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Go Nation: Chinese Masculinities and the Game of Weiqi in China (book review)

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Go Nation: Chinese Masculinities and the Game of Weiqi in China. By MARC L. MOSKOWITZ. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. xxii, 184 pp. \$70.00 (cloth); \$29.95 (paper, ebook).

This book is a study of the game of *Weiqi*, better known to Americans as Go, in China. Based on fieldwork conducted in 2010 and 2011, the author explores the cultural significance and social meanings of the game among three groups of players: children (and their parents), university students, and older male park-goers. As the book's subtitle suggests, however, it is also a study of Chinese masculinities, which the author argues are critically reflected in the game. The book provides a lucid introduction of Chinese *Weiqi* for readers who have no previous knowledge about it and does an admirable job of situating the game within the historical and contemporary cultural context of China.

In the introduction, the author attributes *Weiqi*'s popularity in contemporary China to its origins among the elite scholars of ancient China—an alternative to Western cultural markers, such as learning English and playing the piano. The author argues that *Weiqi* remains a male-dominated field “that incorporates historical images of the Confucius gentleman, martial strategists, innate genius, and an unforgiving work ethic” (p. 19), and thus offers a unique site for studying Chinese masculinities.

Chapter 2 is a cultural history of *Weiqi*, in which the author traces its meaning all the way from the ancient myth of Emperor Yao to contemporary culture. Confucius was dismissive of the game, which he saw as a waste of energy, but generals in later periods of Chinese history studied it as a philosophy of war, as did Mao Zedong in modern times. It was denounced as a feudal remnant during the Cultural Revolution, but later was also constructed as a symbol of nationalist pride.

In chapter 3, based on previous scholarship, the author provides a survey of shifting notions of masculinity in Chinese history and their close connections with nationalist discourses in modern China. While the survey is useful, it has also uncritically inherited the problematic conclusions of previous works, in particular the use of the term “feminine.” For example, the author writes, “In contrast to the talented scholars whose feminine charm was depicted as being virtually irresistible to the fairer sex, macho men . . . were thought to be incapable of attracting women of virtue” (p. 51). By what criteria did the talented scholars possess “feminine charm”? The same question could be posed about the following statement: “The Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) Dynasties were decidedly more feminine than the Han (206 B.C.–220 A.D.) and Tang (618–908) Dynasties. The Song Dynasty was more feminine still” (p. 55). The author seems to assume a universal gender norm in these statements.

Chapters 4 through 6 each focus on a different age group. Parents bring their children to learn *Weiqi* because they believe that *Weiqi* can improve their children's focus, endurance, and logic, and hence, prepare them to compete in society as adults. The last point resonates among the group of university students in particular, some of whom are former professional *Weiqi* players. The game teaches them how to face the uncertainty and competitiveness of the job market in the future. For both children and college students, *Weiqi* is a very effective means of cultivating a person's *suzhi* (quality), which is a sign of class difference in post-socialist China. The emerging new middle class is supposed to include people with better *suzhi*. But this understanding of *Weiqi* is not applicable to the third group: older, working-class, male *Weiqi* players in the park. For them, *Weiqi* is more of a hobby, a way to enjoy their retired life, rather than a kind of rigorous *suzhi* training for a competitive future. If college students see the strategizing and slow moving in the game as the embodiment of erudition, a

masculine virtue, the older park-goers see the same gesture as too weak and too gentle for a man.

The author makes a convincing argument that *Weiqi* is a male-dominated field and *Weiqi* training is coded as masculine. But the question remains: are these masculine characters fostered in the art of *Weiqi* possessed exclusively by men? Girls are sent to *Weiqi* school along with boys. The author constantly quotes Sylvia, a female student at Peking University, who was trained to become a professional player as a child. An exploration of female masculinity in contemporary China would be a valuable addition to the field of Chinese gender studies.

For China specialists, a Chinese glossary always adds to the pleasure of reading, especially for a book on *Weiqi*; some of its terms are so specialized, such as *xianshou* (先手).

The merit of this book is that the writing is very accessible, and free of academic jargon, so it could be used for undergraduate courses on contemporary Chinese culture.

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