

Changing Chinese Masculinities

From Imperial Pillars of State
to Global Real Men

Edited by Kam Louie

Hong Kong University Press
The University of Hong Kong
Pokfulam Road
Hong Kong
www.hkupress.org

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ISBN 978-988-8208-56-2 (*Hardback*)

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound by China Translation & Printing Services Ltd. in Hong Kong, China

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Introduction

Kam Louie

The many political and social upheavals of the second half of the twentieth century, such as the civil rights movement and protests against the war in Vietnam, resulted in a growing interest not only in class and race, but also in gender. In the Western world, this social phenomenon gave rise to gender studies as an academic discipline. However, initially, gender studies was, to all intents and purposes, effectively women's studies. Men as a gendered category escaped close scrutiny until the turn of the millennium, when masculinity studies began to emerge as an academic discipline. While the number of men's studies courses at tertiary institutions remains small, discussions about men in gender and women's studies classes are growing and there is keen interest in the field. This interest is likely to grow at a rapid rate, as there is increasing awareness that much more research on men and related topics such as sexual exploitation and father-child relationships is necessary if we hope to create a happier and saner society. There are now several scholarly journals such as *The Journal of Men's Studies*, *Men and Masculinities*, and *Norma: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* that are devoted to the study of men, and hundreds of academic as well as popular books and articles about men have also been published.

However, in the case of Chinese masculinity studies, this felicitous situation has one major lacuna that needs to be filled. Research and publications on men have indeed been growing exponentially in the last two or three decades, but the focus has been overwhelmingly directed at and situated in Western white societies, so that when nonwhite ethnic groups are considered it is mostly under the rubric of "minorities." This is not a bad thing. Indeed, partly thanks to the work of very good scholars in this area, Orientalist images typified by Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan are only mentioned in serious academic discussions as just that: Orientalist stereotypes. But there is no getting away from the fact that these characters are meant to be Chinese men. The unstated assumption is that they are somehow representative of Chinese men in general, and not just some imagined (usually by white people) exotic beings that are not based on

reality. Furthermore, these men operate in Europe or America, not in China itself. That is, if they are Chinese at all, they are out of context. It is no wonder that they often come across not as real men, but simply as caricatures.

While it is understandable that Euro-American scholars would focus on their own societies, with the result that scholarship on gender studies has hitherto concentrated on the Western world, there is an urgent need to examine men within their “natural” environment so that the diversity of peoples and cultures can be better appreciated. Is there an indigenous Chinese masculinity? Apart from my *Theorising Chinese Masculinity* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) in which I proposed the *wen-wu* (cultural attainment–martial prowess) dyad as a Chinese masculinity ideal and a research tool for analyzing men, there have been few sustained efforts to answer this question. But with the economic and political centers shifting toward East Asia in the new millennium, there is increasing interest in this region, especially China, as well as a growing recognition that Chinese masculinity is intrinsically fascinating and worthy of study, regardless of its relevance to the Western world. But, of course, China’s connections to the rest of the world are now so intricate that failure to understand what it means to be a man in China in effect means failure to understand the West as well. Indeed, ever since China began to open its doors and foster trade with the rest of the world at the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), Chinese goods and people have been found in all parts of the globe. At the same time, more and more outsiders are now visiting, studying, or working in China. The number of tourists going to China, for example, had increased from around a million at the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 to nearly 100 million by the end of the millennium. In many big cities around the world, Chinese immigrants and students constitute a substantial proportion of the resident population. Their cultural baggage with respect to gender needs to be understood, for their sake if not for that of the rest of the population. To unpack that baggage, of course, we need to look at their home country.

