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*Everyday Masculinities in 21st-Century China: The Making of Able-Responsible Men*

Magdalena Wong

# Everyday Masculinities in 21st-Century China

The Making of Able-Responsible Men

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# 1

## Introduction

One evening in the autumn of 2014, more than halfway through my fieldwork in Nanchong, a southwestern prefecture-level city in China, I was chatting with Tian who owned and managed a newsstand in the neighbourhood where I was living. The newsstand, described as a ‘tin box’ by Tian’s wife, was small and stuffed with merchandise. The business area was extended, with stacks of products such as toys and snacks hanging out on mobile poles and tables. There was enough space for two customers to stand in front of the small counter that was manned by either Tian or his wife. I often chatted to Tian at the store. We had come to know each other well enough to comfortably exchange greetings or converse for a few minutes, or longer, nearly every day. That evening, while we were chatting, an opportunity arose for me to ask him what the term ‘a real man’ meant for him. Tian refused outright to respond, saying that there could be no answer to such a question. I was taken aback and tried to clarify what I was after. At that point, a young-looking man in his late twenties came in to buy cigarettes. Tian said in a dismissive manner, ‘Ask him!’ Although I felt uncomfortable and didn’t really expect an answer, I asked the young man my question and added that I was doing academic research. Even if he found it odd, the young man replied swiftly: ‘Of course, he [a real man] is someone who is responsible to his parents, his family, and society.’ He took his cigarettes and walked away. Tian and I looked at each other. He seemed to assume that I was delighted and satisfied by this simple and direct answer, and immediately refuted what we had heard: ‘This is common vernacular talk (*dabaihua* 大白话)!<sup>1</sup> Men say this because they are poisoned by the government, and coerced (*bichulai* 逼出来) by women. The government always asks us to be responsible. Women just want to be the chiefs with their heads up (*taitou zuozhu* 抬头做主). But in the end, what they really want is for men to make money for them. I don’t approve of this kind of responsibility.’

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1. *Dabaihua* refers to language that is formulaic, commonplace, casually uttered, and often lacking in real meaning.

Tian was right to point out the oddity of how direct I was in asking about the meaning of a real man, or what it means 'to be a man' in China. This is the central question I address in this book. In Nanchong, I set out to explore whether a dominant masculine ideal exists, what it is if it does indeed exist, and how that dominant ideology ramifies in people's lives. The entire fieldwork was built on immersive observations and daily conversational exchanges with people. I occasionally posed a direct question such as the above to see if I could provoke impromptu, instinctive responses to a contentious subject I wanted to explore. The strategy worked in the above case because what the young man and what Tian said was revealing, a point I shall explain more in this chapter. *Responsibility* is one of the key words I found being used to underpin the expression of a real man in my field site, the other is *ability* or, more directly, the power to make money. Thus, from the ground up, I have conceived the concept of the *able-responsible man* as a dominant and hegemonic form of masculinity in present-day Nanchong.

Kam Louie's (2002) theorization of *wen-wu* (文武) is a fitting starting point to discuss Chinese masculinities. It stipulates that a great man in Chinese culture is one who excels in both *wen* (mental and civil) and *wu* (physical and martial) qualities but, historically, the cerebral male often has greater right to power than a brawny male. The *wen-wu* concept is crucial for understanding the Chinese cultural representations of men's personae, expected skill sets, accomplishments, and shortcomings,<sup>2</sup> but it helps less in interpreting the everyday behaviours and micro-processes of life in connection with those representations. I am looking for a dominant theme in Chinese masculinity that takes into account both public discourse and private behaviours. That is, what is expected of men in a particular social and cultural setting, the response of men from different backgrounds to those expectations, and how their lives and relationships are affected. Following Matthew Gutmann, who authored the compelling study *The meanings of macho: Being a man in Mexico City* (1996), I explore male identity and practices in relation to macro changes that have occurred in China since the Reform era in the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> Gutmann's research in Santo Domingo revealed diverse expressions of manhood and he dispelled the stereotypical *machismo* description of Mexican men. In contemporary China, there is no strong stereotypical characteristic describing Chinese men that could be the equivalent of machismo. However, a hegemonic male ideal that has developed during the Reform period has surfaced from extensive research; this forms the point of departure for my inquiry into men and masculinities in Nanchong.

2. In Nanchong, one could hear the term *wen-wu* being used, usually when a boy's or a man's talents or personality traits were being described.

3. Deng Xiao Ping introduced China's 'reform and opening-up' (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) programme in December 1978. The period starting from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s is generally called the early Reform era, and from the mid-1990s, the late Reform era. See Harrell and Santos (2017: 14–15).

## The Moneyed Elite in the 1980s to Early Twenty-First Century

As in other parts of the world, most of the earlier studies of gender in China were centred on women, but they also provide some understanding of men. The academic focus on men and masculinities has gained steady ground since the turn of the millennium. Many of the scholars who consider gender-related topics in China have suggested a desired form of manhood that is coupled with wealth. I give examples to illustrate this.

Song and Hird, in their *Men and masculinities in contemporary China* (2014: 12), contend that 'masculinity is increasingly being defined in terms of money, bearing remarkable similarities with the discourse of "hegemonic masculinity" in the West'. Zhang Li (2010), in her study of commercial property ownership in Yunnan, observes that masculinity in post-socialist China is increasingly being defined by one's power to provide and consume. Men's self-worth is linked to 'one's ability to make money, possess desirable material goods, or gain political power' (2010: 185, 166). Osburg (2013) analyses the new-rich entrepreneurs and contends that the performance of an elite masculinity is becoming institutionalized, 'and in the process it is becoming the normative masculinity around which all urban men's practices are oriented and measured' (2013: 10). Farrer's study of young people's romantic lives in Shanghai indicates that masculinity is identified with earnings and career success (2002: 16). Zheng Tiantian's (2009) anthropological account of sex workers attests to the fact that in post-socialist China, men are judged not by birth status or education but by their competitive abilities and entrepreneurial activity. Women and prostitution become a testing ground for men to prove their wealth and prestige. A similar theme is developed by Uretsky, who describes a 'hegemonic masculinity of success' (2008: 57) that is linked to the attainment of economic and political status in contemporary China. Earlier on, Jankowiak (1993: 77) finds in his 1987 survey of occupations in Huhhot city that a person's income has become a key factor in evaluating their social worth, which was not what he discovered during a previous study in 1983. Hinsch, from a historical perspective, posits that nowadays in China, 'money represents the essence of masculinity; a higher income represents superior manliness'. In short, businessmen set the new standard for heroic Chinese masculinity (2013: 163). Significantly, Louie, who develops the famous *wen-wu* dyad, conjectures in his latest work that notions of *wen-wu* have been overwhelmed in the modern era by an emphasis on monetary and material concerns. The wealthy, worldly and worthy globe-trotting Chinese entrepreneurs are winning in the ideal masculinity stakes (2015: 89–104). Both Lin (2013) and Choi and Peng (2016), in their studies of migrant populations in China, decipher the ways men with limited resources negotiate and refashion their masculine subjectivities. As Choi and Peng explain, the men were acutely aware that they could achieve



neither of the two hegemonic ideals of 'monied manhood and quality manhood' (2016: 100–101).

All the writings I cite above reveal that, since the 1980s, wealth has been legitimized as a prime quality of men. Building on this body of work, I found during my study—for which I carried out most of the fieldwork in 2014—that financial power is clearly a critical factor defining masculinity. It has become a necessary but not sufficient condition for a man of honour; an equally important dimension is responsibility.

