

BOOK REVIEWS

Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China. By Martin W. Huang. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006. Pp. vii + 284. \$60.00.

In his latest study, Martin Huang explores the ways masculinities are negotiated in China. The work begins with a look at antiquity, but it is really the late imperial period—from the fall of the Ming to the fall of the Qing especially—that is under review. There is a certain symmetry in the way Yan Yuan (1635–1704) begins and ends the discussion. The opening pages use Yan to introduce the duality that prevails throughout the rest of the book, that is, the two main ways in which masculinity is configured by men. On the one hand, argues Huang, lies the “strategy of analogy.” A man might portray himself in positive terms as a neglected wife or chaste widow when trying to describe his loyalty to a ruler. On the other hand, the “strategy of differentiation” crops up when men wish to avoid feminine association, as when brotherhood is favoured over conjugal ties. Yan Yuan opens Huang’s study because he cast doubt on the practice, widely current in his day, of praising the suicides of Ming loyalists via analogies to those of virtuous women. Moving though it might be to set them in this light, does this not bring out the passivity of late-Ming officialdom, Yan wonders? In Yan’s mind, the link to widow suicide should be seen in negative, not positive terms.

When Yan reappears in the final pages it is in a somewhat different context. To late-Qing reformers like Liang Qichao (1873–1929) he was a prescient apostle for modern pre-occupations. Yan’s concerns about the possible effeminacy of all Neo-Confucian officials, whom he categorized as thinking and writing too much, when added to his interest in physical activity and concrete, practical learning, served the agenda of “remasculinization” that Liang put forward for China, now widely viewed as the “sick man of Asia.”

In between these two vignettes, Huang explores the issue of masculinity in three main types of literature. Section one takes the high road, literarily speaking, exploring the role of the minister in Ming politics, especially late-Ming politics. Throughout the focus is on loyalty, namely, whether the devotion such figures extend to the ruler is construed along the lines of wifeliness, or whether (and under what circumstances) it is described in more masculine terms. This section takes the reader through a number of pairings of rulers with ministers and reviews the types of analogy to the feminine that they evoked in their time. Penultimately, it arrives at the fascinating case of Xu Wei (1521–1593), whose portrait appears on the cover. Like several other individuals that come up for discussion, Xu was never an official in his own right but rather served as a secretary (*muyou*) to an official. This somewhat humiliating position, when added to the fact that Xu was a live-in son-in-law (*ruzhu*) may have sensitized him to gender issues. In embarrassment at failing to stand up for his disgraced employer, who subsequently died in prison, Xu went so far as to castrate himself. When he later murdered his wife on suspicion of infidelity, many worried about his sanity. In Huang’s analysis, however, Xu’s writings reveal the logic behind his actions. His

several dramas on female cross-dressers show that the real issue was talent and whether it was properly recognized by the system. Anything short of full recognition was a humiliation difficult to bear. It was through writing about talented women that Xu sought to reclaim a kind of masculinity he had not previously known. Xu's relationship to the two strategies is complicated. His was predominately a strategy of analogy, albeit to cross-dressed women, even though he also took an interest in masculine military figures and swords.

The final chapter on this section is about the fall of the Ming. Here a debate on widow suicide recapitulates the issues introduced through Yan Yuan in the opening pages: whether suicide is heroic or overly passive, and along with that, whether there was something overly bookish about the way Neo-Confucians constructed the world. Via a strategy of differentiation, both questions raise the specter of undue femininity that might be viewed as a shortcoming of the Neo-Confucian world view.

The second section of the book is about vernacular fiction, Huang's chief area of intellectual specialization. This section, the longest of the three, approaches the questions of masculinities through a whole range of novels, each of which yields a different take on the subject. Again, however, the paired strategies of analogy and differentiation continue as organizing concepts. Here we see a more heroic portrayal of officials than the one in the first section, as when *Sanguo zhi yanyi*, allows the Confucian minister a choice as to who his master is, a freedom no women could ever have enjoyed. However, the upper fictional register of this novel is compared to more popular and more masculine forms of the story, where brawn is favoured over brains. This leads into a discussion of *Shuihu*, perhaps the most misogynistic of all popular novels, where the *haohan* (stalwart) becomes a figure of interest. *Shuihu* clearly operates around a strategy of differentiation, not analogy. More Confucianized versions of the *haohan* are identified in three novels on the Sui and Tang, however, where loyalty and chastity are once again honoured. Other types of masculinity are introduced through other novels—the ever effeminate male beauties of scholar-beauty fiction, the male-male loves that crop up in *Honglou meng* and *Pinhua baojian*, and the ruminations on the sage and the military hero in novels like *Yesou puyan*. To an extent these and other novels' views of gender devolve from historical circumstance, but the figures of *haohan* (stalwart), *yingxiong* (hero), *sheng* (sage) and *xia* (knight errant) are also discussed as tropes with long genealogies of their own.

The final section of the book is about “prescriptive literature,” particularly morality books and the “*qingyan*” (pure words) texts that surfaced in the late-Ming and early Qing. These types of work are quite different from one another, but Huang manages to find some continuities and to extend the application of concepts developed in earlier sections. Here the issue of what constitutes sagehood and whether it was construed as superior or inferior to (i.e. more masculine or more feminine than) a more active type of heroism becomes a central concern.

A concluding chapter poses questions about the perception of diminished masculinity among Chinese men at the end of the Qing dynasty, when Manchu domination and the threat of competition with the West emerged as causes for preoccupation. In this chapter the various tropes discussed above pale in significance before an overriding concern with China's weakness as a nation, as articulated by Liang Qichao.

