

Development of the Idea of Chastity in Chinese History

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In the days of Old China, chastity was a duty for women, while a different standard of morality was generally applied to men. Chastity was a female virtue and it had little to do with man's virtue. But fornication was forbidden not only to women but also to men. Especially intercourse with a married woman, widow, or unmarried virgin was punished being considered as criminal, though intercourse with prostitutes was indifferent seen from the penal code. The maintenance of lineage demanded concubines to ensure an heir. In consequence, sexual jealousy was sinful for married women. According to the doctrine of Confucianism, lust is not immoral; but carried to excess, it is wrong. Sexual impurity was scarcely considered a sin in the case of a man; but in the case of a female nothing was held to be more abominable. In and after the days of Ming dynasty, if an unmarried virgin immolates herself to follow her deceased fiancé to the grave, an honorary gate shall be erected near the door of the paternal dwelling.

In this article we have tried to throw some more light upon the historical development of chinese custom and tradition regarding their sexual morals.

The Political Structure of the Ming Dynasty

by

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Chu Yüan-chan (朱元璋), later known as Hung-wu-ti (洪武帝), the founder of the Ming (明) Dynasty, was a poor priest. When the war which had broken out in the latter part of the Yüan (元) era became violent, he recruited new soldiers from his native land, Fêng-yang (鳳陽), in order to protect it. His troops, therefore, were consisted of farmers or low-class soldiers like Hsü Ta (徐達) and Li Shang-chang (李善長). As the leader of his troops, he did not stand to them in the political or social relation of a lord to his vassals as was the case with the powerful local families, neither did he have the advantage of kinship with a mighty family. He had to depend wholly upon the cooperative spirit of his soldiers in protecting their native land against an invader. By great good fortune they were brilliantly endowed with military talents, though their social standing was very low. His troops came out victorious in several wars, and it was not long before he was able to overthrow the Yüan troops, defeating such rival leaders as Chên Yu-liang (陳友諒), Fan Kuo-chên (方國珍) and Chang Shih-chêng (張士誠). Thus in 1368 he finally succeeded in establishing the Ming Dynasty.

Meanwhile, his troops had grown into an enormous army and had occupied an extensive territory. Nevertheless, Chu Yüan-chang and his followers coming from Fêng-yang banded themselves against the new followers from other places. Chu Yüang-chang made every effort to place the members of the Fêng-yang group in favourable political and military positions. Thus, the Fêng-yang group including Chu Yüang-chang obtained the exclusive possession of political power in the Ming Dynasty. This is the polity which I will call "the Fêng-yang structure". Since the Fêng-yang structure was originally formed, as had been explained, for the purpose of protecting the land from invasion, its character naturally showed a strong tendency to be self-defensive, conservative and exclusive.

But in the course of time, a crisis crept into the Fêng-yang structure. Many scholars and politicians from parts of the land other than Fêng-yang began to criticize unfavourably the self-interested policies of the Fêng-yang group. Furthermore, there began to arise among the powerful members of the group keen competition for power and position. Even Hung-wu-ti himself could not be free from this kind of competition. Though he had assumed the title of emperor, there was hardly any essential distinction in rank between

him and the powerful members of the group. The status of Hung-wu-ti in the early years of the Ming Dynasty was not the status of an absolute monarch. It was nothing more than the status of a leader of the Fêng-yang group. So in order to improve and secure his position, Hung-wu-ti found himself under the imperative necessity of excluding from his group, in one way or another, those powerful members who had rendered many distinguished service in creating the Ming Dynasty and were then keenly competing for position among themselves and were even in some cases secretly ambitious of succeeding to the throne. This, as a natural result, begot factional strife and the surreptitious poisoning of rivals. To overcome this crisis of the Fêng-yang structure, in 1380 Hung-wu-ti put Hu wei-yung (胡惟庸), who was then in the most powerful position of prime minister, and his followers to death, laying on them a false accusation of rebellion. After this he never appointed any prime ministers but treated all the politicians on an equal footing without regard to native place even if this happened to be Fêng-yang. This radical reform in the government brought the desired result: not only could he strengthen his position as emperor but he succeeded in decreasing the criticism against his policies. Thus the situation developed remarkably in his favour.

And yet this large reform was limited in its application. It was carried into effect only in South China and its neighbourhood—hence I will hereafter call this reformed system “the structure of South China”—and it was quite impossible for Hung-wu-ti to spread it all over China, for a special policy was necessary in North China where a sort of war structure had been organized against the powers of the Yüan Dynasty still in existence to the north of the Great Wall of China.

