書　評

Female Virtue and Confucian Order: A Review Article on the Cult of Chastity in Late Imperial China*

Margaret Tillman**

書　　名：由典範到規範：從明代貞節烈女的辨識與流傳看貞節觀念的嚴格化
作　　者：費絲言
出版時地：臺北市：國立臺灣大學出版委員會出版，1998
頁　　次：371頁

書　　名：*Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China*
作　　者：Janet M Theiss
出版時地：Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004
頁　　次：296頁

書　　名：*True to Her Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China*
作　　者：Weijing Lu
出版時地：Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008
頁　　次：368頁

* I would like to thank Professor Chien-ming Yu（游鑑明）for inviting me to join her seminar in discussing Lu Weijing's book at the Institute of Modern History at Academia Sinica on 7 March 2009. This review has benefited from the insights of everyone in the group, especially those who made presentations (in chronological order according to chapter): myself, 王詩穎，柯小菁，陳曉昀，陳瑩芝，連玲玲，衣若蘭，and Julia Stone.

** Margaret Tillman is a Ph.D. candidate in Chinese History at the University of California at Berkeley.

©中央研究院近代史研究所

In 2009, at a conference celebrating the hundredth anniversary of Sinology at Hamburg University, Du Weiming championed his agenda of reviving Confucianism while Hans van Ess concluded his careful analysis of Chen Yi's commentaries by agreeing with May Fourth indictments against Chen's sexual bigotry. Van Ess thus suggested that the most important challenge to the viability of reviving Confucianism is its hierarchical subjugation of "little people." Indeed, their suffering seems to undercut Confucianism's promises of moral enlightenment and personal cultivation. For example, the Confucian ideology of the family promises to encourage filial sentiment through ritual while promoting personal cultivation through study; however, in the early twentieth century, many Chinese considered this model practically impossible and theoretically flawed. Revolutionaries exposed the cruel injustices of Confucian hierarchy in the family through women's biographies; thus, they inverted traditional biographies of virtue by writing modern biographies of suffering. The individual suffering of these women belied missed opportunities to appropriate their social contributions and the failure of the Confucian tradition to protect the interests of the weak while promoting the achievements of the strong. Thus, May Fourth intellectuals considered gender inequality to be an indictment against not only social hierarchy, but also Confucian philosophy.

Lu Weijing's *True to Her Word* offers a different perspective on the relationship between Confucian principles and gender history. Lu views chastity not as a hypocritical double standard, but as a positive indication of the superiority of women's "gendered virtue" over men's political loyalty. She understands chastity not as a Confucian mandate that yoked women to patriarchal lineages, but as an individual choice that often required women to oppose their fathers. Lu thus sees the cult as a site of contention about how female virtue should be defined and maintained. As she writes, "Viewed dichotomously as moral exemplars who possessed "extraordinary virtue"—and were singled out for state honor—or as "elopers" who violated Confucian rituals, they sparked one of the most polarized and lasting ideological debated on ritual and female virtue in Chinese history" (pp. 1-2). By exploring these "elopers," Lu hopes to show that Confucian society tolerated more diversity and dissention than May Fourth radicals assumed. These critics, Lu charges, ignore the volition of women in traditional China, the diversity of Confucian thought, and the complexity of "gendered virtue" and its relationship to political culture.

Lu's new book thus offers not only a fresh and original understanding of gender in Confucian society, but it also marks a very shift in the way that scholars have studied and understood the history of Chinese women's agency or victimization. This review will contrast Lu's book with two significant works on the chastity cult in order to highlight different contemporary feminist approaches to historical Confucianism.

Fei Siyan and Lu Weijing

Fei Siyan engages very profoundly with previous scholarship in the field of female chastity in Chinese history. She bookends her text by offering reviews of the literature, first of traditional May Fourth scholarship in the first chapter, while her conclusion includes a consideration of work on women's history published around the world. While taking May Fourth scholarship seriously, Fei brings to her reviews profoundly critical reflections of their methodological issues. Fei is most concerned about the bias that gazetteers introduce. Wishing to contextualize this production of information about chaste women, Fei is unconvinced that scholars can safely rely upon data gathered from gazetteers to create accurate statistics about the supposedly representative geographical and demographic shifts—such shifts, she suggests, might be a function of changes in record-keeping rather than in behavior. This causes Fei to distrust a "material approach" to her study (p. 45), but she is also equally ambivalent about taking anecdotal accounts at face value.