The leap from the ideal of a wealthy, worldly and worthy man to the able-responsible man warrants deeper examination. It cannot be coincidence that all the above studies of Chinese men, many of which are based on empirical research, single out the significance of material wealth. This is ironic and sounds awkward for China, which is still officially a socialist state. It was not long ago that the whole country went through the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1967–1976), and selfless, modest figures from the military or working class were made into powerful cultural icons. It is notable that most of the studies I cite above were published in the first fifteen years of this millennium. The radical economic growth that started in the early 1980s accelerated over the following two decades and led to China becoming the global superpower that it is today. The process of economic transformation was accompanied by liberalization, with numerous reforming policies such as the household responsibility system in the countryside, the loosening of restrictions on mobility and the *danwei* (work units) social organization, and the gradual privatization of state-owned enterprises. These have led to an individualization of Chinese society (Yan 2009, 2010). Marketization and consumerism have made it necessary to engage in conspicuous consumption to maintain the types of *guanxi* network through which power and status can be expressed.<sup>4</sup> People have come to embrace neoliberal ideas such as the desiring self (Rofel 2007). The polarization of wealth has intensified over the post-Reform years, causing greater rifts in the socio-economic hierarchy.<sup>5</sup> The emphasis on personal wealth as a benchmark for powerful and desirable men, which many scholars have scrutinized in their writings in the last decades, has advanced in this context.

The understanding of masculinities (and femininities) in every society has to be situated locally and historically (Cornwall and Lindisfarne eds. 1994;

4. *Guanxi* is a popular Chinese term, which describes the use of personal connections to facilitate business and other dealings. More negative implications have been built into the term since the late 1970s, when opportunities were rare and people's resources were limited. During this period people were forced to use *guanxi* to knock on the back-door in order to achieve certain aims. Anthropologists have provided valuable readings on the topic. See Kipnis (1997); Yang (1994); Yan (1996).

5. A succinct reflection on different waves of politico-economic changes in Communist China, associated with changes in public sentiments, can be found in the introduction of *Restless China* (Link, Madsen, and Pickowicz, eds. 2013).

Gardiner 2002; Aboim 2009; Inhorn and Wentzell 2011). Louie points out that there have been few sustained efforts to answer the question, ‘Is there an indigenous Chinese masculinity?’ subsequent to his seminal work on the theorization of *wen-wu* (Louie 2016: 2). My conceptualization of the able-responsible man could be considered an effort towards answering that question.

## The Able-Responsible Man in the New Millennium

Soon after I started fieldwork in Nanchong, I noticed that many people were talking about ability and responsibility in robust terms that they applied to all individuals, irrespective of gender. However, I heard many more accusations—and also compliments—aimed at men rather than women when it came to the subject of responsibility.

### *Ability*

The first informant I heard talking about a man’s ability, *nengli* (能力), was a nanny named Miao. Miao and her husband were both migrant workers, but they lived in different cities. One day, Miao and I talked about the instability of marriage caused by *xiaosan* (小三), a popular term that refers to a female intruder into a couple’s marriage. I asked Miao in passing if she worried about her husband having a *xiaosan*. Miao looked at me, burst into laughter, and said, ‘Who would be interested in my husband! . . . He is a farmer! He has no ability (*meiyou nengli* 没有能力), how can he attract any other woman?’

Miao used the description *meiyou nengli* for her husband in a deprecating, but humorous, manner. Thereafter, I heard a number of wives of working-class men commenting on their husbands’ lack of competence, with an implicit or explicit link to their money-earning power. These conversations were usually part of the daily gossip among neighbours in a communal park close to where I lived. Most of those comments were, to my hearing, made in an understanding and forgiving tone. It was still often the case, however, that a man’s *nengli* had to be displayed and recognized in terms of material success. I noted that it was mainly male adults, not women or children, who were judged by their *nengli*. Comments about lack of ability were projected as a worry for the future, but not as an immediate concern for children or young teens. For boys, academic success was critically important as it paved the way to a good career and the ability to make money. There were not so many worries about daughters’ *nengli*. Many mothers and fathers said that, after all, women could depend on men.

Strong *nengli* in a woman was likely to be associated with being a successful career woman, not as a quality of a desirable wife.<sup>6</sup>

Material wealth, such as properties and cars, is a visible sign of one's ability. A more subtle, but fertile, ground for demonstrating *nengli* is how a man uses his time. There is a saying that the most admirable man 'has both money and leisure' (*youqian youxian* 有钱有闲). He can relax because others are running around making money for him. Those who do not belong to the *youqian youxian* class but are seen to have a lot of leisure time are perceived as lazy and incompetent, not admirable. For them, to relax or to have nothing to do is to be seen as idle, and idleness easily meets disapproval. Many divorcees or unhappy couples I met in Nanchong had quarrels because the wife thought her husband was not hardworking and progressive enough, whereas the husband found his wife aggressive and demanding. Those husbands often spent their time gambling, a prevalent activity in Nanchong, which usually resulted in the accumulation of debt and increased the harm done to their marital relationships.

A progressive man is expected to continue to find ways of making more money. In Nanchong, this is done by engaging in large or small investment projects, using old and new contacts. In a city with very few factories or corporations of significant size, many people make their living by starting up small businesses. A woman who owns a made-to-order curtain company told me that small businesses like hers operate as if in a simple exchange economy: 'I open a shop and buy things from you and you buy from me.' Among friends, there is constant chattering about business opportunities inside or outside of Nanchong, with the hope that something will materialize one day. This fits the reform ethic in China, which emphasizes the enterprising and entrepreneurial self, and individuals' capacity for upward mobility as they are emancipated by the new market economy (Zheng 2009; Zhang 2010; Uretsky 2016). Discussions of these kinds of potential businesses are not done in a formal manner, but over a meal or afternoon tea, while eating and drinking, gambling, karaoke singing, or in a foot or body massage parlour. During my fieldwork, I attended many of these functions and occasionally saw government officials participate, as well as people working in illicit fields such as online gambling and loan shark operations. Wives are seldom invited to such functions, but female friends can be more than welcome, unless male attendees have plans for calling prostitutes. The maintenance of both female and male company requires the man to have money. The man is always expected to pick up the bill for women, and he must also be able and prepared to be the one who pays the whole bill in male or mixed

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6. The term 'strong woman' (*nü qiangren* 女强人) has become popular since the 1990s. It connotes a masculinized female who is aggressive and powerful. There is growing acceptance that strong women can also be feminine and attractive, but the mainstream view is that they are undesirable for men. See Pei and Ho (2006) and Nie (2013).

company. In these leisure activities, masculinity can be conveniently demonstrated by showing off one's network, economic power, and social conviviality.<sup>7</sup>

## *Responsibility*

The second term used in relation to ideal manhood is *fu zeren* (负责任). Traditionally, the term was applied exclusively to men. *Fu* is a verb, meaning to carry or shoulder something. The word *ze* relates to the incurring and repayment of debt, which were strictly men's affairs; *ren* refers to the responsibility, dedication, and trustworthiness of a dominant position holder, who was always a male (Lu & Koehn 2015: 608). Another word for *zeren* used by my informants is *dandang* (担当). Wong and Yau, who studied the situation in Taiwan, briefly mention that masculinity is defined by the concept of *dandang*: a man's strong sense of responsibility to his family and his country through military service (2016: 228). The authors make a point that the word is used exclusively for men; they have never heard of female *dandang*.<sup>8</sup>

During my fieldwork, responsibility struck me as a critical element in Chinese notions of masculinity. When a man does something dishonourable in the eyes of the public, he is often criticized for being irresponsible (*bu fu zeren*). For example, a man who does not try his best to make money is irresponsible, as is a man who gambles and fails to play his paternal role. A man who doesn't share the housework with his working wife is irresponsible, as is a man who doesn't produce a grandchild for his parents. A man who fails to protect his girlfriend when she is teased in public is also seen as irresponsible. Above all, no man can claim to be responsible if he is not seen to fulfil his filial duties to his parents. Male responsibilities refer to the obligations of a husband/boyfriend, a father, and a son. Both men and women will accuse men of irresponsible behaviour such as that described in the above examples. On the other hand, and paradoxically, men can use their obligation of responsibility as an excuse for irresponsible behaviour. To give two examples, a wealthy woman whose husband had extra-marital affairs told me that she had hoped for better behaviour from her husband, but in the end accepted that 'he is a responsible husband because he gives me all that he

7. Many anthropologists (e.g., Osburg 2013; Uretsky 2016; Zheng 2009) have provided vivid descriptions of, and insights into, this whole area of male performativity in entertainment. See Li Zhengping (2010) for centuries-old rituals, customs, and the enjoyment Chinese literates expressed in drinking wine.

