

*Zhu Xiaojing**

Subjective factors of female chastity in Huizhou in Ming and Qing times

ABSTRACT: The chastity behaviors of women were especially outstanding in Huizhou in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Much study has analyzed the external factors of this phenomenon, neglecting the internal factors. There were complex motivations for the chastity behavior. This paper mainly discusses the following subjective factors: adherence to chaste ethics, responsibilities for the family, the predicament of life, and the hope for a good reputation. Driven by the external and internal factors, the chastity behavior became a kind of trend in Huizhou. Thus, the chaste women in Huizhou were victims of religious concepts of chastity.

KEYWORDS: chastity; women; Ming–Ching Times; Huizhou; subjective factors

Introduction

In the Ming and Qing dynasties, female chastity was most popular in China. The chastity behaviors of women were extremely salient in Huizhou. The gazetteers of Huizhou allotted a large amount of space to Biographies of Famous Ladies. There were 70 volumes in Gazetteers of Wuyuan, of which 14 were about “Famous Ladies”, accounting for one-fifth of the works. The Gazetteers of Xiuning recorded that there were as many as 2200 chaste women in Xiuning, Anhui in the Qing Dynasty. The Chaste Lane that was built in 1905 in the south street of She county commended 65,078 chaste women in Huizhou.

Many scholars analyzed the reasons for the female chastity from different aspects. Zhou Zhiyuan (1997) listed the following factors: feudal

* Zhu Xiaojing. Lecturer of Shandong Institute of Business and Technology, Yantai, Shandong, China. E-mail: xiaojingkay@sina.com

commendation system, Neo Confucianism, the patriarchal clan system, the influence of the traditional customs of the local social and economic conditions and the women's social and economic status and so on. According to Chen Jiuru, the chaste behaviors were based on such elements as closed geographical environment, the advocacy of the feudal system, powerful patriarchal forces, and Neo Confucianism edification. However, all these account for the chaste behaviors from external factors. This paper aims to analyze this phenomenon from the internal factors. These subjective factors include adherence to chaste ethics, responsibilities for the family, the predicament of life, and the hope for a good reputation.

1. Adherence to chaste ethics

For the women in the old society, chastity ethics means maintaining chastity of body, namely, protecting the body against infringement. But in the traditional patriarchal Chinese society, women had to follow "father at home, husband after marriage, son after the death of her husband", and had no independence. So the chastity of women is not for themselves. Chastity is not only a mode of behavior, but also a kind of moral practice. The adherence to chaste ethics has two implications: the chastity of body and protection of marriage.

In the age when people worshipped female chastity, women tried to maintain the virginity of their body, resisting any temptations. In their eyes, physical virginity was even more important than their lives.

In order to prevent body and reputation being tarnished, they adopted various ways. Some avoided all contacts with males. Some even closed themselves indoors, and cut off all connections with the outside world. Of the women who lived indoors, some lived upstairs, with water and food hanged by a rope up. If the appliance went wrong, they refused to have it fixed. Even when some disasters came, they would not move out.

In the Huizhou government records, there were frequent disasters of water and fire. However, when the disasters endangered life, many women who abided by the ethics of dogma ultimately died, because they refused to accept the timely help, fear of being ridiculed naked, or going against the etiquette.

Widows usually led a tough life. Physical illness was common for them. When some women had body diseases, they often procrastinated, especially when it happened to some hidden parts of their bodies. They refused medical treatment for fear of their own nudity in front of men.

A series of gender segregation etiquette formed during the Qin Dynasty. Chunyu Kun said: "Man and women didn't touch each other when passing or receiving." Mengzi agreed with him. The purpose of advocating gender segregation was to prevent the occurrence of extramarital sexual relations

between men and women, ensuring pure lineage relationship of Father and Son, in order to consolidate the patriarchal and patrilineal inheritance. The Book of Rites put the gender segregation into a series of operable daily behavior standards. For example, men and women didn't sit together; and women didn't have communications with their brothers-in-law.

This suggests that gender segregation etiquette within the family had been deeply embedded. However, "men and women could not communicate" was just "ethics" rather than "law". Following the ethics was a conscious action, and would not be enforced. In addition, the sex segregation etiquette was performed in the noble level and did not apply to ordinary people. Therefore, it was a kind of conscious behavior that chaste women avoided all contact with men in the Ming and Qing Dynasties in Huizhou.

