

More than Half the Sky:
The Women's Virtue Movement in Contemporary China

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Preface

I used to be a lover of tradition. During my years of primary school between 2004 and 2010, every summer I had to recite *Confucius' Analects*, following my father's instruction. While it was a tough experience, as I did not fully understand the verses in the book, I remained persistent in my recitation. Back then, I thought the words of Confucius were really the words of wisdom. So, for me, reading and reciting *Confucius' Analects* could be a great way to achieve wisdom. I sincerely hoped that I could recite the complete *Confucius' Analects* (twenty chapters in total) by the end of every summer vacation.

Things didn't work out. I never finished reciting the whole *Confucius' Analects*. In fact, by the summer of 2009, I grew so tired of the sage that I procrastinated my reading and learning by rote. By the end of that summer, I hadn't recited the whole *Confucius' Analects*, again. But I was relieved to be done. At the same time, I remained interested in exploring any sort of Chinese culture in my daily experiences and reflections.

This was not my last time encountering the classics. In my first summer break at Colgate in 2017, I went back home complaining that the Philosophy department didn't study Chinese philosophy, namely, texts like *Confucius' Analects*, the *Zi Han*, and the *Zi Han*. Then, my father offered me the idea of reading and studying the texts myself. There started my journey into anew. I spent my summer reading the *Confucius' Analects* and watching a national studies lecturer, Zhong Yongsheng

entirely broken away from my past. I am conscious of the classics I read back in my primary school days and the study I did in the summer. I saw

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My appreciation also goes to the staff at the circulation desk staff in the Colgate Case-Geyer Library and the staff at the Buddhism Branch of the Hangzhou Library for their kind assistance in locating and retrieving sources related to the Women’s Virtue Movement, Master Yinguang and Wang Fengyi. I especially want to thank the student staff at the circulation desk in the Colgate Case-Geyer Library. During my laborious process of writing my thesis and my long nights of wandering around the library for support, they generously encouraged me throughout. In return, I offer my heartfelt thanks to them.

I want to express my gratitude to my friends from the 2019 Fall Senior Seminar in Religion. It

Johnson, Kate Bundy, Tatyana Anand, and many others are always in my heart. I want to thank the staff of Chobani at the Hieber Café, specifically Michael and James, for their love and support. I am grateful for the support and encouragement from my class of 2019 friends Emily Kahn and Denise Larson. I extend my thanks to my friend Zhu Yanjin for our engaging conversation about women's virtue. I thank my friend Yang Kaicheng for our ten-year friendship since junior high school, and our continuous conversation on topics ranging like culture, philosophy, history, religion and politics. Similarly, my sincere thanks to my friend Shelley, Colgate class of 2017, who now works in California. I appreciate her recommendation of the Chinese talk show , which I was able to consult for this thesis. I am also grateful for her encouragement to be a better feminist during my research process. Ultimately, our passion for Victor Hugo and Romanticism, our shared ideals, our ongoing, animated and thought-provoking conversations on current affairs, and most importantly, her kind support, have helped me endure my own uncertainty, anxiety and stress during my research.

As this research examines the question of women in modern China, I want to express my appreciation again to the courageous, strong and beautiful women and feminists I have met in my life. Many of them, acknowledged above, continued to serve as inspirations for me.

Lastly, my greatest thanks to my parents and my family back in China. Without their unconditional love and support, I could not have achieved what I have today. I owe a great debt of gratitude to them.

Introduction

The Cosmos is divided into Heaven and Earth. The Human World is divided into male and female. The male symbolizes Heaven,

Movement (WVM) in

exist? What can the WVM reveal about contemporary Chinese society?

The WVM reflects a larger shift in Chinese society since the 2000s. Chinese society has witnessed a push from grassroots groups and activists, correlated with the existing official propaganda, to return to China's glorious past. This tendency has been seen in the cases of popular Confucian revival, the rise of neo-Maoist groups online and on the ground, the promotion of the Han Clothing Movement, the fervor of traditional Chinese medicine, and now the Women's Virtue Movement.⁹ Concurrently, the Chinese state has implicitly and explicitly exacerbated structural gender inequalities and gender discrimination in Chinese society. This includes the official rhetoric of calling upon women to return to the household;

the \$

intellectuals. They refer to the WVM's "evil cult/heretical teaching" (), a term used traditionally by imperial Chinese officials and today by the contemporary Chinese state, to denote heterodox teachings and dissident religious and spiritual groups.¹¹ Many bloggers and commentators have called the Women's Virtue Movement and its teachings "brainwashing" and its lecturers' actions "bad preaching."¹² Although the semi-scholarly analyses employ the normative language of the Chinese emperors, most of these criticisms are secular in nature and portray the WVM simply as a fringe group of individuals who reject modernity. Most criticism focuses on the gender issues behind the WVM, while others adopt a market-based economic analysis. Thus, they downplay and brush aside the religiosity of the Women's Virtue Movement.¹³ While it is important to criticize the anti-feminist and misogynist contents in the Women's Virtue Movement as its lecturers disapprove of feminist causes and criticizes women in the workplace, it is equally crucial to pay attention to and study its religious aspects. The references that participants in and lecturers of the Women's Virtue Movement make to religious masters, Chinese classics, and popular morality teaching

activities. Local officials and ex-officials sponsor and host the WVM events and publications. Upwardly mobile businessmen and businesswomen, along with some women party members, also join its ranks. The Chinese state countenances such loyal religious movements because, by so doing, the Chinese state and the CCP are in turn sacralized, so that their political legitimacy remains unquestioned.

Women and their bodies are caught between these religious and political forces. An entire cosmology is built around the idea that protecting the homeland means protecting the household and the family, and protecting the household and the family means securing women's bodies. Mao Zedong in the early days of the People's Republic of China popularized the catchphrase "Women protect the home" (Wom xtieo

many different roles women are asked to serve.

