Divine, Demonic, and Disordered: Women without Men in Song Dynasty China. By Hsiao-wen Cheng. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2021. Pp. x + 233. $99.00 hardcover, $30.00 paperback.

It is indeed satisfying finally to publish one's book, especially one's first one. Still authors often must make concessions in the process, if not with the content, at least with the title and cover. This was no less the case with this book. Hsiao-wen Cheng originally wanted the book's main title to be "manless sexualities," a key analytical concept in her analysis. Her editor considered it, however, insufficiently catchy and, probably, also unsexy. "Women" was also not supposed to be in the original title because some of this book's originally female subjects no longer even considered themselves to be so once they embraced their new renunciant identity. As for the cover, the random splotches of orange, blue, and red in the three head silhouettes nicely reinforce the final title's three alliterative words—*Divine, Demonic, and Disordered*—by suggesting these women represent the cases of enchantment explored in two middle chapters of the book. Cheng informed me, however, that she would have preferred that at least one of these three silhouetted women appeared to be tonsured (instead of with hair buns or a bob cut). This would have visually foreshadowed better her focus on celibate women and renunciant identities in the last two chapters of the book. Despite not getting either the title or the cover Cheng desired for her book, it seems that she did not have to compromise, however, with its contents.

Cheng's focus on medieval China makes an important contribution broadly to the study of women, gender, and sexuality from an unprecedented angle. To start with, she demonstrates that the assumption that compulsory heterosexuality was universal, and especially relevant in patriarchal China, does not apply in her sources. Cheng has been influenced by Adrienne Rich's observation in the 1980s that what men may fear most of women might be their indifference to men altogether.[1] She also drew inspiration from Tze-Lan Sang's insight that there was no compulsory heterosexuality but just a marriage imperative in Chinese history.[2] Although the Chinese bedchamber literature expressed an interest in female desire and even conveyed a sense, as per Rich's point, that woman may not even desire

[1] Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, eds., *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 130–43.

[2] Tze-lan D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

men, the traditional Chinese marriage was not founded, as Sang pointed out, on caring for women's desire.

Cheng elaborates further upon these insights by developing an analytical concept of her own creation, "manless women," to productively make sense of what she found in the accounts about female celibacy in wide-ranging sources: medical texts, bedchamber literature, manuals of exorcism, religious treatises, anomaly accounts, Buddhist and Daoist hagiographies, literary tales, miscellaneous jottings, and anecdotes in local gazetteers. Rather than seeking to differentiate these sources in terms of what other scholars might consider closer to the historical facts about the specific lives of these women, Cheng treats all these genres as providing comparable narratives that reveal rather historical facts as "stories told with specific purposes, framed under certain values and worldviews, and situated with reference to particular historical settings" (p. 5). In fact, she applied a similar method in an earlier publication to interpret medically relevant anecdotes in the *Yijian zhi* 夷堅志 (Record of the listener), a collection of "strange" stories that the author, Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123–1202), considered to be true. By calling attention to "the unexplained details that the storyteller had taken for granted" [3] —such as literate women being able to consult medical texts and give medical advice themselves—she argued such a source could be read as historical facts of unexceptional possibilities for women during the Song.

By reading similar anecdotal accounts across these very different types of primary sources, Cheng discerns that women's desire for men, or for other women for that matter, were similarly not considered problematic, but rather exceptional cases were of those women who did not have sexual contact with men at all. Cheng argues that although the concept "manless women" was neither a premodern Chinese actor's category, nor does it fit into modern classifications of sexual identity or sexual orientation, it is nonetheless analytically useful to examine "distinct configurations of gender, sexuality, illness, divinity, and subjectivity" (p. 5) in medieval Chinese sources. Even more importantly, Cheng uses this concept to eschew modern assumptions derived from Western understandings of gender, sexuality, and female empowerment in favour of the more historically accurate medieval Chinese conceptualizations, which in Cheng's analysis, are also more challenging to modern preconceptions of gender and sexuality. For example, "manless women" proves to be a more appropriate analytical category for thinking

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[3] Hsiao-wen Cheng, "Authority or Alternative? Rethinking Gender and the Use of Medical Knowledge in Song China, 960–1279," *Gender Forum: An Internet Journal for Gender Studies* 24 (2009): 56–67; for quotation, 61.

through the Chinese material precisely because it better captures the categories that her historical actors used to articulate what they considered to be problematic (and not just anomalous) issues related to gender, sexuality, and female independence.

Regarding the issue of renunciant identity, Cheng similarly argues that historians must further push the critique of secularist assumptions that portrayed Chinese women as passive victims of oppressive patriarchal systems. One cannot view religious women's agency within modern secularist views of liberation, success, and achievement, for instance, because some Chinese women who entered monastic life did not become nuns to liberate themselves from the constraints of marriage or as a satisfying career path but rather understood it as taking a bodhi path. Although many other scholars have argued that these women did use entry into the monastery as a means to escape marriage, Cheng critiques this interpretation for projecting on to the past liberal secular understandings of individual choice and social status. Many accounts of such women, she points out in rebuttal, rather framed the bodhi path as a divine calling or a matter of karma rather than an individual choice. Suzanne Cahill's analysis of discipline among women in Daoism found, for example, that female renunciants were not motivated by hindrance to their individual freedom but rather sought through religious discipline liberation from mortality itself.[4] Cheng thereby focuses on the practice of piety not as an escape from marriage or freedom from the constraints of domestic life, but rather the opposite—namely, taking a more austere path to understand suffering and possibly even transcend it altogether.