8. A slightly different perspective is drawn by Jankowiak and Li (2014). Their longitudinal Gender Stereotype surveys (1980s and 2000s) find the personality trait 'responsible' having the same relevance to male and female; the trait is therefore gender irrelevant. Nevertheless, their qualitative interviews reveal that men are perceived to have to shoulder greater financial responsibilities and pressure in life; women's pressure is not as readily acknowledged, and their responsibilities are less concentrated in a provider's role.

earns'. A married man recounted to me an affair he had with a woman. He asked for a divorce, but his wife vowed that if he filed for divorce she would kill their two children and then commit suicide. The man finally terminated the affair but thought he would regret it for the rest of his life. He said being too soft and too responsible had killed him.

Since I routinely heard references to responsibility when people discussed men, I started to realize that this could be a key element of masculinity in the society. I decided to test people by asking them to define, in an entirely open-ended way, what masculinity was for them. I used several terms interchangeably when I posed this question: real man (*zhenzheng de nanren* 真正的男人), good man (*hao nanren* 好男人), a manly man (*nanzihan* 男子汉), ideal man (*lixiang de nanren* 理想的男人), simply a man (*shi ge nanren* 是个男人). I spoke to about ten adult men, including Tian and the young customer at his newsstand, on this subject. To my surprise, the majority of them mentioned responsibility in an explicit or implicit manner. They used phrases such as 'can shoulder responsibility', 'fulfils filial duties to parents', and 'keeps his promises'. When I asked women how they would define a real woman, I got a greater variety of answers, with a stronger theme of individualism and self-entitlement, compared to men's answers. As well as having to perform their family duties, women emphasized the importance of pursuing their own careers, hobbies, friendships, financial independence, and taking care of their health and beauty. Taken altogether, these answers gave me the strong impression that responsibility is usually integral to how masculinity is seen. Femininity, on the other hand, has more diverse meanings, going beyond the traditional expectations—a point to which I shall return.

### *Modern man of honour: The able-responsible man*

All of the above suggests that in present-day Nanchong, the masculine ideal is defined by a combination of *nengli* and *zeren*. These two components are obviously interrelated: a man has to have *nengli* to be able to perform his responsibilities; a man who isn't responsible is not adequately qualified as an able man. I argue that financial ability constitutes only a part of what defines a real man in Nanchong; what is required is the fulfilment of a man's responsibilities. There is a moral dimension, without which the exemplary male model is incomplete. Chinese civilization puts significant emphasis on the cultivation of the moral self and preservation of the social order (Qian 2002: 83–92; Bond and Hwang 2008; Feuchtwang 2012). It goes without saying that although this is of ideological importance, it is not necessarily practised. Confucian moral principles are not always emphasized in relation to the desired form of selfhood. Deng Xiaoping's reform strategy starting in 1978 aimed at allowing a group of people to get rich first, rather than worrying about ethics such as responsibility; people were motivated to become an enterprising self rather than a moral self. Although China

has successfully developed into the second-largest economy in the world, a host of new problems has emerged. These include a growing rift between rich and poor, corruption, discontent over social injustice and the civic irresponsibility of individuals and merchants, a hypercompetitive economy, hedonism, conspicuous consumption and materialism, a steep rise in extra-marital affairs and divorce, children left behind by migrant workers and abandoned elderly people in rural villages—critically, the dismantling of the whole system of traditional values, a spiritual vacuum or moral vacuum, and many other problems. Against this backdrop, we can expect anxiety and resistance from the masses and calls from the state and the public to address these issues. As Maoism and Marxism have lost their potency, the state has had to promote a new set of ideologies to rescue the collapsing moral order and to reset national values. It is within this problematic context that the rhetoric of responsibility has been born. The development of the Internet and rise of social media certainly expedite the circulation of public discourse. There are rhetorical narrations of the idea of able-responsible man circulating on social media. For instance, a famous movie star, who always plays tough-guy roles, posted the following:

For men, the most important thing is *zeren*. My understanding of *zeren* is to be responsible and not owe others anything. To the country—the fatherland has developed me, so I have to do my best to follow the rules and laws, and when the country needs me I shall fulfil my obligations and responsibilities; to the family—my parents have nurtured me, I must be filial, to make the elderly feel good about their son; to my wife—I do my best to maintain the wellbeing of my family; to my son—may you feel proud of your father; to friends—may you be happy to have me as a friend; to people—my existence can benefit them. (Chen Daoming, downloaded 13 April 2015, *Weixin*, my translation)

It is clear that by the turn of the new millennium there was a growing discourse on the cultivation of responsibility and self-discipline in society. Kipnis (2011b, 2012b) and Tomba (2009) describe it as a form of governmentality, a political project of subjectification, and even a process of nation-building (Kipnis 2012b); whereas Kleinman et al. (2011: 1–31) deliberate that a psychological and moral transformation arises with a self-reflective consciousness. In recent years, a notable number of scholars have observed a change towards a more ethics-driven masculinity. Zavoretti, in her article about intimacy (2016), emphasized responsibility. Uretsky (2016: 54–85), in her study about HIV in China, states that manly men (*nanzihan*) are expected to fulfil a prescribed set of personal roles and relationships that encompass the idea of responsibility. Choi and Peng (2016) observed that rural migrants who do not live up to the current masculine ideal construct a concept of respectable manhood that prioritizes morality, or their responsibility as a father and son. Hird (2016) shows how white-collar men construct themselves as new moral subjects by drawing on traditional Confucian masculine identities and practices (*junzi*) on the one hand, and cosmopolitan

and transnational elements on the other. In the last couple of decades especially after Hu Jintao took over in 2002, moral doctrines such as harmonious society and 'eight honours and eight shames' (Lin 2012: 176) have been popularized.<sup>9</sup> The amendments to the Marriage Law (1981, 2001, 2011) have recast marriage in terms of responsibility and renewed individual obligation to provide elderly care (Wang 2004; Zavoretti 2016: 1201). Martin Whyte, writing about filial piety in China, muses that 'one of the most notable rehabilitations during the reform era has been that of Confucius himself' (2003: 13). Tomba describes that the political goal has been to 'responsibilize' autonomous social players (2009: 600).

Most men do not meet the ideal male standard, but they try to fit in with the culturally imposed ideal. The collective ideal matters because it relates to a man's honour. In Nanchong, numerous men mentioned that honour (*rongyu* 荣誉, *mingyu* 名誉, *zunrong* 尊荣) provided a rationale or reward, encouraging them to strive for something in life. Honour implies public recognition and is in many ways similar to the notion of face, which is necessarily nourished in a culture where the subjectivity of people is located in a web of relationships rather than in the self (Kleinman and Kleinman 1985; Hwang 1987). A Chinese man's honour is embedded in both his ability and his responsibility to other people. It is publicly displayed and often discussed and judged. The environment in Nanchong is conducive to the public making and unmaking of honour due to widespread chatting, or gossip, which is a common social activity.

Gossip has an agentic power.<sup>10</sup> A middle-class man in his late fifties prided himself on his success in building and owning several properties and providing for his extended family. He told me of the importance for a man of having integrity and ability because people gossip. News spreads and honour or dishonour is built through words. One's deeds are always observable, as an informant vividly described, 'as shadows on the wall'. A man who worked in the underside of society (*jianghu* 江湖)<sup>11</sup> used this slangy phrase to describe the pervasive and malicious nature of gossip: 'Saliva can drown people to death' (*tumo keyi yansiren* 吐沫可以淹死人). He felt ashamed, as the only son in his big family, of his failure to sustain their father's business and of having two ex-wives, who deserted him

9. Included in the 'eight honours' (*barong* 八荣) are love the country, serve the people, follow science, be diligent, be united, be honest and trustworthy, be disciplined and law-abiding, live plainly and struggle hard. The 'eight shames' (*bachi* 八耻) are antithetical to these.

10. Many anthropologists have written about the power of gossip. Brison writes that for the big-man in Melanesian villages, it is 'just talk' that they have most to fear (1992: 245). Besnier asserts that 'talk matters' (2009: 189). For Scott (1985), gossip can be launched against those higher up in the hierarchy and work as a weapon for the weak. See Harrell (1990) for cases in China.

