

Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China

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Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China

By

Geng SONG
Derek HIRD



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INTRODUCTION

CHINESE MASCULINITY: IS THERE SUCH A THING?

It was in a newly renovated high-class conference room, a few minutes before a faculty meeting. A female senior colleague, a Singaporean Chinese who was educated in English, approached one of the authors and asked about his area of research. Upon hearing the answer “Chinese masculinity,” she sneered and said, “Chinese masculinity? Is there such a thing?” The remark was followed by gales of laughter in the conference room; most of the people were local Chinese. This happened several years ago when one of the authors first came to a university in Singapore to teach. Even today he does not know whether the woman’s open disdain for Chinese men extends to himself, who happens to be Chinese.

This disappointment with Chinese men, however, is not uniquely found in a “postcolonial” and “conservative” society like Singapore. It is, for instance, echoed in Yi Zhongtian’s (1998, 1–2) fierce criticism of the “unqualified” men and women in China:

There are men in China and there are women in China.

It is a shame, however, that at certain times, and in certain ways, Chinese males apparently do not act quite like men, and Chinese females do not exactly act like women....

If the men in China are all very manly, then why do we hear calls for a “search for real men” in China? If Chinese women are all very feminine, then why do we hear phrases such as “where have all the women in China gone”? ...

Chinese culture and traditional values have always placed importance on the relationship between male and female, emphasizing the distinction between the two genders. That is to say, based on traditional Chinese culture, the hope and ideal is for men to be very masculine and women to be very feminine. Yet ... in reality we find awkward situations, such as “weepy men and women who swear out on the street” or “women without allure and men with impotence,” and other similarly inappropriate circumstances. Isn’t this an irony? Isn’t this a joke?

If this were merely a joke, then it might be all right. What makes it worse, however, is that as it directly reflects the basic inner qualities of a nation’s people, it has already affected the nation’s prosperity, strength, and ethnicity. Because a strong and prosperous state depends on a civilized people to build, a flourishing nation can only be made by healthy citizens. ... For the past century, our nation has undergone some severe disasters. The causes of these disasters are of course evident to all; one hundred years of bloodshed can be

blamed on the Western powers, a decade of turmoil can be blamed on Lin Biao and Jiang Qing. Yet, the dog- or lamb-like fear that many people possess when faced with foreign invaders, and their tiger- or wolf-like cruelty when they are with fellow countrymen—is this more or less connected with the above-mentioned phenomenon that “men are not like men and women are not like women?”¹

Do the “Chinese” have “masculinity”? How does Chinese masculinity compare with its counterpart in the West? Are the “unhealthy” Chinese men a cause or a result of China’s failure and humiliation during the last century? Questions like these reflect entrenched stereotypes and essentialist understandings of both masculinity and Chineseness and unfortunately still have wide currency in mass media and popular discourse today both in and outside of China. The “crisis of masculinity” in China remains a constant topic of concern. At the same time, however, globalization and rapid social transformations in the country have opened up numerous new possibilities for gender and sexuality in China, and these new options have significantly challenged and changed traditional notions and discourses. Although Chinese masculinity has attracted growing scholarly interest in the last decade and a number of theoretically informed works have emerged in this field, interdisciplinary critical studies on men and masculinities in contemporary China are lacking.

This book, exploring the social, economic, and cultural factors that have affected men and representations of men in China over the past few decades, represents our combined efforts in this field and brings to fruition our research activities of more than ten years. Our approach to men and masculinities is “historical, cultural, relational, materialist, deconstructive, and antiessentialist” (Pringle et al. 2011, 2). As an interdisciplinary attempt, the study synthesizes research methods of both the humanities and social sciences, including textual reading, content analysis, interviews, participant observation, and so on, and interrogates the links between practice and discourse.

The study, however, makes no pretence to be exhaustive. The time frame of the “contemporary” period covered in the study refers to the post-Mao era (since 1976), with particular focus on the recent decade (since 2000). Our discussions on the social practices of men in China are mainly confined to urban China. It also needs to be pointed out that, although the chapters entail investigations of interesting topics such as homophobia, gay identities and visibility, and, in particular, the implicit homosexual

¹ All Chinese texts are translated by ourselves, unless otherwise stated.

subtext under a “homosocial overcoat,” the book for the most part deals with heterosexual adult men. In other words, it focuses on the compulsory and unconscious performance of gender by men in contemporary China (see Butler 1990). By doing so, however, we by no means imply that “being a man” equals “being masculine” (see Clatterbaugh 2004). Masculinity is not necessarily to be coupled with men. As a matter of fact, female masculinity in the Chinese context (such as the longstanding tradition of female heroism in Communist literature and film) is a fascinating topic that deserves a lengthy study elsewhere.

