



Hsiao-wen Cheng,

Divine, Demonic, and Disorder: Women Without Men in Song Dynasty China

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The Dilemma of 'Women's Manlessness'

Hsiao-wen Cheng, author of *Divine, Demonic and Disorder: Women without Men in Song Dynasty China* (2020), is a cultural and intellectual historian of the middle period of Chinese history. This book unfolds dimensions of manless women's lives focusing on ideas of gender, sexuality, subjectivity, desire and liberty. Cheng traces the genealogy of manless women by taking into account centuries' old history, manuscripts, myths, as well as medical, sacred, fictional and non-fictional records. Therefore, the issues of gendered sexual representation, the absence of women's subjectivity, matrimonial pressures, and social abnormalities are central to this study. In this seemingly universal dilemma of women throughout the entire history of humanity (and especially with reference to the quoted Chinese history) women are constructed as having to choose between personal desires and public demands. Concepts of women in *Divine, Demonic and Disorder* range between the private and public, and social and asocial spheres of their lives. Questions of 'normalcy, desire, sexuality and gender based identities' (p. 2) in the time of the Song Dynasty (690–1279) are central to this study. Cheng develops a procedural process of knowing women via their stabilising movements against bodily gendered identities while they are working/living with patriarchal ambassadors. She presents a view of their (women's) own room. The sole existence of unmarried and married women indicates their demand for subjectivity, sexuality, idiosyncratic identity and gender.

Textual analysis of 'manless women' defines 'distinct configurations of gender, sexuality, illness, divinity and subjectivity' (p. 3). This book is composed of three interconnected parts that are: (i) 'Husbandless women in Medicine' (ii) 'Enchanted women in Song Anecdotes' and (iii) 'Gendered Identities and Female Celibacy'. This study descriptively evaluates both men and women. However, its focus is on gendered and sexually oppressed women that are tagged with different names in different manuscripts. These manuscripts provide political understandings of different dynasties and differentiates their narrative structure to address the same objectives of womanhood, motherhood and wifhood. The study also deals with question of religion and women's marginalisation by expanding upon 'Buddhist and Daoist hagiographies.' The gender-based stratification of women reflects that, 'Manless women were rarely included in official biographies or epitaphs,' and widows are not part of this gendered documentation, 'because their sexuality still belonged exclusively to their deceased husbands' (p. 16).

This book has three sources in its composition. It discovers unstable meanings in respect to

celibate women by taking extra care with reference to these women's lives, desires, stories and so on. Cheng explores them by dealing with the inconsistent and heterogeneous nature of discourse. She provides an exploration of the complicated and diversified way male authors' questions evolve. It seems that these are 'narratives of failure' for the description of manless women's sexuality. Above all these ways of dealing certify one thing—that there are descriptive notes about manless women's anxiety and depression that overlap with the situations and positions of women. She also signifies the fact that women, gender, sexuality, subjectivity and desires are controlled and commanded by the 'other' (male) quite in the same way that the narrative of modern science controls objects. This presents a view of Victorian England that controls sexuality and subjectivity. As Cheng suggests, it is the 'state's decisions to protect and regulate some bodies and not to regulate and protect others' (p. 21). The book provides a contextual understanding of historical China in relation to its modern comprehension of manless women's affairs.

Cheng explains that 'the scientized, naturalized, and apparently neutral and transparent concept of sex/uality was not present in either pre-nineteenth-century Europe or pre-twentieth-century China' (p. 15). The book addresses exactly 'what was' missing in the maximum spheres of study. It 'approaches the history of sexuality beyond the legal system and state control and draws attention to [the] unspeakable, inexplicable, and the lives that the state neglects' (p. 15). Women are always supposed to desire men in pre-Song and Song dynastic China. Their desire, their gender, and their sexual identities are merged in their opposite sex. It seems that sexuality (biological sex) and gender (sociological sex) are connected with the empowered, with men only. Cheng points out that women have no sites of escape from the dominance of men. There is no, 'escape from marriage.' Their only centre is 'marriage and married life' (p. 16). Cheng, after raising a number of questions concludes, there is no secular life for them. In traditional China, 'a woman's gendered identity and subjectivity' (p. 28) is tied to her sexual connection to men. However, this gendered identity is 'not two-sexed' (p. 28). For women, there is an intersection between spiritual, social, sexual and personal possessions.