In case their body and reputation might be violated, the chaste women could sacrifice everything to defend their chastity, even their lives. After the women's husband died, pursuing chastity became the focus of attention. People tended to make groundless speculation on the behaviors of the widow. If her reputation was slandered, or she thought rumors would tarnish her reputation, she often cost her life to show innocence or protect reputation from being insulted. Even after death, the chaste women did not want people close to their bodies, so most of the bodies were tightly sewn before the women committed suicide.

For married women, their chastity and martyrdom was essentially persistence and insistence to the engagement. In the traditional Chinese institution of marriage, the relationship between husband and wife did not end with the death of the spouse. Even if one of them was dead, the other still abided by the obligations. No marriage after the death of wife or husband became a kind of moral practice. In the Chinese traditional patriarchal society, males had the responsibility of descent. Men had to remarry after the death of his wife, childless, otherwise it was considered the greatest lack of filial piety. Therefore, for righteousness of Keeper of marriage, although there were mutual obligations between husband and wife, it was only the practice of female.

The women tended to keep the marriage relationship in a persistent way, adopting a variety of ways to prevent family members or outsiders forcing or inducing them to remarry. Many widows believed their presence lost its meaning after their husbands' death, in the absence of child and parents-in-law. So many widows chose to follow their husbands. Some even committed suicide with the children and parents alive. Even under the traditional concept, they had the survival conditions, but they chose martyrdom in the absence of any external pressure. This is based on the marriage commitment.

2. Responsibility for the family

For women in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it was a kind of moral ideal to follow only one husband. But after she really became a widow, it was not an easy thing to practice the moral ideal. Among the chaste women in the Ming and Qing dynasties, some established confidence in life, bearing the responsibilities for the family. They overcame various difficulties, undertaking many family obligations. In most cases, they shouldered the family responsibilities on their own will.

For a widow who lost her husband, only after completion of filial piety of children education, devotion to her parents-in-laws, family businesses in place of her deceased husband, did she complete the duty. Many of the Huizhou chaste women in Ming and Qing Dynasties overcame unimaginable difficulties, and undertook large family obligations under extremely difficult circumstances.

They not only served the filial piety of looking after the parents-in-law, upbringing and educating the kids, Huizhou chaste women sometimes had to raise their nephews and nieces, and even their grandchildren.

After the death of her husband, all internal and external affairs fell upon the widow. From the literature, Huizhou chaste women had to deal with such affairs as burying the husband, processing the funeral, worshipping, dealing with the debt, and participating in a variety of manual labor to maintain the basic family life. Due to family poverty, they tended to sell gold and silver jewelry and other assets to bury her husband.

Most men in Huizhou did business. After the husband died, the wife often had to deal with her husband's accounts. They tended to sell their assets to repay their husbands' debts.

After the death of the husbands, there was a lack of male labor force in the family. Many of the Huizhou chaste women not only engaged in sewing, textile, but also in firewood mowing, plowing the field and other heavy manual labor in order to earn a living. They become the main force to rely on.

It is because of their strong sense of family responsibility that the Huizhou chaste women decided to take on the task of looking after the old and the young, despite the difficulties. Therefore, the broken family was maintained and a large number of merchants appeared after the husbands died.

3. Escaping from a hard life

A Study of Female Suicide in Shandong, Zhejiang and Guangdong found female suicides in the Ming and Qing dynasties outnumbered those in previous dynasties in the developed provinces like Shandong, Zhejiang

and Guangdong. An absolute majority of the women were married martyrs. The social root of suicide is primarily determined by economic factors.

Ju-K'Ang Tien wrote a paper about the issue, believing the widow martyrdom was considered noble behavior for women's chastity in the Ming Dynasty. But in the point of view of people in the Qing Dynasty, widow martyrdom was actually more often driven by despair instead of chastity. Man Su'en pointed out that the very rigorous education that the Qing Dynasty girls received at an early age did not teach them to resist the spiritual and psychological pressure once they lived with a hostile or indifferent spouse. Nor did it teach them how to face the widow life in a society in which remarriage of upper class women was considered a shame. Thus, after their husbands' death, many widows were facing unprecedented pressure, not knowing how to relieve it. They had to commit suicide to get rid of this pressure. Suicide was the only alternative when facing the hard life and in this way the widows escaped from the real life.

