

The Construction and Application of the Chinese Contextual Internet Buzzword "Male Virtuousness": A Study of Cyber Feminist Discourse Symbols

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, courses focusing on Confucian principles have spread across China, once again bringing Confucian teaching for women back to the classroom as a classic. Such education calls for women to return to the home. Meanwhile, in today's Chinese society, where women play an important role in the public sphere, such ideas have provoked a revolt from feminists. By constructing a discourse of male virtuousness, feminists have made society aware of the fallacies of female virtuousness and reclaimed their discourse in subverting the male-centered discourse order. This paper takes the Internet buzzword "male virtuousness" as an example to explain the construction and application of feminism discourse through new media platforms, with critique and discussion of such symbol at the end.

Keywords: cyberfeminism, male virtuousness, Chinese feminism.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the term male virtuousness has become quite popular in the social networks of the younger generation in China. Unlike the ancient meaning of the term, today's male virtuousness no longer refers to the good moral character of men in a patriarchal society. As news about the revival of ancient Chinese female moral education emerges, Chinese internet feminists have seized on the key concept of female virtuousness. They replaced the subject of female virtuousness with that of men, creating the concept of male virtuousness. Playfully, they demand men the same way female virtuousness regulates women while adding their critique of traditional masculinity. Today the discourse of male virtuousness is involved in many ways and is expanding itself.

Although many scholars have discussed online feminist discourses in the context of the awakening of women's power through popular literature, the entertainment industry, and e-commerce, no one has yet used male virtuousness as a material to study the conceptual construction of online feminists. This study focuses on male virtuousness, comparing its production process with female virtuousness, describing its content and explaining the social reasons.

2. COMPARISON BETWEEN MALE VIRTUOUSNESS AND FEMALE VIRTUOUSNESS

2.1 The Origin of Male Virtuousness

Female virtuousness in ancient China has multiple definitions, and the female virtuousness mentioned in this paper refers to the good qualities that women should have. In the modern women's knowledge dictionary, female virtuousness refers to socializing and educating women in Chinese feudal society by disciplining women with Confucian morality. Women's behavior would be brought into feudal rituals and laws, also called female education [1].

The prevailing view is that the origin and spread of the concept of female virtuousness are linked to Confucianism, the feudal, patriarchal system, and the philosophy of yin and yang, with Confucianism playing the greatest role. The relationship between men and women derived from the concept of yin and yang initially served as a philosophical topic that laid the foundation for men and women's subsequent ideal moral personality in traditional China [2]. The doctrine of yin and yang placed the two sexes in different positions in contrast, with yang as the male as the rigid and yin as the female as the soft,

and from the respect of heaven and earth to the respect of men and women. The prototype of large-scale women's education was formed during the Han Dynasty, which was related to the rise of Confucianism and the general context of its education. During the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, Confucianism stood out politically and gained the status of national faith. Against this background, the teaching materials on women's virtue surrounding Confucianism were gradually enriched, and the Confucian discourse on women's education was established. During the Tang and Song dynasties, the content of female virtuousness construction gradually shifted to chastity, loyalty and piety. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, female virtuousness was strengthened, and chastity became a heavy yoke that restricted women. Confucianism placed great emphasis on the importance of women's education, but there are strict gender distinctions. The goal of such education is to shape women into ideal women who best meet the requirements of a male-dominated society, adhering to the principle of a different social division of labor between men and women, defining a woman's place through physical discipline and enhancing the efficiency of her domestic work [3]. At the same time, traditional Chinese society was a patriarchal society bound by blood ties, which also required the cooperation of women's moral education and the Confucian idea of the homogeneous structure of the family together to maintain the continuity of patriarchal hierarchy.

The main elements of traditional female virtuousness can be summarized to some extent as described above: the subordination of men to women, the regulation of women's speech and behavior, and the restriction of women's sexual and physical freedom and intellectual scope.

