
Studies of women in the Tang dynasty (618-907) have recently become more numerous, particularly in the Chinese language world. This growing interest in Tang women’s lives has probably been stimulated by the thriving scholarship on women in late imperial China during the past two decades, but it certainly is also related to the intrinsic importance of the Tang dynasty itself. Tang China, or at least the first half of the Tang, has long been considered one of the golden ages in Chinese imperial history, while the disastrous impact of the An Lushan Rebellion (755-63) on the Tang was such that the second half of the dynasty has often been viewed as initiating one of the key transitional periods that led to significant social, political, economic, and intellectual developments in late imperial times. Although many recent Chinese language studies of Tang women have explored possible influences of the initial stage of the transition on Tang women’s lives, only a few examine the topic from the vantage point of gender. Yao Ping’s book is one such example employing gender concepts put forward by the notable feminist historian Joan Scott.1

In the past few years Yao has published several articles on Tang women’s lives.2 Two chapters in the book reviewed here incorporate the material from these articles in modified and reorganized form. In addition to an introduction, there are ten chapters: 1. Age of hair pinning, or the eligible marriage age for women; 2. Marriages through matchmakers; 3. Marriage arrangements and conditions; 4. Relations between husbands and wives; 5. Contractual gender relations other than spousal relations; 6. Afterlife marriages; 7. Women outside of marriage; 8. Mothers’ images and status; 9. Childbearing; 10. Children.

In the introduction Yao states her intention to investigate Tang women’s lives through “gender institutions,” referring to “types and arrangements of marriages” and “gendered meanings,” rather than merely to examine women’s general position and status, as most previous Chinese language studies have done (p. 2). Guided by this theoretical orientation, Yao addresses four major concerns: (1) the normative concepts that defined women’s lives in the Tang; (2) the relationship between women’s lives and Tang social, political and economic institutions; (3) Tang women’s “self-identity” and the factors that influenced their identification

1) On page 2, Yao Ping cites Joan Scott’s well known article “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” American Historical Review 91 (1986): 1053-75.

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with particular roles; and (4) the interaction between women's lives and social change in the Tang (p. 1). Throughout the book, these four concerns serve as the frame of reference for Yao's organization, analysis, and explanation of the source materials used, but they do not unite the chapters thematically. In other words, even though the ten chapters can be divided into three units focusing on three related aspects of Tang women's lives—marriage arrangements, relationships between married couples, and motherhood (p. 6)—without a manifest theme, these chapters do not cohere into a unified whole.

Yao's book, like many works published recently in Chinese, surveys a comprehensive variety of subjects and draws on an equally impressive range of sources. However, there are two features that distinguish Yao's study from these other works: First, she employs the concept of gender to interpret, or rather re-interpret, the usual Tang source materials: for example, dynastic histories, anecdotes and stories, prose and poetry, Dunhuang documents, and especially, extant Tang epitaphs. Second, she focuses on the epitaphs as her primary source and examines themes in them more extensively than other studies have done; as we'll see later, she sometimes also neglects salient themes in these sources. One can say that through her investigation of these epitaphs, Yao's study confirms and consolidates some of our present knowledge about Tang women's lives. In itself this is undoubtedly a laudable service to the field.

According to Yao, among the six-thousand-plus extant epitaphs, more than fifteen hundred were composed in honor of women. In addition, more than six hundred were compiled in admiration of non-elite members of society (p. 4). Yao's effort to classify, categorize, and explain this enormous body of sources is quite commendable, especially her quantification of some of these data, which are presented in more than fifty charts demonstrating statistical results of her findings.

One reason Yao relied so heavily on the epitaph sources is her belief that their fixed and regulated style reflects changes that occurred between the early and later parts of Tang history with regard to the norms prescribed either for “gender institutions” or for women's roles in life. Indeed, such changes are demonstrated in this work.

In the rest of this review, I will provide a summary of Yao's main points and then offer my own comments.

Chapter 1 starts with a discussion of the term jinian, or “the age of hair pinning,” in the Tang. According to Yao, this term may be traced to the Liji, and refers to a female who has reached the legally acceptable age for marriage. That age varied from fifteen to twenty sui at different times. In the Tang, however, the “age of hair pinning” was usually set at thirteen sui, but we learn that this legal norm was often ignored, especially in the second part of the dynasty. On the basis of information from epitaphs, Yao finds that the average age of marriage for women throughout the Tang was around seventeen and a half sui, close to that in the later imperial dynasties. But it would seem from her discussion that in the era after the An Lushan Rebellion, Tang women tended to marry later, sometimes even at twenty-plus sui. Moreover, contrasted with the biological and social