Bret Hinsch


208 pp. $75.00 (£44.95) cloth. ISBN 978-1-4422-2233-5; $27.95 (£16.95) paper. ISBN 978-1-4422-2234-2.

In *Masculinities in Chinese History*, Bret Hinsch aims to provide a “general overview” of selected “ideals of manhood” throughout Chinese history (pp. 9–10). Thus he devotes each chapter to a particular mode of manhood in a specific historical era: the segregated Zhou man; the vengeful Han man; the celibate Jin monk; the woman-controlling Tang man; the flower-loving Song literatus; the homosocial, marginal, Ming ‘good fellow’ (*haohan* 好漢); the nationalist, capitalist modern man of the late Qing and early Republican period; and the revolutionary, material and metrosexual men of the Mao and post-Mao eras; in the final chapter, he ignores his framework of one theme per chapter. In his introductory chapter, Hinsch does not provide his rationale for selecting these particular masculinities, despite stressing that they have been “carefully chosen” (p. 10). Nor does he seek to justify the much maligned history-by-dynastic period that he adopts. Thankfully, throughout the book Hinsch often ignores his own structure by discussing material from different historical periods and pointing to co-existing masculinities, although not often enough.

In his introduction, Hinsch usefully identifies and discusses four main influential factors in the shaping of historical masculinities in China: kinship bonds, both real, as in filial practices, and fictive, as between gang members; elite men’s intimate relationship with the state, in which the state endowed high officials with masculine status in return for loyalty; shifts in economic relations, particularly the rise of commerce; and foreign masculinities – nomadic, Buddhist, Western – that entered China at significant junctures (pp. 7–9). In each subsequent chapter, Hinsch provides a concise introduction to the salient sociocultural conditions, beliefs and practices which gave shape to the specific form of masculinity he has chosen to elaborate on. He draws from a wide range of English language publications as well as scholarship in Chinese from diverse disciplines to provide insights into the particular masculinity at hand, and brings in relevant conceptual frameworks for analytical purposes. For example, in a fascinating chapter ‘Cultural Capital and Manhood’ in the Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279), Hinsch argues that the sophisticated appreciation of peonies became a marker of elite cultural status. At that time, increasing numbers of men achieving literati positions through the expanded civil service examinations could not fall back on hereditary status or family wealth to distinguish themselves as gentry. They turned to refined performances of classical learning, tea connoisseurship, calligraphy and indeed peony cultivation to display their...
‘cultural capital’, which instituted a new form of hegemonic masculinity: the ‘educated and tasteful connoisseur’ (p. 94).

An earlier chapter covering the Jin 晉 dynasty (265–420) similarly discusses the emergence of a new form of masculinity, in this instance Buddhist monkhood. Hinsch shows how Buddhist hagiographies point to three strategic practices employed by Chinese Buddhists to make Buddhist monastic masculinity more familiar and acceptable to the general population: rejection, appropriation, and transformation of existing masculinities. The latter strategy involved the transplantation of power structures from mainstream society into the temple, including the construction of fictive kinship relationships such as the demonstration of ‘filial’ deference towards superiors. These and other transformations and appropriations, combined with the gradual growth of state-managed monastic posts, brought Buddhist masculinity into line with conventional relationships among men, and rendered it less threatening (pp. 63–4).

The impact of foreign masculinities of a different kind is explored in a chapter on the late Qing and Republican eras. Here Hinsch brings into play Kwame Anthony Appiah’s argument that the challenge to Chinese male honour posed by the Western imperialist presence in late Qing China was a major motivation for reform (p.148 n.9).1 Hinsch cites Kang Youwei’s 康有為 (1858–1927) memorial to the throne expressing his deep shame at the ridicule heaped upon China by foreigners because of its opium addicts, beggars and, most shaming of all, women with bound feet (p. 132). It is pertinent to add here that the anarchofeminist He-Yin Zhen 何殷震 (ca. 1884–1920?) was already arguing in 1907/8 that elite men’s volte-face on foot-binding was motivated more by their longing for respect from Western men than by a genuine commitment to gender equality.2

As capitalist policies took root, a new ‘patriotic icon’ of manhood appeared in the Republican period, the ‘brash and industrious’ businessman, who upheld the nation’s honour in its competition with other nations (p. 137). Hinsch also outlines how the very infrastructure of the modern metropolis in China – cinemas, parks, sports grounds, libraries, museums – developed to suit the new middle-class men’s pursuit and display of physical and cultural distinction (pp. 139–144).