11. The man called himself *shehuishang de ren* (社会上的人), which is a lighter, more contemporary way to describe people in *jianghu* (rivers and lakes): the outlaw world of the dark path. See Boretz (2011) for a portrait of some men's lives in *jianghu*.

successively for men who were wealthier and more powerful. He was also bad-mouthed because he didn't stay by his mother's side as she was passing away. Another informant, who felt the community despised him, taught me a similar folk saying: 'There is no wall through which air cannot pass' (*meiyou bu toufeng de qiang* 没有不透风的墙). Both men felt bitter and shamed as a result of being disparaged for failing to live up to the honourable male values. They used different means to elevate their other virtues, compensate their lack, and exert their masculinity. The *jianghu* man will come up briefly in Chapter 4, while the man who suffers marginalization is a key character in Chapter 5.

To summarize, men of honour in my thesis are defined by their demonstrable ability to make money and shoulder responsibilities. This conception of ideal manhood stratifies men into different ranks in the public eye and exerts a coercive force in society. I explicate the phenomenon by drawing upon Raewyn Connell's distinguished concept of hegemonic masculinity.<sup>12</sup>

## Hegemonic Masculinity

According to Connell (1987), hegemonic masculinity is a cultural ideal that legitimizes and naturalizes the interests of powerful men, and which creates hierarchical relationships among men and between the two genders. The ideal masculinity does not have to correspond to the actual personalities of the majority of men; it instead brings into existence aspirational goals and fantasy figures, which are honoured and desired by the rest in the hierarchy. The hegemonic ideology in any particular region is established through cultural consent and maintained by complicity. The majority of men comply with the hegemonic ideal and they spread those ideals and behaviours in everyday life. Messerschmidt (2018: 46) clarifies that the achievement of hegemonic masculinity 'occurs largely through discursive legitimation (or justification), encouraging all to consent to, unite around, and embody such unequal gender relations'. Connell's theory has been extensively debated and contested in the literature. Although discussions around the perspective have become less frequent in the last decade, it remains common currency in scholarly debates on cultural representations of masculinity across disciplines.<sup>13</sup>

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12. Connell was previously Robert W. Connell and is now Raewyn Connell after her gender affirmation. According to an interview with Wedgwood (2009), Connell prefers to be referred to, even in the past tense, as a woman.

13. For a small sample of work discussing the usefulness and application of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, see Demetriou (2001); Gutmann (2003); Schippers (2007); Lusher and Robins (2009); Messerschmidt (2010); Inhorn (2012). For more critical analysis and theoretical exploration, see Donaldson (1993); Wetherell and Edley (1999); Whitehead (2002); Howson (2006); Moller (2007); Beasley (2008); Hearn (2012);



## *Allegiance and resistance in Nanchong*

The notion of the able-responsible man is readily acknowledged by people, as shown by the comments of the young man in the opening vignette. However, the follow-up comment from Tian is exceptional and, I contend, more profound and elucidatory. Despite his rejection of the young man's answer, Tian's remarks point to a few critical facts about the able-responsible man. He did not deny the prevalence of the idea of responsibility, but he referred to it as a form of cultural coercion (*bichulai*, coming to existence because of force), which suggested the notion of hegemony. He also pointedly offered reasons the able-responsible man became a hegemonic ideal: first, it is promoted by the government, a strategy that always works in China; second, it is pushed by women, who constitute the other half of the population and whose views, therefore, are critical. Tian used the terms *bichulai* and *dabaihua* (common in vernacular talk) to express that due to social force and pressure, the ideal has become a reality, or what Gramsci describes as 'common sense' (Forgacs, ed. 2000: 421). Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* (Hoare and Nowell-Smith eds. 2001: 198–199) and writings elsewhere defined common sense as spontaneous feelings of the masses, instinct, folklore, or ideology that has become everyday thought and which makes situations of inequality and oppression appear to be neutral. Back to the newsstand episode, Tian's comments imply that it is obligatory for men to act as if responsible, but this is not always genuine. Indirectly, this says that responsibility is a hegemonic ideal, but not necessarily the reality. Tian saw men who link real manhood to men's responsibilities for the family and society as knowingly pretentious, helplessly complicit, or verging on stupid. From my research, Tian was not alone in being cynical and resistant towards the able-responsible male ideal, but he was the only one who expressed this thinking to me so plainly, clearly, and angrily.

In Nanchong, men and women readily articulate the idea of able-responsible man as an ideal, sometimes even as a tool to pressurize boys and men to perform and to get closer to that ideal. At the same time, many are well aware that the rank of able-responsible men is restricted to those who have far more than average resources and capital. I find that it is very common and easy for men to join the social discourse in pronouncing the importance of ability and responsibility for men. Their feelings and actual practices in response, however, are not unified. Some men acquiesce to the ideology, others from different backgrounds and of different temperaments can be aloof, cynical, or defiant as they mindfully try to behave as able-responsible men or oppose the idea. Gramsci posited that the subordinate classes suffer from a 'false consciousness' in acceding to what is promoted by the dominant class and its intellectual and political agents. Scott (1985), however, argues forcefully that social agents are not passive bearers

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Johansson and Ottemo (2015). The article by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and Messerschmidt's recent publication (2018) make vital contributions to the debate.

of hegemonic ideology but are able to penetrate and demystify the prevailing ideology, which they only accept with an attitude of pragmatic resignation, not approval (1985: 317, 325). In his study, Scott describes the everyday resistance of peasants to the ruling class as ‘weapons of the weak’, which are exercised under a facade of behavioural conformity and symbolic compliance. The men I met in Nanchong show a mix of false consciousness and resignation, together with keen awareness and resistance. They take different actions to assume their masculine identity and these will be presented in the following five chapters.

The notion of the able-responsible man in my study diverges from the classic interpretation of hegemonic masculinity in one important respect. Hegemonic masculinity is usually associated with negative, toxic, sexist, oppressive male values and behaviours (Wetherell and Edley 1999; Messerschmidt 2018: 39–40). The version of hegemonic masculinity that has developed in China contains a positive, ethical dimension that is seldom identified by other scholars. The positivity of the masculine ideal is shaped and led partly by the state’s control and propaganda efforts. I have explained how an ethos of responsibility has developed in the post-Reform period after three decades of exponential economic growth in China. The idea that money defines a man’s success does not suit the socialist vision. Xi Jinping, who assumed presidency in 2013, is more determined than his immediate predecessors to promote traditional moralities and ethics. The state influence in this respect will become clear as we proceed with the analysis. I shall provide details to explain the circumstances that create an emphasis on responsibility—one that can easily suggest a male ideal that is not simply a singular recognition based on money. While the notion that money talks may sound despicable, the idea of being rich and responsible seems more benevolent and desirable. However, does this mean that there is a raised standard for being a man in the city? If yes, does this promote better male behaviour and personal relationships? My research shows that the bar against which men are evaluated has indeed risen due to the increased emphasis on ethics. However, I cannot tell if the renewed masculine ideal has actually created men who are more benevolent than before; I do not have the longitudinal data to make a close comparison, and the research is not designed for that purpose. But I have ample examples to show how boys and men, and also women, interpret the current dominant expectations of men and how this leads them to live their lives.

### *Being a man in a family*

This book investigates the social and family lives of men in diverse settings, with a special interest in changes in the family context. For us to understand an adult man in China, it is important to see him as simultaneously embodying the identities of father, son, and husband, and even that of a son-in-law. In many cultural settings, a man is not defined by his familial roles, but in China these are crucial.

Despite growing individualization in Chinese families and an apparent deinstitutionalization of marriage (Davis and Friedman 2014), many of the traditional ideals and practices involved in married life and family responsibilities have been reconfigured rather than discarded.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, a married man must be responsible for his parents and in-laws, and even his siblings and close affines. A growing number of studies of fatherhood and family men have emerged in the last two decades, both in China and in a global context (to be reviewed in Chapter 4). Most studies, especially those in non-Chinese settings, examine the lives of men as husbands or fathers, but hardly ever as adult sons. In recent years, there has been more academic study in China looking at the position of men as sons, but not as sons-in-law. In most research, the identities of father, husband, and son are dealt with separately, rather than as multiple identities carried by the same person. But it is the combination of these three roles a family man has to perform on a daily basis that makes it especially challenging for him.

