
‘Woman of talent, female exemplar.’ Those are the words chosen to describe Susan Mann, the scholar to whom this edited volume is dedicated. They are familiar words for students of women and gender in China: they describe a pre-modern ideal as well as an old conundrum (could women have talent, and if so, could they still be moral exemplars?); they hint at several of the titles of Mann’s extensive scholarly output, and they point to one of the transformations in the field Mann herself was responsible for: the move away from seeing ‘women as hapless victims of an oppressively patriarchal society’ (p. 6) to recognizing their talent and agency. Beverly Bossler’s introduction provides a useful overview of the study of gender in Chinese history in which Mann played such a key role. Bossler presents this volume as building on this rich legacy but also taking the study of gender in China ‘in a variety of new directions,’ claiming that ‘each chapter breaks new ground, thematically, methodologically, or both’ (p. 11).

Of course the validity of that claim depends on how one defines ‘breaking new ground’. There are strong thematic commonalities running through the chapters: the limits of historical sources, the relationship between gender, power and governance, women’s talent and education, and, in the broadest sense: gender and change over time. The new thematic ground Bossler suggests this volume breaks is less the introduction of entirely new themes, and more subtle but important adjustments and refinements within a familiar thematic landscape. For example, the writings of European missionaries or Confucian moralists about women in China are not new sources, but Ann Waltner and Guotong Li bring something new to their readings of these materials: Waltner by linking her careful reading of a French representation of a Chinese wedding procession to a much wider discussion about the global connections that make this image ‘the product of an early modern moment’ (p. 36), and Li by bringing ethnicity into a story of political control over women’s bodies and labour. The studies of Ellen Widmer, Joan Judge and Yan Wang, dealing, respectively, with gentlewomen of the 1870s, talented women in the early twentieth century, and urban women of the late Qing are, thematically speaking, on familiar grounds, but their
contribution is to show much more precisely how women negotiated and shaped the transition from the imperial to the ‘new’ modern.

Thematically, perhaps Yulian Wu’s chapter most convincingly breaks new ground, not only because it is the only contribution to focus on masculinity, but also because it deals with merchants, while the few studies of masculinity we have to date have focused on literati. Wu shows that the merchant Wang Qishu used collecting as a strategy to assert ‘his own manhood’ and to promote ‘new models of the ideal man’ (p. 65). Regardless of whether merchants like Wang collected seals, women’s poetry, or simply wealth, the various practices associated with collecting, Wu argues, can all be read as performances of different kinds of masculinity.

Methodologically, perhaps the last two chapters break new ground in the most interesting ways; both show the ways in which gendered stories of the recent past get retold to shape gender relations of the present. Emily Honig analyses the (after)life of Mao’s famous Cultural Revolution slogan (‘The times have changed; men and women are the same. Anything male comrades can do, female comrades can do too’ 时代不同了，男女都一样。南同志能办到的事，女同志能办得到), to suggest that the slogan may not really have gained in prominence until after the Cultural Revolution, and have served mostly to reshape the memory of the Cultural Revolution in the interest of the economic reforms that followed. The last in the volume, Gail Hershatter’s chapter is written as an afterthought to her 2011 The Gender of Memory. Hershatter lets us listen to Wang Xiqin (born in 1932) and her daughter Wang Nilan (born in 1957) as they transmit stories of their own and each other’s pasts. Memory studies have made an important contribution to the study of history, but Hershatter avoids the word here to emphasize a different aspect of the ways in which the past is remembered. She wants to emphasise not only that women produce different versions of their own past, but that daughters can only partially hear and understand the stories their mothers tell because they do not share the experiences. Hershatter shows, and this is her methodological ‘breaking ground’, that the distracting hisses in the transmission of the past also have something to tell us. If we amplify them, we hear how women use the transmission of the past to create a new contemporary. As a whole, this volume stands as a very worthy tribute to a scholar who has made such a difference to the study of women and gender in China.

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