

A New Insight into Chinese Women of 17th Century

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Abstract

This paper is to introduce a book titled *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*, which provides its readers with a new insight into women of that time. After reading, one may find that he or she has a totally different understanding of the seventeenth-century Chinese women. Feudal Chinese women, as are depicted in History textbook or some works of literature, were oppressed and restricted only to the family; but this book by Dorothy offers an opportunity to renew the impression of those women. The paper will mainly focus on two parts of the book: one is the image of feudal women; the other is the concept of companionate marriage.

Keywords

Feudal women; Companionate marriage.

1. Brief Introduction to the Book and Its Author

Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China, as the title implies, talks about Chinese women in the 17th century. Through the detailed depiction of some women, the book gives its readers a deeper understanding of women in the seventeenth-century China, along with their life, their social activities and the culture created by them.

The author, Dorothy Ko, is an American scholar and history professor at Barnard College who studies Chinese culture and Chinese women's life in the 17th century (at the end of the Ming Dynasty and the beginning of the Qing Dynasty). Her research interest lies in the everyday lives of women in China, along with the domestic objects they made by hand. She takes them as a significant part of country's cultural, economic and political development. She works at the intersections of anthropology, history, and women's studies. Ko's 2005 book, *Cinderella Sisters: A Revisionist History of Foot binding*, won the Joan Kelly Memorial Prize of the American Historical Association. Recently, she has been turning her attention to the skills of women's artisans such as embroiderers, stone carvers, and ceramic artists. She is also co-editor of *Women and Confucian Cultures in Pre-modern China, Korea, and Japan*. Ko's courses include Chinese cultural history, body histories, women and culture in seventeenth-century China, and Confucian cultures [2].

2. A Subversion of the Popular Image of Feudal Women

It is widely believed that the majority of women in feudal China were oppressed and suffered a lot either from life itself or from the people around them. And there are many a novel and film describing the life of those women [3] —overlooked by their family of origin, mistreated by their husband's family after marriage and occupied with household affairs in the rest of their life.

This book, however, shows its readers a totally different picture of women's life at that time and thus corrects some misunderstandings of women in feudal society. As the author herself said in the introduction, all women in feudal society were not victims. The notion that women

were victims was widely accepted because some classic literary works shaped such figures and some historians strengthened it [4].

Teachers of the Inner Chambers begins with the question whether all the women in feudal society were Xiang Lin sister, a poor woman in Lu Xun's famous short story the New Year's Sacrifice. And she emphasizes that Xiang Lin sister was not a true portrayal of women in feudal society. The reason why Xiang Lin Sister became a popular synonym for feudal women was that the demonstrators of the early 20th century wanted to show the drawbacks of the feudal system through her misfortune; therefore, they referred to Xiang Lin Sister as a typical feudal woman.

In fact, according to Dorothy, women in feudal China, though not as free as modern women, did not suffer so much as we commonly imagined. They developed hobbies, made friends (mostly with other girls and women) and had social activities of their own. They also helped shape the culture—that is to say, women were not neglected in the son-preferred society.

The author posed a question about the idea of man-woman dualistic antithesis, arguing that men and women were not two groups with distinct boundaries. Instead, women did play an important role in feudal Chinese society. It was true that in the Ming Dynasty (AD 1368-1644) and the Qing Dynasty (AD 1636-1912), there were more restrictions on women's behavior than ever, which required them to obey their fathers, husbands and even their sons (after their husbands' death). Besides, people of that time put excessive emphasis on the chastity of women, which is also considered a terrible limitation on women's freedom. It seems that women were forced to stay in a space sealed off from the outside world, and men and women were two social groups isolated from each other. But actually, this is not the case. Just as Joan Kelly says in her essay *The Doubled Vision of Feminist Theory*, to isolate men and women reflected not the social reality but the ideal of the patriarchy-centered culture [5].

Dorothy Ko is in favor of Kelly's point of view. And she points out something even more astonishing to Chinese readers: it is not appropriate to say that men belonged to the "outside" while women to the "inside". To back her own argument, Dorothy cites some more opinions of social scientists'. In fact, "family" and "state" could not be separated from one another. As we all know, the feudal China, guided by Confucianism, attached much importance to the family (or the clan), and the family in turn asserted great influence on the whole state, especially in terms of politics. Therefore, women, who were in charge of the family, were in reality engaged in the politic life (but of course not in an obvious manner). Another evidence of feudal women's access to the outside world—or the society—was that they formed informal groups focused on arts and literature. They kept in touch with other women who shared their hobbies or art taste, and some of their works went out of their group to the community, thus leading to the formation and development of women's culture. In a word, women were not completely restricted. If one wants to know more about the women of that time, he or she shall not depend only on the official records or the conclusions on textbooks; it is sensible to pay some attention to the folk culture and look for the traces of some talented women.

