

Transnational Asian Masculinities

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Pamela Hunt

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Masculinity and Attitude in Postsocialist Chinese Literature

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Hong Kong University Press
The University of Hong Kong
Pokfulam Road
Hong Kong
<https://hkupress.hku.hk>

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ISBN 978-988-8754-05-2 (*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 New Century Printing Industrial Ltd. in Hong Kong, China

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Introduction

I truly respect the older generation of authors, who went through such tribulations. But because they didn't care a bit about money, because they never slept with more than a dozen girls, they didn't write anything worthwhile. The next generation may have sampled the sweet taste of gold and women but they were too coy, or too pretentious, to produce anything decent. Our generation is different: we're a bunch of guys with limitless greed, emerging hungrily from every corner, foul-mouthed, smashing and grabbing everything in sight.

—Zhu Wen, *I Love Dollars*, 1995

This book considers representations of masculinity and subversion in mainland Chinese fiction since 1989. Writers had already begun to push at the boundaries of cultural respectability in the immediate post-Mao years, but the 1990s ushered in a veritable 'age of Attitude'.¹ The quotation above, taken from Zhu Wen's 1995 tale of a dissolute freelance writer, sums up this attitude well. Its subject matter is typical, with its exploration of the momentous changes wrought by reform and opening up, and the ideological confusion that appeared with it. The relative freedoms of consumption, artistic expression, and sexuality are written as a double-edged sword, producing both exhilarating and grotesque results. Zhu's tone is also representative: part gleeful provocation and part irony with, perhaps, an undercurrent of anxiety. Works such as these, about which 'Chairman Mao would not be amused',² are inundated with antiheroes, losers,

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1. Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 263.
 2. This phrase was the title of Howard Goldblatt's 1995 anthology of Chinese literature. The anthology includes works written in 1985, but Goldblatt observes that the year 1989 'caused an artistic and philosophical rupture of unprecedented significance, and has produced a generation of novelists . . . whose work probes the darker aspects of life and human behaviour'. Howard Goldblatt, 'Introduction', in *Chairman Mao Would Not Be Amused: Fiction from Today's China*, ed. Howard Goldblatt (New York: Grove Press, 1995), x.

criminals, hooligans, and sexual deviants, all of whom place themselves on the margins of society and transgress an abundance of societal norms.

The characters and the authors who create them do not engage in outright dissent but, with a certain nimble understanding of where the red lines of censorship exist, they persistently take aim at figures and spaces of authority. From the idea of 'pure' literature and a lofty *wentan* 文坛,³ to the authority of local officials, fathers, and teachers, to the broad concept of a harmonious, modern socialism with Chinese characteristics—it seems very little is safe from the biting, critical prose of many post-1989 writers. Much of the literature in this period, as we shall see, is marked by a sense of ideological confusion, anomie, and a profound awareness of the continuing strictures placed on the writers as artists and as individuals. Yet the attitude that appears from texts such as Zhu's indicate that writers are still managing to carve out, in Robin Visser's phrase, 'realms of agency'.⁴

However, the above quotation is also illustrative of another tendency of this kind of text: the attitude on display is curiously gender-specific. As we shall see in the following chapters, to read much of the fiction of this period is to navigate multiple layers of self-knowing irony and satire, and Zhu Wen's novella is no exception. It is nonetheless striking that, as he describes the swaggering subversiveness of the writers of the new age, Zhu is only really concerned with the 'guys' (*jiahuo* 家伙). While men indulge in their various expressions of rebellion, women in this telling are reduced to sweet, voiceless objects. Zhu's androcentric approach is also reflected in the narrative structure, in which women serve only as props, existing purely so that we might further consider man's fate. In this text and the others that appear in this study, it is only the men who subvert, who play with traditional moralities, and who contest the mainstream. Since the 1990s, the literary field has experienced a level of openness and vitality unmatched since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) first came to power in 1949.⁵ But even a brief survey of the works that have been lauded at home and abroad as challenges to authority reveals that they appear to be cut from this same pattern: be

3. As Marco Fumian has pointed out, the term *wentan* can hold different implications, referring either to the official literary establishment (separate, for example, from more market-driven literature) or the entire literary scene. In this book I use it to refer to the latter. Marco Fumian, 'The Temple and the Market: Controversial Positions in the Literary Field with Chinese Characteristics', *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 21, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 130.

4. Robin Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 291.

5. Shuyu Kong, *Consuming Literature: Best Sellers and the Commercialization of Literary Production in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 4.

it the thugs of Su Tong's historical fiction,⁶ Wang Shuo's rakish hooligans,⁷ Wang Xiaobo's louche sent-down youths,⁸ or Jia Pingwa's debauched intellectuals,⁹ these texts build their critical thrust on dissolute, freewheeling, maverick men. Time and again, women are seduced and then sidelined, presented either as dupes—unthinking participants in the new social code—or victims, crying out for rescue. It is all very well to explore and celebrate the playful new literary attitude of this period, but what does it mean when so much of it appears predicated on a conservative understanding of gender?

