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*Mastery of Words and Swords: Negotiating Intellectual Masculinities in Modern China, 1890s–1930s*

Jun Lei

# Mastery of Words and Swords

Negotiating Intellectual Masculinities in  
Modern China, 1890s–1930s

Jun Lei

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# 1

## Performing Chinese Masculinities on the World Stage

### *An Introduction*

#### **The Specter of a Male Femininity**

In an essay published in 1925, Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936), arguably the most influential Chinese writer of the twentieth century, advanced with his usual irony about female impersonation in Peking opera: “The greatest, most prevalent and forever lasting arts of us Chinese is man playing woman. . . . The value of this art lies in its capacity to ingratiate both: Men see ‘a dressed-up woman’ and women see ‘a man dressed up.’”<sup>1</sup> Lu Xun repeatedly expressed his vexation with this type of transvestism and was a frequent and vocal critic of Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳 (1894–1961), the acknowledged master of female impersonation. He targeted Mei’s gender-ambiguous body and disparaged Mei for seeking fame among Westerners on tours of the United States, Japan, and Russia.<sup>2</sup> Chinese intellectuals of Lu Xun’s time often conceptualized Japan and Russia as part of the more advanced Western civilization, despite their awareness of these two countries’ cultural differences from western European powers.<sup>3</sup>

Some literary critics have tried to make sense of his criticism by suggesting that at this time of national crisis, a spokesperson for modern Chinese literature and culture like Lu Xun would naturally disapprove of linking a traditional art to the new image of China on the global stage.<sup>4</sup> This explanation is certainly well justified, as Mei Lanfang was a much-celebrated cultural icon of “Chinese tradition” and actively socialized with literati such as Fan Zengxiang 樊增祥 (1846–1931), Zhang Jian 张謇 (1853–1926), and Luo Dunrong 罗惇融 (1872–1924), all strong supporters and practitioners of Chinese poetry, calligraphy, Peking opera, and other traditional arts. However, attention to the modernity-versus-tradition argument should not neglect Lu Xun’s concerns with the lack of masculinity of Mei’s body, which exuded feminine charm on and off stage. On stage, the female impersonator, according to Lu Xun, muddled Chinese audiences’ sense of what a true man should look like. In real life, Mei achieved domestic and international popularity by presenting what Lu Xun considered a fraudulent, effeminate image of Chinese men.

The gender-ambiguous performer triggered multiple layers of psychological baggage in Lu Xun about the exposure of Chinese masculinity to the foreigner's gaze. First, it evokes a male castration complex. In his assessment of the female impersonator's bisexual appeal, Lu Xun alludes to the "asexuality" 无性 of a eunuch culture 太监文化,<sup>5</sup> drawing an analogy between this theatrical performance of female impersonation and the unnatural condition of male impotence. We further discern this complex when considering the broader context. It was not uncommon for elite men to keep sexual liaisons with male performers in late imperial China,<sup>6</sup> but Lu Xun's generation of modern intellectuals strongly reproved this as depravity. In another essay, he calls Mei a "beloved" 宠儿 of the literati, hinting at his role as a "male favorite" 男宠 to male elites.<sup>7</sup> His brother Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885–1967), a famous writer and literary scholar, similarly criticized male opera performers for their participation in the sex trade as "male courtesans."<sup>8</sup> Chinese modern enlighteners like Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren were concerned with the male performers' gender ambiguity and male homoerotic desire because of their implied threat to masculinity and human reproductivity. As this book will show, although these enlighteners usually did not object platonic or homosocial relations between two men, many treated homosexuality as pathological and unproductive for society.

I find Lu Xun's disparagement of Mei Lanfang a provocative case with which to begin my exploration of modern Chinese intellectual masculinities as they evolved between the 1890s and 1930s, a period characterized by drastic ruptures in personal, sociopolitical, and cultural domains. Lu Xun's remarks on Mei betray his apprehension of "improper" presentations of Chinese masculinities to the Western gaze. He elicits the complex relations between performers and audiences to distance himself from them as a more conscientious observer, relative both to the older generation of literati and to those "muddleheaded" Chinese commoners. He thus addresses what he imagines to be an enlightened audience who can discern Chinese male "lack" and the power imbalance of transnational gender politics. This group consisted of new generations of intellectuals,<sup>9</sup> Lu Xun himself included, whom he expected to function not only as mindful viewers equipped with a cosmopolitan vision and national sensibility but also as conscientious performers of "true" Chinese masculinities. Moreover, since modern Chinese intellectuals like Lu Xun also partially adopted the Western gaze, he could see the Othering of his own vulnerable self that was inherently connected to a Chinese literary or scholarly masculinity. As these Chinese modernists often examined social issues with a scientific or medicalized gaze, they increasingly associated men's gender ambiguity and male-male homoeroticism pathologically with male femininity and sexual aberration.

Indeed, anxieties about effeminacy have perpetually haunted Chinese masculinities in literary and cultural representations of Chinese modernity, as well as in popular debates about the proper ways to present "real" men or "true"

Chinese masculinities to the global community. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, neologisms such as “sissy pants” 娘炮, “pretty boys” 花美男, and “young, fresh meat” 小鲜肉 have appeared frequently in the media, often pejoratively, to refer to well-groomed and delicate-looking young male entertainers. Recently, following Chinese state media’s ban on effeminate celebrities, attacks were initiated against “sissy men” on a variety of platforms. TV stations staged popular variety shows with evocative titles such as *Takes a Real Man* 真正男子汉, and worried parents and coaches were eager to mold young boys into “alpha males” in Real Man Training Clubs.<sup>10</sup> Most notably, Wu Jing, the director and writer of the top-grossing *Wolf Warrior* 战狼 film series, brushed aside Western film critics’ disapproval of his ambition to promote China’s international standing and the nation’s colonial efforts in Africa. Instead, he proudly declared that his principal goal was to reform China’s male gender. After complaining about the current prevalence of effeminacy in Chinese culture and entertainment industry, Wu explained that he chose military themes to inspire men to become “real men” 纯爷们 and encourage women to favor “real men.” He also cited characters played by Tom Cruise and Sylvester Stallone as models of physical and sexual prowess for “inadequate” Chinese men to emulate.<sup>11</sup>

These seemingly incidental cases, separated by almost a century, nevertheless point to a perennial desire to toughen the Chinese male gender when national and world orders, then and now, are in a heightened state of flux. I juxtapose them to highlight a few of this book’s central themes: first, the theatrical dimension of modern Chinese manhood, or the persistent performance and performativity of masculinities; second, the intricate relationship between perceived effeminacy, Chinese masculinities, and Chinese “national character”; third, the keen awareness among male Chinese intellectuals of gender politics on the world stage and their strategies of repudiating “male femininity” in performing masculinities.