Fei differs from Lu significantly in the way that she defines and analyzes "chastity." Fei includes in her consideration of chastity the period of sexual absence during mourning for fathers, whereas Lu defines chastity as loyalty specifically to the husband rather than the father. Thus, Lu often sees these two loyalties in conflict (as when fathers oppose their daughters' decisions to become "chaste maidens"). In contrast, Fei sees chastity as a mechanism that helps to preserve the purity of the male family line, and she even suggests that female suicide may have developed as a way to prevent wartime rape by soldiers (p. 6). In a patriarchal society that promoted pure male lineages, Fei argues, it was natural that the standard of virtue for sons was the opposite of that for daughters: daughters' chastity preserves the purity of the male family line, whereas sons'

polygamy helps to extend the male family line. Fei thus defines chastity within the context of patriarchy as the defining impetus of the Confucian ideology of the family. Her definition of chastity is deeply imbedded within this context, so chastity is a mechanism that helps to regulate the entire system of patriarchal ideology.

In contrast, Lu Weijing carefully disaggregates "chaste maidens" (who never consummated their marriages) from "chaste widows" (who lost their husbands), and so the connection between lineage purity and chaste maidenhood is less obviously clear than is the connection between lineage purity and chaste widowhood. Furthermore, since chaste maidens had not taken marriage vows before the death of their fiancés, they violated Confucian norms, which Lu Weijing argues demonstrates female agency. By disaggregating chaste maidenhood from other forms of gendered virtue, Lu highlights the tension in the relationship between female virtue and Confucian ideology, whereas Fei's definition of chastity links it definitely to the ideology of the family.

Although both Fei and Lu center their explorations of female chastity in the late imperial (especially Ming) periods, their approach to that history also differs significantly. Fei, Lu (and Theiss as well) all periodize gender history in terms of Chinese dynasties, thus taking for granted that gender is historically constructed rather than biologically inscribed. However, the focus and context of their inquiries differ radically. Even though Fei's definition of chastity is broader than Lu's, her sense of the appropriate context for this history is narrower than Lu's. Fei charts the ways in which family institutions and their state context changed through the dynasties. Again, Fei considers the appropriate context for chastity to be the institution of the family. For Fei, the "institutionalization" and "bureaucratization" of chastity created stable models of behavior that became increasingly "strict" and "rigid." In contrast, Lu's analysis is not limited to the family. Lu argues that the political context of each dynasty shaped the ways that Chinese defined both political loyalty (often considered masculine) and sexual chastity (often considered feminine); Lu attributes the unevenness of this binary to the fact that Chinese statesmen used female chastity to chasten disloyal men—and suggests that women may have simply excelled and surpassed men in virtue. Furthermore, Lu explores the spirit of each dynasty, revolving around poles of radicalization or moderation, which influenced how chaste maidens decided to articulate and express their feelings of loyalty. Thus, by focusing on

particular contexts, Fei highlights the strictures surrounding female chastity, while Lu is able to focus on the environments allowing individual expression.

Both Fei and Lu anticipate and acknowledge counterarguments to their theses, but their ultimate foci differ significantly. Early on in her book, Fei mentions that the state protected women's "right not to marry" when their families might have wanted to remarry them for economic reasons (p. 4). Likewise, Lu also acknowledges that some families may have pressured women to be chaste in order to gain prestige and status. However, these admissions ultimately do not deter each author from the focus of her work. Fei is not as interested in individual examples of women's agency as she is concerned with the way that the entire machinery of the institution of the family, backed by state ideology, narrowed the scope of women's choices. What women chose to do is of lesser importance because, even if they freely chose chastity, their options were nevertheless becoming increasingly rigidly defined. Fei is thus less focused on female agency than on the ways that intellectuals and statesmen tried to educate women from the top down.

In contrast, Lu does not believe that the scope of women's choices had become so very restricted. In her original dissertation, Lu asks rhetorically, "Was becoming a faithful maiden the only responsible choice for a betrothed woman whose fiancé had died? Hardly" (p. 118).[1] Instead of focusing on top-down change, Lu is deeply invested in uncovering stories of female agency. Furthermore, Lu points to Confucian texts that condoned second marriages for women. Because of parental opposition to many famous cases of chaste maidenhood, Lu feels that parents—and by extension, the patriarchal systems they represented—could not have mandated these choices. Furthermore, she posits intellectual debates about the marriage rites and female chastity as a *response* to the stubborn fervor of chaste maidens. Thus, while Fei and Lu are both sensitive to the possibility of different examples, by orientating toward different levels of society, both authors structure their work to emphasize different aspects of the faithful maiden cult.