The troubling representation of gender in contemporary Chinese literature has not gone entirely unnoticed. Sheng Ying put it succinctly in 2010:

Recently, many readers have had the same experience as I have in reading works written by major contemporary male writers, and have found themselves caught in a state of irritation, confusion and indignation [at the] flood of patriarchal language in China's literary writing.¹⁰

A handful of studies have explored the masculinism evident in post-Mao literature, focusing on the 1980s.¹¹ These studies have not only pointed out a revival of conservative, even chauvinistic, representations of gender, but draw a link between persistent misogyny and oppositional stances, transgressive literary techniques, and the authors' sense of intellectual marginality.¹² In a highly influential study which considered literary masculinity since the May Fourth era but with a particular focus on the 1980s, Xueping Zhong referred to this tendency as a symptom of a 'masculinity besieged', or a male marginality complex.¹³ Male authors, anxious about their status as intellectuals, as Chinese in a globalizing

6. For example, Su Tong, *Mi* [Rice] (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1991).

7. Wang Shuo, *Qianwan bie ba wo dang ren* [Please don't call me human] (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 2004). This was originally serialized in 1989 in the literary magazine *Zhongshan* 钟山 4, 5,6 (1989).

8. Wang Xiaobo, *Huangjin shidai* [The golden age] (Guangzhou: Huashan, 1997). This was originally published in 1992 in Taiwan.

9. Jia Pingwa, *Feidu* [Ruined capital] (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1993).

10. Sheng Ying, 'Feminist Critique: The Patriarchal Discourse of Chinese Male Writers', in *Gender Discourse and Self in Literature: Issues in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong*, ed. Kwok-kan Tam and Terry Siu-han Yip (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2010), 125.

11. Arthur Brittan describes masculinist thought as that which 'assumes heterosexuality is normal . . . accepts without question the sexual division of labour and . . . sanctions the politically dominant role of men in the private and public spheres'. Arthur Brittan, *Masculinity and Power* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 4; also cited in Xueping Zhong, *Masculinity Besieged? Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 12.

12. Zhong, *Masculinity Besieged?*; Tonglin Lu, *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism and Oppositional Politics: Contemporary Chinese Experimental Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

13. Zhong, *Masculinity Besieged?*

world, and as men in a changing society, responded by searching for robust, macho masculinities that were founded on patriarchal premises. This pattern—a sense of marginality and crisis combined with a reassertion of a regressive performance of manhood—will also be readily apparent in this study. Yet works by Zhong and others only reach up until 1989, and until now no study has considered representations of masculinity in Chinese literature since the series of historic political, economic, and cultural shifts that created the postsocialist era. While Zhong characterizes the ‘besieged’ men of the 1980s as caught up in an anxious search for modernity, the texts that feature in this study are instead confronting the changes that postsocialist modernity has created, from market reform to urbanization to globalization.

Meanwhile, in post-1989 China masculinity has continued to grow as a major cultural preoccupation. It is discussed, debated, and carefully reconstructed across page, screen, newsprint, and the internet. Spurred on by globalization and the growth of the market economy, different images of ‘real’ and ‘modern’ men proliferate, while some commentators look back to millennia-old gender ideals as a way of capturing a truly ‘Chinese’ masculinity. Modern-day *junzi* (君子, gentlemen) are emulated and celebrated alongside rugged action-movie heroes,¹⁴ as other commentators issue a rallying cry to ‘save our boys’ from the twin threats of metrosexual pop stars and female academic success.¹⁵ More recently, other voices, fewer but growing in number, have begun to identify and debate a pervasive misogyny across Chinese society and culture, charging various public figures with chauvinistic ‘Straight Male Cancer’ (*zhinan'ai* 直男

14. Geng Song, ‘Chinese Masculinities Revisited: Male Images in Contemporary Television Drama Serials’, *Modern China* 36, no. 4 (1 July 2010): 404–34; Stephen Teo, ‘The Chinese Film Market and the *Wolf Warrior 2* Phenomenon’, *Screen* 60, no. 2 (2019): 322–31; Derek Hird, ‘Moral Masculinities: Ethical Self-Fashionings of Professional Chinese Men in London’, *Nan Nü* 18, no. 1 (2016): 115–47.

15. The term ‘save our boys’ is most often associated with a 2010 monograph by Sun Yunxiao who declared that the Chinese education system and the influence of androgynous celebrities were making Chinese boys increasingly effeminate. See Kam Louie, ‘Introduction’, in *Changing Chinese Masculinities: From Imperial Pillars of State to Global Real Men*, ed. Kam Louie (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), 1–10. For more on recent public debates regarding Chinese boys and men see Zheng Jiawen, ‘Why It’s Silly For Chinese to Worry About “Sissy” Young Men’, *Sixth Tone*, 19 September 2018, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1002942/why-its-silly-for-chinese-to-worry-about-sissy-young-men>. A more recent controversy over Chinese masculinities was ignited by an article in *Xinhua* in 2018. See Xin Shiping, ‘Xin Shiping: “Niangpao” zhi feng dang xiuyi’ [Xin Shiping: The ‘sissy’ trend must stop], *Xinhua*, 6 September 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-09/06/c_1123391309.htm; this is discussed in Qian Zhecheng, ‘Xinhua Mocks “Sissy Pants” Male Idols’, *Sixth Tone*, 7 September 2018, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1002883/xinhua-mocks-sissy-pants-male-idols>.

癌)¹⁶ while a nascent ‘Me Too’ (*mitu* 米兔) movement also confronts patriarchal values across different platforms.¹⁷

All of this points to the need to consider how men and masculinity have appeared in post-1989 Chinese literature. It suggests in particular the need to probe the connection between the oppositional agency and attitude that critics have identified in parts of postsocialist Chinese literature and the widespread preoccupation with masculinity. In this book I ask: How is masculinity represented and reconstructed in postsocialist literature by male authors? How is ‘attitude’ expressed? How and why are expressions of resistance connected to masculinity, and what are the implications of this connection? This book, the first detailed study of masculinity in post-1989 literature, aims to highlight the widespread fascination with, and concern for, masculinity in contemporary Chinese fiction. It argues that male authors are deliberately exploring, questioning, and rebuilding manhood in contemporary China.