Visitors to present-day China, including Sinologists who know its history and culture well, are inevitably astonished by the seismic transformations that have taken place there. They cannot help but be struck by the changes in the physical landscape, from the skyscrapers that have sprung up in erstwhile villages to the super high-speed trains that fly above former bicycle tracks. Changes in human relationships have been equally dramatic. The Communist revolution that resulted in the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 had already institutionalized major national undertakings such as the new marriage laws that ended polygamy. The family structure that had been in place for centuries has now been totally disrupted. With monogamy as the legal basis for marriages and couples able to choose their partners instead of leaving this decision to their parents through arranged marriages as in the past, family relationships are conducted on a new basis, leading to major transformations in many other basic gender roles and social networks. The Cultural Revolution,

with its intensified promotion of the slogan “women hold up half the sky,” further shook ideologies and practices in human relationships, but the greatest change probably came after the Cultural Revolution, as the one-child family and migration of young people to the towns and cities radically altered the shape of Chinese society. These changes had repercussions for fundamental human experiences, such as parent-child relationships, with the role of the father becoming in many instances a lot less aloof and severe than in the past.

The fact that more and more women have gone to school and tertiary institutions and are excelling in what they do has also revolutionized gender relations. In the popular domain, for example, shelves in bookshops are lined with self-help books on how to manage men or women; men are often seen as disadvantaged in the new social structures and as so underachieving that there is much talk of a masculinity crisis and manuals have appeared on how to “save the boys.” All of these “how to” books and treatises are meant to help boys and men perform better at important junctures in life such as examinations and job progression. But often such fears of a crisis are simply sensationalized claims. Most of these social changes do not indicate a complete break with past beliefs or practices in gender relations. Rather, the vehemence with which authors and readers react to what they see as a world turned upside down only shows the strength of their convictions about what they regard as “normal.” To understand the degree to which traditional hegemonic masculinity maintains its grip on today’s China—and indeed whether and to what extent past and present masculinities are hegemonic in the sense that higher-class men oppress lower-class men and men in general oppress women—we need to look at specific features of masculinity in traditional times.

In recent years, there have been many excellent academic studies about how changing social and gender relations affect women. However, as indicated above, while there are many journals and monographs on various aspects of Chinese culture, we are only just beginning to see Chinese masculinity studies take off. Nonetheless, this beginning is rapidly gaining momentum. A glance at the recent books and articles on Chinese masculinity in the references section of this volume shows that while Chinese men have come under the microscope as gendered beings only in the twenty-first century, scholarly work on this topic mushroomed once the field began to be opened up. Yet despite some excellent work on different historical and contemporary periods in China, there are few book-length studies on significant topics related to masculinity that provide original research material that highlights similarities and contrasts between the traditional and modern eras. Given these pressing problems, a couple of years ago I invited some of the best scholars working on Chinese masculinity to write original research papers relating to this topic.

Interestingly, although my request to the invitees was fairly general, along the lines of “Chinese Masculinities on the Move,” the papers that came in fell neatly into two time periods: late imperial China and present-day China. Clearly,

most scholars consider these periods to be the most fascinating and informative in revealing how Chinese masculinity has moved from traditional times to now. This is not to say that the long twentieth century was insignificant or uninteresting. Indeed, much scholarly work has been devoted to this period, and the chapter by Harriet Zurndorfer in this book gives a full and insightful account of polygamous behavior from the late imperial era until the present day. But on the whole the book provides a neat divide and comparison between the traditional past and the modern present, thereby allowing the similarities and contrasts to be more starkly revealed. The issues that are discussed cover key aspects of male identity such as family relations (including being a son, husband, and father), sexual activities (including attitudes and practices relating to sexual partners such as concubines, mistresses, or prostitutes), sexual orientations (homosexual and homosocial etc.), the relationship between masculinity and nationalism, and so on. These issues are significant in China now, and yet the chapters on present-day Chinese masculinities often echo concerns raised by the chapters on the late imperial era, and show the extent to which traditional thinking and practices were “modern” as well as shedding considerable light on the current situation.