In ancient China, there was considerable internal competition for the teaching of traditional female virtuousness, and it was constantly renewed and enriched by the needs of the changing society of the times. But above all, the presence or absence of social power always played a decisive role in disseminating these women's moral discourses. First of all, almost all of the authors of the classics of women's virtue are social elites and royalty, with high social status and position, even as emperors or queens. They are the definers of the content of women's virtue [4]. In addition, to enhance the authority and popularity of their works, these works were recommended by dignitaries and literati of the time as critics. And in a society with a high concentration of power, the elites are few and close in relationship. Furthermore, there are social and academic elites who can directly define what is a classic. For example, at the end of the Ming Dynasty, Wang Xiang edited four books on women's virtue into the "Four Books for Women" and explained the legitimacy and importance of "admonishing women" in the form of notes [3, 5].

Female virtuousness is part of Confucian culture and has had, and continues to have, a profound impact on the daily lives of Chinese people and has become part of Chinese culture. Even though it had waned due to the more than half-century of westernization ideological trend between the late Qing Dynasty and the early years of New China, when the timing is right, female virtuousness will break out again with a new face.

2.2 The Production of Male Virtuousness

Male virtuousness in ancient China can refer to men who possess good moral qualities. A few people have also used it on the Chinese web to describe the gender discrimination that men suffer from in a patriarchal culture. That is, men must be full of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is an ideal type of masculinity that dominates femininity as well as other types of masculinity.[6] However, male virtuousness in this article is distinct from these meanings and refers only to the term and its extensions that feminists have created to counteract the male-centered discourse by mirroring female virtuousness. Unlike Hegemonic masculinity's demand for men to obtain high social status in the public sphere, male virtuousness emphasizes men's morality, manner, and behavior in the private sphere.

The first bud of the male virtuousness discourse was around 2017 when female virtuousness classes with the theme of teaching women and reviving traditional Chinese culture were once thrust into the spotlight with the wave of strong promotion of traditional culture. Among the most active promoters of this trend are organizations that support the revival of traditional culture. Their classes tell a lot about their daily experiences and quotes from the classics of female virtuousness. They hope to revive the ancient traditional female virtuousness that women should be meek, humble, and return to the family, denying men and women's current equal educational status. They use exhortations, confessions, and even intimidation to sell conservative ideas about women, contrary to contemporary educational concepts. They attribute family and social problems simply to women's failure in the family and suggest women should be self-denying, self-sacrifice, and provide unconditional service to the family. They treat women as tools to serve the family, not as human beings with full rights.

Against this backdrop, the revival of women's virtue began to provoke the anger of women. As a result, a wave of feminist sentiment emerged on the Internet - it was time for men to feel how women were being oppressed. The discourse of male virtuousness began to emerge and gradually build its users and audiences as it spread online so that more people would know that there was still much invisible exploitation against women in this society. Male virtuousness began to appear in the form of irony and simple subject substitution, using the standards of female

virtuousness to regulate male behavior, trying to make society aware of the absurdity of female virtuousness through irony and sarcasm.

However, the further spread of the male virtuousness discourse is mainly attributed to two news items of Chinese interest. The first was the case of Liu Qiangdong, the founder of Chinese e-commerce platform giant Jingdong, who was accused of rape in the United States. In this case, married Liu and jingyao entered the woman's apartment after attending a dinner party together, and then jingyao called the police to report that Liu had raped her. The relationship between consent and power, and the expression of sexual consent or not, has been widely debated in this case. While some of Liu's supporters arguing that the reporting victim was dressed scantily and actively seduced Liu to set him up. Jinyao's supporters (mostly cyberfeminists) found it difficult to use existing language to criticize male immorality and push back against such statements, so they directly used the term female virtuousness to replace the subject of female virtuousness with Liu Qiangdong, imitating the tone of a conservative criticizing his indiscretions. This linguistic pattern is witty and empathetic and has gained widespread popularity. This wave led to the emergence of a blogger named 'Male Virtuousness' with Liu as his avatar, which became the key opinion leader of the male Virtuousness discourse, examining male celebrities through the lens of male virtuousness. Then, another hot event this year propelled the male virtuousness discourse into one of the hottest online terms among young people today: the case of an 18-year-old woman who accused famous teen idol Chris Wu of raping and mentally controlling her and a group of other women. The controversy was also quite similar to the previous Liu Qiangdong case, but with more serious circumstances. Therefore, not surprisingly, male virtuousness was also used. Since there was already ground, male virtuousness spread virally to unprecedently, surpassing the centuries-old term "female virtuousness" on search engines. As a result, the practical guidance of male virtuousness has been strengthened by the online parade of these male celebrities, and more and more people have come to believe that men should abide by this male virtuousness.