In particular, I point to a continuing literary trope of male marginality. Focusing on the fiction of four prolific authors—Zhu Wen 朱文, Feng Tang 冯唐, Xu Zechen 徐则臣, and Han Han 韩寒—I identify a recurring figure in their otherwise very different works. This is a man who turns his back on the mainstream and seeks his own oppositional space on the edges of society. Even as he does so, however, he remains complicit with, and even reinforces, heteronormative, patriarchal values. This, I will argue, comes from a combination of factors, with two playing an especially important role: the historical resilience of cultural models of rebellion which link resistance to masculinity and misogyny; and the dynamics of ‘marginalized masculinity’, wherein men, even as they strike poses of rebellion, still seek a form of masculinity that is culturally accepted, thereby ensuring that they are granted some measure of authority.¹⁸ Marginal men, therefore, continue to seek, and support, the centre.

As a result of the pattern highlighted in this study, women and non-hegemonic images of men are repeatedly written out of postsocialist literature. Rebellion and transgression, such as they stand, are articulations that are reserved entirely for heterosexual men. What is at stake here is a recognition of the further subtleties,

16. For discussions of these terms see ‘Chule Zhou Guoping, haiyou na xie zhenjing guoren de “zhinan’ai” yanlun’ [Apart from Zhou Guoping, who else is an example of ‘Straight Male Cancer’?], *Pengpai Xinwen*, 14 January 2015, http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1294158; Zhang Ru, “‘Nuannan’ shi bianxiang “zhinan’ai” ma?’ [Is the ‘Warm Guy’ the alter ego of ‘Straight Male Cancer’?], *Pengpai Xinwen*, 24 January 2015, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1297348.

17. Zhongxuan Lin and Liu Yang, ‘Individual and Collective Empowerment: Women’s Voices in the #MeToo Movement in China’, *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies* 25, no. 1 (2 January 2019): 117–31; Leta Hong Fincher, *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China* (London: Verso, 2018).

18. R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). I will discuss this phrase in more detail below.

or ambiguities, of the realms of agency that appear in the postsocialist literary field, and the way in which resistance can go hand in hand with more regressive representations. I suggest that conversations about the countercultural attitude of postsocialist Chinese literature are missing a major piece of the puzzle if they do not take gender into account.

In the process, this book also provides further insight into cultural production in the postsocialist era from 1989 to 2010. Although it does not attempt to be a comprehensive survey of literature in the period, the texts discussed here contribute to our understanding of a time characterized by flux, unevenness, and rapid expansion, even as elements of a longstanding Chinese culture were rebuilt.¹⁹ Undeniably, in attempting to consider such issues as literary resistance, or gender, or even the broader cultural landscape of post-1989 China, one must wrestle with some fairly complex conceptual difficulties. In the remainder of the introduction, I will explore these by turning to three of the words that appear in my title: postsocialist, attitude, and masculinity.

Postsocialist Literature

Any discussion of resistance, agency, and gender in this period must be placed, first and foremost, against the backdrop of a postsocialist China.²⁰ The changes ushered in by the turn towards the market and the world in the post-Mao years have been thoroughly discussed in existing scholarship, and are difficult to overstate. Alongside the astonishingly fast-growing economy and attendant rifts in

19. Haomin Gong, *Uneven Modernity: Literature, Film, and Intellectual Discourse in Postsocialist China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012).

20. For a more detailed summary of the history of the term 'postsocialism', see Michel Hockx, *Internet Literature in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 12–18; see also Paul Pickowicz, 'Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism', in *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, ed. Nick Browne et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 57–87; Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution after the Cultural Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2004); Ralph A. Litzinger, 'Theorizing Postsocialism: Reflections on the Politics of Marginality in Contemporary China', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 1 (2002): 33–55; Arif Dirlik, 'Postsocialism? Reflections on "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics"', in *Marxism in the Chinese Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 229–51; Yingjin Zhang, 'Rebel Without a Cause? China's New Urban Generation and Postsocialist Filmmaking', in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 49–80; Sheldon H. Lu, 'Answering the Question, What Is Chinese Postsocialism?', in *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 204–11; Xudong Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

the fabric of society, including a far-reaching sense of unevenness and inequality, earlier moral and ideological values seemed to unravel at a similar speed. As well as confronting these transformations, writers in this period also grappled with a changing literary field and their rapid change in status as cultural workers. The term postsocialist is used in this book to refer to a historical timeframe and the socioeconomic realities of the era, to a particular aesthetics or structure of feeling, and to an ambiguous relationship between culture, market, state, and individual.

