What did it mean to be a man in late imperial China? It is extraordinary to think that so much has been written about late imperial China, much of it with men taking centre stage, without ever questioning the concept of manhood and the assumptions and idealizations that underpin it. Although a few studies on masculinity in China have begun to appear in the past few years, they are still vastly outnumbered by studies on women. Our understanding of gender in China at present, therefore, still rests largely on a foundation of insights on women, rather than on the ways in which masculinity and femininity were constructed, negotiated and (re)invented in relation to each other. Martin Huang’s study is thus an extremely welcome contribution to the field of gender studies generally and to the study of premodern China specifically.

As Huang himself states at the outset, studies on masculinity in China are extremely limited. One of the first studies on the subject of masculinity in China appeared in a forum entitled “Gender and Manhood in Chinese History”, published in 2000 in The American Historical Review. This forum includes two overview studies by Susan Mann and Robert Nye, and three case studies, by Norman Kutcher, Adrian Davis, and Lee McIsaac (See The American Historical Review 105.5 (2000)). Two other important studies appeared around the same time: Xueping Zhong’s Masculinity Besieged? Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late Twentieth Century (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) and Kam Louie’s Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China, published by Cambridge University Press in 2002. Both of these focus on twentieth-century China, although Louie’s study proposes to use the categories of civil and military (wen and wu) as a framework for understanding masculinity in both premodern and modern China. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom’s Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities, a reader published by the University of California Press (2002), brings together a very useful set of materials on gender, but again, the focus is largely (albeit not exclusively) on modern China.

The publication of Song Geng’s The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture (published by Hong Kong University Press) brought in a much-needed premodern perspective. Song Geng's study, focused on the literary ideal of
the talented scholar (caizi), questions the validity of the binary model of male and female generally used in Western studies of gender for understanding premodern Chinese gender and sexuality. Instead, he suggests, the effeminate qualities of the ‘fragile scholar’ with his delicate physique and literary talents are idealized, an idealization that cannot be encapsulated within a model of masculinity versus femininity. Moreover, Song Geng contends that masculinity is not a monolithic concept, but rather exists in multiple forms depending on the socio-cultural context.

Huang takes this notion of multiple masculinities much further, as his interest is less in ‘what late imperial Chinese masculinities were’, and more in ‘how different models of masculinity were proposed and negotiated in relation to the feminine’ (p. 9). Huang’s meticulous study, largely chronologically ordered, begins with Mencius and Sima Qian, and then moves into the Ming and Qing periods. One of the important contributions his study makes is to clarify the extent to which masculinities were constructed and negotiated in encounters with the ‘other’, including not just the feminine but the non-Han other. Of course one might look to earlier periods of encounters with the non-Han ‘other’ in Chinese history, for example, to the impact of the invasion of the Mongols on gender and masculinity during the Yuan dynasty. Such issues are addressed in Beverly Bossler’s study ‘Gender and Empire: A View from Yuan China’ (in Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies 34.1 (2004): 197–223) and in my article, ‘Friendship through Fourteenth-Century Fissures: Dai Liang, Wu Sidao and Ding Henian’ (in Nannü 9 (2007): 34-69). But it is Huang’s masterful discussion of ‘Manhood and Nationhood’ during the fall of the Ming (pp. 72–86) that is most enlightening. Men, in Huang’s analysis, felt overpowered by the two dominant female models of the period: the chaste woman and the shrew. Both put men and masculinity to shame: the chaste woman because in her choice to die a martyr she gained the moral highground over the majority of Ming loyalists who chose to continue living under a new regime, the shrew because her dominance could be interpreted as the emasculation of the male. The various models of manhood that are constructed in response to this mid-seventeenth-century crisis reveal very clearly the extent to which masculinities had to be re-invented and negotiated during the late imperial era.

In the epilogue to the book, Huang briefly explores masculinity in what he refers to as ‘China’s painful experience in its encounter with the Western powers’ (p. 201). Here Huang briefly reflects on the impact of foreign invasion on Chinese
perceptions of manhood, including the Manchu invasion of the 1640s, and the encroachment of Westerners from the nineteenth century onwards. The crisis of masculinity caused by this ‘penetration’ by non-Han Chinese outsiders is somehow equated with the crisis of nation. As Huang suggests, this opens up important new avenues of research into the links between masculinity and nationalism in modern China. Huang’s valuable study of masculinities in the late imperial era makes abundantly clear, however, how important an understanding of that period is for the study of gender and sexuality in the modern era.

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