I argue that with the ongoing shifts in gender power and relational dynamics within families, the most challenging adjustment for men is not being a good son and a good father, but how to be a good husband. I found men to be more adaptable and ready to conform to the changing expectations of a father and son, but much less so to the changing expectations of a husband. My hypothesis is that spousal relations have changed more substantially on an ideological level compared with father-child and son-parent relations, where the changes have been more to daily practice than underlying ideology. The growing reliance on grandparenting and the intensifying pressure on single children to take care of their elderly relatives, among other factors, have resulted in a trend of prolonged parenting and delayed reciprocation in families. The essence of reciprocity between parent and child has not changed. On the other hand, the ideology of gender rights and female power, together with the popular consumption of romance promulgated by consumerist media, requires men to perform dramatically differently compared to past expectations. Men would acknowledge that gender equality is a legitimate ideal in the modern world, but they have not developed ways to cope with the demands of this relatively new ideal. What is more, new tensions have developed for men as sons-in-law. This tension is bound to increase due to the closer relationship and more frequent interaction between a man and his in-laws. New living arrangements in city life increase young couples' dependence on the help of their elderly relatives, which engages both the agnatic and uterine seniors. Conversely, parents and also in-laws have an increased need to lean on their sole child's family for support. In-law

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14. See, for example, Li et al. (2010: 679); Whyte (2003); Shen (2011); Huang (2011); Donner and Santos (2016). A recent book coedited by Santos and Harrell (2017) provides many good essays on this subject.

relationships viewed from the men's perspective is an area that has been wholly ignored in the literature of kinship and masculinity.<sup>15</sup> It deserves much more study.

This book investigates issues of patriarchal benefits, domination and submission, intergenerational cooperation and conflicts from the positions of both men and women. Women are a strong presence in all the ethnographic cases; however, the subjects of gender power and (in)equality between men and women are not dealt with in a substantial way. My ethnographic focus is on women's roles in co-creating the masculine ideal through their interactions with men and how this works for women's rights and interests in a number of ways. The narratives and individual experiences will confirm the rise of women's power and a general decline in the patriarchal benefits enjoyed by men. This does not mean that the new gender regime where the folk ideology of able-responsible man dominates can grant women equality in all aspects. Hegemonic masculinity reinforces gender differences and certain traditional beliefs and practices that continue to place women in a subordinate position.

In drawing an emic account of how people conceptualize masculinity in China, and how it affects men's lives and their relationships, I have used an ethnographic research method. I gathered information from a wide pool of interlocutors, rich and poor, but concentrated on individuals in the middle to middle-low stratum in society, and purely on heterosexual persons. The findings have to be read with the specificities of the fieldsite and the timeframe of the study in mind. Most empirical research into gender and masculinity in China was carried out in more developed locations such as Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Nanjing, or cities in the Guangdong Province. I chose a fieldsite in a smaller city, Nanchong, which even Chinese mainlanders would take little notice of.<sup>16</sup> Officially, Nanchong only became a prefecture-level city (*diji shi* 地级市) in 1993. It is below the status of a municipality or provincial capital city but higher than county-level cities. I chose this mid-tier city not only to fill a void in the literature, but also to serve an analytical purpose. Since the notion of a moneyed elite is apparent in many of the studies that were done in economically developed cities in China, I wanted to examine if the same version of masculinity can be identified in a less developed but midstream city. As is clear from the above analysis, traces of the wealthy, worldly and worthy ideology can be found in Nanchong, but the important feature of responsibility is added as an ethical layer to define an exemplary man.

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15. There are well-known Chinese studies that bring relationships with in-laws to the fore, highlighting the position and strategies of *women*, either as mothers-in-law or daughters-in-law. For example, Wolf (1968); Judd (1989, 1994); Evans (2002, 2008a); Yan (2003); Stafford (2008).

16. There is a total of 662 cities in China. For people who live outside of Sichuan Province, the name Nanchong is often misunderstood as Nantong in Jiangsu Province, or Nanchang in Jiangxi Province.

One can hypothesize that the notion of able-responsible man exists in other cities in China. Future research would be required to test the evidence for this.

## Nanchong: The Fieldwork Site and Its People

### *A small city*

Nanchong people like to say in a self-deprecating tone that theirs is ‘a small city’ (*xiao chengshi* 小城市), even though, as of 2017, it has a population of 7.32 million,<sup>17</sup> the second largest in Sichuan Province. Using a number of indicators, including population size, Wang and Li (2008: 8) place Nanchong as one of the top nine cities in Sichuan. The city was much smaller until 1993, when a number of counties were brought under its jurisdiction, resulting in the addition of a large agricultural (or rural) population. Based on the proportions of permanent residents (*changzhu renkou* 常住人口) living in the urban city and county areas, Nanchong’s level of urbanization reached 47 per cent by 2017, compared to a national level of 59 per cent. We get a somewhat different demographic picture if we check the population registration record called *hukou* (户口). Under the official *hukou* record, 72 per cent of Nanchong’s residents are entered as villagers (*xiangcun renkou* 乡村人口), compared to 42 per cent nationwide. This shows that a vast number of Nanchong city’s residents are of rural background and have not changed their *hukou*. The majority of people I met in Nanchong who were over the age of twenty had moved from villages or towns more than ten years ago. Almost all households still have a plot of land and a house in their home village. Contrary to what is frequently reported, I understand from my interlocutors that people prefer to hold a rural *hukou* nowadays. They hope that their land, however remote it is, can be appropriated or redeveloped in future. Furthermore, the policy in Xi Jinping’s era has led the government to announce many subsidies to assist the rural population in villages (to be discussed further in Chapter 6). Having urban resident status is mainly a benefit for students, who are then eligible to be allocated places in schools in the city.

The perceived smallness, or bigness, of a city, reflects the level of economic development and urbanization that people subjectively experience. I got the impression in my early days living in Nanchong that people were not proud of their city. They were surprised that I had come to Nanchong to do research because, in their view, ‘there is nothing in Nanchong’. When I asked taxi drivers

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17. All the population numbers in this section are based on reports released by the National Bureau of Statistics of China and which can be found online. Check <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2017/indexeh.htm>. A Nanchong-specific report, 2017 *Guomin jingji he shehui fazhan tongji gongbao* 国民经济和社会发展统计公报, can be found at <http://www.cnnw.cn/2018/0405/220873.shtml>. The author has also consulted statistical yearbooks in print form that are saved in Nanchong University’s library.

to take me to the biggest bookstore, one where I could find cultural artefacts, I was told ‘the biggest bookstore here is small’; ‘I don’t know where to take you to. We in Nanchong have little interest in culture or art.’ Knowing that I had lived in Shanghai and Beijing for many years, people would say, ‘then you must find Nanchong very backward’ (*luohou* 落后). Nanchong was once known as the Thousand-year capital city of silk (*qiannian choudu* 千年绸都),<sup>18</sup> but I could hardly find a silk factory or workshop in the city. People seemed indifferent to the city’s history and told me the title was from a long time ago. Unlike many other cities in Sichuan Province, Nanchong does not claim to have any famous tourist attractions.

### *A melting pot of migrant workers*

On a more general everyday level, people would comment that Nanchong is a comfortable place to live. The environment is pleasant because the city is full of hills, with the river Jialing Jiang passing through from north to south. The air is relatively clean due to the absence of heavy industry and factories. Unlike some other Sichuan cities, Nanchong has never suffered from major natural disasters. The urban area of the city is compact and easily commutable. It is on average two hours by train away from the megacities of Chengdu and Chongqing, making travel to other places easy. Being a ‘small city’, Nanchong is relatively unsophisticated and less developed. There are few big enterprises and joint ventures, or foreign companies. Even when the central government announced the Open up the West programme in 1999,<sup>19</sup> Nanchong did not benefit. Many would recall that the economy took off only after the earthquake in 2008, when the government injected capital to help rebuild cities in Sichuan. It was around this time that Nanchong started to attract returning migrants who had left their villages to work, mostly in the Guangdong Province, in the early 1990s.