To anticipate my argument, let me first posit that discontent with effeminate images of Chinese men went far beyond any individual critique of traditional Chinese art forms and male performers. Rather, it pointed to a change in collective consciousness prompted by a masculinity crisis concurrent with China’s transition from a “celestial empire” to a semicolon through numerous failed military contests with Western colonial powers and Japan from the mid-nineteenth century onward.

This book focuses on the period between the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). This period captures Chinese intellectuals’ most intensive interactions with Japanese and Western colonial powers in negotiating personal and national identities in this anomalous era of modern Chinese history. Internal wars between political forces within China also led to regime shifts during the time examined, which roughly covers the last two decades of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), ruled by an ethnically Manchu imperial house, and the first three decades of a new and troubled

Republic of China (1912–1949, established after the 1911 revolution). The new Republic itself went through the Beiyang government (controlled from 1912 to 1928 by Yuan Shikai 袁世凯 [1859–1916] and other warlords), and the Nationalist government (1928–1949) after Chiang defeated the warlords.

This book examines male intellectuals' exploration of new masculine expressions and ideals during this span of approximately half a century. Male literary and cultural producers were not only "besieged" by internal and external wars and political violence<sup>12</sup> but also deeply troubled by their marginalized social status, rapidly changing familial roles, and relations with women. Many grew increasingly sensitive to "unmanly" traits and uncertain about the "appropriate" way to assert masculinities. Such sensitivity and uncertainty were sometimes not openly or directly enunciated but wrapped up in the ways they implemented literary ideals, cultural reforms, and the more pronounced Woman Question.

The book examines three generations of semimodern and modern male intellectuals: the late Qing, the May Fourth, and the post-May Fourth generations. I realize that this artificial division with the May Fourth Movement as its watershed risks dismissal of the heritage in between generations. Crucially, I attend to both historical continuities and discontinuities while highlighting the far-reaching impact of the May Fourth Movement on Chinese masculinity and other cultural identities. Narrowly, the term refers to the patriotic protests on May 4, 1919, triggered by China's compromise with Japan in the Treaty of Versailles. I use May Fourth throughout this book in its broader sense, as a Chinese enlightenment movement in the sense used in Vera Schwarcz's classic study. It is a near equivalent of the New Culture Movement but with a heavier emphasis on its political agenda. According to Schwarcz, although the late Qing generation initiated the enlightenment project, Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873–1929) and his peers did not mobilize it into a movement until the May Fourth generation. In her own words, late Qing intellectuals only "led the way to the threshold of enlightenment" but were "unable and unwilling to cross it into the strange, lonely and doubt-filled world beyond."<sup>13</sup> Edmund Fung similarly argues that Liang Qichao belongs to the first generation, also a transitional generation between literati and modern intellectuals. They differ from members of the May Fourth generation such as Hu Shi 胡适 (1891–1962), Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 (1879–1942), and Lu Xun, who received an education overseas and completed their intellectual transition to the modern world.<sup>14</sup> This movement, coupled with various wars and the aforementioned regime shifts, inevitably affected the social status of male intellectuals and their outlook on foreign and native cultures in articulating gender politics.

These Chinese intellectuals, especially those born in the second half of the nineteenth century, witnessed the low point of China's decline firsthand. Many became not only vehement opponents of older Chinese systems and customs but also enthusiastic advocates of campaigns to strengthen the nation. In other words, they were compelled to reevaluate the traditional roles of Chinese

literati and construct new intellectual masculinities. However, the coexistence of Western modernity and Western imperialist aggression complicated their perceptions of and choices between tradition and modernity, between male aggression and nonviolence, and between military nationalism and national interest, intellectual freedom, and cosmopolitan humanism. From this perspective, Lu Xun's disdain for the feminine charm of a male performer is symptomatic of the dilemma of Chinese male intellectuals and the deeply felt sense of humiliation that arose from the exposure of Chinese male "lack" to the world audience and the subsequent desire to cure this "lack."

## Repositioning to *Wen* 文 (Literary) and *Wu* 武 (Martial) Masculinities

The twofold crisis of national identity and Chinese manhood can be identified in male intellectuals' repositioning of *wen* and *wu* masculinities. *Wen* is the literary or scholarly Chinese masculinity of the *wen-wu* dyad that Kam Louie uses to differentiate Chinese masculine ideals from dominant Western masculinities.<sup>15</sup> Louie astutely associates *wen* with soft-faced and soft-bodied Confucian scholars in Chinese history, their literary accomplishments, cultural refinement, and genteel mannerisms. Meanwhile, he uses *wu* to describe warriors' physical prowess, martial valor, and military strength. According to Louie, men who possessed *wen* masculinity often enjoyed textual, sexual, and even political privileges in Chinese history. Geng Song has advanced Louie's study of *wen* as a distinctive Chinese masculinity through literary representations of *caizi* 才子 (talented scholars). Song more explicitly points out the association between literary masculinity and "feminine" traits such as softness, fragility, passivity, and emotionality.<sup>16</sup>

Yuejin Wang, based on his examination of male images in Chinese film and literature, even more boldly asserts "it is the man who lacks." Wang therefore reaffirms feminine traits as desirable components of Chinese masculinities as well as the existence of a "femininity complex" as a cultural form of collective unconscious in Chinese literary and cultural representations of men.<sup>17</sup> Although it is simplistic to identify the valuation of "softness" as a clear-cut point of division between Chinese and Western masculinities, acknowledging soft qualities in men that are often denigrated as "effeminate" is necessary to reconceptualize literary masculinity or any other soft masculinities in more neutral or positive terms.