Finally, Fei and Lu's different foci are related to their different methodologies. Lu uses data and analysis from gazetteers in ways that Fei might consider inadequately critical, but her investment in women's agency also allows her to

---

1 Weijing Lu, "True to Their Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in China, 1650-1850," (Ph.D. dissertation, Davis: University of California, 2001).

incorporate anecdotal evidence very effectively in a rich cultural history of chaste maidenhood. Lu's work is punctuated by striking and often humorous examples from individual women, whereas Fei is more careful to offer theoretical considerations about the representativeness of such examples. Although Lu distinguishes between male and female writing and takes into consideration the context of publication and circulation (p. 161), she is not as interested in using female chastity as a springboard for exploring theoretical issues in historical studies in the same way as Fei. Thus, even though Lu uses female chastity to shed light on Confucian patriarchy, the foundation of her argument—and the inspiration for her book—lies in the individual choices of women in history.

Janet Theiss and Lu Weijing

Janet Theiss's *Disgraceful Matters* describes the cult of maidenhood as both an extension of state orthodoxy (akin to Fei) and an expression of female agency (akin to Lu), but her analysis is very different from both Fei and Lu. Whereas Lu Weijing sees early Qing exemplars as a "moral standard" that "constituted a constant source of inspiration" for later faithful maidens (p. 73), Theiss sees an increasing "obsession" with chastity much more menacingly as a new "orthodoxy." Although Theiss and Fei view state rewards as a greater threat than Lu does, Theiss shares with Lu an appreciation for female agency. However, Theiss focuses specifically on female expressions of opposition to orthodoxy rather than (as in Lu's work) their devotion to principle; Theiss views female agency as a negative reaction precisely because state orthodoxy was so oppressive.

Fei, Theiss, and Lu all explore the relationship between family and state, but in different ways. Lu Weijing sees state endorsements of female virtue primarily as a way to encourage *male* political loyalty rather than female virtue, and thus she believes that the political context and cultural environment organically influenced the celebration—rather than (as Fei and Theiss might feel) the imposition—of examples of female virtue. Whereas Fei sees a close alignment between state and family institutions, however, Theiss concentrates on the ways that orthodoxy, especially as codified by law, struggled to regulate social practices. Theiss thus conceptualizes the relationship between family and state as analogous to the contested space between the "ancestral hall and the yamen." Because the Qing

Code forbade the private settlement of crimes, even within lineage associations, Theiss underscores the tension between family and state—especially when lineage leaders had to appear in court because clan members opposed their authority.

Theiss's focus on legal records helps expose tensions and conflicts within Chinese society and the ways in which Chinese women could try to negotiate their own affairs and reputations. Although she also uses other sources, Theiss draws the bulk of her data from 850 legal cases over the course of six years (Qianlong 4, 5, 18, 32, and 60) that were recorded as *xingke tiben* (刑科題本) and preserved in the Number One Historical Archives. Although the lines of conflict (loyalty to natal or marital families) are sometimes similar in Lu and Theiss's work, the nature of social conflict and female agency is very different. Whereas the tension in Lu's work primarily takes the form of intellectual debate over the significance of rites or the tension between paternal concern and youthful heroism, Theiss analyzes difficult and sometimes bloody feuds that ended up in the law courts. Against the backdrop of very different types of social tension, Theiss and Lu focus on different forms of female agency and negotiation.

Both Lu and Theiss challenge stereotypes about the victimization of Chinese women, but in different ways. Lu hopes that the stories and voices of faithful maidens, follow the trend of recent scholarship by "problematizing the received wisdom about the victimization of women and women's insignificance to historical changes" (p. 2). Whereas Lu focuses only on "female maidens" who voiced their agency by remaining chaste, Theiss studies widows suspected of adultery and women scarred by rape. Whereas Lu and Fei ponder copious records of female exemplars, Theiss's work abounds with scandalous rumors that—according to the obligations of the law—should be reported to the county yamen, *despite* concerns for saving face and protecting relatives within "moral communities." In Lu's work, "futile negotiations" with parents and in-laws could hasten a faithful maiden's suicide, but Theiss argues that women committed suicide so that their family members would no longer hide the "disgraceful matters" that shamed them. Whereas Lu describes faithful maidens who commit suicide in order to prove their sincerity and express their love, Theiss analyzes cases of married women who commit suicide in order to prove their innocence and to exact *revenge* on their accusers. Female agency in Lu's work sometimes results in parental grief, but female agency in Theiss's work seeks malicious harm.