Almost nine out of ten working adults I met in the field were either returnees or new incoming migrants. In the last decade, the city has started to attract young workers from other smaller cities. Nanchong’s lower cost of living means that, even though earnings are lower, it is possible to afford a more comfortable life and save more money than would be possible in the big cities. For those with

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18. Nanchong is customarily referred to in books as the ‘Thousand-year capital city of silk’ (Wang and Li 2008; Liu and He eds. 2008), and also on websites found on Baidu.com. The city manufactured quality silk in ancient times. As early as the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), its products were exported to foreign countries from South Asia to East Africa along the Silk Road.

19. A developmental strategy to open up the western region in China was proposed in 1999 by General-Secretary Jiang Zemin. The aim was to boost infrastructural development of cities in the west (where Nanchong is situated), which on the whole lagged behind the more prosperous cities in the north, south, and eastern coastal regions.

an entrepreneurial spirit, Nanchong is not as saturated with small businesses or as competitive as the upper-tier cities. For workers from other Sichuan cities, it offers the advantage of being closer to home. The strong migrant background of Nanchong citizens and the impact this has on interpersonal relationships will emerge in the ethnographies in the following chapters.

### *A city of violence*

After I settled in, I discovered that Nanchong is considered one of the ten most violent cities (*shida baoli chengshi* 十大暴力城市) in China. Ranking charts on this subject can be easily found on the Internet, but there is no official source provided for this characterization. According to my interlocutors and some online reports, Nanchong got its reputation as a violent city in 1988 when groups of hooligans, among an audience of 30,000 spectators at a football match, started a riot after the Sichuan team lost its chance to advance to the next round in a national tournament. People were mostly ambivalent about the infamous reputation of their city and opinions varied as to whether this was fair comment. Violence defies easy categorization: 'It can be everything and it can be nothing' (Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes 2004: 2). But in the course of my sixteen months of fieldwork in Nanchong, there was evidence of quite a broad range of behaviour that I, and I believe most people, would consider violent.

A teenage boy told me there were always ongoing feuds (*qundou* 群斗) at his school (even though a female student of the same school told me this was not the case). A twenty-year-old woman gave a graphic account of how she and her friends bullied their classmates at their county school some years ago. I heard similar stories from quite a few other men and women who had been 'left-behind children' at some point, when their parents left home to work as migrant labourers. They told me how they felt deserted and unloved. The boredom at school and in the small township made them trouble-seekers (*zhao mafan* 找麻烦). Young men entered into fights without any particular reason, sometimes just to show their bravado in front of girls. Domestic violence seemed to be common. At one point during the fieldwork, I dislocated my jaw. A neighbour became aware of this and insisted on taking me to a massage parlour. Miraculously, the doctor spent just about thirty seconds readjusting my jaw. I said casually that he must have treated many patients like me. The doctor replied, 'Oh yes, there are quite a lot of women coming for help.' When I asked why they had dislocated jaws, he replied 'because they have fights with their husbands!' A man told me how his wife infuriated him, which led him to beat her. She had called him useless in front of his mother and made him lose face. From my apartment, I could hear and was woken up a few times by the noise of fathers beating and disciplining their boys, sometimes very late at night. I also heard from quite a few men of gang fights they had participated in not long ago. Putting on a heroic tone, an

ex-gang member told me, 'Good brothers (*xiongdì* 兄弟) are forever. If one of us has problems, we will go and fight for him no matter where we are' (*yifang younan, bafang xiangying* 一方有难, 八方相应). He expressed a martial masculinity with an underlying sense of honour and righteousness. A man in his seventies who had been a captain in the Vietnam War told me that men had to be hardened in the process of growing up, metaphorically explaining: 'Do you prefer to be the butcher's knife that chops the meat, or to be the meat being chopped?'

A martial attitude can be heard among women too, but always as a means of self-defence or righteousness. A very gentle woman I met at the gym told me that she had instructed her teenage daughter to always retaliate if she was abused: 'If there are stones around, take the stones; if there are bricks, take the bricks!' Another woman recounted to me how she hit and shamed a pickpocket who tried to steal from her handbag. 'I shouted very loudly to that short and lousy man, "Get away! You are not a man to try and steal from a woman. You don't even qualify as a pickpocket!"' A close informant recounted with righteousness that when she was young and living in a village, she would retaliate by beating up boys who made fun of her family. I got the impression that women in Nanchong are far from fragile and defenceless. Some would say jokingly that Sichuan women are generally tough and hot-tempered because they eat hot and spicy food; some would refer to the hardships of rural life and the heavy duties women must shoulder, which develop their toughness. Quite a few reminded me that the only female emperor in Chinese history, Wu Zetian (武则天), came from a city in Sichuan. Some would explain that Nanchong and many other cities in Sichuan Province are in very mountainous and deserted places, hence the famous saying *Shudao nan* (蜀道难 the *Shu* path is difficult). *Shu* was Sichuan's official name in the past. *Shudao* refers to the huge pathway that was first built for military troops to pass through. The mountainous frontier life is said to give the Sichuanese their strength of character, endurance, and a strong sense of pragmatism (Xu et al. 1999: 1162–1167).

The notion of the able-responsible man, which hinges on qualities of competence and the morality of responsibility, would naturally exclude violent behaviour because it is raw, hurtful and denigrating. However, there are times when the use of violence is deemed righteous (such as to support brothers or family members in trouble), responsible (such as in disciplining a child), and face-saving (such as retaliating when one's male honour is threatened). But violent solutions, especially in the context of domestic violence, are generally considered shameful. Men would speak about their violent behaviour with embarrassment, not a sense of honour, even as they sought to defend themselves as having been provoked. Fathers who beat their sons would admit that this was no longer a useful parenting method and regretted their bad temper and loss of patience.

Nanchong's violent reputation seems in sharp contrast to the idea and behaviour of the able-responsible man. I will show through ethnographic observations



that the use of both physical and emotional violence by men can be explained as compensatory acts carried out to assert their masculinity. This may explain why many men engage in emotional violence towards their spouses. As written by Hearn (2012: 602): ‘Constructions of men and masculinity may be quite contradictory, with complex connections between “responsibility” and “violence”, “honour” and “violence”, “respect” and “violence” . . . and all these combinations contribute to the construction of men.’

## Research Method

My research was grounded in the anthropological method of participant observation. My first trip to Nanchong took place in September 2013, and I stayed until November 2014. I followed this with two short revisits, one in September 2015 and another in September 2018. I also met several informants in Chengdu and Shenzhen during separate visits as they had moved or travelled there.

My first and major network of informants was developed in the middle-class neighbourhood where I rented an apartment. Around my low-rise block of flats was a lively and pleasant communal park. I initially got to know some of my close informants by hanging out in the park. Usually, I met the elderly, or housewives, or nannies first. Some invited me to their homes, where I met their families and friends. Many of my neighbours operated small businesses around the community such as a barber shop, a pharmacy, a bakery, or a tea house. It was convenient for me to drop by those shops as a patron, and occasionally as an unpaid assistant. I also acquired valuable contacts through memberships of a nearby gym and church.

A particularly valuable site for carrying out participant observation was a hawkers’ area just outside the entrance to the residential buildings where I lived. In the evening, I often hung around a stall selling cold meat. The operator, Lu, worked from about half past four until close to midnight every day. I would sit around and chat with Lu and his girlfriend. Every now and then, in the late evening, I would encounter one or two men sitting there chatting and eating and would join the conversation. I became a familiar face. Some neighbours jokingly described those chats as *bai longmen zhen* or *bai longmen* (摆龙门阵/摆龙门), dragon-gate chat), which deserves some explanation.