Divine, Demonic, and Disordered has a tripartite structure of two chapters each. Bookending the six chapters are an introduction on analytical and historical methods that inform the entire book and a conclusion that uses the public debates in Taiwan over government sponsorship of Taipei's LGBT festival in 2006 to contrast modern from the premodern Chinese status of medical knowledge vis-à-vis gender norms and sexuality. The "demonic" theme is taken up first in Part I, "Reconfiguring Gender, Sexuality, and Illness." Here Cheng focuses on illuminating the historical actor's categories from the Song physician Chen Ziming's 陳自明 (1190–1270) new social category, *guafu* 寡婦 (husbandless women) (chapter one), to medical cases that

[4] Suzanne E. Cahill, "Discipline and Transformation: Body and Practice in the Lives of Daoist Holy Women of Tang China," in Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush, and Joan Piggott, eds., *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 251–78; idem, *Divine Traces of the Daoist Sisterhood: "Records of the Assembled Transcendents of the Fortified Walled City" by Du Guangting (580–933)* (Magdalena, NM: Three Pines Press, 2006).

feature women inflicted by *guijiao* 鬼交 (ghost intercourse) and *guitai* 鬼胎 (ghost fetuses) (chapter two) in medical and Daoist sources of the same period.

Chapter one, for example, uses the convergence of a Chinese medical discourse on "husbandless women" and neo-Confucian discourse on female desire to question the universality of the sex-desire-procreation link in modern views of sexuality.[5] She also demonstrated that there was an epistemology of "manless women" broadly, namely what she defines as the sets of vocabulary and the conceptual framework available to men and women alike to understand what they see and to describe what they do or why they are the way they are. This epistemological baseline, she argues, was what they started with to ask questions, for example, about women whose sexual and reproductive bodies were made unavailable or inconvenient to their present, future, or late husbands. Such a woman, for instance, could be one who decided to become a Buddhist nun at a marriageable age or even while married to a husband who was still alive. But these premodern Chinese gendered distinctions do not fit at all modern categories of sexual identity or sexuality. Rather, by the Song dynasty, Cheng persuasively argues, it was especially a woman's manlessness that required explanation in the first place not primarily their so-called sexuality, female or otherwise. In other words, she demonstrates that in medieval China different perceptions of manless women's subjectivity were connected to different constructions of female sexuality.

The "disordered" thread weaves through most of Part II on "Inconvenient Female Sexuality and Multivocal Narratives" found mostly in specialist and canonical texts, tales, and anecdotes. She examines first pre-Song tales of *meibing* 魅病 (enchantment disorder) (chapter three) and then Song-period anecdotes of enchanted women (chapter four), showing that sexual and spiritual possession intersected and that a key feature of an "enchanted woman" was that her husband could not sleep with her or even be in the same room with her at night. Marriage, considered to be an indicator of successful treatment because it was a basic social condition for women, was tried as a cure. But marriage never worked within these stories of enchanted women. People at the time found this so puzzling and problematic they wrote about it. Cheng is interested in these accounts precisely because they illuminate awareness of epistemological inadequacy. These accounts reveal a self-awareness of inadequate knowledge about women and what is going on with them. Cheng, in other words, does not take sexual identity, or sexuality for that

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[5] For her stand-alone article on this topic, see Hsiao-wen Cheng, "Manless Women and the Sex-Desire-Procreation Link in Song Medicine," *Asian Medicine: Journal of the International Association for the Study of Traditional Asian Medicine* 13 (2018): 69–94.

matter, as a given. Rather she reconsiders everything scholars of modern sexuality would likely put into a "sexuality box." What Cheng is more interested in is opening up for contemporary readers the many different boxes into which medieval Chinese put "disordered" or "anomalous" women[6] and teasing out when her storytellers seem to be self-aware that their epistemic boxes are insufficient to express these women's experiences. The author Hong Mai of *Record of the Listener*, for example, included narratives of failure when the storyteller admits they have no idea what happened to the women. Through such failure narratives, Cheng adroitly excavates not what was known, but rather what was considered unknown about women.

The "divine" dimension of women's lives in medieval China animates all of Part III on "Gendered Identities and Female Celibacy." Here Cheng shifts focus to accounts of independent women in "gendered practice and renunciant identity" (chapter five) and then to "meanings of female celibacy" (chapter six) to challenge the major emphasis in modern feminism and women's history on agency as focused on freedom and individual choice. She argues that for religious women, piety and devotion were more important values related to agency and that agency should be an expansive enough concept to include also external interactions with other people and things and not just inner intent and free will.