The first point to discuss in relation to the term postsocialist is that of chronology. It pivots around two dates in particular: 1989, when the shocking events at Tiananmen Square brought an end to the idealism of the previous decade; and Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour of 1992, which confirmed that China was now moving in the direction of a socialist market economy.²¹ The 1990s are regularly recognized as marking a decisive break from the 1980s, witnessing the end of 'high culture fever',²² the reshaping of the bureaucratic elite, the loss of idealism, the influence of a market economy, and an increasing sense of alienation amongst individuals.²³ However, as theorists have been careful to emphasize, the 'post' of postsocialism is not intended to refer to an era after socialism, but instead indicates a period in which China has begun to experience capitalist expansion alongside certain entrenched socialist structures. Therefore, as Zhang Xudong puts it, the term 'indicates simultaneously discontinuity *and* continuity';²⁴ if this appears a paradox, then this is entirely in keeping with the 'postsocialist condition' as a whole, which is marked by contradiction, ambiguity, and what Michel Hockx has summarized as 'messiness'.²⁵

The implications of this term therefore extend beyond that of periodization. Postsocialism has also been associated with a particular aesthetics and cultural logic. Postsocialist China is a space of diversification and constant change, as globalization and the ongoing development of the market economy and urbanization have in turn prompted new pluralistic and fragmented forms of cultural production. Studies dealing with postsocialist cultural production frequently describe works that are filled with expressions of alienation and a deep sense

21. McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 2–4; Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, 10.

22. Wang, *High Culture Fever*.

23. Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, 8, 38–39; see also McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 25–27; Rong Cai, *The Subject in Crisis in Contemporary Chinese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 179–223; Zicheng Hong, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*, trans. Michael M. Day (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 437–50. This is not to say, however, that the literati in post-Mao China did not feel anxious and marginalized before 1989. See Julia Lovell, *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China's Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 4, 17–18, 122–23; Zhong, *Masculinity Besieged?*, 15–51.

24. Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, 10.

25. Hockx, *Internet Literature*, 16.

of despair.²⁶ Pickowicz's relatively early use of the term refers in particular to a 'negative, dystopian cultural condition', while McGrath speaks of an increase in cultural production that is 'fraught with experiences of fragmentation and anxiety'.²⁷ This will be evident in many of the texts that appear in this book. However, it is important to retain the idea of ambivalence that is associated with postsocialism. This era also created new forms of identity and new possibilities of expression, giving rise to mischievous ingenuity as much as anxiety, struggle, and confusion.²⁸ Alongside anxiety, then, the texts considered in this study also exude a sense of play, gleeful irreverence, and opportunity.

Thus, rather than seeing the postsocialist condition solely as an anxious response to the drastic social, economic, and cultural changes in the 1990s, it is more the case that responses to market reform and globalization are highly ambivalent or even contradictory. This situation has been aptly described by Zhang Xudong as one of 'fascination with/resistance to the capitalist commodity and the attachment to/forgetfulness of the revolutionary and socialist experience'.²⁹ The postsocialist condition in China is also marked by the blurring—or eradication—of many ideological binaries. In his seminal study of popular and unofficial culture in the 1990s, Geremie Barmé refers to a 'greying' of Chinese culture, as literature, art, television, and film began to inhabit a space between the 'red' of officialdom and the 'black' of illegality.³⁰

A major facet of this study, then, is an exploration of literary 'attitude' within this context, because as binaries of official and illegal blur, expressions of subversion or complicity become ever more multifaceted. Since 1990, as Barmé has

26. McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*; Zhang, 'Rebel without a Cause?'

27. Pickowicz, 'Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism', 62. McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 1–2.

28. McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 2; Haiqing Yu, 'After the "Steamed Bun": E'gao and Its Postsocialist Politics', *Chinese Literature Today* 5, no. 1 (1 September 2015): 55–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21514399.2015.11834073>.

29. Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, 10; Bonnie McDougall, although she does not talk about China in terms of postsocialism, also refers to the 'mixed feelings of liberation and anxiety' amongst writers of the 1990s, who lost an 'assured role in a stable . . . hierarchy' and needed to compete in an open market. See Bonnie S. McDougall, 'Literary Decorum or Carnivalistic Grotesque: Literature in the People's Republic of China after 50 Years', *The China Quarterly*, no. 159 (1 September 1999): 730–31.

30. Geremie Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 100. Although he does not use the term postsocialism, Barmé's study paints a particularly vivid picture of much of what later theorists of postsocialism would discuss, especially the ambiguities, hybridity, satire, and cynicism that marked so much of 1990s cultural production. Equally, without referring to the concept of postsocialism, Julia Lovell identifies a similar situation in the 1990s, wherein 'old binaries—official vs. unofficial identities, high vs. low—blurred, as feeling of nationalism ran high alongside worship of American-style capitalism, and intellectuals embraced a mass culture entangled with state ideology'. Lovell, *The Politics of Cultural Capital*, 138.

put it, cultural production has followed a narrative of ‘rebellion and co-option, attitude and accommodation’.³¹ In the 1990s, the intellectual world reeled from the shock of Tiananmen Square and the deepening of economic reform, both of which seemed to make material gain the new social and cultural priority. This shift has been portrayed as leading to a crisis for intellectuals, especially those in the humanities and social sciences, whose ability to partake in the nationwide impulse to *xiahai* 下海, or plunge into the seas of entrepreneurship, was not as immediately obvious as was the case for the scientists, engineers, and technicians.³² The literary field, as with the rest of Chinese culture, enjoyed new forms of freedom in terms of aesthetics and expression; yet these were not to be taken at face value, limited as they were by continuing political controls.³³

Arguably more effective than state control in the early 1990s, however, was the influence of market logic on the *wentan*, as a slew of reforms affected the livelihood of writers, literary journals, and publishing houses. As support from the CCP’s ‘iron rice bowl’ was rescinded, writers focused their energies on creating works that provided economic reward over spiritual or ideological fulfilment, with far more emphasis on audience and market demands.³⁴ As well as a general pluralization of the *wentan*, the influence of the market meant that literary works were increasingly in competition with, or attempting to merge with, forms of popular culture such as television shows and films.³⁵ In part because of political disillusionment, in part because authors’ main incomes were increasingly to be drawn from royalties rather than a salary,³⁶ the emphasis in the 1990s was on entertainment and sensation rather than the 1980s’ high culture fever. Increasingly, sensationalism, swagger, and notoriety sold.

