

Women in Ancient China. Bret Hinsch. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. 226 pp., 20 figures, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. Hardback US \$79, ISBN 978-1-5381-1540-4.

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Bret Hinsch has made a number of contributions to the history of gender and sexuality in China, primarily for the ancient and pre-modern eras. His latest book, *Women in Ancient China*, “details the process of growing sexual inequality as it unfolded” across the Neolithic, Shang, and Western and Eastern Zhou periods (seventh millennium to third century B.C.) (p. x). This work greatly expands upon Hinsch’s summary of these periods in a chapter in his other recent book, *Women in Imperial China* (Hinsch 2016:1–32). It also serves as a welcome and long-awaited companion to his *Women in Early Imperial China* (2002), which covers the Qin and Han periods (third century B.C.–A.D. third century). Like many of his books, *Women in Ancient China* takes a chronological approach, which allows Hinsch to examine the various ways that a woman’s identity and status were affected by the shifting social, political, and institutional structures of each ruling power. Thus, each chapter is a comparative study that looks both back in time and anticipates future developments or changes.

Drawing from multiple disciplinary perspectives, this useful and comprehensive study synthesizes the growing body of secondary scholarship on women’s lives in ancient China. Hinsch’s central thesis is that “growing institutional complexity affected female rights and privileges” (p. xii). The study details the various ways that gendered hierarchy became standardized with the expansion of a patriarchal governing system, relegating women to roles in which they invariably served to aid or help legitimize men. Interwoven within this narrative, however, are stimulating accounts of instances where women occupied positions of political, moral, and maternal authority.

Hinsch’s chronological study is framed by chapters that take up two prominent and influential “myths” in the study of gender in early China, including theories of matriarchy and a rhetoric of females causing the downfalls of major dynasties. Following the

“Introduction,” chapter 1, “The Myth of Matriarchy,” addresses the “vexing methodological problem” with early and in some cases current scholarship that views early society in China as matriarchal (p. xiv). Such theories developed in the mid-nineteenth century under the influence of Marxism; to a certain extent, they remain part of state orthodoxy (though they are quietly disregarded by most scholars today) (p. 5). As Hinsch demonstrates, evidence of matriarchy and matrilinealism in Neolithic China and into the succeeding periods has been disproven. These approaches, however, must be acknowledged in an historical survey of women in ancient China since for decades they have been an underlying assumption of many scholars from numerous disciplinary perspectives, including archaeology, religion, social history, and linguistics. By including this “critical discussion” at the opening of his book, Hinsch positions his research as separate from this outdated body of scholarship (p. xiv). It should be noted, however, that a rather crucial part of the historiography of the “matriarchy myth” is missing from Hinsch’s summary. Quite relevant to the purposes of his book are some of the positive outcomes that came with the quest to uncover China’s matriarchal beginnings, as explained very clearly in an article by Gideon Shelach (2004) titled “Marxist and Post-Marxist Paradigms for the Neolithic.” According to Shelach, misguided as they were, theories of matriarchy were foundational to the study of gender in the archaeological record of China:

The Marxist paradigm fostered in China a coherent discussion on issues such as the family structure during the Neolithic period and forced Chinese archaeologists to think of archaeological methods that could flesh out these abstract social norms. Contrary to commonly held views in the West, Chinese archaeologists vividly debated theoretical and methodological issues related to concepts such as

matriarchy, matrilineality, patriarchy, and patrilineality. (Shelach 2004:14)

These are some of the very issues that are central to Hinsch's book and as such should have been properly acknowledged.

In chapter 2, Hinsch surveys the Early, Middle, and Late Neolithic periods of China, with dates provided from individual cultures (though no dates are offered at all in some cases). The chapter considers a range of evidence from mortuary contexts, including: material culture such as utilitarian items, symbolic objects, and ornaments to address the development of gendered identity, specifically with regard to specialized labor; osteoarcheological data for information on age, life expectancy, and childbirth; and burial type (i.e., single or joint burials, positioning of individuals) for analyzing ritual treatment of individuals. He begins with the Early Neolithic and the rise of agricultural societies, noting that a shift to agriculture from hunting and gathering affected many facets of life, including the development of new technologies and corresponding material cultures (as found in graves). With agriculture came settled communities, economic development, and specialized labor; it is here that burials first indicate that gender was associated with specific occupations or activities. In these early graves, groupings based on kinship reflect the family as a basic unit and in some cases differing burial goods point to a gendered division of labor. Hinsch determines that "in spite of a few examples of women who assumed high positions, growing social inequality depressed female status overall by spurring the rise of patriarchy" (p. 15). By Middle Neolithic times, there is a more marked differentiation in burials of men and women, as observed in the number and type of grave goods; more specifically, men began to possess and control ritual paraphernalia, thus hindering women from participation in "prestigious rites" (p. 17). By the late Neolithic, early urban centers included specialized spaces dedicated to religious, military, and administrative activities (p. 18). Social and by extension gendered hierarchies are more marked, as evidenced by a lower distribution of women's graves in cemeteries and the introduction of subsidiary

burials of human sacrifices; many of the sacrifices were women, clearly denoting their inferiority in the social stratum.