Divine, Demonic, and Deranged surveys these issues from the Southern Dynasties (420–589) to the Yuan (1271–1368) times primarily as a means to delineate major transformations that, Cheng argues, occurred during the intervening Song dynasty (960–1279). During the Song, for example, "manless women," as a historical actor's category, first appeared in the medical writings of Chen Ziming. Similarly, Cheng found that in a wide range of Song-period sources she could discern changes in attitudes related to such women connected to three broad social and economic transformations. First, regarding the issue of desire, Cheng argues that before the Song only bedchamber literature expressed any interest in women's desire. But during the Song there was a new discourse on desire as distinct from necessity and spontaneity among Confucian scholars. At this time, Song neo-Confucianism influenced scholarly physicians and so several discussed female desire in their medical discourses whereas before it was primarily a topic restricted to the bedchamber literature.

Secondly, with a growing elite population resulting in greater overlap of elite with commoner cultures, there was also a greater attention to ordinary people's

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[6] For her stand-alone article on anomalies as not producing "norms" and her critique of projecting the modern "abnormal-normal" distinction onto premodern Chinese experience, see Hsiao-wen Cheng, "Before Sexual and Normal: Shifting Categories of Sexual Anomaly from Ancient to Yuan China," *Asia Major*, Third series, 31.2 (2018): 1–39.

lives. This broad social change is also linked to local cults and temples that were community centres, where local leaders held meetings and from which gentry relied on local cultural symbols to construct their regional identities. More detailed temple inscriptions as well as collections of anecdotes, such as Hong Mai's *Record of the Listener,* provide accounts of witnesses and testimonials of efficacy from the experiences of ordinary men and women that orally circulated and were preserved in these sources.

Thirdly, urban and commercial developments during the Song made it more possible for women to live independently outside of the monastic order. Cheng is most interested in women who were not sheltered either by their families or an organized recognized community. These are the kind of women who started to arouse suspicion and, possibly because of their economic independence, were associated with demons. There were certainly some pre-Song references to independent women as vendors, ritual and healing service providers, and small business owners. The Song changes in urban life, transportation, trade, and the overall money economy, however, further increased opportunities for women to be economically independent. Related to this Cheng has found a greater sense of uncertainty and bewilderment about them in the primary sources. She productively mined local gazetteers for accounts of independent women, such as the one who had enough money to fund something independently and another woman who sold wine to support herself after her parents died.

The accounts of religious women's lives covered in the final two chapters of part three allow Cheng to make her most trenchant correctives of assumptions in modern studies of gender and sexuality. Many sources Cheng discusses show that the practice of celibacy among these women transformed their self-conception so much so that many no longer even saw themselves as women. Inspired by Volker Scheid's work on contemporary Chinese medicine that explained the concept of *qi* 氣 as also having non-human agency,[7] she argues that there was an assumption in her sources that one was what one does, with whom and with what one interacts, rather than an assumption of a fixed gendered identity. She suggests that agency should also not be defined as something independent but rather as based on interaction with things. According to this line of reasoning, women who engaged with spirits can even be considered to have agency because they interacted with something else. It is not what one thinks but rather what one does that constructs who one is, as her analysis more broadly suggests. She found many

[7] Volker Scheid, *Chinese Medicine in Contemporary China: Plurality and Synthesis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

narratives in which spiritual practice transformed the female body as well as the practitioner's identity. Cheng considers, in other words, that it would, therefore, be more productive to think about agency based on interactions with other people and things rather than on individual intent or free will, especially since everyone is always disciplined and situated within a time, place, and culture. Further scholarship developing upon the distinction Cheng raises here between individual-focused versus interaction-focused agency could, in fact, be productive beyond this case study to think through assumptions in modern studies of gender and sexuality.

Cheng makes an excellent case for why "manless women" works well for understanding different subjectivities and constructions of female sexuality in medieval China. How this concept could be useful to think about gender and sexuality outside of premodern China remains to be explored further. Her book suggests, however, that if modern sexual categories are not sufficient for analysing conceptions of gender and sexuality in medieval China, then, perhaps, they are not completely adequate either for our present. Through her book on "women without men in Song dynasty China" we can see how contemporary gender and sexuality studies are too narrowly focused on the present. Since few scholars in that field think that anything premodern can offer inspiration for their modern present, they remain historically uninformed of alternative possibilities and so conceptually deficient as well. By decentring desire, Cheng's historical perspective on the medieval Chinese case makes it possible to see other things. The main take-home point arguably of *Divine, Demonic, and Disordered* is that one should not take sexuality as a given in sources from anywhere in the premodern world. Whatever historians of gender and sexuality find in their historical contexts can thus be potentially a critique of our modern categories and assumptions.

Contemporary gender and sexual categories are certainly useful and powerful in specific contexts but Cheng's historically nuanced gender analysis of wide-ranging primary sources from ancient to medieval China warns that such categories based on modern experience are likely not only to exclude but, even worse, to misconstrue premodern types of bodily experiences as well as identity formations. In short, this book offers much for historians of gender, sexuality, religion, and medicine in China to reflect upon and even more for scholars of modern gender and sexuality studies to reconsider about their theoretical assumptions. Indeed the past record may be even more valuable than present phenomenon to refine their intellectual toolbox.

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