Book Reviews

Women in Tang China. By Bret Hinsch. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020. Pp. vii + 244. $104.00.

With this extremely useful volume on women during the Tang period Bret Hinsch adds to the overall narrative of the history of women in Chinese civilization an important segment covering a time in Chinese history when they certainly made their presence felt. In his efficient "Introduction," which provides in the opening ten pages of the book a concise historical overview setting the scene for what is to follow, he even describes the late seventh and early eighth century as "a high point of female power" (p. 3), a verdict with which one imagines few historians would probably disagree. Yet the fast-moving political developments of those decades are not allowed to dominate the story: here the entire dynasty is taken as a unit within which to assess what we know about the lives of Tang women, both at the pinnacle of the power structure and far away from it. The book is designed on a topical basis around eight chapters, the disadvantage of which arrangement is duly mitigated in an eleven-page conclusion (pp. 139–50) that ties the various threads together. Endnotes ensure that a considerable body of further sources of information is also unobtrusively made available to those using this work as a guide to further reading; the range of secondary scholarship drawn upon is gratifying indeed and includes not only the expected sources in a number of languages but in particular a large number of contributions to recent Chinese academic journals that help to illuminate many facets of the lives of Tang women scarcely touched upon in earlier times.

The reasons for this are perhaps not that far to seek: it is, after all, only in recent decades that women have entered that part of the historical profession dealing with medieval China in any numbers, especially in East Asia. I recall one of my teachers telling me that once when he was visiting the area not long after the mid-twentieth century he was slightly surprised to find a young woman among the entourage of a famous scholar whom he was visiting, and so ventured to ask what she was researching. "She pours the tea" was the only

answer he got. Even in the Western world it is possible to point to one or two pioneers, such as the extraordinary Judith Gautier (1845–1917), who was largely responsible for bringing Tang poetry to the attention of a broad educated readership, or, in London, Evangeline Dora Edwards (1888–1957), the one-time missionary school principal who established the teaching of Tang studies in the United Kingdom, but most of the female experts whose names may be found in the bibliography are contemporaries who are with us yet. This is, therefore, in an important sense a young field, and much of the pleasure that may be derived from reading the pages of Hinsch's study comes from the sense that most of the topics touched upon are, more or less, innovatory, even if the categories deployed in organizing the material are not.

The first chapter is entitled "Marriage," for better or worse the social institution that allowed most women to appear in our sources, identified perhaps by their natal family name, as in many epitaphs, but, in any case, linked inevitably to a male with a different family name. The arrangement of marriage was, of course, very much a family affair for everyone, high or low, but it is interesting to note that in Dunhuang at least intermarriage between different ethnic groups does seem to be attested (p. 16). The next chapter, "Mothers," again deals with the relational status of women, in that it was the birth and survival of children that could consolidate their family standing; in the course of this chapter the research cited goes beyond the title of the book to tell us, on p. 30, the statistics derived from various sources on the average number of children in a Tang family, usually between three and four, it would seem. Chapter 3 takes us on to "Government," and it is here that the expected stories of Emperor Wu Zhao 武曌 (r. 690–705) and of Yang Yuhuan 楊玉環 (719–756), titled *Guifei* 貴妃, may be found, narrating the involvement of women in the business of the ruling dynasty. But the lesser-known lives of other palace women also gain attention, including the telling revelation (p. 42) that when in 710 several thousand were exceptionally allowed out to attend a New Year *pañcavārṣika* assembly, a massive Buddhist festival involving a spectacular lighting display, many seized the opportunity to make good their escape from palace life and disappear.[1] The presence of women for a

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[1] For the type of festival concerned, see Jinhua Chen, "*Pañcavārṣika* Assemblies in Liang Wudi's Buddhist Chapel," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 66.1 (Jun. 2006): 43–103.

time at court audiences, described by David McMullen, might also have been mentioned in this chapter.[2]

The fourth chapter, "Wealth," moves on to consider the position of women in economic life under the dynasty, opening with important considerations relative to dowries and inheritance before turning to the ways in which women might make a living, or even accumulate some wealth, spanning the economic spectrum from toiling peasants to popular courtesans capable of securing a degree of financial autonomy. The fifth chapter then moves on to "Religion," starting with a brief account of the role both of women and of female deities in the popular religion of the day, a topic that is unfortunately as yet far from adequately researched, despite the pioneering contribution of E. H. Schafer to the study of the latter category. The bulk of the chapter is then devoted to the role of nuns in the Buddhist and Daoist clergies. These two traditions remained quite distinct, despite what is said concerning the Daoist Jinxian 金仙 (689–732) Princess on p. 82: though she demonstrably had Buddhist friends, my own suspicion is that both her ordained Daoist status and her involvement in Buddhist patronage connect not with whatever her personal religious predilections may have been but rather with her role as an imperial surrogate.[3] The sixth chapter passes on to "Learning" and the education of women, not only in the male sense of mastery of written materials but also in the sense of the mastery of those technologies that were seen as particularly the preserve of the female sex; rather unsurprisingly, our sources foreground the former realm, and this is therefore quite inevitably reflected in the balance of the chapter.

