The Chaste and the Licentious: Female Sexuality and Moral Discourse in Ming and Early Qing China

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The three centuries of European “early modern” history stretch across China’s last two dynasties, the Ming (1368–1644) and the Qing (1644–1911), commonly termed the “late imperial.” One of the defining features of this period lies squarely in the gendered terrain of sexuality: women’s sexuality, not men’s, was thrust into the moral discourse unlike at any other time. The symbolic power of female sexuality was inscribed in two opposing cultural icons: the chaste and the licentious.

Few women received the level of public attention conferred on chaste widows (jiefu) and faithful maidens (zhennü), young women who pledged a lifetime of fidelity to or committed suicide for their deceased fiancés. Such attention was owing to an all-out effort by the social elite and the state that promoted them. Chaste women were the subjects of commemorative writing by Confucian scholars and were recipients of awards and recognition from local and central government. Hundreds of thousands of chaste widows and faithful maidens were honored through jingbiao (court testimonials), with the state-financed building of stone arches and memorial shrines in their honor. Jingbiao was not a new institution, but it was in late imperial times that the jingbiao awardees began to be predominantly chaste widows and faithful maidens.

While the chaste woman was enshrined, literarily and symbolically, social tolerance for the remarriage of widows slipped to a new low. The Confucian elite cast remarried widows in a negative light. Huang Zuo (1490–1566), for example, decried women who “see their husbands as servants, their homes as post houses [meaning temporary stopping places].
They wear mourning dresses [for their deceased husbands] in the morning and enjoy intimacy with their new husbands in the evening.” Here Huang was not affirming remarriage that took place after the mourning ritual for a deceased husband was completed; rather, he was conveying his utter disgust for remarriage in general. A remarried woman, Huang Zuo implies, was not a worthy wife to begin with.

The opposite of the chaste woman, however, was not the remarried woman but the licentious woman (yinfu). Stories about wanton women proliferated in late Ming vernacular literature, which created arguably the most notorious “licentious woman” in Chinese history, Pan Jinlian. Even before her marriage, Pan had already developed a reputation for “stealing men (from their wives).” Her illicit sexual relationships led to her liaison with Xi Mengqing, a rich, handsome merchant whose unmatched sexual energy was enhanced by his sexual techniques. Pan killed her husband with poison before entering into Xi Mengqin’s household to be one of the four concubines Xi had in addition to his wife. There, she continued sexual trysts with other men in the family compound, including servants and Xi Mengqing’s son-in-law.

It is important to note that both types—the chaste and the licentious—were only popularized or defined in the late imperial period. To be sure, female chastity was a time-honored ideal. However, until the thirteenth century, the remarriage of widows occurred commonly even among the elite. Likewise, early records about licentious women were scarce. There was no shortage of “bad women” in pre-Ming classic, didactic, or popular literature, but few of them were painted as sexually devious and evil. The closest to a Ming-Qing yinfu type was perhaps the “state-toppler,” the sensual woman who captivated a ruler to such a degree that he neglected his official duties, causing the state to decline or collapse, as conventional history has it. There is a crucial difference between a state-toppler and a yinfu, however. Although the state-toppler’s destructive power was based on her sexuality, she was principally the subject of male sexual indulgence, not herself a vicious pursuer of sexual pleasure.

It is also noteworthy that there was no male equivalent of the yinfu. For example, in the late Ming literary accounts of illicit sexual relationships, a lustful man was not termed a “licentious man.” The male counterpart of
yinfu is instead called jianfu, or the “adulterous man.” The difference in terminology betrays a double standard: a man was condemned for his adulterous act, but was not subject to the same degree of demonization as a woman would be for sexual misconduct. The term encodes a critique of his action, not his fundamental character.

