

Bret Hinsch (2016). *Women in Imperial China*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. xiv + 255 pp., ISBN 978-1-4422-7165-4.

The vast scope of Chinese women's history throughout its two millennia-long imperial period invites sustained scholarly attention to their status, position, image, and a wide range of gender-related issues. Whereas recent years have witnessed an increasing interest in examining historical Chinese women in different dynasties, Bret Hinsch's new book offers a succinct, yet eloquent survey of womanhood in the shifting contexts of Chinese history, from remote antiquity to the end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911).

The core of the study consists of seven chapters, appended by a brief conclusion that summarises the main arguments put forth in the volume. The chapters proceed, in a chronological order, to examine Chinese women's achievements, failures, restraints, and struggles. Instead of a mere outline of historic figures and events, Hinsch selects the most representative figures and events, including the warrior empress Fu Hao (d. ca 1200 BC), the only female emperor Wu Zetian (r. 690-705), the powerful empress dowager Cixi (1835-1908), and many other ordinary women who are less well-known. Based on this examination, he focuses on the different ways people in each period constructed female identity, and how different people accepted or contested it. Moreover, he traces the transformation of female social roles and the changing mechanics men deployed to control women, as well as the factual and imaginative tools women used to thrive in spite of the limits they faced.

Covering such a large time-span within merely 200 pages is certainly not an easy task, and Hinsch is fully aware that such an approach runs the risk of being "not only futile and boring but even counterproductive" (p.xiii), but he masterfully solves the problem by highlighting some of the most important themes that characterised each period. By situating Chinese women in larger historic trends in economics, social structure, thought, and other important topics, it enables a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution and transformation of womanhood throughout imperial China.

Although recent studies on Chinese women in particular dynasties or time periods are abundant, Hinsch's volume invites readers to reconsider some of the established views about the history of Chinese women. Women's personal freedom in imperial China, for instance, has been conventionally seen as subjected to a rigid patriarchal authority both in society and the family. Patriarchy is normally understood as male domination. However, Hinsch reveals that women often helped uphold patriarchal norms, and savvy women even realised that they could employ male-dominated institutions to obtain substantial advantages. Furthermore, Hinsch aptly points out that although Confucianism clearly distinguishes men from women and thus creates a defined social inequality, it also provides each sex with space to flourish. This perennial emphasis on separating the sexes kept women from attending schools or serving in public office, but such a parallel female realm also "fostered the development of spaces where women could act with a degree of autonomy" (p.204). Some even turned patriarchal ideas such as patrilinealism and filial piety to their

advantage, as both Wu Zetian and Cixi have demonstrated. Because customs such as foot binding, reclusion, and widow chastity that favoured men also provided women with tangible benefits, they “often collaborated with men to construct and maintain patriarchal customs” (p.207).

Throughout the volume, Hinsch makes strenuous efforts in illustrating an extremely diversified picture of women in Chinese history, paying particular attention to the considerable change and development relating to gender and womanhood across the long sweep of China’s history. Hinsch’s keen observation of the different lives of women in the north and the south during the Northern and Southern dynasties (420–589) is refreshing and compelling. In particular, he examines how the Xianbei people “selected and modified Chinese customs to suit their particular circumstances” and how the different lives of women in the north and the south “reflected the cultural division of these two eras” (p.63). Yet critical readers may expect a more elaborate analysis of women in the Khitan Liao (907-1125) and the Jurchen Jin (1115-1234), two non-Chinese neighbours to the Chinese Song in the south. Were the lives of Khitan and Jurchen women the same as their Chinese contemporaries? To what extent did ethnicity impact womanhood? How did the different acceptance of Confucian norms influence gender roles and identity? All these questions remain unanswered. Moreover, the period of the paramount Mongol Yuan dynasty (1368-1644) is neglected, leaving a major gap in Hinsch’s otherwise enormously cogent discussion of the formative impact of earlier times on later eras.

This minor cavil aside, *Women in Imperial China* is a lucid, sharply-observed study that displays the impressive lives and achievements of women through China’s long history. At a time of a continuous revival of interest in Chinese women, Bret Hinsch’s new book is a fitting addition to the growing body of scholarship on women in traditional China and will surely attract academic professionals, students, and general readers.

Hang Lin
Hangzhou Normal University