Many Huizhou chaste women supported the broken family in extremely difficult situations, enduring great physical and psychological pain and overcoming various unimaginable difficulties. They had to protect themselves, raise parents-in-law, and educate their children, under tremendous pressure and burden. Not only did they lack the necessary financial resources and endure the hardships of living a life of deprivation, but also they often endured accusations and abuse from parents-in-law and other family members, humiliation from the local ruffians rogue, and constraints from Confucianism. Suicide is cruel, and is irresponsible for her own life. However, for many Huizhou chaste widows during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, a suicide perhaps was also a relief, compared with the long cold and lonely chastity life.

4. Desire for a good reputation

In Chinese traditional patriarchal society, women were isolated from the public domain. They had no opportunity to make contributions. Many men in the Ming and Qing Dynasties took up the official career and became well-known. Influenced by them, many women had the desire of a good reputation. But they had a great deal of psychological pressure, due to the contradiction between the desire and the lack of ways to realize it. This resulted in their deep anxiety, forcing them to build a bridge between reality and the ideal. In the Ming and Qing mainstream ideology, chastity system provided a way for women to obtain a good reputation. As long as she met the conditions of female chastity, she might get recognition from state and society so that she stayed in the historical memory of the state and society. Thus, many women in Huizhou of Ming and Qing Dynasties,

when it was appropriate, often carried out the practice of chastity without hesitation.

The desire of the Huizhou chaste women to have a good reputation was satisfied through their own practice in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. This also reached the expectations of the country. It was in this way that they made history.

Conclusion

When we examine the behavior of the Ming and Qing Huizhou chaste women, we should conduct a comprehensive study of their motivation. External factors are certainly an important driving force for their chastity behavior, but their subjective factors are particularly important. Gender inequality between men and women on the concept of chastity was long-established. With the right to speak, men provided women with a series of codes of conduct, so that every move of the women was constrained by the ethics and was taken into the social order as Mother, Wife and Daughter. The emergence of a large number of Huizhou chaste women is the outbreak of this long evolutionary process. It is a product of various factors. Under the influence of Neo female education, the idea of chastity in the Song and Ming Dynasties developed to an unprecedented degree, thoroughly enjoying popular support, and became the first rule of behavior of women. The idea intensified during the Ming and Qing dynasties through the commendation system and implementing mechanisms, a variety of recognition methods, chaste women role models, consistent guiding public opinion, coupled with the chase and blind obedience of the women. Chastity ideas became a kind of trend. Under the impact of this trend, hundreds of thousands of women either supported the family in a persistent and difficult way or sacrificed when their husbands died or they were faced against thugs. Although some chaste women won the glory, and some could obtain certain material benefits, they were the victims of the religious concept of chastity.

Huizhou chaste women were solitary at home from youth to old age, during which there were countless difficulties and hardships, and there was also some youthful restlessness and loneliness. They had to endure great physical and psychological pain, and stick to chastity and the belief of faithfulness, with patience and sacrifice. They strengthened ethics of social order in Huizhou, safeguarding the stability of Huizhou. They had to overcome unimaginable difficulties, to support the broken family. They maintained a complete clan organization and promoted the rise of the business in Anhui. The chastity arches erected in Huizhou showed the glory of that period. The chaste women maintained the continuation of the family and contributed to the prosperity of the society of Huizhou.

References

1. *Chen Jiuru*. Causes of woman chastity in Huizhou in Ming and Qing dynasties // Journal of Huainan Teachers Colledge, 2001, № 4. Pp. 44–45, 114.
2. *T'ien Ju'ang*. Male anxiety and female chastity: A Comparative Study of Chinese Ethical Values in Ming–Ch'ing Times. Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1988. Pp. 39–69.
3. *Man Su'en*. Women in the 18th century. Nanjing: Jiangsu People Press, 2005. P. 28.
4. *Tang Lixing*. Merchants and the Chinese modern society. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2003. Pp. 140–159.
5. *Zhou Zhiyuan*. The motivations of woman chastity in Huizhou in the Ming and Qing dynasties // Huizhou Social Science, 1997.