

A New Paradigm of the Study of Women's History and the View of History of the May 4th Movement: Comment on *Unswerving Ambition: The Virgin Phenomenon in the Ming and Qing Dynasties*

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Abstract:

The book *True to the Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China*, written by Professor Lu Weijing, an American scholar, is a highly representative achievement in the study of women's issues. This achievement attempts to construct the discourse system of describing the life of virginity and the history of Ming and Qing dynasties, reveals many disputes and contradictions behind the phenomenon of virginity, and puts forward some questions and criticisms on the traditional historical view that ancient Chinese women are passive and negative. However, it is also worth criticizing and questioning the writing purpose of opposing and overthrowing the view of the May 4th Movement, and the excessive emphasis on self and ethnicism exposed in the research, and disregarding social justice and social progress. Although the May 4th historical view has its obvious drawbacks, it attaches great importance to the value of human life and the meaning of existence, and always exudes rational brilliance in its adherence to the basic idea of anti-oppression and liberation.

Keywords: *Women, Historical view of the May 4th Movement, Marriage.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The chaste women who died for protecting her chastity or ready to die to preserve her chastity are the largest group of women in ancient China with exact records. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the number of chaste women, the strong atmosphere and the pain of behavior were far ahead of the generation. Virgin is a very special kind of chaste women in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, although the number of them is few, but they are the most controversial part, and it is also the research content concerned by female historians at home and abroad in recent 20 years. In 2012, Professor Lu Weijing, an American scholar, published the Chinese version of *Unswerving Ambition: The Virgin Phenomenon in the Ming and Qing Dynasties* (hereinafter referred to as *Unswerving Ambition*) in China. The description of virgin's emotion,

ideal and life course in *Unswerving Ambition* not only enriches the content of the study of virginity, broadens the horizon of the study of the history of women, but also provides a new paradigm for social group research. It is a highly representative achievement in the research of women's issues. However, it is also worth criticizing and questioning the writing purpose of opposing and overthrowing the view of the May 4th Movement, and the excessive emphasis on self and ethnicism exposed in the research, and disregarding social justice and social progress.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 A New Study of the Phenomenon of Virginity in *Unswerving Ambition*

It is the first new feature in *Unswerving Ambition* to attempt to construct the discourse system of describing the life of virgins and the history of Ming and Qing Dynasties. Firstly, Professor Lu Weijing attaches great importance to the analysis of the complex inner world of the virgin, making use of many historical texts to deeply analyze the virgin's understanding of their own role, identity and life significance, so that readers can understand the meaning of their choice of behavior and the rich emotional world from the self-examination of the virgin. Secondly, the author puts the study on the group of virgins under the background of the great narration of the social development and changes of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, believes that the phenomenon of virginity is an organic part of the process of historical change in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and the behavior of virginity has had an impact on many fields such as politics, culture, society and meaning form in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and comes to the conclusion that women are not on the edge of society at all. This systematic analytical perspective avoids the fragmentation of women's group research, and provides an analytical sample of women centered text writing for the academic community. Thirdly, although Professor Lu Weijing still had to take the historical materials of virgin deeds such as historical records, local chronicles and literati biographies written mainly by men as the basic materials, the author also took the poems written by virginity themselves as the core material to discuss the subjectivity, emotion and behavioral significance of virgins. At the same time, the author adopts the methods of juxtaposing the materials written by the author and reading and analyzing the historical materials from multiple angles, in order to get closer to the ideological and emotional world of virginity and offset the inherent gender bias in male writing. In this way, by carefully selecting the research content, determining the research angle of systematic analysis and using the historical materials selectively, the author takes the study of virginity as the starting point, links the phenomenon of virginity with the social development of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and constructs a grand narrative and discourse system of describing the history of virginity in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

It is the second new feature of *Unswerving Ambition* to reveal many disputes and contradictions behind the phenomenon of virginity. The appearance of the phenomenon of virginity is undoubtedly the result of many factors such as policy guidance, cultural inheritance, educational construction, environmental influence, social change, family edification and personal choice, which is also a conclusion confirmed by previous academic researches. But the valuable feature of *Unswerving Ambition* is that it not only admits that the above factors play an important role in the formation of virginity group, but also describes

virginity as a controversial complex of contradictions. Because Confucianism and social norms do not oppose the second engagement of unmarried women. Therefore, their behavior was generally opposed by their parents and brought the fiancée family into a very embarrassing situation. At the same time, the public discussion about whether the virgins conformed to the Confucian ethics and whether the virgins' appearances were legal or not was caused. The supporters called the virgins the moral models, while the opponents thought that they were the corpses who had defiled the Confucian ethics. Professor Lu Weijing's description of a series of contradictory problems on the phenomenon of virginity vividly highlights the main consciousness of the virgin and its role in the social development. It is quite successful to construct the "insignificant" story of the virgin as an organic part of the history of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and effectively brings a marginal group into the public view of people's grand narration of the history of the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