Notions of manhood in China have manifestly shifted, and many of the seismic movements occurred in the twentieth century, but inside the new clothing that is worn by the Chinese man today, we can still find the historical Chinese man. As we read each other’s papers, we were again and again struck by the fact that pressing concerns in the contemporary world needed to be framed in historical context, and a context that is Chinese. Thus, while we do not want in any way to downplay the value of China-West style analysis or using “Western” methods and assumptions to analyze Chinese masculinities, we believe that a book that depicts these linkages will help to advance a more holistic picture of Chinese masculinity. Chinese masculinity is so diverse and complex that no single book could hope to capture all of its nuances. But, by displaying significant and similar characteristics that link “tradition” and “modernity,” that diversity and complexity can be better appreciated. Based on the above rationale, I have divided the book into two parts, with Part 1 dealing with the late imperial period and Part 2 with the current era.

This contrast needs to be emphasized because China studies is such a huge field that, even in a subfield such as gender studies, we often found that those who worked on traditional times knew very little of current trends and manifestations in male behavior, especially the “global” attitudes of the young. Similarly, those who worked on the contemporary scene often had little knowledge of the past. Time and resource constraints meant that to do original and thorough research, most scholars needed to specialize so that the scope of their research was not too wide. Yet, if the lens was to capture a longer time period, the continuities and discontinuities between the past and present would become startling yet clear. For example, many observers find the sudden rise and acceptance of the practice of “second wives” and prostitution in China quite shocking

when compared with the situation in the country only a few decades ago. Yet, as Harriet Zurndorfer's far-ranging chapter on the relationship between polygamy and masculinity shows, these practices were widespread in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Indeed, like the "second wives" that are now in vogue, concubines were seen as prestige objects, and both indicate a man's worth. In this way, they serve as a status marker, a visible sign that demonstrates superiority to other men. Marriages tended to serve the purpose of fulfilling familial and social obligations, and love was rarely valued as a basis for marriage. Of course, there were exceptions. Zurndorfer mentions the celebrated example of Shen Fu's (1763–1810) memoirs, in which he portrays his love for his wife, as an indication of the first stirrings of companionate marriage.

Shen Fu lived in the mid-Qing dynasty (1644–1911); this was when China was on the verge of the "modern" era, so marital relations were already undergoing a transformation. Indeed, many historians have worked on the understanding that "modern China" began in the early nineteenth century when European powers drove straight into the heart of the Chinese Empire after the Opium Wars. This is the "big picture." For a more refined and targeted examination of how the social changes taking place in China at that time affected an individual man's sense of gendered identity and his attempts to come to terms with a role he did not relish, Martin Huang's chapter on Shen Fu is innovative and enlightening. Huang's analysis of Shen Fu is especially valuable in showing that this "poor scholar," despite his obligatory protestations about filial piety, had to struggle to find an acceptable role for his wife in the face of his father's (often oppressive) demands. The father-son relationship and its effects on the development of a Chinese man's gendered identity are fascinating topics that are attracting more attention, as shown by Xuan Li and William Jankowiak's chapter, which looks at contemporary father-child relationships in a couple of Chinese cities.

The difference between Shen Fu and the educated urbanites of today is that Shen was considered poor and "struggling" because he did not hold an official position as all literati in those days strove to do. Today, many men who have modest salaries and do not have access to power and privilege may also see themselves as struggling, but they are still mostly upwardly mobile, and most would not see anything amiss in making money via business and trade. As much of the first half of this book shows, Ming-Qing China was considered "traditional," but it was a society in transition, on the verge of change brought about by domestic forces, and a society in which the rise of the merchant class in particular was changing the way the gentry (*shi* 士) behaved in relation to other classes. This had a direct impact on how they performed masculinity. It also influenced the way in which other men, and women, saw that performance. The shifting fortunes of the gentry as a class in Ming-Qing times provide the background for much of the discussion in the first half of the book. The uncertain fortunes of the "struggling" literati find their counterpart in the newly rich's pursuit of money in contemporary China. This quest for wealth and its implications for

their perceived status as men are matters that are alluded to in most chapters in the second half of the book.

