35 males respectively, were selected randomly and selectively, which in the way it can represent as many opinions as possible, and reducing bias with maximum

efforts (Strugis, 2008). As the attention of the questionnaire is focused on Modern China, and the university students can be considered as the representative groups of educated Chinese young people, therefore the candidates of the research are all selected among the Chinese students in UNNC. Moreover, the division of male and female represent the 'outside' and 'inner' factors. Apart from the self-conscious of women, men's attitude will affect women's understanding of chastity. Hence, it is crucial to include both of the two genders.

On another hand, 70 copies of survey for parents, 35 females as well as 35 males, were sent along with the ones meant for students. It is interesting to compare and contrast the ideas on women's virginity and fidelity between the parents and their children, which they are respectively representative for the new generation that surrounded by the global environment, high-level education, widespread mass media, and developed technology; and the older generation who grew up in a period when China was relatively more closed to the outside world, and the progresses of technology and education are limited. Furthermore, the older generation may also be able to demonstrate the view of women's chastity of Republican China. Through the comparison of the two different generations can provide the possible causes that might lead to the different perspectives on women's virginity and fidelity.

For the purpose of not making the candidates take too long when filling the questionnaire, the questionnaire is designed with two sections. There are 15 multiple choices and 3 open questions for UNNC girls, and 7 closed questions and 1 open question for UNNC boys. The mothers' one is similar to their

daughter's while the fathers' one is similar to their son's. Overall, parents' ones contain two extra questions asking their age gap and education level, which seemed unnecessary for the UNNC students since their age gap and education level are confirmed: undergraduate. It is ensured that each survey takes no more than 15 minutes to finish it, without disturbing their study and work.

According to Simmons (2008), pilot study is important with its function that it helps to refine the questionnaire. Thus, the initial samples were sent to several friends of mine before the actual distribution of the questionnaires, in order to examine the questionnaires critically with their objective points of view. As a result, some weaknesses of the original questionnaires were found. Such as the unclear instructions and questions, and some other possible option of answers that some candidates may want to choose are left out (ibid).

Qualitative method was chosen in the first place, however, with the trial on few random UNNC students which I found on the High-Street, and one of the aunts who works in Canteen, I discovered their unwillingness of answering such sensitive questions, especially to a stranger. As an alternative, I chose questionnaire since it is less awkwardness to answer the questions. In the beginning, I sent the questionnaires to all UNNC undergraduates with the postscript of " for Chinese Students only". Nevertheless, I found little response, and within the received questionnaires, most of them skip the sensitive questions such as 'are you a virgin'.

In order to maximise the response rate and the facticity, I managed to upload the questionnaires online, in which it is completely anonymous and make it more comfortable and more convenient for the candidates to do the surveys. Yet, there was a misgiving about the people other than UNNC undergraduates might answer the online questionnaires and eventually affect the result. As a consequence, I locked the questionnaires with password, and sent the four addresses of online questionnaires and the password to all UNNC undergraduates via email: UNNC girl, UNNC boy, their mother, and their father respectively. Also, in the email, I required the students not only to enter the relevant website, but also forward the online surveys to their parents. Additionally, the questionnaires for UNNC Undergraduates were written in English, while the ones for their parents were written in both Chinese and English.

Findings and Discussions

4. 1 Summary of Literature Analysis

As what the literature analysis manifested, the demand of women's virginity before marriage and the fidelity after marriage was extremely strict in Qing.

Due to the traditional ideology of Confucianism, women were merely one of men's properties in the patriarchal society. The popularized chastity cult played a vital role in Qing by honouring two female virtues: purity (jie), and martyrdom (lie). The former one referred to the sexual purity to one husband and the absolute lifetime fidelity to serve the in-laws; whereas, the latter one was more towards the absolute commitment to jie, which required more self-sacrifice and often end up with death. Numerous women were recorded

chastity suicide during Qing. Several major causes of women's chastity will be analysed in the following paragraphs.

First of all, women's chastity was significant in terms of human dignity. Majority of them felt failed of being a person after being offended even through slight harassments such as flirtation. Moreover, governmental policies highly promoted the chaste women, and severely punish the considered un-chaste women such as the women accused of adultery. In addition, social pressure and education had a great contribution as well. Finally, widows could obtain particular advantages. Social respects and family honour, for instance.

Nonetheless, it is argued that the chaste suicides in Qing might have been over-emphasized. On one hand, there were a large number of women who carried on adulterous affairs without concerning their reputation. On the other hand, most rape victims did not search the path of death during the Qing era.

For the women who were willing to become chaste widows after the death of their husband, monetary issues often stopped them from doing so. In order to collect enough money to liquidate the debts of the dead husband, or to finance his interment, a certain number of women accepted the remarriage. In other words, they traded themselves with the bride-price to their new husbands. Additionally, the widows with property which left by their deceased husband might be forced to take the arranged remarriage by the envy in-laws who wanted to take over the property.

In the late Qing, a group of open-minded intellectuals who were influenced by the Western culture, had brought up the idea of gender equity, and defied the traditional chastity. Yet, their focuses were mainly on the campaigns of women's education and the freedom of marriage.

4. 2 Questionnaire Summary

The total valid responses were 79, including 33 female undergraduates, 22 male undergraduates, 13 mothers, and 11 fathers. It is a satisfactory rate of response, which reached 56%. More than half of the