2.3 Comparison

Both the subjects and the purposes of production of the two discourses are completely different. The emergence, spread and development of female virtuousness are top-down forms led by the government, and the producers, core disseminators and beneficiaries of female virtuousness discourse are mostly power elites. However, the origin of male virtuousness is the opposite: it is a discourse created by internet feminists themselves under the condition that the Internet has empowered the masses to a certain extent. It has not only to go viral but

also caused bottom-up cultural feedback. This cultural feedback is reflected in the fact that the masculine discourse created by online feminists has influenced the ideology of a generation of women or even the whole generation in dissemination, providing them with a masculine perspective of analysis. In applying this perspective, they exert their motivation to rebel against female virtuousness culture and gain power and a sense of control. They offend masculinity, as they were offended before, and take power by objectifying men as they were objectified. For example, the aforementioned Chris Wu was given the nickname Wu Qian (toothpicks), which criticized his rape by mocking his sexual organs. The toothpick thus became a metaphor that kicked off the objectification of men.

Moreover, they do not correspond to the same cultural order of gender. As Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee points out, Chinese Confucian culture cannot be simply compared to what Western scholars refer to as "masculine culture," nor can the "masculinity" and "femininity" of Western feminist critiques be simply equated to Chinese "yin and yang".^[7] In fact, in ancient Chinese society, gender was often associated with social roles, and there was no clear reference to masculinity or femininity, emphasizing the neutralization of yin and yang. On the other hand, male virtuousness was born in a synchronic, globalized society, where Chinese society was influenced by the West and then developed itself. Yet Chinese gender studies has not established an impactful theory of its own. Chinese feminists have been influenced by the #MeToo movement to deconstruct within the framework of masculine culture, and the critique of male virtuousness has become the "masculinity" and "femininity" of the Western feminist critique.

Although there is reproduction and appropriation, the contemporary discourse of male virtuousness emphasizes texts that are not the same as the ancient female virtuousness but are more related to the cultural restrictions and gender discrimination that women are subjected to today. Also, male virtuousness is not only influenced by gender but also by class, generation, ethnicity and many other factors. Constantly, it is self-extending. More importantly, it is always related to the changing ideal image of men and women in society. It interacts with modern female virtuousness, both in terms of the frequency of its appearance, the emotions attached to it, and the effects it produces. From this perspective, contemporary male virtuousness is also a mirror that shows the current Chinese social situation (especially gender patterns).

3. THE APPLICATION OF MALE VIRTUOUSNESS

I adopted a typological approach, using the discourses of male virtuousness that appear in the Chinese social networks Weibo, Douban, and Tok-tok as materials, and

tried to classify the contexts and application scenarios of "male virtuousness".

One of the most prominent opinion leaders, "male virtuousness," has 760,000 followers as of August 2021. This account is active in the comment sections of various male public figures and social events, from domestic violence and cheating to posting nude photos, all manifestations of not following "male virtuousness". He even wrote the "Code of male virtuousness". Based on its framing of the content of male virtuousness and observing the public's use of the term. I categorized it into three sections: image constructs, intimate relationships, and social morality, based on the content and scenarios.

3.1 Image Construction

Compared to the common male flirtation for displaying loyalty with male virtue in intimate relationships, male celebrities, especially teenage idols, receive the most serious scrutiny of male virtuousness discourse. Male virtues seem to be presented in a critical, ironic, and negative tone by women most of the time. In the entertainment industry, however, talent agencies have made good use of the trend towards male virtuousness by creating images of male stars that meet the demands of women, capturing the interaction with female discourse and showing their innocence, introversion and meekness in contrast to counter-examples, as a way for male stars to meet women's expectations of a new image of masculinity. Male stars exploit male virtues but are also constrained by them. Gradually, this situation began to intensify. Fans zoomed in on photos of their idols to see if they were exposing too much skin and observing gentlemanly manners. It was more like a simple expectation of gender conformity, a real expectation, and a mirror image of female virtue than irony.