The emergence of the mercantile class in the Ming dynasty in competition with the gentry for higher social status is deftly revealed by Mark Stevenson in his essay on the role of the *huapu* 花譜, the commentaries on the actors (most of whom were or would become catamites) in the Beijing theater scene at the end of the Qing. Stevenson shows how this genre was used by the literati in an effort to maintain their claim to cultural superiority over the merchants, a claim that was being eroded as money was increasingly being seen as a signifier of status and successful manhood. But the new rich also wanted social prestige, so they aimed for symbols that marked them as having *wen* refinements. Like concubines, second wives, and mistresses, keeping a catamite meant obtaining a trophy in the competition for superiority against other men. And the ability to comment on and judge the qualities of the ideal catamite was valued highly as an indication of the refinement and taste of a connoisseur. These developments were only able to take place when China had reached a high degree of urbanization.

Cuncun Wu's study on male prostitution and urbanization in the late Ming also uses the topic of actors and catamites to demonstrate the social transformations that were taking place at the time. Adding to Stevenson's argument that urbanization had changed the nature of the male prostitution market in late imperial China, she shows the effects of urbanization and commercialization on the actual players: the buyers and sellers of sex. Social and spatial mobility had by late Ming transformed strict feudal structures to the extent that, rather than having to serve their lords as bonded playthings, catamites could become free agents who would sometimes amass considerable wealth and redefine their own masculinity and gender roles. This was possible because of the commanding function of the marketplace. Unsurprisingly, this social mobility was more attainable for those engaged in male same-sex prostitution than for female prostitutes. So even here, masculinity continued its hegemonic grip when it came to the position of women.

Indeed, Louise Edwards argues in her chapter that, contrary to modern conventions whereby elaborate beautification rituals or bodily displays of decoration are normally seen as feminine characteristics, male bodies were the preferred aesthetic form in Ming-Qing China. Edwards illustrates her point by zooming in on the classic Chinese novel of that era, *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Red Chamber Dream), and its descriptions of clothing, dress, accessories, and fabric. Focusing the spotlight on men's appearance in the Qing dynasty in this way shows that elite men were definitely not so self-effacing that they hesitated to display their "beautiful" attributes. On the contrary, they were as eager as the actors and catamites to show off their bodily refinements, and such ostentations were considered normal. In fact, as Binbin Yang's essay on the Manchu official Wanyan Linqing (1791–1846) highlights, the literati in autobiographies would

use both written text and pictorial representations to portray their lives of “unparalleled glory.”

Yang’s object of study, Wanyan Linqing, lived on the threshold of what many historians delineate as the “modern” period. The Opium War of 1842 marked a watershed in Chinese history, and it was after the repeated defeats of the Chinese military by European powers following this war that China was dubbed “the sick man of East Asia.” Throughout the so-called “modern” period, Chinese men’s self-identity had to somehow come to terms with this epithet. It was only with “China’s rise” at the turn of this millennium that a more confident and assertive configuration of Chinese masculinity emerged. Yet, even with the impending crisis of his time, Wanyan Linqing’s self-portrayals as demonstrated in his autobiography reveal a man whose image of himself was anything but self-effacing or feeble. They show a man in charge of his circumstances and a masculinity that was self-assured and robust. Of course, that might have had something to do with his class, and he certainly came from a privileged background.

Class as an omnipresent marker of masculinity is most manifest in the Chinese contemporary scene. Indeed, the first two chapters in the second part of this book, by Derek Hird and John Osburg, reveal the multiple ways in which the new rich in China benefit from the norms and values that have emerged in recent years in terms of acceptable ideals of masculinity. Hird examines “white-collar men” as emblematic of the global success of China’s economic reforms. He shows how these men distinguish themselves from those in a similar social stratum but who are seen as corrupt (the “black-collar men”) or those who have reached top managerial levels and are therefore almost off the comparison table (the “gold-collar men”), and so on. While the new middle classes want desperately to be seen as having achieved good social positions by having secure jobs and families, they also want the respectability that comes from having civilized values and high moral standards. However, Hird’s ethnographic approach exposes the discrepancy between ideology and practice. For example, he wryly remarks of one interviewee that the man in question espoused equality in housework and childrearing activities, but that what he observed during the time he spent with them was that the wife still did almost all of these chores. Nonetheless, at least this man saw such household chores as acceptable masculine activities, and that can be said to be more enlightened than the views of most men in the past.