*Bai* is to display. *Longmen zhen* has two different but related interpretations. First, *longmen* was a typical kind of pavilion (called dragon gate), built in old Sichuan rural communities, where neighbours gathered to talk during their free time. Another interpretation says that *longmen zhen* was a plan drawn by a military strategist called Xue Rengui (薛仁贵), who mapped out wartime military tactics, such as the deployment of soldiers and the use of weapons, in mind-boggling complexity. Nowadays, *bai longmen* has come to refer to social chats that take place in neighbourhoods; they are spontaneous, communal, inviting and

inclusive in nature. People can participate as active speakers or passive listeners. Those who speak are usually good storytellers, with a breadth of experience, who can shift from one subject to another and go with the flow. I have observed that when people use this term they are more likely to be referring to a male-dominated gathering. Women's conversations are more often called *liaotian* (聊天) or *bagua* (八卦), which is more private and domestic in nature, and considered more frivolous. Dragon-gate chat, on the other hand, is very open, public, and dominated by men. The subjects discussed by the men centre more on social issues than personal affairs. In its classical form, their chat is a subtle and performative occasion in which men compete. Those who can express their views in an elaborate and persuasive style easily control the chat and the audience. During my fieldwork, an old man who was nostalgic about communist China and a middle-aged retired soldier appeared from time to time. Tian, the newsstand man, and a young manager at a nearby piano school chipped in when they had time to spare. The group usually consisted of only three or four people, which is smaller than suggested by the term dragon-gate chat. I was usually the only woman who would sit there and actively participate. Lu's girlfriend only conversed freely with him, Tian and myself. At times, passers-by stopping at the hawkers' area joined or even took over the conversation. Occasionally, a man would reveal his more intimate and personal experiences to me. The venue provided me with some very lively and useful opportunities to hear men talk and to learn about them.

Several factors helped me in the ethnographic process. I found it very easy as a female to connect with both men and women. It might be difficult for men to reveal their vulnerabilities to other men, but they seemed to feel at ease disclosing their experiences and feelings, including emotional distress and weakness, to me. Naturally, I was welcome to enter women's circles. I believe that it was my gender in conjunction with my age that facilitated my cross-gender integration—'one is never *just* a man or a woman' in the field (Grimshaw 1986, cited in Callaway 1992: 34, original emphasis). I might not have been so easily accepted into people's social worlds if I was a younger woman, especially because I was single. A Latin dance teacher told me his girlfriend would be upset if he went out alone with women, 'even in the name of academic research', but she was relaxed that he was going out to see me, the Elder sister Wang (*Wang jie* 王姐). The fact that I am a Hong Kong native also helped people see me as just an ordinary Chinese person. However, I was still sufficiently different to justify my awkward-sounding questions and to make some people curious to talk to me. In addition, I speak fluent *putonghua* and was able to pick up an elementary level of the Nanchong dialect.

## Organization of the Book

I have presented the concept of the able-responsible man and its historical and cultural context in this Introduction. The next five chapters will take the reader through different elements in men's life courses to reveal the meanings and lived experiences of different masculinities.

Chapter 2 begins by describing how hegemonic masculinity exerts its influence during two teenage boys' formative years. I illustrate the alternative strategies and paths taken by the two drastically different boys to negotiate the masculine ideal that weighs on them. The one-child policy, migration, parenting and grandparenting, education, and regional and global influences all affect young people's sexuality and their process of becoming (or failing to become) able-responsible men.

Chapter 3 explores the aspirations and anxieties of men as they seek romantic and spousal relationships. All the men in the case studies belong to a new generation of migrants who do not take up labour work, which would disadvantage them in the marriage market, but nevertheless face certain challenges in finding wives. The chapter reveals an intrinsic contradiction in the hegemonic ideology of able-responsible man in that it bears the traditional values of patriarchy and yet it also requires men to display the so-called modern male attributes of being caring, romantic, and egalitarian.

Chapter 4 investigates changes in husband-wife and intergenerational dynamics, and the corresponding strategies that married men develop to face those changes. In navigating the roles of father, son, and husband, men appear to struggle the most with their spousal roles due to ideological changes in women's power. Adjustments in fatherhood, on the other hand, are pleasing for men, and changes in reciprocity result in relatively more benefits to sons (and daughters) than parents.

Chapter 5 discusses more aggressive actions taken by men to assert their masculine pride. It brings to light the complex issues of domination and subordination among men as well as between men and women. I show how men are marginalized, but how they can still exert agency and negotiating power in performing their masculinity. It also presents intergenerational dynamics and exposes a new challenge for men dealing with their in-laws, especially the patriarchal father-in-law.

From family and personal relationships, I move on to nationalism in Chapter 6. I posit that President Xi Jinping is presently the supreme bearer of hegemonic masculinity in China. Through the comments of my informants and citing various sources, I trace the construction of Xi as a hegemonic leader who exemplifies the qualities of an archetypal able-responsible man. It is clear that the state system of authority and the male domination attached to the system have survived.

## Conclusion

### The Able-Responsible Man in a Comparative Perspective

A collective vision of an ideal masculinity that is defined by a man's *ability* and the moral code of *responsibility* exists in Nanchong, a prefecture-level city in southwestern China. The notion of the able-responsible man is recognizable, not least because people routinely pass judgements on boys and men, in public and in private, by using terms related both to ability (such as *nengli*, *benshi*) and to responsibility (such as *zeren*, *dandang*). Men also reflect in everyday conversation on their own ability and on the fulfilment of their responsibilities, usually in the context of discussing their work and family life. A real man is considered to be one who is able to make good money and who takes responsibility for his family, his society, and ultimately his country. This masculine ideal is underpinned socially by reputation and honour. A man's honour is not his own private affair but affects the reputation of his family and even the whole community. These values are shared socially and internalized by men, the majority of whom feel compelled to strive towards this ideal. Some men may not, in fact, be convinced that these values offer a true definition of a real man. Others may agree to the hegemonic ideal only on the surface, they resist the gist, or substance, of it and exemplify alternative forms of masculinity. Nevertheless, people are acutely aware of the collective ideal, which they may or may not discern as a state project.

Hegemonic masculinity is not an unchanging phenomenon. Changes in how the real man is defined and what makes a man 'like a man' are initiated by shifts in the political, social and cultural spheres. A considerable body of scholarship has shown that masculinity in China during the 1990s was enacted via ostentatious signs of material accomplishment, including the exploitation of women in the sexual economy. The economic take-off at that time released Chinese men from the tormented feelings of emasculation that had been inflicted on them throughout China's imperialist history and then by Mao's policies during his

regime. Men reasserted their masculine identity and confidence by getting rich, becoming enterprising individuals, and 'recovering their potency domestically and in the world political/economic arena' (Brownell 2000: 230). I build upon this existing literature but argue that by the turn of the twenty-first century, the meaning of manliness for Chinese people, at least in Nanchong, includes an ethical dimension. Both the government and the public drive a moral discourse that affects how masculinity is seen and performed. Connell (2016) expounds her argument on the construction of new hegemonic projects at global, national and local levels alongside social transformations. The state can set up a model and imageries of a desired-to-be hegemonic masculinity that may resonate in the general public in big or small ways. The able-responsible man has evolved during a time when people began to resent the harm done by the dominance of a materialistic mentality and the thorny gap between the rich and poor.

Drawing on evidence from a wide range of participant-observation data, I show how the notion of the able-responsible man permeates people's everyday lives in Nanchong. The new male standard is in no way more achievable than one that singularly stressed wealth. The boys and men I observed displayed a wide array of responses to hegemonic masculinity in their trajectories. In one way or another, they all seem to fall short of some of the crucial qualities and behaviours expected of able-responsible men—for example: boys who underachieve in their studies and cause parents to worry that they will fail in performing a man's duties in the future; an unwelcome potential son-in-law whose 'three NOs' (no house, no car, no money) disqualified him; a disorientated man who thinks he deserves the privileged status of patriarch because he assumed the provider's role in the relationship; a subordinate man who hesitates to commit formally to an uxorilocal marriage; married men who disappoint their wives by being non-entrepreneurial, idle, unromantic, and uninvolved; husbands who engage in domestic violence; and men who judge themselves, or are judged by their communities, to be unfilial sons. Nevertheless, we also see the boys and men performing masculinities distinctively in a variety of ways. They use different strategies to negotiate their manhood, respond to the demands made of them, and counteract their disadvantages. I observed a mix of complicity and resistance, and it is too early to judge whether the hegemonic project would succeed.