This phenomenon is, of course, a major complicating factor in any exploration of ‘rebel men’. The concept of ‘bankable [or packaged] dissent’, coined by Barmé, is particularly useful in teasing out these complexities. Barmé uses it to refer to ‘nonofficial or semi-illicit works . . . that, owing to repressive state control, could

31. Barmé, *In the Red*, xvi.

32. Cai, *The Subject in Crisis*, 180–81; Jianying Zha, *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids, and Bestsellers Are Transforming a Culture* (New York: New Press, 1995); Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside*, 100–128. I discuss the rhetoric of crisis in more detail in reference to the ‘humanist spirit debate’ in Chapter 2. More recently, Sebastian Veg has indicated how this shift might be framed less in terms of a crisis and more in terms of move towards the *minjian* (grassroots, unofficial) spaces. Sebastian Veg, *Minjian: The Rise of China’s Grassroots Intellectuals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

33. McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 11.

34. For an in-depth discussion of this process see Kong, *Consuming Literature*.

35. Kong, *Consuming Literature*; Cai, *The Subject in Crisis*, 193–96; Barmé, *In the Red*.

36. Studies agree that it was the 1992 four-volume collection *Wang Shuo wenji* [The collected works of Wang Shuo] that first used royalties rather than a fee to reimburse an author, marking the moment when literary works began to be assessed in terms of their sales.

accrue a certain market value—and street cred—regardless of (or even, in some cases, despite) their artistic merits'.³⁷ We might extend this beyond dissidents and banned writing to any kind of text which seeks a wide audience and courts the market by declaring its subversiveness. The concept reminds us of the fundamental postsocialist condition, which created blurred lines between any form of resistance and complicity, as well as between literature and the market. The line became muddied still further into the twenty-first century.³⁸

To speak of literary attitude in a postsocialist era, therefore, is to understand that the expressions of resistance that appear hold within them many different hues. Whilst authors seem to do battle with a number of foes—the government, mainstream society, the literary establishment, the market, forces of globalization—we will also find that these same authors negotiate with, comply with, and even rely upon these same institutions. Therefore, the texts I turn to in this book not only show signs of both rebellion and co-option, but the two standpoints often blur to the point that they seem to almost converge.

Attitude and Agency

The term 'attitude' as I use it in this book refers to an author's critical take on the realities of postsocialist society, combined with a playful response to the same. Texts with attitude have an element of subversiveness to them in terms of the values expressed, their depiction of society and the nation, and their representation of normally revered figures and institutions. Equally, they refuse to treat the literary field and the act of writing as sacrosanct, and fill their texts with characters who are rebels, antiheroes, misfits, and mavericks. Either the authors, their protagonists, or both, appear to resist many of the values and expected behaviours of mainstream society.

However, as we have seen above, this study's interest in attitude and literary resistance in the postsocialist era poses many conceptual difficulties. Many of the terms already used several times in this introduction—resistance, margins, centres, agency—are highly ambiguous, and are made still more confusing in the context of Chinese postsocialism. 'What', as Sheldon Lu asks, 'is there to resist and oppose in China? Capitalist hegemony? Socialist politics?'³⁹ In a period of profound change and plurality, shifting literary fashions, state censorship, the growing cultural market, and more, these terms are particularly slippery.

In exploring how expressions of attitude and resistance might relate to masculinity, this book assumes, first of all, the possibility of agency within contemporary Chinese society and literature—what Sabina Knight calls 'the belief

37. Barmé, *In the Red*, 188.

38. See Fumian, 'The Temple and the Market'.

39. Sheldon H. Lu, 'Soap Opera in China: The Transnational Politics of Visuality, Sexuality, and Masculinity', *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 1 (2000): 28.

4

Floating Men: Xu Zechen's Migrants

Renewed opportunities for movement must stand as one of the most momentous of the changes that have taken place in mainland China since economic reforms took off. The effects of these changes, which have included vast waves of migration and a new 'floating' population, are among the most visible symptoms of postsocialist modernity. Mobility is therefore a major topic of study and a theme that runs through much of Chinese cultural production. As a trope, it contributes to an overarching sense of a 'restless China'.¹ Just as with so much else of the postsocialist era, this new development might spell more freedom, but it also creates precarious new situations; uncertainty and danger arrive alongside liberty and adventure.

Meanwhile, long before reform and opening-up provided China's citizens with the opportunity to move again, representations of various forms of travel had been a means for authors to survey the trajectory of the nation, explore the link between the individual and society, discuss the development of the self, and examine the possibility of agency.² Thus, as Rong Cai has put it, the figure of the traveller 'is deeply embedded in the historical imagination of both modern and contemporary China'.³

Xu Zechen (b. 1978) personally experienced the move from small county town to big city and has placed China's postsocialist mobility at the core of his writing. Part of the same *qilinghou* (七零后, post-1970) generation as Feng Tang,

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1. Perry Link, Richard P. Madsen, and Paul G. Pickowicz, *Restless China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).
 2. Leo Ou-Fan Lee, 'The Solitary Traveler: Images of the Self in Modern Chinese Literature', in *Expressions of the Self in Chinese Literature*, ed. Robert E. Hegel and Richard C. Hessney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 282–307; Cai, *The Subject in Crisis*.
 3. Cai, *The Subject in Crisis*, 128.