Osburg also draws on ethnographic material in his discussion of changing norms and values associated with Chinese masculinity in the world of the new rich—more specifically, government officials and state enterprise managers. Members of this new group have often been exposed as corrupt and as manipulating the legal system to their own advantage. Osburg shows that many of the values they hold—ideals of hierarchy, loyalty, and mutual solidarity; notions of sexual privilege and consumer pleasure; and modes of status and power—are

intertwined with the unfolding configurations of elite masculinity that straddle both government and business worlds in contemporary China. Their penchant for making the right connections (not just officials, but gangsters and assorted minor criminals) often mimics the traditional ideologies and practices of the sworn brotherhoods. The corruption that results thus follows patterns established in some of the most enduring masculinity ideals that are exemplified in classic brotherhoods such as those found in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin*. Far from having *wen* refinements as indicated by the *wen-wu* 文武 ideal, the new rich often display lower-class *wu* preferences and behaviors.

So, are both the moneyed and the working classes reviving the rough and tough aspects of *wu* in the *wen-wu* dyad that I have characterized as emblematic of ideal Chinese masculinity? Did the Republican and Communist revolutions have no impact on current constructions of Chinese masculinity? Until now, the symbols and models that were characteristic of the Chinese working-class hero were quite different from traditional ones. During the Cultural Revolution in particular, the world of gender relations was turned upside down, at least in rhetoric. Women were said to hold up half the sky, and Jiang Qing in particular made sure that the ideological apparatus showed women as having stood up. It was really during the post-Mao reform era, when “normality” was restored, that the use and abuse of power that sometimes rivaled the worst of the old days became favorite topics for discussion and exposure. Indeed, one can say that many of the new norms attempted to copy pre-Communist Revolution ones, and this can be clearly seen when the film industry is examined, as Sheldon Lu does in his chapter on Jia Zhangke’s films.

In Jia’s films, the working-class heroes of the Mao period such as the “iron man from Daqing” Wang Jinxi, “the model peasant of Dazhai” Chen Yonggui, and “the good soldier” Lei Feng do not appear. So where do working-class men look for models? Sheldon Lu’s examination of some of the most influential films by director Jia Zhangke shows how Hong Kong gangster movies provide inspiration for the creation of working-class heroes. But the protagonists in Jia’s films generally lead tragic lives and suffer the trauma of losing their loved ones (girlfriend, wife, or lover) or have difficulty entering into satisfying relationships with women due to the fundamental social and economic transformations of the Reform period. *Wu* masculinity is unambiguously in evidence. Indeed, one of the films Lu looks at is titled *Xiao Wu* 小武 (Little Wu), and its protagonist’s fate is to end up as a pickpocket whose arrest provides the film’s ending. While more “human” in having to deal with modern frustrations than the improbable model worker-peasant-soldier figures from the Mao period, these working-class heroes (or more precisely, male antiheroes) demonstrate the difficulties facing Chinese men in their search for some form of successful manhood ideal in the present day.

In retrospect, it is easy to see that the Cultural Revolution propaganda was more wishful thinking than reality-based. Model men from that era are now seen

as illusions or fakes, and a wholesale restoration of older exemplars seems to be consciously taking place. Yet the Mao years did leave an indelible impact and any backward step cannot be complete. In fact, Chinese men now do take more of a role in family matters, and at least claim to engage in housework and child-care. It is accepted as normal that women, especially educated ones, pick men as much as men pick women, as can be seen in the format of the popular television dating game show *If You Are the One*. And the possibility of tenderness between couples is now taken as something that is at least achievable and desirable, and practiced fairly widely in some cities and districts. Indeed, the measure of the modern man in terms of his relationship to family members is not just begetting children and being filial to his parents. There is much more concern now with being a kind and loving father than with being a strict one. Xuan Li and William Jankowiak's chapter shows how old chauvinistic models are declining and more sensitive behavior is on the increase.