Chinese Masculinity as a Field of Study

As many scholars of gender in the West have pointed out, conducting gender studies without studying men risks encouraging the sort of dichotomy that kept women in their (second) place. Masculinity, in the words of Tim Edwards, is at once “everywhere and yet nowhere, known and yet unknowable, had and yet un-have-able” (2006, 1; emphasis in original). The situation has significantly changed in the last two decades because a large body of works, crossing the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, psychology, media and film studies, history, and literature, have successfully made men visible *as men* and deconstructed and subverted the “natural” link between masculinity and patriarchy. It is commonly believed that this growing interest in studying men’s gendered position was inspired by second-wave feminism. At the same time, however, studies on men should not be viewed simply as a “me-too” response to feminism, or even as a parallel to “women’s studies.” They have significantly different roles and aims. Therefore nowadays more and more scholars have rejected the term “men’s studies” in favor of “critical studies on men” (CSM), “critical men’s studies,” or “studies of men and masculinities” (Ford and Lyons 2012, 2).

In terms of theoretical framework and focuses of investigation, Tim Edwards (2006) has identified three “waves” of critical studies on masculinities: from sex-role paradigm to the concept of hegemonic masculinity to the study of manhood normativity, performativity, and sexuality (Connell 1987, 1995; Butler 1990; Simpson 1994b; Buchbinder 1998). The third phase or “wave,” beginning in the mid-1990s, has been characterized by a “cultural, poststructuralist, or more media-driven” approach to masculinities and, according to Edwards (2006, 3), “[a] common theme is the importance of representation and its connection with wider questions of change and continuity in contemporary, and in some more historical,

masculinities and identities.” The three “waves,” however, do not have a clear-cut boundary but are intertwined with each other and are generally in line with the directions of research in gender studies.

The third phase has also witnessed a burgeoning interest in the critical study of masculinities in a global context and a growing body of scholarship on men and masculinities in non-Western societies (Louie and Low 2003; Mellström 2003; Roberson and Suzuki 2003; Chopra, Osella, and Osella 2004; Osella and Osella, 2006; Clark 2010; Ruspini et al. 2011; Ford and Lyons 2012). This is because masculinity has been closely linked with globalization. As R.W. Connell puts it, a “world gender order” has connected “the gender orders of local societies on a world scale” (Ford and Lyons 2012, 9). Globalization of mass media has made it virtually impossible to focus on an isolated “Chinese” or “American” masculinity (see, for instance, Chapter 3 of this book). The interaction between local and global forces in the construction of masculinity has become a major issue of concern and the context in which we “must now think about the construction and enactment of masculinities” (Connell 2005, 74). On the one hand, the discourse of masculinity has become increasingly plural in a given culture; on the other hand, this local plurality is compatible with a globalized singularity of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 850).

Studies on men and masculinities in China remain as yet far from sufficient, though a body of work has emerged since the new millennium. Most of these studies focus on premodern Chinese literature and culture, with textual reading as the major method of inquiry.

Kam Louie’s *Theorising Chinese Masculinity* (2002) remains the most important and influential work in this field. His widely cited conceptualization of the historically hegemonic models of masculinity in Chinese culture through the *wen/wu* (literary/martial) dyad has had a far-reaching impact on the study of masculinity in a global context. Both *wen* and *wu* were regarded as masculine qualities, and during most periods of imperial China *wen* enjoyed primacy over *wu*. Louie uses Confucius and Guan Yu as icons of *wen* and *wu* masculinity respectively in Chinese cultural tradition and extends the discussion to include modern Chinese literature and film stars such as Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Chow Yun Fat. The *wen/wu* dyad has proved to be a very powerful analytical tool and provides a foundation for future studies of Chinese masculinities. It also invites more historically specific scrutiny of a variety of discursive constructions of masculinity within this general framework.