and subject to the same rhetoric of marginality once applied to Feng,⁴ Xu left his hometown in Jiangsu to study when he was young, eventually attaining a master's degree at Peking University. He is now editor of the magazine *People's Literature* (*Renmin wenxue* 人民文学) in Beijing, and is often referred to as a star of the Chinese literary field. His short stories are frequently published in such prestigious publications as *Harvest* (*Shouhuo* 收获), *Master* (*Dajia* 大家), and *Short Story Monthly* (*Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小说月报). He was awarded the Lao She Literary Award in August 2014 for his novel *Jerusalem* (*Yelusaleng* 耶路撒冷), and in the same year received the Lu Xun Literary Prize for his story 'If We Are Snowed In' (*Ruguo daxue fengmen* 若果大雪封门). In 2019, his novel *Northwards* (*Beishang* 北上) won the Mao Dun Literature Prize. Despite this acclaim in China, he has attracted very little scholarly attention outside of the country.⁵

This brief biography indicates that Xu might quite reasonably be considered a member of the literary establishment, especially when compared with the outlier reputation that the other subjects of this study hold. Indeed, Xu does not take part in the same countercultural posturing as Feng Tang and Han Han, nor has he ever declared a literary 'rupture' in the manner of Zhu Wen and his colleagues. His writing style is also considerably less provocative than any of these writers. However, attitude and agency are still to be found in the subject matter of Xu's works, and the lives of the protagonists he creates. Xu first came to the attention of the literary world with a series of short stories that critics soon referred to as his *jingpiao* (京漂, drifting through the capital) works. In these tales, Xu focuses on the so-called lower rungs of society: prostitutes, pirated-DVD salesmen, and unlicensed drivers who have all moved to the capital from the countryside. His protagonists are roguish mavericks, whose charm comes

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4. Writing in 2007, for example, Shao Yanjun observed that Xu Zechen had been overlooked in favour of younger writers, once only noticed by journals on the margins. See Shao Yanjun, 'Xubu xiangqian: Xu Zechen xiaoshuo jianlun' [Steadily walking forwards: A brief study of Xu Zechen's fiction], *Dangdai Wentan* 6 (2007): 28. Seven years later, critic Liu Tao in his collection of essays on the *qilinghou* referred to him as a 'famous author' who made his name quickly. Liu Tao, 'Shangxia qiusuo: Xu Zechen lun' [Searching high and low: On Xu Zechen], in *Qiao, zhexie ren: '70 hou' zuojia lun* [Look at them: On the 'post-1970' authors] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2014), 47.
 5. Federico Picerni, 'A Journey into the City: Migrant Workers' Relation with the Urban Space and Struggle for Existence in Xu Zechen's Early *Jingpiao* Fiction', *Annali Di Ca'Foscari. Serie Orientale* 55 (June 2019): 449–72, <https://doi.org/10/30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2019/01/014>. Several of Xu's short stories have been translated into English. See, for example, Xu Zechen, 'Wheels Are Round', trans. Eric Abrahamsen, in *Shi Cheng: Short Stories from Urban China*, ed. Ding Liu, Carol Yinghua Lu, and Page Ra (Manchester: Comma Press, 2012), 115–38; Xu Zechen, 'Voice Change', trans. Charles A. Laughlin, in *By the River: Seven Contemporary Chinese Novellas*, ed. Charles A. Laughlin, Hongtao Liu, and Jonathan Stalling (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 45–84.

in large part from their determination to strike out on their own and to make their own rules. As with the other authors in this study, then, Xu is concerned primarily with marginal characters. This is, of course, despite the fact that his own experience of the city—as a student at Peking University and later as editor of a renowned literary journal—places him very comfortably in the social and intellectual centre of China. The marginality of Xu's characters, however, comes not only in the social and economic sense but also in that they refuse—or appear to refuse—to conform to the expectations of postsocialist society.⁶

This sense of marginality and disconnection from mainstream values is closely connected to another major theme in Xu's oeuvre: mobility and its implications for Chinese individuals and society. As Xu puts it,

[My characters] always want to go, to leave, to drift. To use a popular and rather clichéd expression, they are always 'on the road'. . . . They never stay within their prescribed limits, always wanting to 'go'.⁷

Xu's interest in marginal migrant workers is not solely an attempt to document a striking social phenomenon. Rather, through the rhetoric of drifting, Xu poses broader questions that run through contemporary China, such as the possibility of freedom and agency, the meaning of social responsibility, and ways of surviving in a postsocialist, fast-moving, and ever-globalizing world. Moreover, as the above quotation suggests, in going, Xu's migrants deliberately seek to move beyond proscribed limits, and as such travel becomes an act of agency and of rebellion. By extension, as he writes about movement, Xu is also probing the nature and possibility of transgression.

As this chapter will explore, Xu's stories reveal the manifold, and often contradictory, ways in which movement, agency, and transgression can be delineated in fiction, as these topics intersect with the other pressing concerns of postsocialist China: urbanization and the market economy, the breakdown of old networks and construction of new ones, and, finally, the working out of gender relations. For it is the case that, like Zhu and Feng, Xu's exploration of the migrant experience also becomes an exploration of postsocialist masculinity. As Xu's tales focus on the image of the traveller to probe the effects of postsocialist modernity, they also demonstrate the ways in which gender insistently cuts into all of this, colouring any kind of attitude that might appear in his works.