The final two chapters turn to more imponderable matters, though both are well handled. The heading "Virtue" turns out to be concerned largely with what is usually considered the traditional Chinese conception of widowhood. Widows did remarry under the Tang, of course, and if they did not that might be (p. 123) an indicator of wealth and social status as much as of moral zeal. The eighth and final chapter is devoted to "Love," and here well-known tales

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[2] David L. McMullen, "Disorder in the Ranks: A Political Analysis of Tang Court Assemblies," *Tang Studies* 28 (2010): 1–60.

[3] Timothy Barrett, "Daoism in Action? The Princess-Nuns of the High Tang Period," in Florian C. Reiter, ed., *Purposes, Means and Convictions in Daoism: A Berlin Symposium* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), pp. 113–30.

such as those of Li Wa 李娃 and Yingying 鶯鶯 are contextualized against a much broader literary and historical background. The chapter does not end happily, devoting its final pages to the "jealous woman," a label that, as Carolyn Ford has shown, was established as a literary category well before the start of the Tang.[4]

Up to this point the chapter, like its predecessors, is much enhanced by a number of well-chosen poems, even if in at least one case the same poem appears twice in different versions (cf. pp. 12 and 134). No matter: without a good helping of poetry, how would we truly know we were in the Tang? Beyond the "Conclusion" there is a Chinese character glossary, and over forty pages of the highly informative notes already mentioned above, followed by almost the same number of tightly packed pages of bibliography, again one of the strong points of the volume. The book is rounded off by a disappointingly brief index, though possibly this incentive to read and thoroughly digest the work itself is not inappropriate. It is not, one must admit, so short as to disguise the occasionally repetitive nature of the text that has resulted from its thematic structure. Xu Hui 徐惠 (627–650), an intellectually gifted concubine of the second emperor, is introduced to us once under "Government" (p. 41) and twice in rather quick succession under "Learning" (pp. 94, 103), though after she has suffered centuries of eclipse no doubt no reader will begrudge her this novel degree of attention.

To write of women in Tang China is to write constantly against the grain of the sources. In one or two instances more could perhaps have been done to fill out the picture. Bret Hinsch has himself researched the role of women in textile production in earlier times and the cultural values associated with that activity; the page (p. 64) devoted to this element in the economics of female life is therefore concise but very well informed. But needlework added more value to cloth, and embroidery seems to have played an important role in religious contexts, allowing women a creativity that was much appreciated at the time even by male writers, though, so far as I am aware, only Zhiru Ng has paid any attention to this practice, in relation to the cult of one specific bodhisattva,

[4] Carolyn Ford, "The Afterlife of a Lost Book—*Du ji (The Record of Jealous Women)* Fifth Century," in Daria Berg, ed., *Reading China: Fiction, History and the Dynamics of Discourse: Essays in Honour of Professor Glen Dudbridge* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 170–99.

whilst a more general account is yet to be written.[5] Otherwise today only a few examples of Tang needlework retrieved by archaeologists preserve the mute remains of women's labour, whereas in general women's voices, at first sight, seem to be relatively abundant in the transmitted literature of the age. All too much of this, however, turns out to be addressed to a male readership; little is preserved that illuminates how sister spoke to sister; rare indeed is the woman who ever spoke back to a man.

But there is one: the "daughter-in-law from hell," whom Paul Demiéville introduced to a Western readership over sixty years ago.[6] Banging the kitchenware and bellowing like a buffalo, answering back to her in-laws, and generally behaving in an outrageously uncontrolled manner, she may be a stereotype, but she is gloriously realized, and I am rather sorry that she did not make it into this book to offset the many representations of less intractable women. There is so much else to learn from, however, that this scarcely matters. This volume does not present itself as anything more than a summary of existing scholarship, but in diligently and readably bringing together what we now know after several decades of groundbreaking research, let us hope that it proves to be an inspiration to younger scholars and a starting point for further advances. One looks forward to the frequent citations that will indicate to the author that his hard work has been appreciated.

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5 Zhiru Ng, *The Making of a Savior Bodhisattva: Dizang in Medieval China* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), pp. 203–6; I hope to publish more on this practice in due course.

6 Paul Demiéville, "La nouvelle mariée acariâtre," *Asia Major* (new series) 7 (1959): 59–65.