Before reviewing the soft/hard and Chinese/Western masculinity debates, let me note here that *wen* was a masculine ideal formulated for and by Chinese men of letters themselves, and that its dominance in certain times of Chinese history was obtained and maintained through the political power and cultural resources of the scholar-gentry class 士大夫.<sup>18</sup> Although a Chinese man should

ideally aspire for both *wen* and *wu* qualities, *wen* and *wu* professions represented two vastly different career paths and almost always implied disparate assemblages of bodies, attires, behaviors, and mental faculties. Historically, scholars and warriors competed for hegemony, and scholar-officials, who won their appointments in local and central governments, often through the civil service exam system 科举, began to ascend in power over warriors after the Eastern Han dynasty (25 CE–220 CE). From the Song dynasty (960–1279) to the late Qing, Confucian scholars more frequently occupied dominant positions than did military officers in court politics, and civilian authorities were often in charge of the military.<sup>19</sup>

The scholar-gentry established the institutional hierarchy of *wen* over *wu*, and their ideology excluded *wu* from the four major male occupations<sup>20</sup>—scholars 士, peasants 农, craftsmen 工, and merchants 商—by condemning the violence committed by warriors and soldiers. In literary and theatrical representations of *caizi*, *wen* also represented the epitome of Chinese masculinity possessed by literary elites. The talented scholar, or what Geng Song vividly portrays as the “fragile scholar,” is characterized by delicate looks, fragile physique, emotional sensitivity, knowledge of Confucian classics, and refined taste in literature and art. These qualities of what would later be labeled effeminate attributes in the discourse of modernity were not believed to impair his masculinity. Instead, they were crucial to the construction and manifestation of his *wen* masculinity. They authenticated his cultural sophistication, bolstered his political power, and comprised an integral part of human sensitivity and men’s heterosexual sex appeal.

However, this Confucian masculine ideal became an object of ridicule for foreigners and Chinese alike in the late Qing. Charles Toogood Downing, a British surgeon and avid traveler who practiced his profession in China from 1836 to 1837, described a Chinese gentleman he encountered as weak, sick, and feminine. Downing saw such “extreme delicacy and sickliness” as a major source of foreigners’ “disgust and antipathy.”<sup>21</sup> His writing marks a visible shift from the characterizations advanced by earlier foreign envoys and visitors to China, who unreservedly lauded the mandarins’ elegance. As I will explain in greater detail in Chapter 3, the sick, weak, and effeminate “Chinaman” stereotype was part of a new, global, racialized colonial discourse initiated on the eve of the First Opium War (1839–1942), which grew popular in subsequent decades.

Half a century later, American missionary Arthur Smith wrote and publicized another key Western account of the Chinese people. Smith’s book appears to primarily examine the shared characteristics of Chinese commoners, but careful readers will find his special attention to “Chinese literary students and graduates.”<sup>22</sup> In Smith’s eyes, educated Chinese men were “literary fossils” whose long robes hindered their movements and whose long nails precluded them from manual labor. Smith presents them as living proof of “irrational Chinese education,” which produced inefficient bureaucrats, blindly pious sons, unprincipled

## 4

# New Men of Feelings

## *“Freedom of Love,” Modern Ethics, and Neo-romantic Masculinity of the May Fourth Generation*

After the failed 1911 Revolution, Beiyang generals and military men dominated the government. Enthusiasm for political and cultural revolution took a downturn before it surged again during the May Fourth Movement. The influence of late Qing intellectuals, including that of Liang Qichao, was waning. In the middle 1910s, the May Fourth generation of male intellectuals became the new cultural leaders of Chinese enlightenment. The Western imperialist masculinity that had inspired Liang might still hold some appeal to military men and athletes in China for its physical strength and martial valor. It nevertheless ceased to be a model to emulate for Chinese men of letters. Even Liang Qichao himself, disappointed with the autocracy of the new military government and shocked by the disastrous consequences of the Great War (1914–1918), began to reflect on his prior advocacy of martiality, and he published anti-war polemics. In other words, the brutalization of scholars—the process in which scholars become or are made to become brutish—no longer seemed to be a wise option, and the new generation of male intellectuals were no longer eager to assume the physically hypermasculine traits of military men. Further, Liang also became dubious of Eurocentric cosmopolitanism and more critical of science-based materialistic culture in the West. He returned to Chinese culture elsewhere, particularly pinning his hope on renovating Confucianism and Daoist philosophies to save a declining world civilization.

The May Fourth generation, however, were more determined to turn their back on the elsewhere China, never curbing their enthusiasm and curiosity about elsewhere. They were effective at assimilating and synthesizing new knowledge of different fields and disciplines from the West and Japan and, most of all, at highlighting humanity’s common feelings, goals, and universal values. Unlike their late Qing predecessors, who resorted to both words and swords to assert masculinity, the May Fourth males mostly used words as swords to advance their enlightenment agendas, including reshaping femininities and masculinities. The effort to construct intellectual masculinity largely shifted emphasis

from *shen* (the body-person) to *xin* (the heart-mind). Liang and his cohort in the late Qing admired martial masculinity, offered fit male bodies as fighters and breeders, and advocated sacrifice of individuals to the nation. Contrastingly, May Fourth men of letters looked to European Romantic writers and philosophers as well as thinkers and theorists of “mind science” for inspiration and elucidation. In literary creations many directed their gaze inward to the tormented hearts and minds of the “individual,” a newly rediscovered and much-cherished conception.

