BOOK REVIEWS


Under Confucian Eyes is a collection of Chinese texts about or by Chinese women, presented here in their first English translation. The texts, arranged chronologically from the ninth to the eighteenth centuries, take a variety of forms and styles: they include epigraphs, hagiographies, letters, poetry, didactic texts on morality, travel notes and ghost stories. What these texts have in common is that they enlighten readers on the position of Chinese women in their society, and on the inevitable tensions between their own expectations and the expectations of those that surrounded them. Presenting this wide range of voices together for the first time under the overarching theme of gender, the editors of Under Confucian Eyes have provided students of Chinese history with invaluable source material.

As the editors discuss in the introduction to the volume, women’s voices as they emerge from the Chinese past are not easy to find: documentary evidence has privileged the spheres of politics and public life, spheres from which women were explicitly excluded according to dominant Confucian hierarchical frameworks. The presence of women, both within the text and as the authors of texts, is therefore marginal: they appear regularly only as the subjects of observations on daily life or of fiction and drama, that is, in forms of writing considered to be lesser genres within classical Chinese literature. Nevertheless, as the editors argue, we should not take the fact that Chinese women are mostly invisible in written texts to mean that they were invisible in elite culture. The collection of texts presented here certainly highlights the notion that where women do appear in text; they reveal much about the importance of their position in society. This importance might well be overlooked if less marginal texts were used as sources about the past; and perhaps this is why, as the editors note, women have occupied comparatively little space in studies of Chinese history (4).

The introduction is also useful in drawing the reader’s attention to the ever-present tensions between Confucian ideals and values, and the realities of women’s lives, including their individual hopes and desires. The texts certainly reflect these tensions in a variety of ways: the biography of Princess Miaoshan by Jiang Zhiqi (1031–1104) in chapter 2, for example, details the tribulations of one deemed unfilial because of her devotion to religion and her refusal to marry, but who is eventually redeemed in Confucian eyes by sacrificing parts of her body as medicine for her dying father (31–44). Gu Ruopu’s (1592–ca. 1681) instructions to her sons upon the separation of the central household reflect the centrality of Confucian family ideals in every day life.
but also the accommodation of differing realities (149–153). Pu Songling’s (1640–1715) ghost stories provide examples of these tensions in the supernatural: the sexual intrigues of female ghosts and demons define by contrast the expectations of demure behaviour on the part of “real” women (197–214).

The range of texts presented allows for a variety of topical approaches, a number of which are helpfully suggested in the introduction. They include considerations of gender and kin relations, of gender and religion, or of the different genres of women’s writing. These suggestions will no doubt be useful to students and teachers alike. Personally, I found the highlight of the collection to be the explorations of boundaries of gender and ethnicity found in chapters 5 (“Customs of Various Barbarians”, by Ji Ling), 17 (“A Brief Record of the Eastern Ocean” by Ding Shaoyi (fl. 1847)), and 18 (“The ‘Eating Crabs’ Youth Book”). These chapters do much to show how gender ideals could be used to measure “otherness”. Particularly delightful is “The ‘Eating Crabs’ Youth Book”, a comical story playing on a young Chinese wife’s inability to cook crabs and the rescue of the situation by an ornately dressed, bejewelled and made-up Manchu aunt. The story takes place in the capital; Manchu, Chinese and Mongols appear in the story; the story itself, intended for a Manchu audience, is bilingual. The cosmopolitanism of Qing period Beijing is palpable. Ultimately, however, the story not only enlightens us on norms of gender, but also on the correlations between markers of gender and markers of ethnicity. Manchu women had more freedom than Chinese women, and their feet were not bound, yet the description of the aunt’s walk to the nephew’s house suggests the small, bound feet that were the markers of feminine beauty amongst Han Chinese.

Overall, each of the texts in Under Confucian Eyes contains its own pearls. Each is introduced self-reflectively by its translator, and placed in historical and literary context. The range of texts collected here presents endless possibilities for use in undergraduate courses or postgraduate research: Under Confucian Eyes is thus highly recommended as a valuable addition to English-language materials on Chinese studies.

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One must persist with this book. It contains a mass of information, which most will find difficult to absorb in one sitting; and so reading a section (not even a whole chapter) at a time is recommended. The theoretical agenda in