It is not that surprising, however, that women in contemporary China are asked to remain in the household and obedient. During the imperial epoch, women were asked to be both virgin daughters and chaste, virtuous mothers and wives so that they could maintain the harmony of the household, thereby sustaining the harmony of the nation. During the Republican era, women were imagined as both independent and self-sacrificial: they would achieve full autonomy in society, yet were equally willing to sacrifice themselves for the well-being of the nation. Chinese women thus are consistently forced to serve the essential link between the state and “social harmony.”¹⁷ th

Part I

Chapter I: Literature Review

There is a fair number of media reports on the Women's Virtue Movement in both Chinese and English. Most of the Chinese reports appeared after 2014, when one of the Women's Virtue Schools was closed by the local government.²¹ More media reports followed after 2017, when one of Ding Xuan's lectures in Jiujiang (九江), Jiangxi Province, was recorded and criticized online. Overall, most Chinese media reports take a critical stance vis-a-vis the Women's Virtue Movement, calling them "feudalistic" and "backward." Most reports promote the values of "self-respect, self-confidence, self-reliance and self-improvement" (自尊、自信、自立、自强).

There are also some English-language reports on the Women's Virtue Movement. Those English reports come from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Voice of America, the Associated Press, the Chinese official newspaper

Although no scholarship directly addresses the Women's Virtue Movement, there is abundant work on both the history of women in China and on Chinese religions.³² Yet as historian Kang Xiaofei contends in her essay, seldom do those two genres of scholarship interact with each other.³³ Kang argues for the importance of approaching women's studies within the framework of the religious question, and, likewise, of addressing religion in tandem with the question of women in China. She believes that this intellectual engagement can "help us see better the mutual transformation of women and religion in the 20th century and contemporary China."³⁴ This paper hopes to shed light on the interplay between those two fields.³⁵ By doing so, we will be able to better understand how women and women's bodies have been asked to serve as the essential linchpins for the formation of the Chinese state and of Chinese nationalism. We will also be able to observe and understand the application of religion and ideology in Chinese society.

While the work of Kang and others like hers are admirable, they are not without weaknesses. Due to the time at which they appeared, these works do not address the Women's Virtue Movement. Furthermore, these works focus primarily on the organized and structured forms of religion, such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Rarely do they

Hence, this paper aims to demonstrate that the WVM incorporates a religiosity that evokes the religious tradition of popular moral teachings in late imperial China and the Chinese cosmic order requiring women to be obedient and submissive to men. This religiosity, for the WVM lecturers, reinstates and underscores the importance of family values and the family order. By establishing a parallel between women's bodies and the nation-state, the WVM thus simultaneously restricts and heightens women's role in securing a morally superior, upright nation. In this process, the Chinese nation is sacralized as an unquestionable, essential, and transcendent entity. Therefore, the Women's Virtue Movement also operates as a religion that serves the interest of the Chinese nation and the CCP.

The literature on the issues of women and fundamentalism/nationalism is robust.³⁶ Similar patterns emerge therefrom which can help us more readily to identify certain features of the WVM in China, including some that may be unique. Broadly, in terms of gender, fundamentalism can be defined as "the religion of the stressed and disoriented": it is a process that rejects modernism and at the same time tries to maintain comp

representative of the purity of the nation-state.³⁹

Nationalism and fundamentalism, although conceptually distinct from each other, can help us to comprehend the characteristics of the WVM fully, as it conflates elements of both ideologies in its discourses. The first common feature that fundamentalism and nationalism share is their emphasis on women's purity. This sense of purity is in many cases connected with a sense of otherness. When feeling

order and national health. The purity of Korean youths' bodies is essential because it creates a dichotomy between the self (Korea) and foreign dangers and invaders (the HIV/AIDS diseases).⁴⁷ Although the Korean nationalists come from a different historical and cultural background compared to the U.S. fundamentalists, they both place emphasis on women's purity and women's bodies. The discourse of Korean nationalists also takes a male-centered orientation in recreating the link between women's suffering and the national suffering.

Lastly, the case of India's Hindu Nationalism is in order. Hindu nationalism intensified during the 1980s, with the case of Roop Kanwar, a Rajput woman who was immolated based on the traditional ritual in 1987. Unlike the first two cases, Hindu nationalism is in general more militarized. Its founders and participants present a mix of images of the Indian women. Those images include the Indian woman as warrior goddess, as chaste, strong mother, and yet also as vulnerable virgin. Under the masculine and muscular narrati

Part II

Chapter II: The Women's Virtue Movement: Two Case Studies

Numerous lectures and summer camps are conducted under the banner of the Women's Virtue Movement and traditional Chinese culture. I begin by setting the scene so that the readers might better envision what a women's virtue lecture and summer camp/week-long training session looks, sounds and feels like. Next, I will present and analyze the common themes of the Women's Virtue Movement that I have identified from the case studies and textbooks. The following chapters will put the WVM into conversation with other contemporary Chinese movements and the historical trajectory of China's modernization, shedding light on this movement.

The summary and report of the entire lecture was posted in an online WeChat post, and

seamlessly. Ma proposes that women should cultivate a sense of mission—one that embodies a long-term vision of service to the nation and the people. She sees that the household, the nation and All-under-Heaven are unified, and that woman is the origin of this cosmic order and rule. Thus, women’s virtue and the “teaching of motherhood” () are vital. At the same time, these activists recognize that the Haikou lecture was offered under the auspices of the Haikou TV

activists to the verge of anger.