The Bronze Age eventually saw the advent of writing in China, and so sources for the Shang dynasty, the focus of chapter 3, include both burial contexts and the documentary record, which is comprised of inscriptions on bone, turtle shell, and bronze. A lengthy treatment of terms denoting women (including *zi* [female or male child], *nü* [woman or wife], *mu* [mother or unmarried woman], *hou* [high-ranked woman], and *fu* [high-status woman or female spouse]) demonstrates that a women's identity during the Shang period shifted throughout her lifecycle, but that her sense of "selfhood and image" was always qualified by blood ties or marriage bonds (p. 38). Male offspring were favored, as evidenced by oracle bone inscriptions, but female offspring played an important role in marriage alliances, which helped secure and maintain relationships with non-Shang peoples (p. 49). What is more, the Shang followed a strictly patrimonial system of government, so royal consorts enjoyed rather unique privileges and forms of authority (pp. 40–41). Hinsch's relatively in-depth account of two such high-ranking consorts, Fu Jing and Fu Hao, both linked to late Shang King Wu Ding, demonstrates that some women played important roles in matters of state by overseeing particular territorial domains, presenting tribute and gifts, leading troops into battle, and even engaging in hunting (pp. 36, 43–48). Women also participated in significant ritual activities and, if they had contributed male heirs, were revered after death along with principal male ancestors.

Women's circumstances changed with the overthrow of the Shang and establishment of the Zhou dynasty. Zhou leaders organized, governed, and maintained their expanded territory as a network of fiefdoms overseen by blood relations of the ruling house. Within this system, women were useful for regional marriage alliances, "[binding] the aristocracy together in an elaborate network of overlapping kinship ties" (p. 64). Toward the end of the period when the central authority of the Zhou was in decline and warring factions had emerged, these political marriages became

even more significant. In chapter 4, Hinsch explores a range of circumstances regarding differing classes of women (e.g., queens, noblewomen, commoners) using evidence from inscriptions on Western Zhou bronze vessels and in poetry. Hinsch explains that while Shang sources were primarily descriptive, “Zhou inscriptions and poems often put forward moral standards and archetypes” (p. 55). Thus, we begin to gather a more qualitative picture of the ideal women, which includes her moral capacity, abilities as a mother, and beauty, in addition to her accomplishments. During the Western Zhou, queens and noblewomen had a hand in affairs of their husbands’ domains, but their titles and thus their identities were derived from the status of their husbands. Moreover, as state rituals developed and became more complex, a woman’s status was institutionally depressed, a phenomenon that can be observed most clearly in the decreasing presence of women in the ancestral order (p. 66). Commoner women enjoyed greater freedom, as Hinsch gathers from the twelfth to seventh century B.C.E. poems collected in the *Shijing* (Classic of Poetry). Hinsch discusses a variety of women’s experiences at the commoner level from marriage customs and sexual freedoms to the more emotional dimensions of couples’ lives, including separation, spousal cruelty, and divorce (pp. 68–70, 72–73).

The centuries following the Western Zhou were characterized by regionalism, interstate competition, and war, with the Zhou authority ruling only in name. In chapter 5, which covers the Eastern Zhou, Hinsch utilizes a growing body of received texts to discuss the profound ways that women’s lives were affected by these changing political and social circumstances. As observed in the growing tradition of joint burial, the marital bond between a man and woman became the core of the family unit, which gained increasing primacy as larger clans deteriorated in the context of war (pp. 79–80). Writers of the period began to shape a new rhetoric around the institution of marriage: “They declared that marriage expresses lofty values by distinguishing the sexes, fixing basic gendered roles essential to proper human relations, and expressing a couple’s commitment

to filial piety” (p. 83). Toward the end of the chapter, Hinsch discusses how this discourse expanded within the domains of “ritual, ethics, and cosmology” (p. 92), whereby thinkers seeking to stabilize an increasingly disoriented society began to interweave ideas of gender inequality within an idealized and harmonious social order. As Hinsch explains, “thinkers now used sophisticated bodies of thought to interpret difference as hierarchy, thus validating patriarchy in persuasive new ways” (p. 93). Most directly, the system of “three obediences (*sancong*)” mandated a women’s place in the shadow of men throughout her life: first she submitted to her father, then to her husband, and finally, to her son (p. 96). Despite their segregation from political affairs and public life, however, Hinsch touches upon some of the nuanced ways that women wielded power within and outside of this system, including utilizing their education to advise or persuade men in political or social matters (pp. 81, 82) and maintaining significant roles in religious and funerary rituals (only mentioned in a short paragraph, p. 81). As mothers to whom all offspring must show respect and deference, women were also elevated within the family unit through *xiao*, which originally referred to sacrifices to ancestors but later was understood to mean “filial piety” (pp. 92–93).