Literary scholars have long pointed to the “inward turn” of the May Fourth literature,<sup>1</sup> and some successfully attested to the “feeling” dimension as assertions of individual or collective modern identities for May Fourth writers. Notably, Leo Lee defines writers such as Lu Xun, Yu Dafu 郁达夫 (1896–1945), Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978), Xu Zhimo, and others as the Chinese romantic generation, arguing that it is the “feeling self” rather than the rational being that made this romantic generation modern.<sup>2</sup> But the May Fourth writers were not the only ones who thematized feelings. The Mandarin and Butterfly school (Butterfly), although writing with a commercial purpose unfit for the May Fourth enlightenment ideology and for a more leisure-oriented “middlebrow” readership, appealed to the “heart” as an even more dominant theme than their May Fourth peers. Revisionist literary histories have already affirmed the significance of Butterfly romantic stories in forming a bourgeois identity and taste among the growing class of semieducated urbanites in the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Haiyan Lee (2006) and Lynn Pan (2015) have respectively examined literary and cultural texts beyond May Fourth literature and Butterfly love stories. Pan offers a cogent analysis of the epistemological link between the Chinese conception of true love and its European and Japanese sources. Haiyan Lee ingeniously theorizes three structures of feelings in what she calls “the revolution of the heart”: the Confucian, the enlightenment, and the revolutionary. Haiyan Lee’s and Lynn Pan’s works, with a much larger array of textual evidence, affirm what Leo Lee posited about the “feeling self.” That is, *qing* 情 (feeling/emotion) was crucial to the formation of modern identities in China.<sup>4</sup>

These affirmations of “feeling” power, however, leave the Man Question untouched. Kam Louie, a leading scholar of Chinese masculinities, has filled that gap to some extent. His seminal book *Theorizing Chinese Masculinities* contains one chapter on the May Fourth era, in which Louie analyzes transcultural romance in Lao She’s novel *Two Mas* 二马. He draws the conclusion that “falling in love was therefore indispensable as a signature for the new *wenren* [literary men].”<sup>5</sup> However, his study of love’s key role in shaping literary men does not clarify whether the love cherished by what he calls “new *wenren*” (the May Fourth generation) was different from that of the older generations of literati or their contemporary Butterfly school. After all, these latter two groups were also known for flaunting feelings in writing, yet both were targets of May Fourth attacks.

This chapter continues these academic efforts to explore the “inward turn” in May Fourth literary and cultural texts, not only as a marker for modern aesthetics but as male writers’ aspiration to provide new formula of what I call a neo-romantic masculinity to reconstruct themselves as the “New Men of Feelings.” I argue that neo-romantic masculinity denotes the May Fourth generation’s reorientations and new strategic positionings to differentiate themselves from older generations of *wen* masculinities. While both Chinese heritage and foreign influence were present in the May Fourth intellectuals’ reconstruction of romantic love and romantic masculinity, they made more conscientious efforts to model “New Men of Feelings” on Euro-American romantic models, sometimes through Japanese sources as the medium. This new idealization requires the use of *aiqing* 爱情 (romantic love), a more narrowly defined *qing*, to substitute the previously more dominant Confucian affective ties of *zhong* (loyalty) and *xiao* (filial piety) as the primary parameter of male subjectivity and as the means to achieve cosmopolitan romantic masculinity. The emergence of a romantic *shaonian* 少年 (juvenile boy) image as male protagonist requires purity, sincerity, and devotion on the part of men, which counterbalances male privilege and women’s subjugation dictated by Confucian ethics. Meanwhile, a more mature version of romantic masculinity also demands active feelings as well as rational self-control of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors to evade the trap of effeminacy.

## Changing Parameters of Intellectual Masculinity

From the mid-1910s to the early 1920s, extensive and drastic changes took place in venues that professed gender and defined subjectivities, and concomitantly transformed the parameters for assessing and guiding intellectual masculinity performance. This chapter mainly emphasizes changes in three interconnected spheres—the institutional, the affective, and the epistemological—which most powerfully shook the core of older ethics of Confucian masculinities and reshaped the interiority of the younger generation.

First, high levels of politics and extended family were fading into insignificance, unable to sustain themselves as principal arenas for male intellectuals to perform masculinities. In dynastic China, different levels of government, together with the extended Confucian family system, were one of the primary fields of gender production. A scholarly man’s masculinity was defined by his capacity to first obtain official appointments through imperial exams, and afterward by his responsibilities and privileges in assisting the ruler to govern the state. The May Fourth generation, however, was blocked from the traditional path to officialdom when the imperial exam system was abolished in 1905. When the military men controlled the state, men of letters were even further removed from the power center. Without an active political role to play like the older generations of Confucian scholar-officials, this generation needed to cultivate new spheres

and channels through which to manifest masculinities as scholars. New social institutions such as Western-style universities and print media industry began to facilitate new professional practices for male authority on social problems. Leading May Fourth writers such as Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Hu Shi, Lu Xun, and Zhou Zuoren were professors affiliated with Peking University. They were also professional writers, journal editors, and contributors in the proliferating channels of publication, which functioned as new platforms for masculine performance.

The Confucian extended family system was the primary target of May Fourth enlightenment discourse. As Hiroko Sakamoto points out, May Fourth discourse shifted from the “stiff, political tracts” that were often “prohibitive and masculinist in tone” to topics such as women, love, and family.<sup>6</sup> Enlightenment journals promoted the nuclear family as the new model to modernize Chinese households. Central to the new family model was a monogamous heterosexual couple with fewer, healthier children. Crucially, the ideal family required equal parental responsibility for child rearing.<sup>7</sup> What this requirement implied was that mothers’ education level should be elevated, since women in general were much less educated than men. This also meant that male intellectuals, in this challenge to the Confucian family system, needed to modernize men’s roles as sons, husbands, and fathers.

The May Fourth male writers showed unrestrained disdain for Confucian patriarchy, especially elder men of means who practiced polygamy and subordinated women and younger men in the household with dogmatic Confucian ethics.<sup>8</sup> Although one man could lawfully have only one principal wife, it was not uncommon for a scholar-official to acquire concubines, which was a sign of social prestige and demonstration of masculinity.<sup>9</sup> The literati of older generations also sought solace in high-class courtesans, who were cultivated in arts and poetry and professionally trained to serve their male clients’ sexual, emotional, and intellectual needs.<sup>10</sup> In the eyes of the May Fourth generation striving to be cosmopolitan modern men, these issues of polygamy, female chastity, and prostitution not only jeopardized their goal of actualizing modern families but also presented a negative impression of Chinese male elites to the world. Thus, they made repeated and eloquent pleas in fiction and nonfiction for women’s rights, a new sexual morality, and love-based marriages. However, as I will elaborate below, the majority faced dilemmas implementing these principals in real life.