The group that holds power is the group that makes the rules. In the age of consumer society, fans are not only the viewers of idols. They are also the makers and constructors of their images. Fans can regulate their idols according to their demands and desires. Male virtue has become a guide to male celebrity image-building through this avenue and has become a common language in the entertainment industry. Female fans have gained considerable power in this area. They can invert the gender of stars and make them their 'wives'. They began to have the power to eliminate the exaggerated and crude 'straightness' of male celebrities and demand that their idols choose to look and dress 'clean'. They now even dictate the moral and speech, and behavioral preferences of their idols. Women also seem to be taking the side of the gazers, transforming men according to their own aesthetics, even subverting traditional gender relations and taking the initiative in this male-female relationship.

3.2 Intimate Relationships

The private sphere was the first major frontier for women's virtue in the past. Much of women's virtue was designed to serve the family in intimate relationships. It required women to remain faithful, to learn obedience, and to be tolerant of their husbands. This argument proclaimed that it was like men to be lustful. As Chinese society entered a new phase and women entered the public sphere, the first injustice felt by women was the cultural gender order. This is also the area where the public resonates most because of the human need for emotion. Chinese women long for equal intimacy.

The spread of male virtuousness is also related to this strong popular resonance. It seems that male infidelity receives more forgiveness all the time. You can still see many cheating men among Chinese celebrities. But as soon as women cheat, they mostly disappear from the spotlight. When this private morality rises to a cultural orientation, perceptive people, especially feminists, are unlikely to be aware of it.

Male virtuousness held men in intimate relationships to the standards of the good wives of the past, demanding that they remain faithful, learn to obey, and be tolerant of their wives. It is not male virtuousness for men not to come home immediately from work, not to do their chores and not to look after their children; it is not male virtuousness for men to dress revealingly and behave flirtatiously in situations where their partner is not there; it is not male virtuousness for men not to look after their partner's feelings and to be selfish and self-indulgent. As never before, the discourse of male virtuousness sets high expectations for men's performance in the home and relationships and promotes strict requirements for men's private virtue.

3.3 Social Morality

As the intensity of the "male virtuousness" campaign has grown, male virtuousness has become a more targeted discipline, spreading beyond the subject substitution of female virtuousness, extending to the widespread bad habits of the male population and criticizing the excessive diffusion of so-called masculinity. Chinese feminists argue that Chinese women do better than men in the area of social morality, that society has long been too tolerant of men, and that it is precisely foul language, loud talking, and leg-crossing that are rarely censured as masculine and virile, such as the behavior of men who occupy more than one seat space with their legs apart on public transportation, men who go bare-chested in public, or men who wear "Beijing bikinis", which means wearing a big undershirt and lifting the top to show the belly. The men like to tell dirty jokes in social life, love to preach, always bragging, full of foul language, and men do not pay attention to the image of public places.

4. SOCIAL CAUSES BEHIND THE EMERGENCE OF MALE VIRTUOUSNESS

The construction of Chinese women's ideology has undergone a long process of development. In the long history of the Chinese nation, a feudal and authoritarian society based on patriarchy ruled the people for more than two thousand years [8]. Under the tradition of "male superiority over female", Chinese women had no right to speak. They were bound by ethical and moral concepts that became the qualities and codes of conduct for women after a long period of subtle influence. Although the new cultural movement, the communist gender policy, and the multicultural influence of globalization have given women a sense of rights and the knowledge to fight for the freedom and dignity of "human beings". However, the deep-rooted moral values in society have not been eliminated. In modern society, the concept of gender equality has given them the right to be "human", but they have lost the privilege of being "women". They still have to take care of their families while working and assume the dual role of "gentlewoman" and "strong woman".