Confrontation then ensued. The activists revealed themselves, and then criticized Ma and pointed out Masaru Emoto's lack of scientific credentials. They addressed their questions directly to Ma and prodded her to answer. Ma deflected their request and used the microphone to talk over her interrogation. At the same time, the audience stood up for Ma and called activists "disrespectful to the teacher and unconcerned for others." The participants attempted to drive these activists out of the conference room, deriding one of them as a "dog." The lecture session was curtailed and came to an abrupt end. During lunchtime, the activists distributed feminist flyers to the participants. Zhang Rouhe, the host of the Haikou Ethics Forum, immediately denounced the activists as "Western invaders," "national traitors," as well as "Hong Kong separatists and Taiwanese separatists." Attendees will later encourage a fifth-grade female student from the audience to write a letter accusing the activists of "betraying the nation" and reminding them that "we are always the Chinese people." Other participants told the activists that without the women's virtue lectures, they would have already committed suicide out of despair. They declared that traditional Chinese culture is promoted and supported by the Chinese government, so the activists should stop their complaints. The confrontation thus took on a hostile and hateful tone.

Some deep reflection on the part of the Nü Quan activists followed this experience. In their blogpost, they wrote that they understand that some people in the lecture hoped to find their spirituality and meaning of life through so-called "traditional Chinese culture." Living in a society that fetishes capitals and other disadvantages, the activists empathized with people wishing to use "feudalistic moral virtues" to heal their wounds. However, the activists concluded their blogpost with the hope that the confrontation would help attendees to doubt their naïve wishfulness, while they also lamented that it is not possible to find another alternative for debunking this wishfulness. On the other hand, the WeChat account of the

night, disgusted by the teachings in the course. Yet in most cases, the participants stay and finish the training course

Movement, the nation, the state and, most of all, the Chinese Communist Party.

In the following chapters I will examine the textbooks of the Women's Virtue Movement and Ding Xuan's 2015 Shanghai Lecture. I will analyze the Women's Virtue Movement by dividing it into several common themes and explaining them diachronically (targeting both China's historical and contemporary perspective) and comparatively across cultures (U.S., South Korea, and India). These themes include Women's Virtue and Tradition/Ancestors; Women's Virtue and the Cosmic Order; Women's Virtue,

Part III: Themes and Variations**Chapter III: Women's Virtue and Tradition, Ancestors, and Sages**

The textbooks indicated in this paper are the popularized, transcribed exegesis of the
by the lecturers of the WVM. Those textbooks are
reserved for audiences to read and study. Throughout the lectures and textbooks of the

and listen to his teaching, how can we understand his intention? The ancestors originally had a profound intention behind designing those women's virtues.... Perhaps our ancestors already foresaw that women would be indulgent and presumptuous in their lives.... Thus, our ancestors set up a great example for us, and we are dwarfed when we are compared with them.⁷⁴

Chen asserts that the audience should follow and practice the teaching of women's virtue unconditionally.

knitting and weaving.⁸¹ Those four virtues were then reiterated by the Han-dynasty female historian Ban Chao in her work () in 100 C.E.⁸²

Throughout the imperial dynasties, women's only purposes were marriage and childbearing. Women's education focused on preparation for marriage.⁸³ Chronologically, the were composed by different female authors in the Han, Tang, and Ming dynasties.⁸⁴ Hence, prior to the Qing dynasty, Chinese women's situation in society was thus mostly limited and suppressed.⁸⁵

During the Qing dynasty (1644-1911 CE), women's situation deteriorated further. Qing rulers retained the emphasis on female chastity and virginity from their dynastic predecessors. At this time, women who became widows before they were thirty and remained chaste until after the age of fifty would be rewarded with a memorial arch, commemorating their achievement and exempting their families from some forms of taxation.⁸⁶ The popular view that "a woman without talent is a woman of virtue" and the more widespread use of foot-binding among the elites were also Qing innovations.⁸⁷ The process of configuring ideal womanhood as a combination of motherhood and virginity became complete under the Qing.⁸⁸ The lecturers of the WVM follow this sacralization process in their rhetoric, and in

⁸¹ Lee, "Women's Education in Traditional and Modern China," 351.

⁸² See Pang-White, , 54-56.

⁸³ Lee, "Women's Education," 349-353.

⁸⁴ Lee, "Women's Education," 345-367.

⁸⁵ Recent scholarship from historians Patricia Ebrey, Susan Mann, Geil Hershatter and many others have pointed out that life for Chinese women in the Song and pre-Qing dynasties was not as oppressive and restrictive as people thought it to be. Joseph Adler in his essay also points out the distinction between prescriptive (the moral teachings and principles on women) and descriptive (women's actual situations) literature in regard with women's historical situations. See Adler, "Daughter/Wife/Mother or Sage/Immortal/Bodhisattva? Women in the Teaching of Chinese Religions," , Vol. XIV, no. 2 (Winter 2006), 14-15.

⁸⁶ Adler, "Daughter/Wife/Mother," 15. The Memorial Arch was prevalent in both the Ming and Qing dynasties.

⁸⁷ Lee, "Women's Education in China," 353-354; Liu and Carpenter, "Trends and Issues of Women's Education in China," 277; Joan Judge, "Talent, Virtue and the Nation: Chinese Nationalisms and Female Subjectivities in the Early Twentieth Century," in

pondering the question of national survival and participating in the nation-building project.⁹⁶ As “feminists,” they rebelled against Shimoda’s logic of female domesticity, private virtues and national survival.⁹⁷ Those Chinese feminists considered that only by expressing private virtue as public talent, through voting and participating in public affairs, could the Chinese nation survive in an age of colonialism.⁹⁸ Radical nationalists themselves, those Chinese feminists contended that women should take responsibility for serving the Chinese nation directly.⁹⁹ Thus they tried to weave patriotic, participatory female identity into the national survival-narratives. At the same time, the modernizing conservatives, relying on the idea of Shimoda, witnessed their views on women’s education gradually becoming passé. Female students at this time engaged in extroverted behavior such as varying their hairstyles, wearing fashionable clothing and glasses, acting unfemininely, and participating in street protests and strikes.¹⁰⁰ Hence, Shimoda’s schools and the education agenda set by the modernizing conservatives during the late imperial Qing and early Republican China alike failed to achieve their goals of preserving the traditional feminine virtues assigned to women.

