In her latest book *The Precious Raft of History: The Past, the West, and the Woman Question in China* Joan Judge focuses on the turn of the twentieth century which she conceives as “a key moment in the unfolding of Chinese modernity” (p. 2). This book investigates the ways in which ideas about women, history and the nation interlocked and mutually reconfigured, producing new insights into the impact that these discursive dynamics had on women’s daily lives. More specifically, Judge focuses on a particular narrative form – women’s biography – and follows its manifestations in ideologically diverse texts and genres.

The introductory section establishes the conceptual framework for Judge’s analysis. The author defines modernity as the interaction of three processes: secularization, i.e. changes initiated by the mid to late nineteenth century encounter between Confucian ritual teachings and foreign-inspired ideas; the translation of new global models; and the emergence of new modes of temporalization. Since the term “modernity” is loaded with multiple meanings and has often been used negligently without any definition in academic literature, the clarification of its precise connotations in this context is very welcome. In fact, more information on the broader socio-cultural and political context, that is, on the complexities specific to Chinese modernity, would have been helpful to enable a better understanding of the phenomena under discussion.

Judge builds on John Bender and David E. Wellbery’s concept of “chronotype”\(^1\) to describe the strategic reappropriation of paradigmatic moments in the past for the political service of both the present and the future. The author identifies four chronotypes that indicate the range of gender, political and historical views at the turn of the twentieth century, namely eternalist, meliorist, archecomodern and presentist approaches. These four standpoints are locations on the continuum of opinions where the one end of the spectrum has been marked by the conviction that the past represents a golden age, while the other sees the future as normative. Thus, proponents of the eternalist chronotype venerated (Chinese women exemplars of) the ancient past and held classical norms (for women) to be sacred, indisputable.

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and unchangeable. Meliorists, in the author’s view, shared the eternalists’ commitment to fundamental Confucian principles and their valorization of the past over the present, but at the same time criticized certain late imperial (women’s) cults and approved of important changes (in Chinese women’s lives) in late Qing and early Republican China. Archeomodernists, Judge maintains, celebrated the ancient past, decried (exemplary women of) the Ming and the Qing era, and turned to modern Western (women’s) accomplishments to remedy past deficiencies. Presentists were devoted to “the new”, disdained the recent past, and were attracted to both Western exemplars and Chinese historical heroines who were reimagined so as to fit their own preoccupations.

Mirroring the primary concerns of adherents of these four chronotypes, Judge’s book consists of three parts. The first is primarily concerned with feminine virtue as a major issue for eternalists and meliorists; the second part is devoted to female talent, which was a focal point in archeomodernists’ discussions; and Part Three revolves around the question of heroism, which preoccupied presentists. Yet, as the author herself pleads, these divisions are “largely for heuristic purposes” (p. 28), since all the themes are intertwined and feature throughout the book. In her conclusion, Judge perceptively but concisely relates the beginning of the twentieth century to its end in China. By highlighting the examples of Liu Huifang, the heroine of the 1990s popular television soap opera Kewang (Yearnings), Li Xiaojiang, the founder of the women’s studies movement in China, and the 2001 multimedia art project National Shame: Guang Lienü Zhuan (Biographies of Exemplary Women), the author shows the intricate relationship between the approach to history and to the women’s question in contemporary China.

In order to substantiate her arguments, Judge draws on a wide array of primary sources produced by female and (predominantly) male authors. The range of analyzed material is truly fascinating, and it includes official documents, didactic materials, early twentieth century textbooks for women, women’s periodicals and newspapers, polemical essays and collections of Chinese and/or Western women’s biographies. Furthermore, the author’s attention to the Tuhua ribao (Daily Pictorial), a popular newspaper published in Shanghai, inspires future research that will certainly complicate our thinking about turn-of-the-twentieth-century China in general and gender expectations that operated in this period in particular.

Joan Judge’s book is richly illustrated – fifty informative and thought-provoking figures are inserted into the text and they greatly contribute to the value of the monograph. However, it would have been useful to include information on the libraries and archives
holding the issues of women’s journals, textbooks, primers and other published sources used in this excellently researched, thoroughly grounded and theoretically informed scholarly work.

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