
*Masculinities in Chinese History* is the first historical survey of changing Chinese male identities, covering the entire chronology from the Zhou dynasty to the present day. Each chapter focuses on a specific theme and period, and looks at the mutual influences of manhood and womanhood, honor, and varying masculine ideals among the elite and other groups in Chinese society. It is an important and welcome contribution to a growing interest in Chinese masculinity studies.

Hinsch begins his volume with the query: “Is a book about men in Chinese history necessary?” (p.1) After all, until recently, almost any standard history of China was almost entirely about men. His response is to alert readers with the fact that when China scholars did take up the study of gender in the 1970s, their primary focus was the study of women and their relations with men. What was missing was the diversity of roles Chinese men had performed over the centuries. Thus, this volume fills a significant void in Chinese gender studies. To account for the widespread practices of Chinese masculinity during 3,000 years of Chinese history, Hinsch considers four influential factors: kinship bonds, both real, as in filial practices, and fictive, as between gang members; elite men’s intimate relationship with the state whereby the government endowed high officials with masculine status in return for loyalty; shifts in economic relations, particularly the impact of commerce; and foreign masculinities—nomadic, Buddhist, or Western. He also indicates, where relevant, the mutual influence of ideas regarding manhood and womanhood on masculine ideals.

A theme Hinsch first mentions in the Zhou dynasty chapter, in which he explains the origins of the principle governing separation of the sexes and its manifestations in both literary writings and daily life, is the importance of homosocial bonding in the history of Chinese masculinity—with women confined to the inner quarters, men sought the comradery and approval of other men. This yearning for same-sex endorsement also extended to men’s desire for public recognition of their honorable behavior, the subject of Chapter 2 which analyzes the complexities of the Han dynasty ideal of vengeance, and demonstrates how filial piety became associated with this belief in ethical texts and in everyday issues of morality.

With the spread of Buddhism into China during the Jin dynasty (265-420), Chinese masculinity entered a new phase. How Buddhist monks transformed filial piety into fictive
hierarchical bonds within the temple community helped ease the strangeness of this otherworldly religion and encouraged the appropriation of Chinese masculine ideals into an acceptable ethos. Hinsch argues that the monk Huijiao’s *Biographies of Eminent Monks* aimed to demonstrate how facets of elite secular masculinity were adopted to monastic life.

Chapter 4 covers the Tang dynasty, and here Hinsch considers the affiliation of masculine honor with the virtue of wifely fidelity. Female mutilation tales and shrew stories of the period indicate the contradictions of male-female relations: on the one hand, the ideal wife would cut her own flesh to serve her husband and his parents, thus illustrating her submission to the patriarchal kinship order; on the other hand, the shrew as model wife was also prepared to exhort her husband’s honor by convincing him of his duty of fidelity to her, even if she had to bully him.

During the Song dynasty, as prosperity opened up a wide range of possibilities for the ambitious landed gentry-literati class as well as rich merchants, there was a fundamental transformation of Chinese masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity now reflected a man’s possession of cultural capital which he demonstrated in his knowledge of classical learning, tea connoisseurship, calligraphy, and even the cultivation of peonies that were symbolic of profound understanding of natural beauty. Scholarly attainment (*wen*) became the highest attribute of Chinese masculinity. But Hinsch does not ignore the masculinity of ‘marginal men’, and in his chapter on the Ming dynasty, he discusses the *haohan* (good fellow) who exemplifies ideal plebian masculinity and martial valour (*wu*) as witnessed in popular fiction that accentuates his physical strength as well as his selflessness and preference for homosociality.

The last two chapters of this book focus on the impact of the rapid changes of the late Qing, Republican era, and People’s Republic on masculine ideals. Early twentieth-century nationalism encouraged the liberation of women and the prestige of Western learning. The eight-year conflict with Japan and the civil war militarized masculinity, and the Communist soldier became the new model man whose honor was measured by his subservience to political authority and filial obedience to Chairman Mao. Hinsch also argues socialist androgyny of the 1950s and 60s is a misnomer, and that the Communist Party encouraged women to engage in work that was once a male preserve such as road construction: masculinity was now the normative standard for both men and women. By the 1980s with China engaged in economic reform, masculine ideals once again took on new attributes—at first, physical toughness as displayed in the novel (and later film) *Red Sorghum* became indicative of the ‘new manhood’. But by the 1990s it was the
‘material man’ with his smart flat, sporty car, flashy female friends, and wads of cash who became the enviable superior man.

Masculinities in Chinese History covers a great deal of ground and one cannot help but admire Hinsch’s finesse and the extraordinary knowledge he possesses to create this analysis of changing male attributes. Nevertheless, in such a condensed work it is inevitable that some matters would be neglected. The mid-nineteenth century saw the rise of an elite of educated military men such as Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang, and one would like to know more about how they themselves viewed the appreciation of manly physical prowess and military might with scholarly learning. Despite these lacunae, the strengths of this well-written and well-illustrated volume verified by a comprehensive listing of primary and secondary publications as well as relevant social science literature make this rich study an excellent source for teaching and research on Chinese gender relations.

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