The discussion of religious and women’s questions revived with the May Fourth Movement after 1919. Intense public discussion of Nora, the female protagonist in Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen’s play *A Doll’s House* prompted May Fourth-inspired intellectuals such as Hu Shi and Lu Xun to present visions of the “new woman” (新女性, *xin fengxing*).¹⁰¹ Different organizations, including the nascent Chinese Communist Party (CCP), started to address the issue of women in their approaches. Throughout this time, however, Chinese political and cultural elites envisioned the “new woman” as an

⁹⁶ Judge, “Talent, Virtue, and the Nation,” 783-785.

⁹⁷ Note that Judge describes those Chinese women as “feminists” as their activism “pertaining to” p

independent, secular actor while remaining a traditional, self-sacrificing wife or mother, who somehow bridges

traditional Confucian schools and launched a “reading the classics” movement.¹⁰⁸ Those movements are anti-modern and nationalistic, emphasizing the values of the Confucian classics. These, they believe, can instill a philosophy of life in the students, preparing them for society better than Western modern subjects like English and math.¹⁰⁹

Meanwhile, the state implicitly collaborated with these grassroots schools by lending its patronage to the revival of the former imperial Veneration of Confucius ceremony. Held annually in Qufu, the hometown of Confucius, the ceremony is broadcasted nationwide on state-affiliated television. Since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, he has made frequent visits to Qufu, consolidating the ceremony’s status as an educative project for Chinese citizens.¹¹⁰ Hence the popular Confucian revival, advocated by both the state and grassroots organizations, has made much headway in Chinese society.

Along with this, publishing houses began to reprint books on women’s virtues. One of the first was published in 1996, in which the series editor in the preface says that it is important to re-examine women’s virtues, reflecting more closely as it does traditional Chinese culture.¹¹¹ The first Women’s Virtue lecture appears to have been held in 2006, at exactly the same time as popular revival of Confucianism was approaching its peak.

This long detour provides us with better insight into the relationship between women’s virtue and the movement’s appropriation of traditional Chinese culture, ancestors, and ancient sages. The Women’s Virtue Movement follows the traditional Chinese dichotomy between public talent and the private virtue. It continues the debate over those two attributes that began during the late Qing dynasty and the early Republican era. WVM lecturers

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apotheosis of women's domesticity and household activities, as only those can women demonstrate their particular virtues such as faithfulness, loyalty, and proper manners. The Women's Virtue Movement thereby determines the work women should do: assisting their husbands and taking care of children. They praise the women who raised up their children as sages, as did the mothers of Confucius and Mencius. These two mothers became the exemplary figures that the movement's lecturers

discourses, they also emphasize the notion of patrilineal tradition and culture, because ancestors and sages in ancient China are all males. These

of religiosity in women's virtue entails in regard to its purpose. This leads us to the discussion of relationship between women's virtue and cosmic order.

never be altered. They then direct this law towards the organization of family and society.

They view family as the inner-space (

regard husbands/men as Heaven and consider wives/women as Earth.¹²⁶ The lecturers next argue that men, like Heaven, should be especially tenacious in holding up the sky for women; they suggest that women, like Earth, should be especially tolerant and patient in maintaining the stability of household. They allege that women, as Earth, should always obey men and Heaven, with no intention of challenging and overthrowing men in the households. They think if women/Earth overthrow men/Heaven, its

law are Mothers too) to substantiate their claim.¹³⁰ They think this song can strengthen their audience's will to respect their mothers-in-law after the lecture, subsequently buttressing the cosmic order.

Music is indeed a good tool for the lecturers to reinforce their cosmic order. Ding Xuan and Chen Jingyu employ other songs in their lectures. They both employ the song “Zhangfu ni xinkule ” (My Poor, Hardworking Husband) in their lectures to invite their female audience to appreciate their husbands and the responsibility they take upon themselves.¹³¹ Ding Xuan also plays the song “Fuqi qing ” (The Love between Husband and Wife) to admire the harmonious relationship between husband and wife within a household.¹³² Both songs provide an important lens for us to understand their connection between the cosmic order and women's virtue. Both songs employ a female perspective to praise husbands' hardwork and dedication to the family. In “Fuqi qing,” Ding Xuan includes the clip of this song's live performance with an actor and an actress as the husband and wife, in which the husband wears a military uniform, while the wife is attentive to the husband. Those rhetoric and imagery have a powerful impact in the Kodg' r endring. By employing a woman's voice to acclaim the hardship of husband, the lecturers in their contexts reinforce their cosmic order, in which the husband holds the upper hand in the couple's dynamics. This legitimizes the necessity of masculinity. EM

Heaven.” Songs these lecturers played in their lectures, as explained above, serve the purpose of perpetuating the notion of heaven and earth to the audience, defending the dualistic cosmic order. The division between men and women, with attributes and concepts such as *yang* and *yin*, heaven and earth, extends from the individual, to the household, to society, and ultimately to the nation. This fits well with the lecturers’ perspective of sustaining the cosmic order.