6. Xu emphasized this in an interview with the author in 2013. Xu Zechen, interview with the author, Beijing, 3 April 2013.

7. Huang Changyi, 'Zuojia yinggai xiaoyu qi zuopin' [Authors should be less than their works], *Shuo Fang* no. 8 (2009): 111. The use of the phrase 'on the road' suggests a cultural connection with Kerouac's 1955 novel; I will talk more about this link in Chapter 5, in connection with the author Han Han.

Drifting through Postsocialist China

In his survey of mobility in modern Western societies, Cresswell notes that movement is often presented as both threatening and positive at the same time.⁸ This ambivalent discourse is also evident in China. Some forms of travel, such as tourism, migration to Western countries, and international business travel, have largely been embraced as positive signs of China's modernization, economic growth, and cosmopolitanism.⁹

It is in the figure of the rural-to-urban migrant that the most conflicted discourses appear. He or she might be framed either as a heroic member of the 'labour army', fundamental for economic development,¹⁰ or, perhaps more frequently, as a dangerous nuisance in Chinese cities, 'dirty, . . . uncivilized and backward';¹¹ the latter discourse reflects and reinforces postsocialist rural-urban inequality.

The so-called rootlessness of this segment of the population is reflected in the vast number of terms applied to them that employ imagery of drifting or floating: *liudong* (流动, floating), *mangliu* (盲流, blind drifting), *liuilang* (流浪, roaming), *piaobo* (漂泊, drifting). While floating might conjure up a positive state of being unencumbered, it is more often given a negative sense in the dominant discourse. Li Zhang points out that a number of compounds using the character *liu* 流, such as *liumin* (流民, vagrant), *liukou* (流寇, roving bandit), and *liumang* (流氓, hooligan), imply a threat to the 'earth-bound sentiments' of mainstream Confucianist culture.¹² People that moved, therefore, were often associated with destruction and immorality. Such terminology, and its potentially pejorative implications, remains in discussions of the migrant population to this day.¹³

As I have noted, the theme of travel in general has long been a tool in modern Chinese literature for surveying the state of the nation and the immense changes wrought over the centuries. Travellers in literature also journey as a way to explore the shifting relationship between self and society and to confront their own (often anxious) sense of identity.¹⁴ Floating and drifting is far from

8. Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 1–2.

9. Pál Nyíri, *Mobility and Cultural Authority in Contemporary China* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2010), 63. I will discuss the more positively viewed aspects of travel in more detail in Chapter 5.

10. Xiaodong Lin, *Gender, Modernity and Male Migrant Workers in China: Becoming a 'Modern' Man* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

11. Lin, *Gender, Modernity and Male Migrant Workers in China*, 31.

12. Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks Within China's Floating Population* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 33.

13. For a discussion of how the terminology of floating has been reclaimed by migrant workers, see Li, *Strangers in the City*, 39.

14. Lee, 'The Solitary Traveler'; Cai, *The Subject in Crisis*, 127–53; Laurence Coderre, 'Meaningful Mobility and the Ties That Bind: 1988 as a Postsocialist Road Story', *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 26, no. 2 (2014): 1–37.

a new motif. In twentieth- and twenty-first-century works it was put to good use numerous times: the roaming intellectuals to be found in the works of Yu Dafu, Shen Congwen, and Ai Wu;¹⁵ Bei Dao's 1990s poems in exile;¹⁶ and, most recently, poetry from migrant workers.¹⁷ Imagery of floating, and the drifters that populate these texts, perform a series of functions beyond reflecting the itinerant reality of the writers and their subjects. In a period of major social and economic change—be that in the Republican era or at the dawn of market reform—floating became a way of symbolizing spiritual drift (*jingshen piaobo* 精神漂泊), or the sense of ideological uncertainty and anxiety that comes with (seemingly) setting oneself adrift from mainstream values. Be it for dissident writers or migrant workers, it is also an indication of the wanderer's unsettled status in the country and the world at large. The terminology of drifting is therefore rife in contemporary depictions of Chinese society, with some suggesting that the generation born since economic reform is in fact a 'generation of drifters'.¹⁸

Xu's repeated use of the tropes of floating and drifting is one of the most distinctive features of his stories and has been much commented upon.¹⁹ It is clear that within his work the motif has its own ambivalence. While drifting and floating sensations accompany a sense of anxiety, material deprivation, and uneasy rootlessness, there are also positive connotations to be found. They signify, as we have already seen, a sense of freedom and adventure—an unshackling from the burdens of social expectation. In an ode to the joys of travel, Xu has suggested that physical movement brings about an 'unfettered' way of