Second and related, as the state and the family systems went through transformations, the human relations and affective bonds that were most definitive of masculinity began to move away from *zhong* 忠 (subject’s loyalty to the emperor) and *xiao* 孝 (children’s filial piety to parents). Confucian governance of the state and the family, more than mere institutional top-down control, had also depended upon mutually affective bonds between ruler and subjects, and between parents and children. It is easy to understand the dissolution of *zhong*

since there was no longer an emperor in the new republic. Unlike many late Qing reformers who still cherished *zhong*, the May Fourth generation saw no correlational interests and affective bonds between the individual and the nation. This especially made sense now that the government had fallen into the hands of military men. As Chen Duxiu argued, "Before asking if we should love our nation, we should first ask what kind of nation it is."<sup>11</sup> Hu Shi made more explicit the importance of valuing personal freedom: "Some people ask you to sacrifice your personal freedom for the freedom of the nation but let me tell you: your personal freedom is the freedom of the nation. A nation of freedom and equality is not made of a group of slaves!"<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, for the May Fourth generation, the affective bonds of *zhong* and *xiao*, ritualized by Confucianism, only fostered unhealthy relations and subservient younger generations. They retooled *qing* as a new emotion, where not only can a man's autonomous self be formed but also his masculinity can be authenticated and revitalized. Maram Epstein reevaluates *xiao*, arguing that it had been a powerful and reciprocal affection in the Qing dynasty that helped to build the intersubjective self (a traditional Chinese self whose growth was dependent upon parent-child affection and duties).<sup>13</sup> The May Fourth generation, however, rejected this interjective self to embrace a Western notion of self whose subjectivity and autonomy is achieved disparately, through individualizing and separating "self" from parents and others. Western-style romantic love thus came in handy as a modern affective bond to help the Chinese man build an autonomous selfhood. Heterosexual romance surely raised the issue of how two lovers could still remain dependent and autonomous while tied to each other with passion and love, but this modern affective bond of *qing* provided the much-needed new resource the May Fourth generation could utilize against the "feudal" shackles of ritualized Confucian bonds. This way, they could forge new ties to "men of feelings" in the world based on *qing* as a more universal feeling and a feeling compatible with cosmopolitan moral principles.

The third masculinity parameter is related to the two I have just discussed but worth separate elaboration. That is, the changing epistemological base for measuring one's level of intellect and quality of thought, which always carries more weight for writers and intellectuals than men of other classes and professions. The May Fourth generation challenged Confucian knowledge and endeavored to shape a new and more heterogeneous epistemology for Chinese enlightenment. Analyzing masculinity performance among this generation, we need to consider the compounded nature of this enlightenment, a nonnegligible cause of tortured hearts, confused minds, and paradoxical and contradictory expressions about romantic love. With a diverse array of inspiration from Europe, America, and Japan on an unprecedented scale together with attempts by some to renew Confucian culture, this Chinese enlightenment contains an eclectic mix of seemingly incompatible and even oppositional elements. We see radical

anti-Confucianism and advocacy of Euro-American liberal culture in coexistence with strident nationalism, traditionalism, Soviet Marxism and collectivism, and fundamental criticisms of Western liberalism, capitalism, and imperialism.<sup>14</sup>

Most relevant to the discussion of Chinese masculinities are two strands of imported intellectual trends with opposing views about gender and discrepancies between intentions and outcomes in shaping romantic masculinity at the time. These two trends were European anti-Enlightenment literature and philosophy, which focused on irrationality and emotions, and the upheld ideas of the European Enlightenment on science, rationality, and the well-known dichotomies of male/mind/culture versus female/body/nature. On the one hand, anti-Enlightenment literature and philosophy inspired many to pair masculinity with emotions, passions, and even mental disorders within dualistic systems of language and representation. On the other hand, because of the Enlightenment's cult of science and reason, irrationality and emotions were often deemed feminine, inferior, and a potential threat to men's intelligence and self-control. Many Chinese enlighteners who embraced science and reason, like their European counterparts, considered men's irrationality and emotions as a repudiation of reason and consequently a lack of self-determination and a sign of effeminacy and weakness.

For many, it was imperative that scientific views should replace Confucian doctrines to nourish modern hearts and minds. Among May Fourth leaders, Hu Shi famously emphasized this point in a long-lasting intellectual debate on science and metaphysics.<sup>15</sup> Li Dazhao, Chen Duxiu, and Lu Xun all sought moral guidance in evolutionary and biological sciences.<sup>16</sup> As Western scientific discourses were gaining epistemological ground during the Chinese enlightenment, the May Fourth generation intended to deploy them as a replacement for Confucian classics as the fundamental knowledge base and criteria by which to measure individuals' intellect and acculturation. Some used imported scientific discourses to renew ideas on love ethics and sexual morality, and others flaunted their scientific knowledge to buttress modern scholarly masculinity. Chinese writers, translators, and literary critics made creative and fruitful (albeit not always accurate) explorations into Western texts of various disciplines—ranging from evolution theory, biological, medical, and natural sciences, to philosophy and literature—as literary and cultural studies of heart/mind and moral guidance for love and sex.

Debates were frequently launched over freedom of love and marriage, individual autonomy and social responsibility, and Chinese tradition and Western knowledge. It was not unusual to see literary criticism that advocated for emotions simultaneously provide scientific criteria to evaluate the appropriateness of emotional expressions. Neither was it uncommon to find miscellaneous components in a May Fourth love treatise: accounts of Russell's love affairs, quotes from Byron's poems and Rousseau's confessions, and references

to neurologist and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), sexologist Havelock Ellis (1859–1939), and Swedish feminist thinker Ellen Key (1849–1926). Consequently, while the idealization of romantic masculinity demanded that men articulate their sincere emotions in words, it also paradoxically required them to understand the individual's free will and emotions with modern scientific knowledge and keep overflowing emotions and desires in check with rationality.