Another important feature of this cosmic order is its reliance on a biological view of the men and women. The lecturers view men and women as biologically different, since women can bear children, and they apply this superficial biological difference to their social and cosmic order. ¹⁴³ *Women’s Stability* (女界之安) childbearing, combined with their imposed ascription of *yang* and earth, makes them more suitable to stay in the household and to be *yang* ed

women who defy their mothers-in-law and husbands, as well as women who fight for feminist causes.¹⁴⁵ For these lecturers, those counterexamples all indicate rebellions against the carved-up cosmic order in their discourse. They pose a challenge to the teaching of women's virtue. A challenge to the teaching of women's virtue would mean a challenge to the stability of the household. A challenge to the household's stability would become a challenge to the harmony and stability of society. Therefore, those lecturers try to prevent their audience from mimicking those counterexamples in order to retain the cosmic order.

The above points can be illustrated through Ding Xuan's quote in the opening of this paper. Ding Xuan in her lecture states that "The male symbolizes Heaven, and the female symbolizes Earth. Heaven is high, Earth is low. ... There is a Principle of Nature that can never change: that is, Earth will never overturn and overthrow Heaven!"¹⁴⁶ Her words follow the same analogy and exemplify the cosmic order with the same trope. By presumptuously proclaiming that Earth can never and shall never overthrow Heaven, indicating the same condition for women and men, she receiv

again.¹⁴⁷ Although different in their cultural background, time, and space, the lecturers of the Women's Virtue Movement and the fundamentalists of the U.S. thus mirror each other in their agendas.

Overall, the lecturers use women's virtue to construct a cosmic order which is reminiscent of imperial China's historical cosmic order. They start from the biological difference between men and women and apply it to the ordering of society with their reference to the Chinese canons, which forges a dualistic division between men and women in terms of their space, their inclination, their positionality. This dualistic division works to link the parallel between family and society. The lecturers then locate women as the focal point of this parallel logic.

Nonetheless, the question still remains: how to instill faith in the audience for this cosmic order? The process of erecting such a cosmic order is laborious. It requires a certain extent of rationality of the audience to follow this logic and to be convinced. Rationality itself is not sufficient to p

peace to All-under-Heavens and achieve the Great Harmony ().¹⁵¹ Ding Xuan considers karmic causes to be an important component of the women's virtue education, for the mother's receptiveness to the idea of karma would have a direct correlation to the education of their children. Similarly, Zhong Maosen in his lecture mentions the importance of karmic education in the teaching of women's virtue.¹⁵² Their words establish the link between karmic education and women's virtue.

In fact, the lecturers establish the claim that karmic education is a type of moral education, citing specific religious masters. Zhong Maosen holds that education of karma should be on equal footing with ethical and moral education (

), as all traditional Chinese culture is about ethical and moral education.¹⁵³ Zhong backs his claim by citing Master Yinguang (1862-1940), a renowned Buddhist Pure Land Master of the Republican Period (1912-1949). Zhong quotes Yinguang's words on family education to say that education of karma is crucial in cultivating a good mother, and it thereby could produce good sons and daughters for society and the nation in future.¹⁵⁴ Zhong quotes Yinguang's recommendation of finding specific books to inculcat

Master Yinguang is not the only religious master that was quoted by these lecturers. Another figure that is frequently quoted by the lecturers is Wang Fengyi (1864-1938), a spiritual healer and rural moralist based in Northern China. Ding Xuan quotes Wang's words that "Woman is the source of the world," and recapitulates Wang's concept of "Jiating liubu jiaoyu" (Six-step Family Education): Women should uphold women's virtues and obey their husbands and act quietly; during pregnancy, women should remain peaceful, stay calm and solemn in their daily actions, listen to sage's teachings, practice vegetarianism and maintain personal hygiene; in the swaddling stage, women should tend to the infant carefully and let it grow naturally; in the breast-feeding stage, women should sit upright, feed the child regularly, stay calm and avoid any sadness and anger; in the infant stage, women should retain child's purity of heart by teaching the child virtue and morality; in the toddler stage, women should teach the child by her example, read the classics to the child and lead the child not into evil and temptation, but enlighten the child with wisdom.¹⁵⁷

Ding Xuan also quotes Wang's teaching that the three transformations, the transformations of xing (virtue), xin (heart), and shen (body), are aligned with his vision of women's three obedience: her virtue should obey Heaven's rule (), her heart should obey morality's rule () and her body should obey compassion's rule ().¹⁵⁸ Wang's teaching is synthetic in nature, as he combined the Three Jewels of Buddhism (the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha) with the three transformations of the Daoism and the three bonds of Confucianism (father-son, ruler-subject, husband-wife) altogether.¹⁵⁹ His words emphasized karmic cause,

¹⁵⁷ Bilibili, Part I, 04:40; Tencent, Part II, 2:37:56.

¹⁵⁸ Tencent, Part II, 42:05; , edited by , 2 Volumes (Beijing, China: The China Overseas Publishing House, 2011), vol. 1, 129, 202.

¹⁵⁹ , 202; Prasenjit Duara,

guidelines.¹⁶⁵ Lecturers treat actions that produce good karma as a sort of medicine that can cure bad karma.¹⁶⁶ The lecturers then prompt their audiences, asking them to decide which karma they want to engage in

misbehaviors will reincarnate as pigs in their next lives.¹⁷⁰ Ding Xuan's demand that women restrain from eating pork is thus part of her emphasis on the karmic cycle .

Although all these claims about karma sound illogical, it is imperative to take those claims seriously as important data for understanding the dynamics between women's virtue, karma, and moral transformation. To understand this dynamic, we have to resort to China's religious history as a é

retributions/karmas and that they should therefore abide by the framework of common ethics) also add more layers to the imperial Chinese religious landscape.¹⁷² Therefore, as China entered the twentieth century, the outlook of its religious landscape was diverse.