Whether demonizing the licentious or eulogizing the chaste, Confucian writers and the state brought female sexuality into the center of their moral discourse. In this discourse, sexual purity was presented not merely as a virtue for women; it was a signifier of female virtue in its entirety. Biographical accounts typically describe chaste women as not only chaste but also filial, proper, and industrious. On the other hand, the licentious woman embodied the ultimate female evil. Take Pan Jinlian as an example: she was depicted as murderous, abusive, and manipulative. One sixteenth-century story categorized four types of bad women who would face punishment in the nether world: the licentious (yinfu), the jealous (dufu), the unfilial (nifu), and the cruel (henfu). But a yinfu was most likely to be depicted as at once jealous, unfilial, and cruel. As yinfu became the symbol of ultimate female evil, the term was even used to refer to any “bad” women. Calling someone “yinfu” simply became a convenient way to cast that woman in the most negative light.

Female sexuality, moreover, was a foil against which not only women’s but also men’s moral quality was gauged and critiqued. The chaste woman was a standard reference in the moral commentaries of male scholars disheartened by the moral decline of their own gender. The act of a man who switched to serve a different ruler was allegorically called “remarriage.”

Writing on chaste women was often intended to make a political or moral point. This comment made by Ming dynasty writer Wu Daozhi is representative:

I often see men studying Confucian teaching (rushi) who talk about ancient kings and humanity and integrity. Looking at their verses and lyrics, all are about sacrificing their lives to save the endangered [ruler or empire] and following the examples of the martyrs to fulfill their duties. However, when such times come, they wait for the chance to save themselves and use hundreds of methods to escape. None of them upholds the virtues of humanity and integrity and rouses
himself to take risks in dangerous situations. So heroic were these women! They were born and grew up in curtained rooms, and did not read classics and histories. Yet, in the end they glorified their mothers’ instructions and did not bring shame to their parents.10

In these chaste women’s outstanding fortitude, men’s weakness was exposed. Chaste women put disloyal men to shame.

The metaphorical power of the chaste female is on full display in such poignant language. Here, the intriguing question is, why was it female sexuality, not that of men, that took on such cultural significance? The question may be approached from two perspectives. First, from the sixteenth century, China ushered in a period of rapid economic growth, leading to what one scholar calls “confusions of pleasure.”11 Traditional social and gender norms eroded, while conspicuous consumption came into vogue, and the family and sexual order were challenged. Making the chaste woman a role model and the licentious woman a cultural villain represented the elite’s response, fighting “degrading” trends in the hopes of shoring up the Confucian social and family order. Second, and more importantly, Confucian ideology had long constructed a parallel relationship between female chastity and male political loyalty. A loyal subject should not ally himself with a different lord, just as a chaste woman should not remarry. In late imperial China, this conventional analogy found special resonance among the high-minded Confucian elite, who were, on the one hand, battling perceived moral corruption within their own ranks, and on the other hand, confronting the gloomy reality of dynastic collapse. Twice China was conquered by non-Han people: by the Mongols in the thirteenth century and by the Manchus in the seventeenth century. As political and national crises loomed large, chaste women became a powerful rhetorical weapon through which the Confucian elite gave vent to their frustrations and expressed their moral conviction as they sought to retain moral supremacy and cultural distinction.12

Notes

1. Since the first century B.C.E, governments under different dynasties more or less regularly selected so-called “filial sons, virtuous grandsons, faithful women, and


4. Pan was first portrayed in *Water Margin* (*Shui hu zhuang*) and later made into a fully fledged character in *Plum in Golden Vase* (*Jin ping mei*). Both novels are considered masterpieces in Chinese literary history.

5. The earliest example of a “state-toppler” appeared in a Han text, *Biographies of Women* (*Lienü zhuang*), by the famous scholar Liu Xiang (77?–6 BCE).

6. In the late Ming vernacular novel, a *jianfu* is paired frequently with *yinfu* to form the phrase “the adulterous man and the licentious woman (*jianfu yinfu*).” For examples, see Feng Menglong, *Xingshi hengyan* (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1994), 175, and 747.


8. For example, see *Jin Pin Mei* (*Plum in Golden Vase*), chaps. 7 and 8.


10. *Xiangfu xian zhi* (Gazetteer of Xiangfu county [Henan province], 1739), 12/47b–48a.


12. The image of the faithful maiden, in particular, became a pivotal symbol of moral integrity and political loyalty, and was fiercely used by the traumatized elite to express various emotions and moral conviction. See Lu, *True to Her Word*, 40–44, 49–67.