The image of the scholar (*caizi*) in late imperial Chinese literature is the subject of Geng Song’s book (2004), although macho images and heroism

are also touched upon as a foil for the *caizi*. The book focuses on the question of why the effeminate scholar, exemplified by Student Zhang in the Yuan drama *The Story of the Western Wing* (*Xixiang ji*), was constructed and accepted as the ideal masculinity in premodern China. Song approached the problematic from several perspectives, including the authorship of the scholar-beauty romance, the examination system since the Song dynasty, and the racial conflicts during the Song-Yuan period. However, the feminine beauty of men is fundamentally attributed to the politicized, hierarchical, and fluid *yin/yang* framework, which, according to Song, occupied a much more important position than the male/female dichotomy in the premodern Chinese discourse of gender. As a gender matrix, the *yin/yang* framework is a key to understanding the relative absence of homophobia in premodern Chinese culture. Furthermore, Song points out that historical masculinities exemplifying martial characteristics, for example, the tough *haohan* (good man) and powerful *yingxiong* (hero) depicted in classical Chinese novels such as *The Water Margin* and *The Three Kingdoms*, did not exhibit strong sexual desires for women, in contrast to the knightly tradition of Europe. Indeed, love for women was seen as an obstacle to their political ambitions. Song argues that Chinese masculinity was primarily constructed in a homosocial network, rather than in opposition to “woman.”

Martin Huang (2006) presents critical readings of a variety of male images in elite discourse, vernacular fiction, and advice literature by Chinese literati in the late imperial period (roughly from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries). A more focused historical perspective constitutes the strength of his study. In Huang’s words, instead of defining “*what* late imperial Chinese masculinities were,” the book pursues the question of “*how* different models of masculinity were proposed and negotiated in relation to the feminine” (9; emphasis in original). The inclusion of women and femininity in the study of masculinity is a laudable attempt, as it reflects the perception of gender as a relational concept. In discussing the role of “female others” in the construction of masculinity, Huang argues that there were two common strategies for negotiating masculinity in relation to women, namely, “the strategy of analogy” and “the strategy of differentiation” (2); the former seeks to “validate itself through the feminine” while the latter “defined itself against the feminine” (32). Insightful as the findings are, however, there is sometimes confusion between femininity and women in the book.

In his new book on homoeroticism in the fiction of the late Ming and Qing dynasties, Giovanni Vitiello (2011, 8) advocates a more nuanced

reading of “the ideological negotiations these basic models [such as the chivalric hero, the Confucian scholar, the sexy libertine] undergo in different textual and chronological contexts.” He particularly points out the emergence of a “syncretism” of the masculine traits derived from both the scholar (*wen*) and chivalric hero (*wu*) models since the late Ming period. He attributes this intellectual project of “reinvigorating Confucian masculinity,” which allegedly led to the rise of a hybrid “Confucian knight-errant” (*xia*) image in literature, to a perceived crisis of masculinity among the literati since the seventeenth century and the loss of the Ming empire to a foreign power.

The above-mentioned studies share a keen interest in reconstructing the picture of masculinity in Chinese culture before East met West. The *differences* between the Chinese constructs and the prevailing Western constructs in gender are without question of great importance.² For instance, scholars have argued that “gender” in the Chinese space may provide people with more choices than the dichotomy of male/female (Barlow 2004), and that sexual activity between men was rarely subject to moral indictment or medical pathologization in premodern China (G. Song 2004; Vitiello 2011). However important and illuminating that may be, masculinity(ies) in contemporary society must be examined as a set of competing constructions, not as a fixed, monolithic, unchanging “Chinese masculinity.” Sociologists have suggested that in the postcolonial world masculinity is ever changing and is mainly a hybrid discourse (Connell 1995, 2000; Demetriou 2001). In response to the recently burgeoning field of “Chinese masculinity,” Kwai-cheung Lo points out that “in a rapidly globalizing Asian environment, the simple East-West dichotomy and confrontation is insufficient in regional gender studies, as is the sheer assertion of some uniquely Asian realities” (Lo 2004, 258). As this book will illustrate, notions and practices of masculinities in contemporary China are constituted through “assemblages” of masculinity,³ composed of transnationally circulating images and practices, and locally situated identities,

² For discussions on discursive masculine identities in contemporary China that draw on historical notions such as the *haohan* (tough man) and *caizi* (scholar), see Hird 2009a, 36–39.

³ “Assemblages” of masculinity are the inherently unstable constellations of always changing notions and practices of masculinity, involving discursive and material elements, that produce non-unitary, and often self-contradictory, masculine subjects and subjectivities. This understanding of assemblages draws from Nikolas Rose’s (1998) deployment of Gilles Deleuze’s theory of assemblages in his analysis of the formation of self and subjectivity. See also Manuel de Landa’s (2006) utilization of assemblage theory to critique totalizing and essentializing assumptions.

practices, and locales. These masculinities draw on images including those generally construed as originating in the “West,” such as the smartly dressed, well-mannered white-collar man, as well as on locally prevalent practices such as business socializing (*yingchou*) with government officials or male clients in karaoke bars and saunas while attended by attractive young provincial women. This very diversity of components of masculinity, or indeed of any aspect of identity, points to the fruitlessness of conceptualizing either culture or self as a bounded whole (Ewing 1990). Or, to put it another way, the ever-transforming assemblages of myriad elements that construct the “effect” named China is no more a coherent, unitary entity than is the subjectivity or selfhood of an individual Chinese man or woman, as we aim to show.