Popular moral teaching books were diffused among Chinese society. Morality books, while ignored by the Confucian philosophers and other dedicated intellectuals, reflected popular moral norms. Morality books we

threats to their careers as well as the grave threat of Western imperialism, the grassroots literati, encountering social Darwinian ideas, provided the illiterate and poor individuals with the practice and morality books. They use stories of karma and divine retribution to “Confucianize” society, as they saw society becoming increasingly immoral and amoral. Their stories also connected Chinese-character writing with the fate and future of the Chinese nation, consecrating Chinese writing as the foundation of Chinese civilization.¹⁷⁷ Morality books thus were tied with nationalist rhetoric.

The story of morality books did not end here; instead, its journey continued in the 1920s and 1930s, with religious masters such as Yinguang and Wang Fengyi. Whereas the May Fourth Movement intellectuals and participants debated hotly over women’s fate and China’s fate, these two masters voiced their own visions of women. Their claims concerning women and women’s virtue left their imprint on the

repulsed by the enthronement of warlord Yuan Shikai () in 1916, yet they were also troubled by the May Fourth Movement and the radical New Culture Movement activists. Meanwhile, although not exactly anti-foreign, these elites also found the Western influence in Chinese society, such as governance, commerce and industry, abhorrent. They thus found

impact and legacy dur

) in 2015.¹⁹⁵ This volume includes Yinguang's views on women's education, karma/divine retribution and other subjects such as family education, filial piety and the concept of Pure Land. This collection is published under the approval of the Chinese Religious Culture Publisher (Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe,). The Chinese Religious Culture Publisher is a state-owned institution, which belongs to the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA, Guojia zongjiao shiwuju,). In other words, Honghua Society's publication and printing of Yinguang's words, including his "feudalistic" words on women's virtue education, are legitimate under the blessing of the Chinese state in 2015.

The appropriation of Wang Fengyi's texts is performed by the grassroots organizations such as Yidan Xuetang (). Those organizations belong to the umbrella movement of the popular Confucian revival, promoting the idea that

popular religious books that aimed to provide moral principles for audience to act morally. By investing themselves firmly in such resources, the lecturers erect the Women's Virtue Movement not only as a social movement, but also as a popular religious movement. This movement clings to an authoritative tradition, a transcendent cosmic order, and the principle of karmic retribution. Its goal is to activate moral transformation across family, society, the nation, and the world. In this sense, the Women's Virtue Movement is similar to the American fundamentalists as they both eagerly try to preserve and return to the past cosmic order, whether a dualistic Chinese one or the "Victorian morality." They both stress the moral superiority of women in their discourses. Yet what distinguishes them is that whereas the Victorian morality was based on the American South and was related to the U.S. Christian fundamentalists, the Women's Virtue Movement relies on the tradition of morality books and the notion of karmic retributions to shape audience reception of the women's virtues.

Furthermore, by citing Master Yinguang and Wang Fengyi, the lecturers, like the two masters and their followers, exploit modernization to reject modernity. The lecturers deliver their lectures in an urban setting. T

as the marker of progress and reject modern ideas and modernity.

This chapter closes its analysis of the dynamic between women's virtue, karma and moral transformation. This dynamic approves of the dualistic cosmic order and heightens the religiosity of the Women's Virtue Movement. The facts that Master Yinguang's and Wang Fengyi's works are published under state approval, and that the karma tales and moral transformation also evoke the nation in the lecturers' discourse remain puzzling. This puzzle leads us to inquire further into the relationship between the women's virtue and the nation-state, specifically the Chinese nation.

Chapter VI: Women's Virtue and the Nation-State

As we have seen in the previous three chapters, there is always an implicit connection between women's virtue and the Chinese nation-state. To unravel this relationship, we will again scrutinize the discourse espoused by the lecturers to see belowwe

In the opening of her lecture, Chen emphasizes that “as long as everyone believes in moral education and retains the true spirit of the Chinese nation (), only then will this nation have spirit, have direction and persevere against any obstacle [thus becoming a strong nation].”²⁰⁵ She invites every woman to “take care of her household and strengthen its moral foundation,” so that “the nation’s future will be bright and brilliant.”²⁰⁶ She chides modern women for being selfish, and exhorts them to think more for society, the nation and their descendants.²⁰⁷ She repeats the same phrase again and invites mothers to dedicate themselves to cultivating their children for the sake of their parents, extended family, the nation and humanity.²⁰⁸ She equally promotes the dissemination of women’s virtue education to the enti~ ati

), an organization that arranges summer camps, pseudo-traditional Han Clothing-style marriages, and schools for learning Chinese national studies () and women's virtues.²¹¹ The members of this association are mostly women's virtue lecturers and cadres who retired from central government and provincial government positions. Accordingly, most of the lecturers in this association are Chinese Communist Party members.

Ding's lecture was held in an auditorium in Shanghai on October 4, 2015. Her lecture provides the most extensive evocation of the Chinese nation, the Chinese state and the CCP compared to other three lecturers. She opens her lecture by paying a lengthy homage to the Chinese Communist Party, President Xi Jinping, the government officials in Shanghai, as well as to the volunteers for the lecture and the attendants' ancestors, whose heavenly virtues brought them together to study women's virtues.²¹² She next pronounces that "the household is the smallest nation, and the nation is thousands of households," alluding to the 2009 song "Guojia" (Nation-Household), which commemorates the sixtieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China.²¹³ Ding Xuan proceeds to say that she is overjoyed with the recently-released two-child policy for women.²¹⁴ She sees it as an opportunity for women to further cultivate their children to become sages for the nation.²¹⁵ She alleges that "marriage is not only about two people. It also concerns the couple's respective families, lineages, and also the serious matter of the nation. ... Marriage between men and women is to fulfill the

also belongs the Chinese nation and the Chinese race.”²¹⁷ She calls women to adhere to women’s virtue and traditional Chinese culture, as she predicts the advent of “Greater China” () with numerous virtuous person and the “noble ones” () blossoming in the land that goes far beyond their imaginations.²¹⁸