Using ideas such as the 'bedchamber' (p. 22), 'excessive thoughts (about men), intercourse with ghosts, and ghost fetus', Cheng presents 'a manifestation of the intentionality' of 'female sexuality' (p. 21), especially women who are husbandless. She reflects the intertextual presence of ideas dealing with women's subjectivity, desire, sexuality and gender. Moreover, manless women/husbandless women are treated badly in comparison to wives and even to concubines. There is a boundary of acceptance and rejection relating to women's gender or social roles. Cheng further introduces argues the roles of women who are unmarried and aged. They are categorised as 'a socioeconomic category defined by age and dependency' (p. 25). Mostly, these 'heterosexual inactive women are considered a medical category' (p. 29). These medical categories are 'one of many ideological tools that men used to discipline and control women' (p. 29) or force them into marriage.

In the texts under discussion, women are represented as a sort of tilting gender between sexual inactivity and sexual desire. Above all their subjectivity and sexuality is connected with the structured reproduction of women's bodies. This idea strengthens the view that for women who are sexually inactive there is bodily disability. Therefore, every woman is bound to marry between the age of 'fifteen to twenty' (p. 33). A woman who does not marry contemplates sexual disability. Indeed, women are embodied within reproduction and physiology and subjectivity and sexuality are normally discussed in connection with men. Cheng states, 'men's sexual desire for women was considered to be normal' (p. 35). However, women are not like them. There is a conclusive statement, 'women cannot be without men', that seems parallel to 'men cannot be without women' (p. 36). With the help of tales about intercourse with ghosts, the author draws the conclusion that

'it is fine for women not to have men' (p. 39). There is 'an implicit link between ghost intercourse and women's sexual status' (p. 51).

Medical and sacred histories establish women's subjectivity, desire and sexuality in line with modern naturalised and universal categories that are present in the absence of exact names and tags. Cheng defines this absence as, 'the problem is not heterosexual inactivity or reproductive readiness but the failure to manage one's thoughts in manless conditions' (p. 44). It 'is an awkward mixture of two etiologies, one focusing on bodily mechanism of internal depletion and external intrusion and the other on sexual inactivity' (p. 40). This again tries to establish the truth of manless women's gender ('social sex') and sexuality ('biological sex'). Men and women both have intercourse with ghosts yet 'women's symptoms were characterized by a loss of subjectivity and a sense of imperceptibility' (p. 52). In this process 'women are often portrayed as passive victims of demonic intruders' (p. 74) who are waiting to be rescued by men' (p. 74). There is another side of the story that reveals a new dimension that suggests that 'the woman falls ill not from a lack of sex with men or from sex with ghosts or demons, but from shame' (p. 75). Furthermore, woman has not right of her own room, her own subjectivity, desire and so on. This book is a composition of stories within stories that highlight the enigma of the discrimination of manless women and their gender and sexuality.

Cheng's analysis in 'Enchanted by a demonic being' (p. 79), 'Intercourse with ghosts', 'bedchamber texts and disordered' mental approaches reflects a literary reworking of these texts (p. 81). There arises a question, 'what happens to a self-disfiguring woman—whether she is enchanted by spirits, [or] defending herself (sexually)' (p. 81) under the pressure of a gendered world. The answer is that 'the demonic and divine is women's unexpected literacy' (p. 81). These women find their literacy in the world of enchanted disorder— an enchanted disorder that is categorised as a medical ailment, connected with ghosts, and divine doctrines. The fundamental reason is inter-located in their sexual potency. This is highlighted by Cheng by suggesting that the Buddhist view of equality is a doctrine of equality and liberation [that] became tainted by androcentric and patriarchal cultures' (p. 137). This creates a breach between 'the social form and the natural or the intrinsic' (p. 137). Indeed, all these variant tales conclude that 'sex with men was closely tied to the very definition of the female body and the identity of being a woman' (p. 138). It explains the tilted view 'of what one does and who one is' (p. 138).

Geographical understandings of gender and sex are very important in many cases. The book explains that 'gender and sexual norms were not more flexible in pre-modern China' (p. 165). Cheng provides examples of fathers granting their daughters different rights. However, in term of marriage daughters were bound by conventions. When a man is not married, he is not considered to have any of the abovementioned disorders with which women are tagged. She points out that even though 'women's manless condition was understood very differently in different sources' (p. 165), the textual references provide a narrativisation of heterosexuality. Cheng ends on a positive note by suggesting that there are new questions to be answered 'about normalcy, desire, sexuality, and gendered identities' of 'women's manlessness' (p. 166).

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