A pioneering inquiry into male subjectivities in post-Mao China, Xueping Zhong’s *Masculinity Besieged?* (2000) discusses Chinese literature and films produced during the 1980s. Zhong’s approach is primarily psychoanalytic, making use of Kaja Silverman’s concept of a “marginality complex.” She clarifies from the outset that instead of all men in China, “Chinese men” in her book refers to “Chinese male intellectuals, especially writers and critics who constitute the most vocal component of modern Chinese intellectual forces” (2). In other words, it is the cultural elite that are under scrutiny. The book concludes that the crisis of masculinity is primarily caused by a male anxiety that can be explained by the “marginality complex” of Chinese male intellectuals and is closely linked with the pursuit of modernity in modern China (the male desire for a “strong man” identity, the root-seeking cultural movement as a male search for an alternative cultural and national identity, etc.).

Though mainly focusing on the popular musical expression of gender in post-Mao China, Nimrod Baranovitch (2003) provides an insightful overview of the changing masculine discourse in contemporary China, with reference to some interesting issues, such as the “crisis of masculinity” in post-Mao China, the link between Chinese rock-n-roll and (Western) masculinity and modernity, the so-called “neotraditional mode of manhood” in the 1990s, and the empowerment of women by commercialization (114–44).

Ethnographically grounded studies on Chinese masculinities in the post-Mao period are few but have been growing in recent years (E. Zhang 2007; Uretsky 2008; Lin 2013; Osburg 2013). They have opened a new avenue for the field. John Osburg (2013), for instance, offers a study of elite masculinity among the “new rich,” which, according to him, is formed through an ethics of brotherhood, loyalty, and patronage. Based on his

fieldwork in Chengdu, especially data generated by interviews and participant observation in places such as karaoke clubs, saunas, nightclubs, high-end restaurants, and teahouses, he examines how elite men interact with each other and establish forms of solidarity, cooperation, and obligations through these forms of entertaining, and how young women play a crucial role by “projecting an idealized masculinity onto the men they accompany” (33).

There are also some other important works that have contributed to the field of Chinese masculinity studies, including anthologies on Chinese femininities and Chinese masculinities (Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002) and on manhood in Chinese and Japanese literature and media (Louie and Low 2003), as well as monographs on popular culture in East Asia (Lo 2010), male homosexualities in contemporary China (Kong 2010), and martial arts and gangster masculinity (Boretz 2011). Among them, Lo’s and Boretz’s books merit particular attention. Informed by Marxist criticism, Lo approaches the issue of masculinity from the perspective of the “excess” generated in popular cultural practices in Asia (mostly China, Hong Kong, and Japan) and links “Asian” masculinities with capitalist modernity. Based on his ethnographic fieldwork in Taiwan and Yunnan, Boretz investigates rituals and codes of masculinity (comradeship, honor, face, etc.) in *jianghu* societies and their influence on common men. Of particular relevance to our discussions in this book is a chapter on wine, women and song in the *yingchou* (socializing) practices by men (Boretz 2011, 176–203).

The current book fills an important gap by focusing on men and masculinities in contemporary China and approaching the issue from a global context. The Chinese “crisis of masculinity” in the post-Mao era goes hand in hand with economic reform and opening up to the outside world, and these changes have swept away both the Confucian and Maoist models of manhood. As productivist and consumerist values gradually and unmistakably replaced the Maoist legacy of class and class struggle in the official ideology, the selfless and asexual Maoist revolutionary hero lost his audience allure. At the same time, the traditional/Confucian gentry-class masculinity condemned during the revolutionary periods (both the Republican “new culture” movement and the Communist revolution) has been further denounced as the cause of the “emasculatation” of the Chinese nation in the media hype about “national character” and the quality of Chinese men produced since the mid-1980s.