## Neologisms and New Love

The interior realities of human beings, as a dominant new focus in May Fourth literature, cannot be separated from the linguistic reforms that were in full swing. Heated debates were launched to thoroughly reevaluate classical Chinese 文言文 and promote vernacular forms 白话 of Chinese language and literature. In 1917, Hu Shi published "Tentative Proposals for Literary Reform" in *New Youth*, the chief forum for the May Fourth pioneers. Hu advised young writers in his first proposal that "words must have substance" 言之有物. He explained that the substance of literature should contain both "emotion/feeling" 情感和 "thought" 思想, which he respectively compares to the "soul" and "brain." He cautions in subsequent proposals that young writers should not imitate certain rigid styles of ancient Chinese masters.<sup>17</sup> Following the lead of Hu Shi, young writers became the major force in the reform. Some were concerned with Chinese characters. Qian Xingcun 钱杏邨 (1900–1977), for example, alleged that "Chinese characters can only express the native thoughts and emotions, and are absolutely incapable of presenting the new world civilization since Lamarck and Darwin."<sup>18</sup> Other writers and literary critics were more worried about the encumbering classical style. Zheng Zhenduo complained, "Restricted by the stereotypical patterns of the old style, so many great thoughts and emotions cannot be expressed to its utmost accuracy and subtlety."<sup>19</sup> Why were the "native thoughts and emotions" in Qian's opinion no longer able to reflect a more advanced civilization? What were the "great thoughts and emotions" whose subtlety could not be fully captured by the crude or outdated Chinese language in Zheng's mind? In what ways were these "thoughts and emotions" different from the kind of thoughts and emotions that classical Confucian scholars were capable of?

Although conflicted on what exactly made Chinese language, literature, and culture backward, these writers expressed a common sentiment that either traditional Chinese literature and language did not have modern emotions and thoughts 情思, or the traditional forms were inadequate to articulate them. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, intellectual masculinity largely shifted its emphasis from *shen* (the body-person) to *xin* (the heart-mind), a generator of both thoughts and emotions. This quest for new linguistic modes—subtler and more accurate expressions—was intricately linked to male writers' desire

## 6

# Optical Scientism

## *Editorial Authority, Male Subjectivity, and Policing “Female Monstrosity” in Shanghai Print Media*

This chapter continues to address native male cultural producers' fear and desire of transgressive modern women and their tactics of mitigating such fear and desire. While Chapter 5 examined the Modern Girl figure in New Sensationalists fiction, this chapter focuses on analysis of visuals in Shanghai pictorial magazines, expanding the discussion to include varied images of modern women and a larger range of male cultural producers with different political agendas. It draws particular attention to male editorial authority as well as male authorial agency behind visual representations of modern women.<sup>1</sup> As scholarly research of print media in Republican China shows, men still dominated the editorial positions in Shanghai presses, including burgeoning women's magazines.<sup>2</sup> Influential pictorial and women's magazines such as the *Young Companion* 良友, *Women's Pictorial* 妇人画报, and *Ladies' Journal* 妇女杂志, all had men as chief editors and largely male editorial boards. Male editorial authority intervened in the publication's rhetoric, its technologies, and its representations of women, to ensure that the display of knowledge in images of women conformed to the gender ideologies of the magazines and functioned to assert male subjectivity through cultural authority over the interpretation of female bodily aesthetics and sexuality.

One tendency emerged in the process of selecting, framing, and integrating materials into the final images constructed of women: some male editors and authors portrayed women's mobility and sexuality negatively through what I call “female monstrosity,” sometimes with a wry sense of humor and sometimes in blunt criticism. To a large extent, one can understand female monstrosity as a counterfeit or contrast to genuinely ideal femininities. As Loise Edwards points out, male intellectuals and cultural producers retained their guardianship of women through dividing modern women into true/good and fake/bad types based on their own political agendas.<sup>3</sup> With new visual materials, this chapter further extrapolates the new criteria for both genders as well as implications of

female monstrosity for the maintenance of male authority. Though a brief discussion on social anxiety about the “third sex” 第三性, followed by analysis of three frequently recurring types of female monstrosity—the sexy wanton women, the masculine feminists, and the sickly beauties—this chapter seeks to shed light on why varied types of monstrous females rendered men’s masculinity problematic and how male editors and contributors sought to assert male subjectivity by exposing and restraining female monstrosity.

I use “optical scientism” to describe the tactic that male editors, visual artists, and journalists deployed as a discursive power to scrutinize the female body, to expose and regulate female monstrosity, with the assistance of scientific discourse, penetrating visual devices, and new forms of visual art. I borrow “scientism” from D. W. Y. Kwok, discussed in Chapter 2, with an emphasis on visual culture. As a brief reminder, Kwok defines “scientism” as a cult of science in Republic China that promoted understanding and organizing all aspects of human reality in a “scientific” way. My conception of “optical scientism” also dovetails with Tani Barlow’s use of “vernacular sociology” to capture Chinese journal editors’ and contributors’ reliance upon natural sciences borrowed from the West to explain social relations and historical processes.<sup>4</sup> Optical scientism also reflects what Foucault characterizes as a modern modality of power, which, unlike the earlier spectacular display of power through violence, permeates trivial aspects of everyday life through a subtler violence and discursive power.<sup>5</sup>

Rather than surveillance of science in general, my use of optical scientism emphasizes how regulatory scientific discourse was more effectively formulated and articulated by new visual technology (photo-reproduction technique) and devices (such as the camera, microscope, and X-ray), as well as new forms of visual art (photo collage, cartoon, advertisement illustration). By the 1930s, Shanghai publishers had largely replaced copperplate printing with photo reproduction and greatly improved the quality of images in printed materials at a reduced cost. The development of visual technologies increased the popularity of pictorial magazines. Visuals, photographs in particular, enhanced readers’ vision of the city in ways that mere texts were incapable. Lai-kwan Pang argues that Chinese perception of unfamiliar imported visual technology and devices in the beginning of the twentieth century reveals “a unique dimension of Chinese imagination and fear of Western modernity.”<sup>6</sup> This chapter shows that as the new optical devices continued to extend human vision to areas deeper and farther, their penetrating power no longer evoked the same degree of fear among the Chinese about Western modernity. In the world depicted by the 1930s Shanghai popular press, new optical technology and devices became useful tools for some cultural producers to expose or control “degenerating” female morality and gender ambiguity.