As there is a sense of joy and hope here, there is also a sense of lamentation and anxiety from Ding Xuan in evoking the Chinese nation. Ding Xuan laments contemporary mothers’ lack of concern for families and their children. She states the fact that China’s annual abortion rate is the highest in the world, which she considers a disgrace to the nation.²¹⁹ She views abortion, along with growing gynecological disease rates in China, as a severe social and moral crisis. She calls

people, and ultimately the Chinese nation.²²³ She declares that “abortion is an act of killing. ... The Chinese women’s wombs cannot hold up our Chinese nation’s future [with millions of abortion annually].”²²⁴ She

nation's "racial superiority" ().²³⁰ She references the ancient Chinese sages to defend her argument.²³¹

Ma Yiling is the last lecturer to be analyzed. Ma has been very active in terms of teaching and spreading women's virtue since 2010, serving as editor for both Zhong Maosen's and Chen Jingyu's lectures-turned-textbooks. She started lecturing on women's virtue around the same year, and was hired by the Yunnan provincial government to lecture on the fifteenth-century () in 2015.

Although her rhetoric is less bombastic and provocative than Ding Xuan, Ma also stresses similar points on the relation between women's virtue and the nation. She demands that women cultivate their children to be talented for society and the nation, otherwise it would be a disgrace for their parents and society.²³² She states that "the vicissitude of a clan and the vicissitudes of a nation are all connected with marriage."²³³ She quotes Xi Jinping's words to accentuate that women are important for elevating family virtues, and that their actions matter to social harmony.²³⁴ She sees the vicissitudes of a household and those of a nation are related by women's words, actions and virtues. Therefore, she suggests, women should speak and act cautiously in line with women's virtue teachings.²³⁵ She instructs women to concern themselves with the national well-being.²³⁶ She tells her attendants that women are the critical foundation of and guarantors for the prosperity of family and the nation. Hence, they should study women's virtue to bring blessings to the family, prosperity to the nation, and pass the torch of the Chinese nation.²³⁷ At the end of her lecture, she calls women to study women's virtue since it will bring flourishing and happiness to themselves,

canons. These activists used national studies to challenge Western universal values; they called upon Chinese tradition and Chinese knowledge to present an alternative to Western modernity. The movement holds a dual character: nationalist (harkening back to China's tradition) yet universalist (proposing an alternative for the globe). By creating an imagined past, however, activists of the national studies fever presented their cherished learnings in an ahistorical sense – unchanging over time. They have a sense of cultural nostalgia that longs for something now absent in Chinese

the society.²⁴⁴ The gender wealth gap was widened concurrently as women generally do not have ownership of their houses.²⁴⁵ When President Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, he stressed frequently that women should return back to the household, coinciding with the change to the two-child policy in 2015.²⁴⁶ Simultaneously, the Chinese government began more actively suppressing feminist activism, maintaining its political authority. The Chinese state has called “Western feminism” part of the “Foreign hostile forces” (

) that intends to disturb the social stability in China.²⁴⁷ This can be seen through the case of China’s Feminist Five in 2015, in which five young Chinese feminists were arrested by police for their social activism, such as distributing pamphlets to factory workers to raise consciousness of gender inequality and celebrating their identities as single, queer and child-free women in Chinese society.²⁴⁸ The Chinese state’s repressive policies for women, as Leta Hong Fincher points out, are attempts to maintain patriarchal authoritarianism and to conform women as the reproductive tool of the state. This can be seen with the initiate attempt of cultivating the cult of personality around Xi Jinping by referring to him as “Big Daddy Xi” (Xi Dada,) and Xi’s emphasis on traditional family values and women’s role in taking care of the youngsters.²⁴⁹ Songs such as “Daddy Xi Loves Mama Peng” became popular as “Big Daddy Xi” remained in circulation from 2012 until 2016. Even as this phrase is dropped out of use, Xi Jinping has still been portrayed as the patriarch of the whole nation.²⁵⁰ By emphasizing traditional family values, the official narratives and Xi Jinping pushed women to return back to the households and perpetuated the notion that

²⁴⁴ See Hong Fincher,

²⁴⁵ Hong Fincher, , 75-108.

²⁴⁶ Similar rhetoric is prevalent in Chinese newspapers this time. For example, see <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2017-08-03/doc-ifyiswpt5013262.shtml> and http://www.xinhuanet.com//politics/2016-02/24/c_1118142363.htm

²⁴⁷ Hong Fincher, , 13, 163.

²⁴⁸ For a more detailed account, see Hong Fincher, .

²⁴⁹ Hong Fincher, 164-170.

²⁵⁰ Hong Fincher, , 164-165.

women should be the reproductive tool of the state.²⁵¹

Grimmer tales lay ahead. In March, 2018, roughly a month after Xi Jinping struck down the two-term presidential limits, Zhenjiang College in Jiangsu Province, China launched a new course for women to learn how to be a perfect woman in the “new era” of Xi Jinping. The course teaches women of traditional Chinese culture, ranging from Chinese history and how not to wear too much makeup in their daily lives. The goal is to preserve traditional Chinese culture.²⁵² This news story portends the future that Xi Jinping and the CCP carve for women.