During the years immediately following the Cultural Revolution, the concern over Chinese masculinity first emerged as a preoccupation with male potency. The emasculatation of Chinese men was attributed to the

regimentation and mental “castration,” as it were, imposed by Communist rule on Chinese men, and particularly on male intellectuals.⁴ The relationship between the Chinese Communist Party and intellectuals was likened to the oppressive father-son relationship in imperial times. At the same time, as part of a strong negative reaction against the gender equality of the Maoist era, it was claimed that women’s liberation in China was premised on the reduction of men’s economic power, and that this reduction had not only diminished men’s social status but also impaired their manhood by turning them into obedient instruments of the authoritarian party-state (T. Lu 1995, 49–50; Zhong 2000; X. Wang 2003, 148; on “women’s oppression,” see J. Fang 2004). This view directly led to the discourse of *yinsheng yangshuai* (women rise and men decline), a topic extensively discussed in the 1980s and still influential even today. In the early years of the reform era, therefore, the quest for masculinity was initially linked with political resistance. It was from this historical and cultural milieu that Chinese rock music emerged. Beijing’s “Godfather of Rock,” Cui Jian, can be regarded as an epitome of this type of (search for) masculinity. In Cui Jian and other rock singers there was a “negation of traditional values like self-restraint, obedience, suppression of the individual self and his(/her) sexual desires, values that were celebrated under the Confucian order and are still celebrated in communist China” (Baranovitch 2003, 119).

As China’s opening-up continued in the mid and late 1980s, however, the discourse of *yinsheng yangshuai* soon focused on disappointment with Chinese men as compared with Western and Japanese men, and anxiety over the virility of China as a nation in the globalizing world. This phenomenon was in keeping with the search for national identity and empowerment in postrevolutionary ideology. In the “new-era” (i.e., since 1979) literary scene, Chinese men have more often than not been described as weak, immature, selfish, and impotent, while real masculinity is embodied by Rambo and Takakura Ken (Zhong 2000, 41). This cultural trend, known as the “search for the real man,” can be interpreted from several perspectives.⁵ To be brief, it echoes both the modernist internalization

⁴ A commonly cited and extensively studied text is Zhang Xianliang’s novel *Half of Man Is Woman* (*Nanren de yiban shi nuren*), the first work in post-Mao China to openly address issues of male anxiety, sexual repression, impotency, and manhood (see Zhong 2000; Baranovitch 2003, 114; Fang 2004).

⁵ *In Search of a Real Man* (*Xunzhao nanzihan*) is the title of a play by the Shanghai playwright Sha Yexin. The expression has been used to refer to literature of this kind. The play, which was staged in Shanghai for six months in a row in 1986, tells the story of a girl who searches for an ideal man and is disappointed with all the men she encounters. See also

of Western gender standards as the universal norm and the rethinking of Communist gender ideology. Since the mid-1980s, the Communist projection of a proletarian collective masculine identity has been gradually replaced by a nationalist search for Chinese manhood, partially attributable to an “inferiority complex” when facing hegemonic Western culture. *Xungen* (seeking roots) literature, films such as *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang*), and “northwestern wind” (*xibei feng*) pop music, all popular cultural forms before the 1989 crackdown, represent an inward turn in the cultural politics of “remasculinizing” Chinese culture in the post-Mao era. The root-seekers describe China’s obsolete feudal and patriarchal system as impotent and ineffective and advocate a return to the genuine, virile, masculine Chineseness represented by a rural folk culture that remains pristine and unaffected by either Confucianism or Western influence. In the world of cinema, Jiang Wen, the actor who played the bandit hero in *Red Sorghum*, can be regarded as an incarnation of this type of masculinity.

In the post-Deng cultural landscape, the coexistence of a variety of competing discourses has replaced the overwhelming pursuit of one particular type of masculinity. Nimrod Baranovitch (2003, 132) observes that “preferences in the domain of gender shifted more recently, and since at least the mid-1990s the macho type of manhood has lost much of its past appeal and there has been a return to the more traditional type of soft and delicate manhood, which ... many in both the West and China today see as a ‘feminized’ type of manhood.” In this regard, the recent popularity of the actor and singer Chen Kun might be considered an example of the return to the traditional *xiaosheng* (young scholar) type of manhood. However, while this “return” to a certain degree reflects the changes that have taken place in the fashioning of manhood after the 1989 crackdown, it would be too simplistic to reduce the complex and profound changes in the discourse of manhood in contemporary China to a shift from one mode to another. Instead, a diversified transformation in masculinities has taken place in the context of globalization, with the following noteworthy characteristics.

First, criticism of and anxiety about the quality of Chinese men compared with foreign (mostly Western) men has continued into the new millennium. For instance, an influential essay in *Renmin wang* (People.com)

Sha Yexin’s recent Web essay “How Many Real Men Under Heaven?” (2007), in which he defines *nanzihan* (real man) as a quality of political adherence that is not exclusive to men, an echo of Mencius’s political and moral definition of *da zhangfu*.