In *Disgraceful Matters*, Theiss presents female agency as a problem for both

individual women and for the Confucian order. Whereas Lu believes that women could triumph over doubts about their virtue (which sometimes arose from concern over their sexual vulnerability), Theiss exposes the high cost of paranoia and zealotry that came with the project of circulating and deflecting rumors. The more difficult the norms of the chastity cult, the more people doubted the ability of women to achieve those standards. As the numbers of chastity suicides escalated, women faced mounting pressure from "fundamentally contradictory expectations" (p. 191). Women's overzealous recourse to suicide had become a major legal problem, which bureaucrats answered with criticism rather than accolades. Theiss argues, "If Yongzhen's chaste widows and heroic martyrs were ideal loyal subjects participating in the civilizing project, Qianlong's chastity martyrs were either victims or ignorant women acting out of desperation and in need of state civilizing charity" (pp. 182-83). Whereas Lu shows the ways that chaste maidens were respected, Theiss shows the ways that women "were assumed to be incapable of moral reasoning and independent moral agency" (p. 191). In contrast to the fathers and scholars who feel shamed by women's virtue, Theiss cites Wang Huizu（汪輝祖）, who wrote that women's moral education was compromised because "women obey family elders; sons and nephews individually follow the principles learned from their inquiry into what is fundamental" (p. 185). In short, female agency was problematic because Confucianism's double standards did not allow Chinese to take women's decisions to be virtuous seriously.

Whereas Theiss believes that women could not engage as full participants with Confucian tradition, Lu believes that faithful maidens were respected for their ability to uphold its principles. Although Lu analyzes faithful maidens' decisions in terms of both a sense of honor (*yi*) and a feeling of affection (*qing*), she ultimately argues that the maidens were "true to their word" rather than faithful to their fiancés in particular. Lu does explore the "psychological impact of child betrothal" (p. 150), which gave very young girls a sense of "belonging" to their fiancés' families. But she agrees with Lady Zhenjiang, who said, "The principle of a *zhennu* is not to break an agreement," when she concludes, "With tremendous fortitude, they fulfilled a promise made in their youth and remained true to their word all their lives" (p. 160). Lu probably chooses the word "word" because of its literary connotations; her aim seems to be that women engage with Confucian tradition by speaking through their actions. A good example is Lu's anecdote about Peng Yuanrui（彭元瑞）, whose ideas about faithful maidenhood

change as a result of his daughter's choices. Peng finds a verse by Ban Zhao, which was embroidered by another faithful maiden; writing a verse in response, Peng gives it to his daughter to embroider. The two sets of embroidery match like "an upright cypress and righteous pine facing each other," (p. 246). This example weaves together male and female poetry as well as the brush and the needle. Even if the embroidery matches another woman's hand, it does not detract from the work of the individual maiden. Lu might acknowledge that female agency is complicated by the fact that faithful maidens are "true" to promises they did not decide to make, but it likewise does not detract from their honor and virtue. Because virtue is based on choice rather than compunction, Lu's appreciation of female agency and female virtue go hand in hand.

Although one could argue that Theiss's and Lu's historical subjects are simply different, both scholars identify their topic as the cult of chastity in the late imperial period (with Theiss focusing more exclusively on the high Qing). Lu Weijing herself argues that by defining chastity in terms of chaste maidenhood rather than chaste widowhood, she addresses a new subfield in women's studies in Chinese history. However, Theiss contextualizes her project in terms of the cult of chastity; standards of virtue and the importance of reputation shamed women to feel that they were "no longer human" and "could not face people" alive (p. 198). Whereas Lu believes that faithful maidenhood is an indication of the diversity and flexibility of the Confucian tradition, Theiss sees these contradictions as cracks in the foundation of the political order. Lu believes that maidens were not "victims" to Confucian gender ideology (p. 127), but Theiss believes women's "suicidal fury" (p. 188) undermined the imperial system's political legitimacy. For Theiss, imperial legitimacy was not simply weakened by the gendering of political culture; patriarchal authority was also weakened by the emphasis on individual exemplars. Theiss writes, "Emperors and officials assumed that the perfection of personal virtue was compatible with proper social hierarchy. What they did not expect, or fully understand, was that this emphasis on individual responsibility eroded the prerogatives of the very patriarchal authority it hoped to strengthen" (p. 208). Whereas Lu shares with biographers a sense of respect for the honor of faithful maidens, Theiss considers personal biography to be a problematic project that destabilized the political culture of late imperial China.

