
Martin Huang’s new book, though its title suggests a more theoretical approach to issues of gender identity, is actually more direct and historical. For the most part, he surveys what late imperial texts have to say, implicitly and explicitly, about “masculinity,” and how those views have changed over time. He divides his exploration into three parts: “Engendering the Loyal Minister” (which looks at “high literati” constructions of the male self, particularly in relation to the literati class’s relationship to political authority); “Heroes and Other Competing Models” (which examines changing models of masculinity in vernacular fiction); and “What a Man Ought to Be” (which looks at handbooks for heads of households and collections of aphorisms). For convenience, Huang divides the discourse into two ways of thinking: first, analogy with the female (in which men explicitly or implicitly compare their situation to that of women and suggest to what extent they can use women in general as allegorical representations of themselves); and second, differentiation from the feminine, in which the male qualities are respected that makes the male most clearly “different” from the female. Though these two methods overlap considerably in all three sections of the book, the “analogy” issues tend to emerge most clearly in Part One, while the “differentiation” issues emerge most clearly in Parts Two and Three.

Huang begins Part One with the inevitable examination of classical and medieval considerations of the masculine, particularly those that derive from canonical Confucian texts and from Sima Qian’s (c. 145-c. 90 B.C.E.) *Shiji* (Historical records). While the author does not really cover new ground here, his summary is a thoughtful and useful one, and directs us to the specific issues that will concern him in the following chapters. Beginning with Chapter Two, he brings us up to the Ming; here, he traces how the male Confucian desire to see the educated literatus as teacher and advisor to the ruler comes into conflict with increasing Ming authoritarianism. In the illuminating words of the Qing historian and philosopher Huang Zongxi (1610-1695), “If I come to serve [the emperor] without regard for serving all-under-Heaven, then I am merely the prince’s menial servant and concubine. If, on the other hand, I have regard for serving the people, then I am the prince’s friend and teacher” (pp. 35-36). Nonetheless, the strength of the literary tradition still led officials who were punished, exiled, or demoted to fall back on the age-old trope of the abandoned court lady to represent their anguish. Much more interesting, however, is Huang’s note about how this feminization takes a sharp turn in the late Ming, as officials compare the daily abasement they are subject to as government bureaucrats to the self-abnegation and humiliation that a concubine experiences: for them, the female analogy suggests not a position of favor lost that can be regained through persuasion and virtue, but a rejection of the entire system and a turn towards the life of the private gentleman.
The third chapter, on the Ming intellectual Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521-1593), is a psychological reading of Xu's behavior following the arrest of his patron Hu Zongxian 胡宗憲 in 1563—behavior that culminated in his bizarre attempt to commit suicide by crushing his testicles with a hammer. Huang sees Xu wrestling with his failure to support Hu in his time of need; and this resonates as well with Xu's poems on chaste widows (where he may see comparison with his own situation) as well as his dramas on the late Han dissident Mi Heng 繼衡 (who drops his clothing in Cao Cao’s 曹操 presence, thus revealing his private parts) and on women figures who cross-dress for (male) success. Huang sees both Xu's literary output and his actions as the consequence of a massive crisis in masculinity, and his need to assert his identity at the moment of feeling impotent and feminized. While normally one might take issue with the psychologizing of a writer's irrecoverable subjective state, Huang makes a compelling case that is definitely worth considering.

In the last chapter of Part One, the author looks at the compulsive use by Ming-Qing intellectuals of the trope of the chaste widow as an illustration of their own predicament in deciding whether or not to serve the new dynasty. Granted the propensity to use the female as an emblem for the self, there is an unintentionally comic quality to the way Huang's literati twist and turn as they struggle to find the morally right comparison to their actions. Should widows remarry, or should they kill themselves (should I serve the Qing or kill myself)? Should women whose fiancés die prematurely never marry (if I was born under the Ming but did not serve, should I still not serve the Qing)? Not surprisingly, literati who went on to serve the new government tended to frown on excessively chaste widows.

Huang also suggests that the next generation of Qing literati tended to see late Ming intellectuals as effeminate, not only because they proved supposedly incompetent during the final Ming collapse, but also precisely because they saw their own moral dilemma in terms of the passive or passive-aggressive analogy of widow-chastity. This may have emerged already in some of the self-flagellating writings of the Ming loyalists themselves: Huang writes of one peculiar argument that came from Qu Dajun 虬大均 (1630-96), who was particularly obsessed with the queue—and how such reasoning may have become implicated in other practices:

By a twist of logic, Qu Dajun was implying that the humiliation of the male subjects of a defeated country could be measured by the degree to which they were forced to feel like women. The alien Manchu regime eventually succeeded in forcing its hairstyle upon all Han Chinese men, while it failed to enforce the ban on footbinding among the Han women. … For some Han male literati, insisting on women's foot-binding became a desperate compensatory gesture of trying to cling to a precarious sense of masculinity when the country (or, for that matter, their manhood) was supposed to have already been lost, but the irony implied in the gesture was difficult to miss (p. 83).