Through the description of women's life and their activities—either physical or artistic, Dorothy Ko successfully makes it clear to her readers that Chinese feudal women in the 17th century were far from being oppressed and confined strictly. The stereotyped impression of "miserable" women is not the proper portrayal of all the women in that period. There leaves much to be studied about the image of feudal women. Read this book by Dorothy, and you may get some of the answers.

3. The Concept of Companionate Marriage

Having reshaped the image of feudal women and made it clear that women in seventeenth-century China led a comparatively colorful life, the author points out in the 5th chapter that people at that time looked forward to "companionate marriage" on both personal and family

level (as a method of forming family allies). In a companionate marriage, the couple were supposed to be soul mates and their family circumstances shall be similar. But this kind of ideal marriage was difficult to realize if one took realistic factors into consideration. After all, “matched” couples didn’t have to form a happy family.

The author gives many examples of companionate marriage in both the real world and the literary world. Shi Chengjin, a writer and publisher in Yangzhou of that time, had an “ideal” wife—a woman famous for her good education in the neighborhood. Ye Shaoyuan and Shen Yixiu, another pair of model couple, also fit in the hypothesis that the husband was good at dealing with people outside the family as well as the government affairs while the wife was educated and capable of managing household affairs. There were, of course, more “ideal” couples in the literary works: many a drama of that time presented a story of happy life after engaging in a companionate marriage and forming a harmonious family. The author called the marriage mode “the idea on the paper”, which in Chinese also indicates unreality.

Then she gives proof of the unreality. While Ye and Shen were on a good term with each other, their elder daughter suffered from an unfortunate marriage and died at a very young age. Miss Ye, a romantic and well-educated girl, married the third son of Ye Shaoyuan’s bosom friend. Their marriage was supposed to be an example of the companionate marriage: the husband and the wife came from two family with similar circumstances and, even better, their blood kins were old friends. However, the supposed perfect match made a tragedy in the end. The husband was irresponsible and Miss Ye got nothing from their marriage but despair. In this case, the author proves that although the companionate marriage seemed to be an ideal form of combination, the reality was usually disappointing because few people considered the realistic factors, say, the personality of the couple. When people tried to match a boy and a girl, the first factors to consider were often their family of origin, their abilities to support themselves and the newly formed family, as well as their reputation in the neighborhood. Nonetheless, marriage is not just living with another person but caring for him or her both physically and mentally. It is hard to do so when the two could not even get along well with each other.

Difficult as it was, people at that time (maybe even today) still expected to be engaged in a companionate marriage. And if a couple did conform with one another in both real and spiritual world—say, similar habits and common hobbies—they would become a living model for ideal marriage, being praised and admired.

This is a little bit different from the stereotype of marriage in feudal China. Marriage then was believed to be arranged by parents after consulting a matchmaker. Pursuit for true love or soul mates usually existed only in operas and novels. Thanks to the description in *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, one could have a look at the actual fact of marriage in the seventeenth-century China.

4. Comments on the Book

The book is considered as a valuable material by scholars both at home and abroad who study women of old China, such as Wang Ran [6]. As a non-fiction which depicts Chinese women and their life in the 17th century, Dorothy Ko’s book is detailed, accurate and attractive. Her attitude is disinterested and she doesn’t put much personal feeling into her book—she just describes what they were like and what their lives implied.

It is difficult not to be attracted by the book since its description is vivid and its evidences are solid. Dorothy provides the appealing arguments and then convinces her readers with the real stories of some women of that time. Her description was more of a biography than a document in terms of its style, which distinguishes this book from the dull and pedantic history essays. Also, Dorothy does not sacrifice the facts for the readability. In this book, one could read about as many evidences as he or she could in an essay. The author modifies her language instead of

the facts to make the book easy to read. Readers can expect both recreation and knowledge from this fantastic book: it is interesting enough to kill time and professional enough to teach the readers something.

Besides, it provides a new perspective to observe and think about the life of women in feudal China. To tell the truth, even a Chinese reader with some related background knowledge—for example, me—would feel surprised when reading for the first time. Common people in China tend to believe in novels and films regarding women in pre-modern times and thus think of them as poor victims of the feudal system and the patriarchal society. But after reading this book, one could find that women also played an important role in the creation of Chinese culture; they were not dumb even though not in power in the society. The novels and films, either misled by the stereotype or produced for some certain reasons (for example, Lu Xun's *The New Year's Sacrifice* as I have mentioned above), somewhat overemphasize the misery of all feudal women and consequently deviate from the truth. Just as Dorothy herself says, all women in feudal society were not victims. However, this point of view is still not so well accepted, especially in China. If one wants to have a glance at the real picture of women in the 17th century of China, the book definitely deserves reading.

Moreover, it is quite interesting to read about what China and Chinese women are like in the eyes of an author who is not native to China. This is like “thinking out of the box”, which offers readers a completely different reading experience. By doing so, readers can look at a seemingly familiar topic from another point of view, and discover something novel and fascinating.

All in all, this is a great book (both the English version and the Chinese version). If one wants to take a close look at the women of 17th century in China, he or she should not miss the book.

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