To summarize a book so complex in its argument and so wide in its resource base is

inevitably to do it a disservice and can only be justified as a means of introducing readers to Huang's main ideas. Let me turn now to my own reactions to his project.

This work fills an important vacuum in our understanding of gender. As noted in the beginning of Huang's study, hardly anyone has attempted to carry the study of masculinity back to the Ming and Qing, and no one has done so at this level of detail. The Ming and Qing have proven especially fertile soil for those interested in feminine gender, so for Huang to lay out masculinity in this complex and multi-layered manner makes a fine addition to existing literature. Moreover, the study is richly informative. Some readers may question how well the three-pronged approach really works. The final section is especially underdeveloped compared to the other two and the link between morality books and pure talks appears, to this reader at least, to be rather thin. But it is certainly useful to bring prescriptive literature into the discussion even in the abbreviated manner that we find.

What follows is a list of suggestions for further study. Huang himself is well aware that he has only opened a discussion, not completed it. His own suggestions for future work appear in the closing pages of his study. My additions to such a list would begin with the fact that the book is very much centred on Han ethnicity. Was not the Qing, as many have argued, a multi-ethnic empire? If so, what of the masculinities one finds discussed in the literature by Manchus and Mongols, and how do they interact with Han masculinities. Second, as might be expected in a book on masculinities, this one is very male-centred. When women enter the picture it is only as analogies (negative or positive) for the behaviour or self-definition of men. An important next step might be to integrate this approach with one centring on actual women. For example, apropos of cross-dressed women, what does one make of the fact that women, too, use this trope in their writings, albeit rather differently from men. As Hu Xiao-chen 胡曉真 has argued in her various studies of *tanci xiaoshuo* women authors are much more reluctant than their male counterparts to return the cross-dressed woman to her "normal" state at the end of the story. How does the strategy of analogy or strategy of identification play into this usage by women, or are other strategies at work in the woman author's mind? And what do cross-dressed women authored by women add to the discussion of the relativity of gender that Huang introduces (drawing on Charlotte Furth's work) in his opening pages? If "the distinctions between genders are assumed to be relative rather than absolute" (p. 4), what does it mean that many women writers felt themselves at a huge disadvantage, relative to men, when it came to setting down their ideas? Did women think of writing (at least of fiction) as a mostly masculine preserve?

Another interesting project might be to consider the tropes that come up for discussion in these pages (*yingxiong*, *haohan* and so forth) and see how many of them can be applied to women characters and if so where? *Nü yingxiong* is a possible category in vernacular fiction, where *nü xia* are also found. Is there such a thing as a *nü haojie* or *nü haohan*, or are those categories nonexistent? And what about the *sheng*, or sage? One normally associates that category with men, but even in Huang's own work we find an example of a sagely woman—the mother of the hero in *Yesou puyan*. Now we must ask whether Madame Shui is truly meant as a female version of this species or whether she is best read ironically, as a reference to the weakness inherent in sageliness, as opposed to the martial clout of the military man? We might also ask when and whether sages crop up in writings by women? It would be fascinating if it were to turn out that the sage is a figure women writers avoid.

Additionally, more attention might be paid to questions of audience. Huang's work is quite sensitive to the class of readers, as in the triptich of works on the Sui and Tang, with their varying level of tolerance for Confucian niceties. But questions of readers' gender could also be brought in. Might the sudden burst of feminized male heroes of scholar-beauty fiction have anything to do with an increase in female readership during the seventeenth century? And how might we account for the fact that *Honglou meng* is the novel most favoured by female readers, as judged from their extant poems? Questions such as these do not come up in Huang's work but they could be used to amplify his ideas.

Finally, it might be hoped that the materials from China on both men and women could some day be matched against comparable materials from Western literatures. It is all very well to discuss the relativity of gender in China, but until detailed comparisons can be made with other literary traditions, the promise inherent in Huang's project seems somehow unfulfilled.

My list of amplifications is in no way meant to cast aspersions on Huang's endeavour. One can only take on so much in a single monograph, and this is an important step forward for gender studies of the Ming and Qing.

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China's American Daughter: Ida Pruitt (1888–1985). By Marjorie King. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2006. Pp. xxxviii + 287. \$42.00 cloth, \$23.00 paper.

Anyone interested in China and encounters between Americans and Chinese over the years now has another volume to place on their bookshelves next to Peter Conn's biography of Pearl Buck, Steve and Janice MacKinnon's of Agnes Smedley, Helene Keyssar and Tracey Strong's biography of her mother, Anna Louise Strong, Tom Grunfeld's manuscript find of Millie Bennet's life story, and the memoirs and reflections of other Old China hands like Rewi Alley, Israel Epstein, and Sydney Rittenberg.¹ Like Sydney Shapiro and Maud Russell,

¹ Peter Conn, *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Janice R. MacKinnon and Stephen R. MacKinnon, *Agnes Smedley: The Life and Times of an American Radical* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988); Tracy B. Strong and Helene Keyssar, *Right in Her Soul: The Life of Anna Louise Strong* (New York: Random House, 1983); Milly Bennett, *On Her Own: Journalistic Adventures from San Francisco to the Chinese Revolution, 1917–1927*, ed. A. Tom Grunfeld (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993); Israel Epstein, *The Unfinished Revolution in China* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1947); Rewi Alley, *Rewi Alley: An Autobiography* (Beijing: New World Press, 1987); Anne-Marie Brady, *Friend of China: The Myth of Rewi Alley* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002); Sydney Rittenberg and Amanda Bennett, *The Man Who Stayed Behind* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).