The Ming troops went on expeditions against Manchuria in 1387 and Mongolia 1388. They thus eliminated the danger from the north. In 1390 Hung-wu-ti altered his policies in North China: he established an oppressive government and imposed the structure of South China. Having accomplished this Hung-wu-ti died in 1398.

As the eldest son of Hung-wu-ti had already died of disease, his grandson, Chien-wên-ti (建文帝) ascended the throne. With the intention of securing the imperial throne and their own positions, his close followers attempted to strengthen the structure of South China and oppressed North China even more severely.

The people of North China, unable to bear it any longer, finally rose in a revolt widely known as “the rebellion of Ching-nan (靖難)”, in which it was Yen-wang (燕王) at Pei-ching (北京) who played the leading part.

With the help of the Mongolians in North China whom the Ming Dynasty kept in subjection, Yen-wang gained the final victory of a four years' war

against Chien-wên-ti who was his nephew. He put him to death and ascended the throne. He was later known as Yung-lê-ti (永樂帝).

This action, however, was reprehensible according to the code of Chinese thought. In order to clear up the confusion caused by his enthronement, Yung-lê-ti declared he would follow the policies of Hung-wu-ti. Some of the institutions which Hung-wu-ti had originated were indeed maintained by him, but a radical innovation was introduced into the political structure, namely the transference of the capital from Nan-ching (南京) to Pei-ching.

In the old days Hung-wu-ti had established the capital in Nan-ching and from there governed South China and its neighbourhood, which was then the most civilized district in the whole of China. But a special concentration of troops in North China, especially along the Wall, was indispensable to confront the remaining power of the Yüan troops. In this sense, it can be said that China was then in grave danger of splitting herself in two. In fact, throughout history, China became disunited whenever a Dynasty made Nan-ching its capital. In order to bring the whole of China under a single government, it was necessary to establish the capital in North China.

Thus Yung-lê-ti planned to transfer the capital from Pei-ching to Nan-ching. To carry this out, it was necessary to collect a possible large amount of financial resources from South China for the large-scale construction of the new palaces and canals.

This laid a great burden upon the people of South China. Though defeated in the rebellion of Ching-nan, they were not completely subjected to Yung-lê-ti. It was still possible that they might be watching their chance to revolt again. He took many years to complete the transference of the capital without provoking the people to rebellion. During this period he gradually concentrated the military forces in North China, where they posed a tacit threat to the people of South China. Meanwhile, in order to break the deadlock in his domestic policies, he made several expeditions into Mongolia with five hundred thousand soldiers under his command.

It has generally been maintained by scholars hitherto, especially by the late Dr. Sei Wada, that the first aim of the great expeditions was to expel the nomadic tribes in the North which had long been threatening the Chinese, and that it was particularly striking that for the first time in history the emperor Yung-lê-ti led the expeditions in person no less than five times.

But I am decidedly of a different opinion: The real aim of these expeditions was not to expel the nomadic tribes in the North but to solve the domestic problems that arose through the transference of the capital. In Mongolia in those days, as we must insist, there were no powers strong enough to threaten the Chinese; even if there had been, it would have been wiser for Yung-lê-ti to

follow the traditional policy of "conquer one barbaric tribe by means of another". Five hundred thousand soldiers under the command of the emperor himself at such an enormous expense would have been, I believe, quite unnecessary for the conquest of the nomadic tribes: a much smaller army led by a general would have sufficed.

The truth about the expeditions of Yung-lê-ti may be expressed as follows: He brought about a concentration of military power by putting himself at the head of an army of five hundred thousand soldiers. Under the pretext of expeditions to expel the barbarians in the north, it was easy to collect huge financial resources, it was also easy to secure the labor necessary for the construction of canals for military transport. At the same time we should not fail to acknowledge the considerable political ability by which he succeeded in dissolving for the general discontent among the people of South China and substituting for it a feeling of tension that he generated by raising the whole nation in a body against Mongolia.

In this way, with the capital in Pei-ching and power centered on North China, Yung-lê-ti finally succeeded in establishing a new political structure which brought the whole extent of Chinese territory under his control. This system was maintained by his followers until the fall of the Ming Dynasty.

To put my conclusion in a word, it may safely be maintained that it was not Hung-wu-ti but Yung-lê-ti who established the solid foundation of the political structure of the Ming Dynasty. My conclusion receives strong support from the fact that the miao hao (廟號, the title conferred on an emperor after his death) of Yung-lê-ti was changed 114 years after his death from Tai-tsung (太宗) to Chêng-tsu (成祖).