True to Their Word and True to Her Word

Because the first two sections of this review highlighted many aspects of Lu Weijing's book, this section will concentrate on the way that her book has evolved from its original form as a doctoral thesis at the University of California at Davis. As Lu revised her manuscript for publication, she subtlety changed the text. First, she had to delete many of the rich and interesting examples that illuminated in her thesis. Her thesis thus reflected even more of her concern for personal biography. In fact, biography serves as an organizing principle for her analysis of intellectual debates. This feature seems to indicate that her true interest and sympathy lies with the individual lives of women who populate her social history, and she takes to her study of intellectual history a sense of the personal backgrounds of her subjects. For example, her conclusion discusses the thought of Zhu Shi（朱軾）, whose polemics against faithful maidenhood were challenged by his own daughter, who took a vow of chastity upon the death of her fiancé. Lu thus treats her historical subjects with sensitivity for their own concerns, and she presents them in ways that they themselves would probably find faithful. In this way, her methodological approach to socio-cultural and intellectual history is very compelling, and readers who turn to her dissertation will find not only more details of social history, but also a renewed appreciation for her intellectual history.

In the transition from manuscript to book, Lu Weijing also changed the title of her work slightly, from "True to Their Word" to "True to Her Word." By changing the pronoun from plural to singular, Lu highlights the gendered aspect of the faithful maidenhood cult, especially in terms of individual cases. In some ways, *True to Her Word* can also be read as a study of loyalty as both a social practice and intellectual ideal in the realms of both politics and family; however, the true heroes of her book are female, so it is fitting that she emphasizes women. In addition to gender-specificity, the title "True to Their Word" also raises the question of plurality. While the title indicates that many women became faithful maidens, their "word" remains singular—in part because chastity was a singular ideal. Even though Lu argues convincingly that women expressed their dedication to chastity in different ways, the principle of chastity itself is a particular way of defining loyalty—which, Fei might argue, indicates the hegemony of social

strictures. Despite Lu's celebration of the diversity of individual expression, her use of the singular pronoun may indicate that differences across geographical and class lines are ultimately obscured by her overarching emphasis on female agency. The tension between diversity and singularity is thus reflected in Lu's title. This tension also provides an interesting focus for this review, since these authors approach a single topic with different definitions and contexts.

In just a decade, women's studies on female chastity in the late imperial period has progressed to the point that it can encompass a variety of different definitions of chastity and approaches to Confucianism. The fact that scholars can define chastity in different ways, especially by highlighting different contexts, reflects the deep complexity of Chinese society and the difficulty of pinpointing specific social phenomena with precision. These scholars also apply very different attitudes towards their subjects—whereas Fei contemplates chastity with a profound sense of anxiety for both theoretical and methodological issues, Theiss analyzes conflicts with a deep suspicion of both orthodoxy and female agency, and Lu Weijing historicizes choices with a humane concern for both women and Confucian patriarchs. Lu positively evaluates Confucianism in part because she takes the choices of chaste maidens seriously. If chaste maidens indeed practiced virtue, then by definition they had to decide to choose virtue rather than simply follow orders. In contrast, Theiss explores female agency that was intended to give the *appearance* (rather than necessarily follow the regimen) of virtue. Different definitions of chastity thus lead these scholars deconstruct Confucian virtue in different ways.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Lu Weijing's positive evaluation of Confucianism marks a significant change from the negative critiques of Confucianism that dominated the much of the twentieth century. Chinese reformers in the early twentieth century felt that the subjugation of women affected everyone in China. Reformers cited examples of female victimization as analogies for China's suffering, and felt that the backwardness of women held back the nation, positing a strong relationship between the individual and society. As Fei argues, the legacy of moral biographies has complicated the way that scholars can approach and even conceptualize personal histories and their significance. The most personal matter, of course, is the way that we approach these questions in our own lives, and I would argue that these works constitute important reading for non-specialists like myself. Do female exemplars from the

late imperial period offer compelling portraits of virtue for us today? How should contemporary women view Confucianism's promise that anyone can become a sage through classical study, especially in light of its stress on the need to develop personally through family relationships? Lu Weijing offers us a compelling explanation of the ways in which we can address these intellectual tensions while trying to cultivate personal virtue, but it might also be wise to remember, as Hans van Ess reminded us, that all ideological traditions are tied to complex histories of intense human suffering as well as great moral achievement.