Based on their observations and in-depth interviews of dozens of men in Hohhot and Nanjing, Li and Jankowiak argue that the new economy has produced male ideals organized around a good balance of traditional *wen* and *wu* attributes. Echoing Derek Hird's findings, the men they interviewed claim to want closer emotional relationships with their offspring rather than the disciplinarian, aloof, or detached role they used to have. They tend to want to develop more caring and supportive spousal relationships too. Part of the reason for these changes stems from changed social and familial structures. As indicated above, when most families in cities have only one child, it is hardly surprising that both parents invest considerable time and energy in this single offspring—even if it is a girl. Thus father-child interactions are necessarily different from those that existed before, even though, as Li and Jankowiak point out, traces of tradition still remain.

How men perceive themselves and others perceive them as “manly” is not confined to their roles within the family; it is of utmost importance in national terms. Chinese governments throughout the ages have invested significant resources and effort in making sure that being a real man includes being good for the country. There are countless tales and legends of patriotic men who should be emulated. Many such tales were generated through folklore, so they include sacrifices made for national ends. Family members (mostly men) who go to war and never come back are often portrayed as martyrs and their sacrifice as glorious. Being a soldier who fights bravely and effectively on the battlefield has always been one marker of masculinity. The current government and image-makers in China have spared no effort in manipulating this desire to be a “real man” for nationalist ends. By analyzing the 2013 popular 70-episode television drama series *The Dog-Beating Staff*, Geng Song explores this phenomenon, showing how the use of the Japanese as the “other” has the effect of defining “Chineseness.” And much of that Chineseness is intricately bound up with how Chinese masculinity is imagined and perceived. Thus, traditional sentiments such as *qingyi*

情義 (emotions of loyalty) could be seen as faithfulness and loyalty to one's wife, sibling, or family, but increasingly in the popular media, they are constructed as loyalty to the country—China.

Song's analysis is insightful. Its corollary is that, to the filmmakers, one of the defining features of having a masculinity within the "Chineseness" rubric is that it implies a state of being subject to the People's Republic. But as I have outlined in *Chinese Masculinities in a Globalizing World* (Routledge, 2014), to Chinese men living outside mainland China, such an implication is extremely problematic. When they live abroad, how can these men strive to assume a masculinity that belongs to another land, even if this land is called China and they are called Chinese? The final chapter of this book neatly illustrates the dilemma. Unlike the other contributors to the book, Heung-wah Wong and Hoi-yau Yau take Chinese masculinity away from the Mainland and show how the particularities of Hong Kong and Taiwan affect the ways in which social frameworks such as political organizations and family relationships are constructed. These frameworks in turn determine how masculinity is constituted. While these constructions are no doubt "Chinese," they have a different set of "Chinese characteristics" from those promoted by the Chinese government or practiced in China.

It goes without saying that it is impossible to give a description of "Chinese masculinity" that is entirely comprehensive, and the last word on the subject will never actually be the last. There are so many ways to view Chinese men that even though we have used a variety of approaches from the humanities and social sciences to discuss the topic, we know that we have only opened paths for further exploration. We have used different methods and materials from the humanities and social sciences in our quest, and even though some subject matters seem quite specific, we use each case study to reach general conclusions about Chinese masculinity. We hope this book will serve as another platform for researchers and lay people alike to ponder the important subject of how Chinese men are managing to perpetuate or transform traditional gender roles in this rapidly changing world.

Finally, we should thank Anne Platt, Fiona Chung, Travis Kong, Paola Zamperini, Matthew Sommer, James Farrer, Jane Park, Lai Kwan Pang, Staci Ford, Kwai-cheung Lo, John Erni, Yiu Fai Chow, Tina Liu and Lezhou Su, Chris Munn, Eric Mok, Clara Ho, Gershom Tse, and the two anonymous readers of Hong Kong University Press for their helpful comments and unfailing support in the production of this book. We would also like to thank the China-West Strategic Research Theme Fund and the Louis Cha Fund in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Hong Kong for their generous financial assistance.

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