Many men acknowledge the legitimacy of gender equality and female empowerment, though they have yet to develop ways to cope with the new relationships and scenarios they have to face in everyday life. It is hard for men to forgo their male privileges, especially when they are hegemonized to play a provider's role. A noteworthy point is that men can no longer enjoy the patriarchal dividend, the legitimate set of privileges men in traditional set-ups command over women. Neither men nor women can be seen absolutely as oppressor or oppressed. It is the new complex dynamics in society and families that I try to unfold. Social and kin relations can be both emotionally rewarding and harmfully hierarchical. Boys

and men who come from families with fewer economic means and who have accumulated little material and cultural capital meet more difficulties trying to dislodge themselves from their humble backgrounds as ordinary men. Playing a responsible role for the family and in society becomes a cushion for men who have limited ability to make money. Male domination and the overall privileges men enjoy over women must be evaluated in conjunction with class difference.

The idea of hegemonic masculinity is cultivated in Nanchong, and probably in China as a whole, by emulating exemplary norms. I contend that political leaders are the ultimate hegemonic models in China. Not all political leaders can be seen as strong models of masculinity, but Xi Jinping may be considered one who is. Xi has been keen to project a big man status that can be compared to, and even surpass, those of Mao and Deng. He shows a combination of *wen* (literary) and *wu* (military) abilities. Xi also breaks new ground in Chinese political leadership by undertaking a public performance of being an affectionate husband, an image that is supported by his wife. China's First Lady presents herself as an adorable woman who does not hold back from demonstrating publicly her admiration and support for her husband. For the first time in recent Chinese history, the ruler and his wife appear before the global and local media as a respectable and loving married couple.

### Shared Characteristics, Nuanced Differences

If we paint the two defining characteristics of the able-responsible man in broad strokes, we may want to ask whether that hegemonic masculinity is a generalized form of manhood in other parts of the world. Ability and responsibility may appear to be universal male attributes. Gilmore's controversial study (1990: 220–230), for example, concluded with a universalized viewpoint that many societies espoused 'a doctrine of a manhood-of-achievement' and that men must protect and nurture their families. Differences lie in the details and nuances. I draw upon four empirical studies, which were carried out in different geographical regions to explain this.

In a study in Peru, Fuller (2001: 323) argues that 'for Peruvian men, to work means to have dignity, to be capable, and to be responsible: the three qualities characterizing manhood'. In Turkey, 'most men defined their masculinities within the public domain: being successful at work, earning money—being the breadwinner and the head of the household—as well as having prestige in the eyes of their friends' (Boratav et al. 2014: 314). The hegemonic notion of the salaryman in Japan emphasizes male success in the work domain, which feeds into their breadwinner role and a male-dominated culture (Hidaka 2010). In Kerala, South India, a dominant masculinity among young men is represented by competence in accumulating monetary wealth, maturity in using resources wisely, and the ability to move forward by marrying and taking a place within

the community (Osella and Osella 2000; 2006: 77–98). The manhood-of-achievement and the provider-male represented in these studies appear to be common archetypes, just as in Nanchong, but significant differences are embedded in the details of what appear on the surface to be the same. We can illustrate this point by looking in more detail into the above four studies.

Fuller explains that in Peru the bodily dimension is critically important in constituting manliness. Strength is the source of vigour and of courage, which enables a man to protect his family and command respect from other men. A man's strength emanates from his firm, muscular body and his capacity to attract women (2001: 320–322). Hidaka (2010) provides a rich monograph explaining the emergence of the salaryman, or 'corporate warrior' in Japan after the Second World War—a historical background that is unique to Japanese men. Just as in Peru, sport is a site where male supremacy is developed and physical training for boys at school has social significance. However, in contrast to the Peruvian concern with bodily strength and sexual attraction,<sup>1</sup> Japanese people emphasize the power of sport activities to inculcate morality and mental strength, including values associated with competition, endurance, collective obedience, and responsibility. Hidaka also describes the many ways men enjoy privileges at work, in the family, and in social entertainment, but then they have to pay a price for enjoying the patriarchal dividend. The salarymen are locked into their work-centric lifestyles. They carry the physical and psychological burdens of excessive work even into their old age. Osella and Osella (2006) stress the way Gulf migrants from Kerala demonstrate mature masculinity by controlling their lavish consumption and performing as wise patrons for their dependents and clients. Boratav et al. (2014) unpack the dilemma faced by married men who try to retain male authority while taking tentative steps towards inclusive egalitarianism in the domestic sphere. The actual enactment and performance of the fundamental provider-masculinity role are multifarious and differ in their details across cultures—even if we limit the discussion to heterosexual men. In the following paragraphs, I try to distil from the research and my own observations some features of the able-responsible man. These features are not unique or exclusive to Chinese men, but they are critically important in shaping the expressions of hegemonic masculinity in Nanchong.

## **Distinctive Features of the Hegemonic Masculinity in Nanchong**

First of all, the notion of the able-responsible man is actively shaped by the state in China. It may be that all modern nation states are involved in regulating the

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1. On how the body is related to maleness and national identity, see Archetti's (1999) illuminating book about Argentinian men's love for polo, soccer, and tango.

fieldwork, I share their perspectives. Our personal characteristics have some bearing on the way we communicate with people in the field and how far we can go in investigating certain topics.

I have emphasized kinship in my thesis. Not only is it true that kin relations, or the identity of a man in his family roles, are crucial for understanding masculinity; my emphasis on kinship is also related to my engagement with informants' family circles. The informants, knowing that I was acquainted with their relatives, sometimes used me as their listener, or even their advisor, on family issues. This helped me gather valuable ethnographic evidence rather than leading to bias in my study. I may appear to have paid relatively less attention to men in leisure. Although I have participated in countless leisure activities with men such as karaoke singing, drinking and eating, gambling, playing mahjong, and sporting, I have chosen to report perceptions of men's entitlement to leisure rather than the performativity of manhood through various forms of entertainment. The latter has been well covered by a number of authors in their studies.<sup>5</sup> I did not venture to attend activities or visit places that were exclusive to men (e.g., massage parlours specially designed for male patrons), but I cannot see how these would have changed my research findings. Men might talk more freely about their sexual appetites and behaviour to a male researcher, but that would not necessarily provide a truer picture. The tendency for men to boast about sexual prowess in male company rings true.

I cannot tell what other versions of hegemonic masculinity may exist in Nanchong, but my study reveals a wide range of alternative masculinities. They include those who: aspire to an authentic everyman masculinity (Chapter 2); pursue the status of petite bourgeoisie or a *daye* patriarch with male privileges (Chapter 3); choose to live as an autonomous agent with the power to control their own destinies (Chapter 2), or that of their partners (Chapter 5); act as a loving, romantic and caring man (Chapters 3, 4, and 5), or even househusbands (Chapters 3 and 4). Androgynous masculinity is highlighted in Chapter 2. I also had frequent encounters with men from the 'underworld' but have not addressed these in this book. Men of the underworld live by an alternative masculinity that has been remarkably portrayed by Boretz (2011) and Osburg (2013, 2016). Finally, Hird identified in Beijing a highly educated, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan white-collar masculinity (2016). It corresponds to the state's preferred model of masculinity by bearing a moral dimension that others those who are 'from practices associated with coarseness, dishonesty, laziness, poverty, backwardness, and the rural' (2016: 140). I do not mean to imply that the men I met in Nanchong are coarse, dishonest, lazy, poor, and so forth—far from it. But it is hard to identify

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5. Zhang (2001), Zheng (2009), Osburg (2013), and Uretsky (2016) provide rich descriptions of elite men's entertainment. Boretz (2011) illustrates the pastimes of working-class men. Chau (2008) describes the sociality of banqueting. For gambling in rural China, see Steinmüller (2011) and Lam (2014).



from my key informants the white-collar man that Hird is precisely referring to. Following the logic that masculinity in China is heavily guided by the state and that Nanchong is developing rapidly, it should not surprise us if the white-collar masculine model spreads from the capital city to Nanchong very soon.

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