In the Epilogue, Hinsch traces the development of the “Myth of the Evil Women,” with which students of all periods of Chinese history are familiar. The content of this concluding essay is anticipated in Hinsch’s discussion of the cloistering of women from public view and participation in politics in the chapter on the Eastern Zhou. As Hinsch explained, “Because women pursued their goals from behind the scenes, undermining regular procedures and institutions, female power became synonymous with turmoil” (p. 81). In other words, any female breach of power within the patriarchal system was considered as a destabilizing threat to the male leaders, thinkers, and writers who designed it (p. 110). Writers rationalized this by referring to the “negative moral and political implications” of the female body and of female beauty, the detrimental effects of succession battles among wives on behalf of their sons,

and the dangers caused by “doting mothers” of future leaders (p. 102). The “evil woman” myth was shaped by first omitting accounts of strong and commanding women (e.g., Wen Mu of the early Western Zhou) from historical narratives (pp. 99–100). Later, writers greatly expanded upon narratives regarding the harmful role played by women at the decline of dynastic periods, such as was the case with Bao Si of the late Western Zhou. In other instances, female figures such as Daji of late Shang were completely invented and shaped as a foil to male rulers. These narratives, codified from the Eastern Zhou into the Han, were foundational to later opinions about women and power and solidified the perception of women as sexually dangerous and therefore necessarily segregated from men.

Other interesting facets covered across the chapters in this book, but not detailed here, include changing terms or titles used to denote and identify women, female divinities and women’s participation in religious rites as shamans, and a woman’s relationship to her natal family. While Hinsch’s survey is wide-ranging and coherent, there are nevertheless some minor points to note regarding clarity. For example, in his chapter on the Neolithic in particular, Hinsch draws from a refreshing range of anthropological and archaeological studies of civilizations around the world. This approach, as indicated, is intended to help further enhance our understanding of the archaeological data in China, considering the absence of historical sources for the period and relative paucity of material evidence from burial contexts. Unfortunately, all comparative material is relegated to endnotes (e.g., chapter 2 notes 15, 32, 46, 49, 63, 67, 93). In his earlier survey, *Women in Early Imperial China*, Hinsch acknowledged that a comparative discussion would “complicate” the work “beyond comprehensibility” (Hinsch 2002:2). This is fair given that archaeology is not the author’s field of expertise and that a comparative approach is not the overall aim of the book; however, it would be helpful to include some indication in the main text of which ideas were derived from scholarship focused on China and which interpretations

reference similar phenomena in other areas of the world.

Also, the incorporation of illustrative figures in an historical survey is almost always helpful, but it is most productive when the text engages with the images. Of the twenty figures included in this book, only one (p. 9, fig. 2.1), an archaeological drawing of a tomb layout, is directly addressed in the text and even then without a description of what the reader is seeing in the image provided. References to images are necessary if we are to understand the puzzling drawing of a Shang dynasty hairpin included at the end of the chapter on the Neolithic (p. 24, fig. 2.6). Most figures would benefit from at least a brief description in the captions, as was done for one illustration explaining the pictographic nature of Shang characters for man (*nan*) and husband (*fu*) (p. 30, fig. 3.2). Many of the figures include only a brief title as caption, with no information on provenance or source (e.g., figs. 5.2, 5.3, 5.4).

Instances where images (either photographic reproductions or drawings) would have added visual dimension to the discussion include the reference to a Shang “jade figurine of a female aristocrat” on page 31, which according to Hinsch illustrates a style of clothing worn by privileged elites. In this case, some intriguing description is included in the text, but no image is provided. Most unfortunately, no endnote is included providing further references to scholarship on the object for the interested researcher. To offer a final example, an architectural layout drawing could be inserted on page 84, where Hinsch mentions that subdivisions in Eastern Zhou royal dwellings reflected growing propriety around segregating the sexes.

In sum, this book is a useful synthesis of (mostly) English and Chinese sources on the positions and statuses of women during the formative epochs of Chinese history. The range of perspectives considered in this study and its wide chronological scope are extremely informative for gathering a macro-sense of what it was like to be women from different classes in early China. Hinsch’s study is readable and thus accessible to both specialists and non-specialists and will surely inspire further

inquiry into and elaboration of the nuances of women's lives in ancient China.

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