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Book Review

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How did polygyny shape Chinese society? What role did sex play in the Republican-era discourse on eugenics? Why is the penis-size question in China also a question of cultural history? Answers to these and many other questions are provided in the short, but well-rounded volume “Sexuality in China: Histories of Power and Pleasure”, edited by Howard Chiang and published in 2018 by the University of Washington Press. Conceived of as a textbook for introducing students to “the major debates, sources, theories, and empirical contours of current historical work on Chinese sexuality, from the ancient times to the present,” (4) the volume offers its readers erudite engagements with such diverse topics as polygyny, eugenics, lesbian-on-lesbian crime, genital anxiety and HIV among China’s urban male elite, to name just a few. Despite the volume’s stronger focus on twentieth century Chinese history, each of the nine chapter take both China’s sexual antiquity and modernity into account to explore how sexual experience makes history.

Howard Chiang has made a name for himself as a leading authority on all things sex in China, which his win of the ICAS 2019 book prize for his latest monograph “After Eunuchs: Science, Medicine, and the Transformation of Sex in Modern China” (2018) further cemented. His remarkable grasp of the field shines through in the introduction, where he explains the pitfalls and challenges of doing sex history in a non-Western context and also explores some of the methodological difficulties historians face when exploring the pleasures of the bedroom through the documents of public life. Without negating Foucault’s importance to the field, Chiang underscores the need for new historiographic approaches that bring Western constructivist notions of sexuality, marriage, family, and reproduction into a productive conversation with formations of historical experience that set China apart from other places in the world. One important point he makes is that we should neither treat sexuality in Chinese history as a variation on Western modernity nor romanticize China’s past as entirely different and more authentic than the modern period, both in China as elsewhere. Such methodological reflections on how the pleasures of the

historian engender research approaches and results don't contradict, but rather strengthen Chiang's spirited plea for new and "sexy, powerful, and pleasurable" approaches to doing Chinese history. (13)

In the first chapter Debby Chih-yen Huang and Paul R. Goldin provide a comprehensive summary of polygynous practices in Chinese history from the Bronze Age to the early twentieth century but focus mostly on Han to Yuan period sources. Although plural marriage was never legal in China, wealthy elite men could until the New Marriage Law took effect in 1950 flaunt their wealth and increase their offspring by taking any number of concubines. The powerful ideology of patriarchy notwithstanding, the authors show that polygyny was not only a form of sexual servitude, but a complicated and evolving practice of family organization that shaped women's experiences for millennia. But whilst the authors usefully explain the many ways women could find greater social and financial security within a household, for instance, through social motherhood or a son, who passes the civil service exams, it would have been interesting to know more on women's experiences of marriage and child-rearing. Although encyclopedic coverage of Chinese sex history would be a tall order to ask of any introductory volume, a follow-up chapter on widowhood or female suicide could have perhaps helped bring female agency within China's marriage system stronger into focus. But historical scholarship necessarily builds on the available sources, from which we frequently learn very little about the everyday life experiences of socially disadvantaged groups. Ping Yao's review chapter of the historiography of sexuality in imperial China thus provides a useful summary of what sources do exist, how they have framed research agendas and what fields might be explored in the future.

Chapter three by Keith McMahon could have also been placed after Huang and Goldin's overview on polygyny, as it discusses the outpouring of sexuality, when the institutions of marriage and family appear no longer to uphold the proper moral and social order. Focusing on the obscure, eighteenth-century pornographic novel *Preposterous Words* (*Guwangyan* 姑妄言) and its place within the vast field of Qing period nostalgia literature that lamented the ending of the Ming dynasty, McMahon's careful analysis of the political and historical meanings of the novel's unabashedly licentious world reveal an unusual, but highly relevant expression of Ming loyalism, which emerged both from the centuries-long association of virility with political strength as well as Daoist theories on the decline of yang energy. The novel also indexes a crisis of masculinity that continued into modernity, where feminist issues further exacerbated Chinese men's fear of losing sexual and political control. This topic is taken up in chapter four by Mirela David. She discusses the reception of Bertrand Russell and Ellen Key in the *Ladies' Journal* (*Funü zazhi* 妇女杂志)

and how Western notions of free love and eugenics shaped the liberal visions of Chinese male feminists seeking to replace the old sexual morality, with the goal of improving the Chinese race. Focusing on the same period, Peter J. Carroll's chapter relates a highly publicized lesbian romance and murder case to Republican-era discussions on changing social mores, the dangers of late marriage, same-sex friendship, female physiology and the new malady of neurasthenia. Howard Chiang's own chapter on two sex-change cases from Shanghai in the 1930s and Taiwan in the 1950s usefully extends Carroll's discussion on the circulation of scientific ideas in Republican-era writings by theorizing the press as an important forum for the formation of public understandings of sexuality.

Just as the Republican period is frequently characterized by its highly heterogeneous cultural industry and intense interest in sexual topics in the public sphere, so is the socialist period often described as its stark contrast – a period, in which aesthetics was fully dictated by politics, and bodies and behaviors were forced to conform to new gender-neutral, desexualized ideals. In chapter seven, Shana Ye contributes to the growing body of scholarship that has in recent years revised this picture by recuperating a queer socialist perspective on the Cultural Revolution. Through “dynamic readings” of *tanbai jiaodai* 坦白交代, a genre of confessional writing from the Cultural Revolution, Ye argues that the neoliberal perspective on Western modernity as the basis of queer liberation is structurally blind to the various ways pleasure and desire is performed and produced within oppressive spaces. Beyond shedding further light on the wealth of sexual expressions during the socialist period, Ye's contribution demonstrates a very innovative and inspired approach to archival work that opens new avenues for further scholarship on queer socialism.

Male experiences are also at the center of the last two chapters. Drawing on various surveys and field work from the 1990s and 2000s, Everett Yuehong Zhang discusses the wide-spread anxiety among Chinese men about the size of their genitals. Zhang argues that feelings of sexual inferiority are not only a result of comparisons to the West during the post-Mao period, when exposure to foreign pornography and a new public shower culture created a competitive environment. The Maoist state's failure to deliver on its utopian promises is according to Zhang also partially to blame for exacerbating a culture of self-doubt and self-questioning. Surprisingly, Elana Uretsky's contribution on HIV among Chinese male elite is the only chapter on sex work, although it revises the term to include not only the work of marginalized women, but also the sexual activities of men that are in some form related to their waged labor. However, public health interventions focus predominantly on the sex work of women, with the result that men's vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases is dangerously neglected.

Overall, smaller issues such as the romanization of 道 as both *dao* and *tao* in chapter two do not distract from the volume's very engaging and thoughtful scholarship. Although from a specialist's perspective in-text Chinese characters are generally preferred, a glossary at the end of the volume compensates for this. However, apart from Carroll's chapter, women's experiences and voices are given far less weight than men's perspectives. Chiang does not explain this imbalance but does take note of the pioneering work of feminist historians such as Gail Hershatter, Emily Honig and Susan Mann, on which the volume builds. Whilst the addition of two or three more chapters, for instance, on courtesan culture, Chinese widowhood or (both male and female) chastity might have helped create a more balanced overview of sexuality throughout Chinese history, this volume nevertheless succeeds at providing a valuable, and highly enjoyable sampler of the field. Moreover, by opening new avenues for comparative research and demonstrating innovative historiographic methods, this volume will not only be of interest to scholars of China, but also to historians and sociologists who study the changing dynamics of sexuality and knowledge.