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15. Tan Guilin, 'Lun Zhongguo xiandai wenxue de piaobo muti' [On the theme of drifting in modern Chinese literature], *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* 2 (1998): 161–74; Cao Yanhong, 'Dui chuantong bianyuan wenhua de queren he zhangyang: lun 20 shiji er san shi niandai xin wenxue zuopin zhong diceng piaobozhe de xiayi jingsheng' [Affirming and publicizing traditional marginal culture: A discussion of the chivalrous spirit of the lower class drifters in new literature of the 1920s and 1930s], *Jiangsu Jiaoyu Xueyuan Xuebao* 28, no. 3 (2012): 78–82.
 16. Chen Hui and Xia Li, 'Piaobo: xunhui shengming de fangxiang—lun Bei Dao 90 niandai shige' [Drifting: Retrieving the direction of life—on Bei Dao's 1990s poetry], *Dangdai Wentan* 1 (2010): 91–94.
 17. Hu Yici, 'Piaobo, tengtong yu kangzheng: xin shijie "dagong shige" zhuti qianxi' [Floating, pain, and resistance: A preliminary analysis of the main themes of 'migrant worker poetry'], *Xiandai Yuwen* 12 (2014): 39–40.
 18. Wang Xiang, 'Piaobo yidai: yi "piaobo" wei shijiao kan Zhongguo dangdai qingnian-zhuti' [A drifting generation: Looking at contemporary youth subjectivities from the angle of 'drifting'], *Yishu Guangjiao*, no. 1 (2014): 12–18; Wang Xiaomeng, 'Zai lu shang: wujin de shengming xingzou: lun Xu Zechen xiaoshuo de piaobo yishi' [On the road: The endless walk of life: On drifting consciousness in Xu Zechen's fiction], *Nanfeng Wentan* 5 (2017): 152–56.
 19. Wang, 'Zai lu shang'; Liu Deyuan, 'Hou Zhongguo jingyan de zhenghoushi biaoda: yi Xu Zechen de xiaoshuo wei lie' [Symptomatic expressions of a post-China experience: With Xu Zechen's novels as a case study], *Luoyang Shifan Xueyuan Xuebao* 34, no. 9 (2015): 57–60.

6

Conclusion: Rebel Men

One of the objectives of this study has been to highlight the recurring topic of masculinity as a source of preoccupation for many male authors in the postsocialist era. Amidst the noise and tumult of market reform, social change, ideological muddiness, and globalization, Chinese men are repeatedly scrutinized, mocked, fretted over, and reshaped. The authors under consideration in this book have woven the question of gender into other critical observations of postsocialist realities. Their work is often read for its literary attitude in a period of change, whether that appears in the form of Han Han's youthful rebellions, Xu Zechen's celebration of the most marginalized and downtrodden sections of the urban population, Feng Tang's sexually explicit provocations, or Zhu Wen's societal dropouts. This book has argued for reading their works as enquiries into the state of masculinity as much as enquiries into the state of postsocialist China.

Paying attention to constructions of masculinity therefore provides a means of identifying what Ortner refers to as the 'thickness' of rebellion and agency. Literary attitude, as we have seen, is a complicated business in the postsocialist cultural field. It is worth remembering, first of all, that we cannot assume that the motivations behind writing subversive texts are to rebel outright against CCP rule; several artists might find that provocative statements, critiquing the establishment, or declarations of marginality and distance from the mainstream hold other attractions besides expressing one's political will. It is likely that most of the authors I have considered in this study would deny that they are 'rebels' at all. Han Han for example, despite constantly being labelled as such by Chinese and foreign media, rejects the term, telling the *New York Times* that 'I don't disagree for the sake of disagreeing, as the word "rebellious" suggests'.¹ His next sentence suggests that any transgressions he makes are born out of individual agency rather than a political impulse, but still it emphasizes the attraction of carving

1. Karoline Kan, 'Once a Voice of Young China, Han Han Stakes Out a Different Path', *New York Times*, 20 September 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/21/world/asia/han-han-china.html>.

out one's own path away from the mainstream: 'I do whatever I think is right, whatever I like and want to do.'² Whatever their primary motives for engaging in literary attitude without engaging in overt dissent, these writers have had to tread a fine and moving line of what was an acceptable level of transgression. At the same time, in a market economy, the commercial appeal of their works has become increasingly important. As Barmé's concept of bankable dissent has outlined, this leads to another layer of careful judgement, as the right level of attitude can bring market value and greater domestic and international attention to a work. In this case, sensation and attitude become not a form of subversion but of complicity with state-led narratives of reform and economic growth.

The expression of rebellion, of declaring marginality and distance from the mainstream, also often involves rebelling against certain models of masculinity. Rejecting mainstream society comes part and parcel with rejecting the most socially acceptable ideals of manhood. Wealthy businessmen, white-collar workers, family men, teachers, officials, and policemen: any man that can be construed as belonging to conformist society features very little in these texts. Instead, the narrative focus is on marginalized masculinities—the disordered bodies, the losers and slackers, the criminals, and the adventurers. This, as we have seen, is done with a gleeful relish that surely adds to the oppositional tinge of the texts in question. In presenting ostensibly alternative forms of 'doing masculinity', the texts this book has considered all highlight the fact that masculinities are plural, malleable, and 'learned', rather than singular or innate to all men.

The great paradox is that in resisting certain hegemonic values of masculinity and in disavowing the idea of an innately 'true' experience of manhood, other values retain their importance. Heterosexuality, virility, fraternity, and a man's privileged position as agent are all vital parts of the texts. A second objective of this book, then, has been to consider how preoccupations of masculinity cut into, and further complicate, the already tangled question of attitude and resistance in cultural production. I have argued that, whether consciously or not, narratives of rebellion and doubts about certain elements of mainstream masculinity irresistibly become narratives about the rehabilitation, rather than the refutation, of the masculine.

It is for this reason that the repeated cries of a 'crisis of masculinity' in post-socialist China rarely ring true. Besides the patently false assumption that often lies behind the idea of crisis—that there is one 'correct' form of masculinity that must be protected at all costs—when the marginalized man appears troubled in his gender performance, it is done in a way that still relies on normative values. Zhu Wen's teasing references to deviant homosexuality appear as a form of humour that details the depths to which men have sunk, rather than dethroning heterosexuality as the sole marker of manhood. Xu Zechen's pitiable Bian Hongqi in

2. Kan, 'Once a Voice of Young China'.

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