It is the third new feature of *Unswerving Ambition* to question and criticize some traditional historical viewpoints. Through the analysis and study of the phenomenon and behavior of virginity, Professor Lu Weijing holds that the virgin group has obvious initiative and goal orientation. With strong faith and firm will, they break through the family obstruction, walk on the road of life chosen by them and defend their values and dignity. The analysis from the angle of positive self-pursuit of virginity is in sharp contrast to the forced choice made by traditional viewpoint. On this basis, Professor Lu Weijing questioned the general view that Chinese ancient women were passive and negative and had no voice in their own marriage and life under the influence of the view of the May 4th Movement, and believed that women were not only controlled by historical forces, but also actors in the construction of culture and history in the late imperial period.

2.2 The Paradigm of "*Unswerving Ambition*" and the Disadvantages of the View of Women's History in the May 4th Movement

Since the late Qing Dynasty, China experienced a "great change that has never happened in three thousand years". The increasingly severe national crisis shook the intellectual stratum deeply, they linked the weak women with the weak China and believed that women "are the foundation of the world's weakness". The fierce May 4th Movement brought the discussion of "women's issue" to a climax, the topic of women's rights and women's liberation was widely spread, the concept of chastity and arranged marriage were regarded as the evidence of oppression of women in the old civilization, and the fierce criticism of the social relations oppressing human nature such as traditional social family and patriarchal system became the important content of the discussion of women's issue during the May 4th Movement. The discourse of the May 4th Movement had a far-reaching influence on the study of female history. Chen Dongyuan, the founder of the study of Chinese female history, once said in his classic work *The Life History of Chinese Women*: "Three thousand years of women's life has been excluded from the society by patriarchal clan organizations. Women hardly matter ^[1]. Chen Dongyuan's view of women as a marginalized and oppressed whole represents the keynote of the study of women's history for a long time.

Objectively speaking, the research paradigm of female history established by the May 4th Movement does have the drawbacks of theoretical explanation of mechanization, stylization and abstraction, and to some extent, there are also problems of exaggerating gender opposition and the degree of oppression and exploitation of ancient women, it is difficult to outline the whole life of ancient women and the unique state of different groups of women. However, the overseas Chinese women's history scholars represented by Lu Weijing uphold the writing purpose of opposing and overthrowing, completely ignoring the positive significance of the May 4th historical view in the study of women's history. In the conclusion, the *Unswerving Ambition* Writes: "A lot of discourses in the 20th century regard young women as silent and obedient victims, and this book refutes this view" ^[2]. Another famous American scholar, Gao Yanji, pointed out in the preface of *The Boudoir Master: The Culture of Talented Women in the South of the Yangtze River in the Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties*, made no secret that the works hope to rewrite the view of the May 4th historical view on the history of women's oppression ^[3].

Under the control of this writing purpose, Professor Lu Weijing tried to break the research paradigm of oppression-emancipation. She questioned women's "victim theory" and the traditional view that women were passive and negative and had and has no voice in marriage and life, and believed that chastity and obedience are the embodiment of their subjective choice and active pursuit of meaningful life. In this context, the traditional female image, which is passive, oppressed, liberated and marginalized, is portrayed by Professor Lu Weijing as a female image with complete subjectivity, independent pursuit of life significance, self-conscious maintenance of self-dignity, completely not on the edge of society, and construction of historical and cultural actors in the late empire.

It is undeniable that as far as the historical records are concerned, a large number of virgins are active, their will is tenacious, the attitude is determined and the manner is fierce, but the question is, in what context they adopted this kind of subject behavior. Even the author admits that the behavior of virgins should be understood from the cultural and socio-economic contexts of the time. The praise of the confucianists to the chastity widows, the emphasis of the society on the peculiar culture, the religious culture, the patriarchal family system, the female education and the custom of engagement in childhood are all the factors that influence the virgin behavior. In this way, the values and subjectivity of virgins do not come from their own perception of life and understanding of life, but from the catering and conversion to the mainstream values. They are actually the behavior subjects constructed, endowed and driven, rather than the real ideological subjects. Just as some scholars point out, "women's subjective initiative largely matches the demands of patriarchal society for women's control" ^[4]. The real control of virgin behavior is not their own thoughts but the social context, and what they sacrifice is their own life, and what they accomplish is the mainstream discourse. On the one hand, it emphasizes the social context, on the other hand, it emphasizes the subjectivity of virgin behavior, and "*Unswerving Ambition*" inevitably falls into the contradictory discourse of dualistic determinism.