## The Third Sex 第三性: Deviation from “Natural” Sexual Characteristics

Before turning to the regulatory criteria via optical devices to rectify the exteriors and interiors of “monstrous” women, let us take a look at a neologism, also an imported “scientific” concept that was crucial to establishment of such criteria in Shanghai print media. This neologism is 第三性, the third (or intermediate) sex. In the early twentieth century, there was a surge of new words describing human sexuality and an influx of Western sexology ideas in China.<sup>7</sup> Tani Barlow argues that “the female sex” 女性 was a neologism in Republican China based on and feeding into “the Western, exclusionary, essentialized, male/female binary.”<sup>8</sup> In this binary system, the male sex was deemed the first sex and the female sex the second. The “third sex” then was used to describe those neither distinctly male nor female. These neologisms contain the character *xing* 性, which meant “human nature” in dynastic China and classical Chinese but took on a more biological and medicalized connotation from Western science in referring to sex, gender, and sexuality.<sup>9</sup> The expression “third sex” already appeared in the early 1920s in Chinese journals. For the most part, this term resulted from Chinese journal editors and contributors’ creative interpretations of Western sexual psychologists, sexologists, and philosophers of love to establish scientific boundaries for the normal first and second sexes and to police gender ambiguity and homosexuality.

Edward Carpenter was one of the most translated Western sexologists in China. Chinese authors often quoted and liberally interpreted his book *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women* to back up their fledgling theories about sex and sexuality. While Carpenter categorized those who do not clearly manifest masculine or feminine dispositions into the third sex, he actually offered positive viewpoints on both homosexuality and androgynous people.<sup>10</sup> He raised the concept of the third sex to encourage society to understand people of the third sex and to confirm such people’s unique double identities as reconciling the two extreme sexes.<sup>11</sup> Chinese journalists, however, mostly disparaged people of the third sex.<sup>12</sup> Carpenter’s Chinese followers in the early 1920s often invoked his theory to criticize feminism’s negative influence on Chinese women. In his article published in *Ladies’ Journal*, Y.D. pointed out the emerging third sex as an undesirable consequence of feminist movement, after defining it as “mannish women and womanish men” who do not belong to the first and second sexes.<sup>13</sup> Even Zhang Xichen, a self-claimed promoter of gender equality and the editor in chief of *Ladies’ Journal* at the time, openly expressed his uneasiness about women of the third sex. Using the pen name Selu, he echoed Y.D.’s view that feminist movements turned the female sex into the third sex. He explained that feminist demands would distract women from their natural duties of the female sex.<sup>14</sup> Yan Shi, another contributor to *Ladies Journal*, showed

# Conclusion

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, the perceived lack of true masculinity has shadowed the international images of individual Chinese men, the loosely formed class of the Chinese intelligentsia, and the Chinese nation at large. Whereas Chinese male intellectuals were inevitably Othered by Orientalist racial discourse, they did not passively adopt the values and practices of the Other during the transculturation. This book teases out Chinese male intellectuals' gender politics and textual tactics in breaking with Chinese tradition and Confucian *wen* masculinity and modernizing intellectual masculinities. They endeavored to negotiate the often-contradictory modern pursuits of strong individual identity, class solidarity, national citizenship, and cosmopolitan membership. This book approaches various contradictions at the heart of such efforts to articulate new tenets for intellectual masculinities amid the long search for global recognition since the turn of the twentieth century.

## Hardening and Softening Forces

This book has examined two seemingly opposing sets of demands that conditioned modern male Chinese intellectuals in the quest for the "mastery of words and swords." One set encouraged cerebral men to toughen up, instilled in them a hypermasculine aspiration to physical prowess and violence, and called for a repudiation of male femininity. The other set detested violence, questioned the sustainability of hard masculinities, and invoked or resonated with those traits and desires in men that were increasingly censured as effeminate. Chinese male intellectuals donned various scholar-warrior guises in their engagement with gender politics and self-presentation tactics. They acquired differential premises about both hard and hypermasculine actions (revolutionary and military exploits, political activism, rational calculation, physical violence, and sexual prowess) and soft nonactions often deemed feminine (literary and aesthetic cultivation, attention to appearance and bodily pains and pleasures, intensive

emotions, and “frivolous” pursuit of romantic feelings). The feminine/masculine dichotomy was an underlying paradigm for these hard and soft qualities, and for the broader system of binaries discussed in this book: modernity/tradition, enlightenment rationality/irrational emotions, and aspiration for a modern nation/desire for individual autonomy and everyday comforts.

The modernized and science-based epistemologies in China generally emphasized different gender roles for men and women based on biological differences. Chinese enlighteners intended to illuminate gender and sex with scientific (and pseudoscientific) knowledge—ranging from social Darwinism, eugenics, and sexology to biology, psychology, and physics—as well as Western literature and philosophy. Notwithstanding achievements in shaking traditional patriarchal and patrilineal hierarchies, these imported knowledges actually created and perpetuated the heteronormative and bio-eugenic myth of active male versus passive female paradigms, owing to both the limitations of those Western knowledges themselves and Chinese intellectuals’ creative interpretations of these knowledges. Even among the most progressive May Fourth male intellectuals, the majority of whom were feminists or pro-feminists opposing patriarchy, many believed in gender roles and sexual manifestations based on “scientific” sexual characteristics. Men themselves were put under more pressure when informed that “scientifically” they were supposed to manifest masculinities through demonstrating physical and mental strength, romantic love, sexual prowess, and other manly qualities in addition to superb writing and thinking. These paradoxical requirements complicated the production of an ideal man who perfectly fuses love and sex, body and mind (or flesh and soul), the pairing of which itself presupposed this dualism.