Statistics from China's Ministry of Education show that the percentage of female undergraduates was 53.44% in 2016, 53.74% in 2017, and 53.99% in 2018, showing an upward trend year after year. With the introduction of the compulsory education system, modern Chinese women's cultural upbringing, worldview, outlook on life, and emotional pursuits have undergone a series of developments. They have become more confident in their ability to survive and in their attitudes towards life. Patterns of the social division of labor have also changed dramatically. Communist de-gendering propaganda and policies directly led to a soaring work rate for Chinese women. Mechanization freed people from manual labor, thus narrowing the differences between men and women at work and giving women the power to compete with men in the workplace and in life.

In addition to the will, there is also the support of the market. In rapid economic development, Chinese society has taken on the characteristics of Baudrillard's consumer society. Chinese women are on the rise in the consumer sphere, and the internet economy is booming. Their increased interest in the entertainment industry has also made their choices more influential in the image presented. Developing to date, women's needs have become more important than ever in online media.

Meanwhile, the spread of goods and the popularity of the Internet is quite dependent on the stack of symbols. The masses look for symbolic identification in information. Male virtuousness cannot be spread and even used for propaganda without these elements.

Of course, male virtuousness, as a gender-related discourse, also necessarily reflects gender issues. China's market economy has also led to a dramatic change in the ideology of a new generation of young Chinese.

Consumerism has given rise to individualistic thinking, the seeds of identity politics are growing in the land, and the contradictory interests between the sexes are exposed.

5. CRITIQUE AND DISCUSSION

Male virtuousness, a high-frequency term on the Chinese Internet at the moment, has also been criticized by many. The rise of male virtuousness has constantly triggered some men to reintroduce female virtuousness in retaliation. For them, the term was coined for offensive purposes, and it has no critical, let alone reforming, significance to reality. These men believe they are being subjected to reverse discrimination. They say that women's objectification brings them certain benefits and that these benefits, combined with the high rate of women working in China at the moment, make women the dominant group. [9]

Not only that, but there are some feminists themselves who hold a negative view of the term. They see the offensiveness of male virtuousness in the eyes of the characteristic population as making it appear that women are seizing the right to speak out and trying to express their demands, but they cannot escape being exploited by capital. More importantly, the discourse of masculinity itself is enslaved to the gender binary and has a conservative tendency. Women gain subjectivity by limiting male masculinity and molding new women whose gender is male. Such an approach might make women's growth restricted, making them masculine in a new generation.

In the discussion of 'male virtuousness', perhaps the more significant question is whether it opens up more imagery about gender.

Let us return to the feminine. Deleuze's idea of becoming a woman has been a strong influence on feminist theory. Deleuze and Gattari placed the becoming-woman in a special position. He emphasizes becoming rather than being, becoming the other rather than becoming the male [10]. Deleuze argued to stop using male desire as a discourse of desire and assuming the closed human body as the basic political unit. Men's virtue is indeed a concept that serves the gender binary, but it is rather one of the beginnings of Chinese women's political practice through discourse. The sense of power expressed through male virtuousness demonstrates female subjectivity in a new era in China. The recovery of subjectivity is the first step for women to begin producing their femininity. On an optimistic note, using a binary structure does not mean that one will be confined to it. In the future, young Chinese feminists may be able to create a more feminine language that deconstructs the dichotomy of social symbols and makes possible the creation of new forms of thought and interaction.

6. CONCLUSION

Unlike female virtuousness, the construction of male virtuousness is a bottom-up form led by cyber feminists. It caused bottom-up cultural feedback that has influenced the ideology of the young generation. Such a course is a mirror that shows the current Chinese gender patterns. Male virtuousness can be categorized into three sections: image constructs, intimate relationships, and social morality, based on the content and scenarios. Social causes behind the emergence of male virtuousness are complex and diverse. The two key factors suggested in the paper are the changing division of labor in society and the rise of consumerism in China. Finally, the discussion of male virtuousness should focus on its possibilities and whether it can open up the imagination of gender.

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