The more essential problem is that Professor Lu Weijing believes that there is no right or wrong in the depiction of women escaping arranged marriage by suicide in the May 4th Movement and virgins maintaining arranged marriage by suicide in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. If we only stay at the level of

describing how women in the May 4th Movement and chaste women in the Ming and Qing Dynasties understand the dignity and significance of life, their attitude towards marriage and love, and the process of suicide, there is no right or wrong between these two descriptions. However, in terms of their social significance, the two kinds of group behaviors are fundamentally different. Women in the May 4th Movement is opposed to the old system and the old rituals, and pursues the new culture and new life. Although their behavior is extreme, their revolutionary and progressive significance cannot be erased, and their behavior truly embodies the subjectivity in a complete sense. On the contrary, the virgins of the Ming and Qing Dynasties were the defenders of the old system and the old rituals, and they pursued the old morals and ideas. Although their behavior is tearful, the nature of their negativity and backwardness was unquestionable, and the nature of being the victim of male-dominated society could not be questioned.

III. CONCLUSION

The discussion on the research paradigm of *Unswerving Ambition* and the disadvantages of the May 4th Women's Historical View just answers the question raised in the book, why the daughter suffering from arranged marriage is regarded as the symbol of all the women in ancient China, because this is not only the conclusion given by the May 4th historical view, but also the reflection of the real life of most women; why the strongest voice of the struggle and ultimate victory of virgins in the Ming and Qing Dynasties is silent, because it is only the personal sacrifice made by a few women under the influence of the patriarchal thought of ancient society, no matter how clear the subject consciousness, the firm attitude and the fierce behavior of the virgins, they are not comparable to the suicides of women in the May 4th Movement. If any academic research does not emphasize the social significance at all, does not objectively analyze the essential attribute hidden behind the phenomenon, and only describes the phenomenon itself, it is not only unable to really touch the truth, but also easy to mislead readers. *Unswerving Ambition* does not discuss the social value orientation of women's and virgin's suicide in the May 4th movement, it is easy for readers to draw a respectable conclusion that women's and virgin's suicide are worthy of respect only by describing their suicidal behavior. The new paradigm of overseas Chinese women's history study represented by *Unswerving Ambition* certainly has the place that mainland scholars need to study and use for reference with modest attitude, but we must be on guard and criticize the thought and behavior of overemphasizing self and ethnicism and disregarding social justice, social development and social progress. Although the May 4th historical view has its obvious drawbacks and needs to absorb the latest achievements of academic research and development at home and abroad for perfection, it attaches great importance to the value of life and the meaning of existence, and always gives out the rational brilliance in the adherence to the basic idea of anti-oppression and solution. As a classical research paradigm, its value in the study of Chinese women's history should not be doubted at all, and should continue to be the basic method that must be paid attention to in the study of Chinese women's history. Mr. Ge Zhaoguang once captured the essence of overseas Chinese study. He said that overseas Chinese study is a part of academic history, political history and ideological history of his country because of its problem consciousness, research thought and method, which is closely related to his native and then academic context as well as political and observational standpoints. In essence, it is "foreign studies". Mr. Ge's advice undoubtedly sounds alarm bells on how to recognize and draw lessons

from western theories.

Finally, we conclude our discussion on *Unswerving Ambition* with a very simple example. As the epidemic continues to spread around the world, different groups of Americans are still arguing about wearing a mask. According to the writing logic of *Unswerving Ambition*, there is no right or wrong to describe the two very different phenomena of wearing masks. It is also a logical part of social research to describe whether different groups wear masks or not, but what kind of behavior is to preserve the survival of life and social security, and which is the selfish risk of individuals and threats to social security. It is the answer that social researchers should give. Otherwise, the continued emphasis on individual dignity and group-centrism on similar issues would only lead to further confusion and danger.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is a staged achievement of the program "Research on Medieval Women's culture"(No. 19FZSB047) supported by The National Social Science Fund of China and Research and practice project of higher education teaching reform in Henan Province (Degree and Postgraduate Education) "Research on the Cultivation of Practical Ability of Postgraduate Major in Chinese International Education—A Case Study of Anyang Normal University"(2021SJGLX223Y).

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