This book aims to challenge the widely-perceived images of ‘victimised and helpless’ (p. 3) Chinese women in the pre-1949 period and ‘emancipated’ women in the post-1949 era. It contributes to a new scholarship emerging in the last twenty years which endeavours to discover the agency of Chinese women and offer a ‘more sophisticated understanding of the continuities, disjunctures and transformations in Chinese women’s lives and in gender discourse’ (p. 3). Proceeding chronologically, its eight main chapters cover periods from the pre-twentieth-century to the post-Mao era. In each chapter, Bailey focuses on both women’s lives and gender discourses by drawing on important and updated scholarly works, as well as by offering interesting examples. The detailed bibliography of the book is very useful.

Chapter One focuses on the pre-twentieth-century era and suggests that both Chinese women’s lives and gender discourses had been fluctuating over centuries. Bailey offers great detail on the evolution of such institutions as the custom of footbinding and the outer/inner sex segregation which were often perceived as illustrations of Chinese women’s ‘oppression’ in traditional China, demonstrating that they were full of changes and transformations.

Chapter Two examines why and how Western (mostly female) missionaries and Chinese male and female reformers addressed the so-called ‘woman question’ which identified China’s women as one reason for China’s national crisis at the turn of twentieth-century. While Western missionaries aimed to train Chinese girls as ‘model homemakers’ (p. 28), male nationalist reformers intended to shape ‘worthy mothers’ and ‘capable wives’, a purpose contrasting with the female reformers’ aim of helping women to be more independent via education. This gender activism encountered gender conservatism in the early Republican era, which contrasted with more radical ideas expressed about women’s rights during the May Fourth Movement. This multiplicity of gender discourses is captured in Chapter Three.

Chapter Four examines the revolutionary mobilisation of women by both the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Guomindang (GMD) in the 1920s and 1930s. Even though both had women’s rights on their agendas, their measures were compromised by the sexism within their party organisations and eventually encountered a backlash when the CCP-GMD United Front was dissolved.
Chapter Five summarizes how socio-economic, cultural and legal changes during the early twentieth century impacted the lives of both urban and rural women and their responses to the changes. Increasingly participating in textile and other industries, women formed alliances with other women from the same native place via ‘sworn sisterhoods’ and developed a clientelistic relationship with workshop forewomen, posing a threat to solidarity among the greater group. Economic modernisation affected rural women’s married lives and shaped the prostitution industry. Both the GMD and CCP legislated on marriage and political participation to benefit women. However, such legislation was consistently tailored to fit other priorities. The Marriage Reform launched by the CCP in the 1950s and examined in Chapter Six provides such an example. The Marriage Law of 1950 made women’s reproduction a matter of public concern with the CCP playing the role of ‘public patriarch’ even modifying its radical message on divorce freedom in order to retain its popularity among male peasants.

Chapter Seven covers the Great Leap Forward campaign and the Cultural Revolution. The meaning and significance of sexual equality were debated, with the wholesale mobilisation of women into the labour force and the concomitant production-reproduction conflicts. Contrary to what is conventionally perceived, gender and sexuality continued to be significant during the Cultural Revolution.

Chapter Eight views the socio-economic changes in the post-Mao era and their multifaceted impacts on women who were both agents and victims of the reforms. While empowered by the market economy, women indulged in material consumption and were subject to both the sexualisation of their image and the sexology discourse. Women’s political presence gradually declined after 1976, a somewhat shocking fact. The ‘Conclusion’ continues with the development of the early 2000s. The ‘traditionalist’ gender rhetoric which celebrates women’s roles as ‘chastity heroines’ enjoyed a revival in both state and public discourses, accompanied by the relaxation of sexual mores.

This conclusion (both the facts it reveals and the section itself) is a bit disappointing, and could be strengthened by a summary of continuities/ruptures in women’s lives and gender discourses over the century. For example, the ‘woman question’, even though always central to various governments’ agendas, was compromised for more ‘urgent’ priorities. Male reformers’ enthusiasm for the women’s movement was often initiated out of their self-interest. Furthermore, despite the author’s efforts to include data from the early 2000s, he fails to consider great changes in the realms of girls’ power, and marriage and education, which, to a great extent, are linked to the demographic transition.
brought about by the family planning policy. The first family planning generation comes of age at the turn of twenty-first-century and this has great implications for gender issues.

Despite these flaws, this is a great overview book. A comparable work I can think of is *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century* by Gail Hershatter, which is more thematically focused. Both are enjoyable reading and can be used complementarily for those with an interest in gender history of modern China.

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