At the same time, the CCP continues to increase its legitimacy by relying on religion as a source of inspiration. Anthropologist Frank N. Pieke recognizes in his work that the CCP develops red tourism, requiring its Party cadres to conduct pilgrimage-like excursions to sites that chronicle Party’s beginning, revolutionary struggles, and triumphs. The Party hopes to cultivate the cadres’ party spirit (,) and inculcate patriotism in them. The end goal of this red tourism is to reconstruct the Party as the sacred entity of worship so that the Party can govern with stronger legitimacy. Pieke finally concludes that the cultivation of party spirit is the CCP’s recent attempt to “turn the Party itself rather than its ideology and mission into a sacred entity and an object of religious awe.”²⁵³

A final word on the theory of religious nationalism with some mainland China characteristics is in order, as explored by political scientist Kuo Cheng-tian. Religious nationalism is a synthesis between religion and nationalism.²⁵⁴ It helps to build the state religion in China. This state religion has a political trinity: patriotism, socialism and rule by

²⁵¹ Hong Fincher, , 170.

²⁵² Emily Rauhala, “Hold in Your Belly... Legs together: Chinese

members listed in Ding Xuan's institution are retired, their support and participation still has an impact

ideas such as social Darwinism, developed a theory that merges race with the nation. Sun Yatsen's racial nationalism focused strictly on Han people, as he pledged that Han people should rally together to get rid of the Manchu rulers of China. The Han people were envisioned as a people with one common culture, language, religion and blood—in short, a race that is one, pure and singular. Like Italian fascists, Sun and his counterparts utilized an application of biological concept of “race” to mobilize people to participate in the nationalist cause.²⁶¹ This eugenics rhetoric has a comeback in contemporary China since the 1978 Opening-up, as the Chinese government reenacted eugenics laws in the late 1980s (rescinded in the 1990s), while the public discourse continues to be filled with popular racism today.²⁶²

Ding Xuan is not the first one to pronounce this rhetoric of racial superiority in the contemporary Chinese social movement. Participants in the Han Clothing Movement voice their discourse of race during their activities as well. Picking up the racial discourse from Dr. Sun Yatsen, they employ Han Clothing to reimagine a pure Han race whose strength lies in women, since women is part of the superior Han race. Han Chinese women, in those participants' reimagination, only serve for reproduction. The participants envision that Han Chinese women do not have any sexual desires and that when women do have sex it is all about producing Han descendants, transmitting the DNA, and preserving the racial purity.²⁶³ Those participants consider sex and reproduction as a matter of a national holy war, in which they have to protect the Chinese women from barbarians (foreign people and black people) and other means of contaminations.²⁶⁴ It thus is of no wonder that some participants of the Han Clothing Movement cooperate with a “ladies' academy” that emphasizes a traditional, idealized femininity and targets primarily Chinese women in Carrico's observation. The teachers of this “ladies' academy” fill the class with abstract traditional virtues such as

²⁶¹ Dikotter,

Conclusion

As this paper argues that the Women's Virtue Movement is a popular religious movement, its implications lie on both the local Chinese level and the global level. There are four observations we can conclude with at the local Chinese level. The WVM, like the other social movements in Chinese society during the 2000s and 2010s, reflects the latest effort of Chinese people seeking answers to solve their existential crises and attempting to answer their life questions. Seeking those answers, participants in the WVM, or other social movements, look backward into the past for a cure to make a better future. This orientation reveals not only a sense of nostalgia, but also a sense of anxiety. This sense of anxiety is not surprising. As China has moved away from the Maoist ideals toward economic development and personal material affluence since the 1978 Opening-up, there have been unforeseen side effects and byproducts. People, befuddled and startled at these side effects and byproducts, need principles to navigate their lives in this apparently new society. While many people stick to economic developmentalism and material affluence, there are people trying to retrieve the Maoist ideals; some seek refuge in religion, and others, like the WVM, pledge their faith to imagined and invented traditions. Either way, it demonstrates the process of reconstituting a common foundation for both individuals and society.

In this process of reconstituting this common foundation, the WVM has proceeded in a similar manner as other social movements do: it identifies the moral crisis as the most urgent problem; it places an emphasis on traditional ideals and archetypes; it prescribes techniques to solve those problems; and, it rallies followers under its wings. In this way, the WVM repackages itself with religiosity. It no longer remains a secular movement; instead, the lecturers of the WVM elevate it to

include religious scholars and religious theories in order to find more nuances and more commonalities between different trends of nationalism.

Lastly, the implication of the connection between nationalism and religion also applies to the question of the relationship between secularity and religion. In our secular society, we have created boundaries that we hope separate the religious and the secular. Yet the WVM is a local indicator of the global phenomenon that the separation between the sacred and the secular is not always clear-cut.

thought about our civil rights and the responsibility of citizenship but only looked at

understand its spirit and legacy rather than let its importance be obscured by the superficial reading of the WVM.

Lastly, all previous studies on the contemporary Chinese social movements alluded to in passing, including this paper, have not paid close enough attention to the recent economic development of authoritarian capitalism in China. A study of Chinese capitalism is necessary, but this study should be conducted through the lens of religious theory. Historically, religions interacted with capitalism on numerous occasions. By using religious theory, we can comprehend how capitalism perpetuates the existing systemic problems and how we might come up with a way to move forward from the status quo. As religious scholar Kathryn Lofton exemplifies in her work, theories of religious studies can provide tools for us to understand the world as it is and to critique this status quo.²⁶⁹

In the end, we should not walk away from misogyny, patriarchy and systemic injustice. Rather, we should confront them, challenge them, and continue our journey.

²⁶⁹ Kathryn Lofton,

(Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), introduction.

Appendix

A Map of China showing the spread of the Women's Virtue Movement. Provinces and cities highlighted are those that held women's virtue lectures between 2006 to 2019.



Provinces marked: Fujian, Guangdong, Hainan, Hebei, Henan, Heilongjiang, Hubei, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Liaoning, Shaanxi, Shandong, Shanxi, Yunnan, Zhejiang.

Cities marked: Beijing, Changsha, Chongqing, Dalian, Dongguan, Fushun, Haikou, Hong Kong, Jiujiang, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Tianjin, Wenzhou, Wuhan, Zhenjiang.

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