Indeed, this book draws attention to knowledge of Western science, or rather Chinese male intellectuals’ interpretation of Western science—a core component of Chinese modernity—as a hardening force (or “subtle coercion” in Foucauldian terms), in regulating gender discourses and practices. As I have argued throughout the book, scientific and pseudoscientific discourses, enhanced by visual technology, were used to scrutinize the human body and sexuality to legitimize essentialized racial and gender distinctions. The legitimization process sometimes involved brutal measures to enforce “normal” gender behavior and penalize “abnormal” manifestations. Male femininity and female masculinity were particularly targeted to ensure science-sanctioned gender roles, sexual conduct, and reproductive decisions.

A deep dive into this particular history and culture that cultivated its creative works has exposed the social construction of modern intellectual masculinities through dialectical tensions between soft and hard elements. In particular, I have discussed a new martial trend that was enabled by ethnic racism at the turn of the twentieth century. Chinese male intellectuals extolled or practiced hypermasculinity to distance themselves from the perceived weakness of the Chinese nation

and the effeminacy of Chinese men. In pursuit of real masculinity and national strength, many lost in touch with “feminine language and narratives” in writing and refrained themselves from expressions of private emotions.<sup>1</sup> This resulted in emotional suppression and the substitution of personal desires with passion for loftier collective missions.<sup>2</sup> The trend of “brutalization of scholars” reveals their attempt to relinquish male femininity for a true congruent male identity, that is, the apparent alignment of real men, masculinist narrative, and male aggression. However, failed attempts to achieve such congruity suggest that there is no solace in masculinist brutality; male intellectuals constantly felt pulled in two directions. The harder they attempted to assert a true masculinity approximating the then-hegemonic trend, the further they found themselves pushed into feelings of lack. As I elaborated in Chapter 2, the supposed failure of the male gender generated melancholia through the “abjected,” which is often lamented and reconnected to the perceived male “lack.” This afforded a feminine space for male writers to recover their sentimentality and reengage with the feminine narrative modes by reviving their repressed emotions and desires.

I have examined the cognitive dissonance associated with the various modes of intellectual masculinities in this book. Authors who advocated violence as the means to masculinity sometimes made unconscious slips or earnest reflections upon hypermasculine behaviors in their writings. For one thing, there lied an uncertainty about the essentialized connection between men and hypermasculinity. Moreover, there was also a suspicion among intellectuals toward the possible co-optation of individual subjectivity by nationalism and other collective forces. Therefore, writings about violence bred their own antidotes to ease psychological anxieties and reclaim human integrity. They were intellectuals’ anesthetized emotional reaction to the moral conundrum of violence’s relationship with manhood amid a shifting political landscape. Antidotes to violence as markers of masculinity unsettled the politicization of gender in political situations where norms were still emphatically masculinist and opened up a “feminine” realm of space as an arena for state politics as well as gender and sexual politics.

Feminine space functioned as a buffer zone from hypermasculine pursuits, an antidote to the central thesis of male violence and aggressivity advanced by a masculinist culture. It was a third space that reconciled anxiety about an in-between male subjectivity and the desire for a more open articulation about intellectual masculinities to challenge binary and hegemonic discourses on gender and politics. This productive and reflective approach to gender played upon Western stereotypes of effeminate Chinese males as well as drawing on a much wider spectrum of masculinities and femininities native or foreign to Chinese culture. Modern Chinese history witnessed the ebbs and flows of intellectual desire for a feminine space in which straddling gender expressions and identities were possible, and for a third space in general where conflicts and differences could be negotiated within a politically “neutral” zone.

## The Abnormal Psyche as a Differentiation Strategy

Since true masculinity is an unstable signifier with no inherent meanings, masculine ideals were often constructed by positioning a male self, with which the male author has an ambivalent identification, against Others in terms of race, gender, class, and generation. This book has elaborated on male intellectuals' strategy of differentiation and textual tactics to manage inter- and intra-gender relations under the compounding effects of increasing political violence, new social hierarchies, commercialization of print media, and mixed influence of Western and Confucian masculine ideals and sexual ethics.

Through examining works by different generations of male writers, we can detect an underlying anxiety about their marginalized position and the various difficulties involved with forging a masculine ideal. Amid external political turmoil and violence, conflicting ideas about and interests in the acquisition of physical aggressivity to make better fighters and breeders for the nation became a popular subject in public discourse. Many young intellectuals aspired to become revolutionary heroes, but this required participation in political assignments they might not be capable of completing. Revolutionary heroism may have also contradicted a writer's idealistic pursuit of independent aesthetic expression, private emotions, individual autonomy, and cosmopolitan humanism (or what was often criticized as the liberal-individualistic bourgeois humanism). The aspiration to revolutionary heroism was most conspicuously expressed in the late Qing and early Republic, when the anxiety surfaced, but it was more critically addressed by the May Fourth writers, who accordingly shifted the focus of masculine construction from exterior to interior.

The injured and dark psyche that emerged from these tensions, tradeoffs, and contradictions was a critical component of masculinity to redeem cerebral men from their hopeless limbo. Writers used the pen as an anatomical tool to poke, probe, and lay bare the highly disturbed and disturbing interiority of the anti-heroes. On the one hand, the abnormal psyche, with its transgressive power, enabled the border crossing between mind and body, nonaction and action, pensiveness and aggressivity, and femininity and masculinity, which made possible newer and less rigid gender identities. On the other hand, an assaultive or violent "life force" needed to be injected into the reconstruction of a masculine heart-mind. This was partly to differentiate masculine emotions from emerging female writers' allegedly overt expressions of emotions, from the affirming and passive and therefore "effeminate" sentimentality of *wen* masculinity, as well as from nonintellectual men incapable of emotions.

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