

2016

Masculine Compromise: Migration, Family, and Gender in China (Review)

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Original Citation

Kang, W. (2016). Masculine Compromise: Migration, Family and Gender in China by Susanne Y. P. Choi and Yinni Peng. *Pacific Affairs*, 90(4), 796-8. <https://pacificaffairs.ubc.ca/book-reviews/masculine-compromise-migration-family-and-gender-in-china-by-susanne-y-p-choi-and-yinni-peng/>

Repository Citation

Kang, Wenqing, "Masculine Compromise: Migration, Family, and Gender in China (Review)" (2016). *History Faculty Publications*. 117.
https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clhist_facpub/117

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MASCULINE COMPROMISE: Migration, Family, and Gender in China.
By Susanne Y.P. Choi and Yinni Peng. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016. x, 179 pp. (Map, Illustrations.) US\$29.95, paper. ISBN 978-0-520-28828-7.

Since the 1980s, China has experienced massive rural to urban migration, during which time rural men and women have found jobs in big cities, ranging from domestic helpers to factory workers, and from security guards to construction labourers. *Masculine Compromise*, written by two sociologists, Susanne Y.P. Choi and Yinni Peng, is a feminist examination of how this migration has changed gender dynamics in contemporary China, with a focus on the lives, subjectivities, and emotions of male migrants. Based on numerous interviews conducted by the authors and their research team between 2012 and 2015 in three major migrant destination cities of Guangdong Province (Shenzhen, Dongguan, and Guangzhou), the book is a welcome contribution to masculinity studies in the China field.

The book is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 serves as the introduction, and chapter 2 provides a clear history of government policies related to rural-urban migration. Between 1985 and 2003, the Chinese state required rural migrants to register and acquire a temporary-residence certificate from the police station at their urban residence, and did not expect their long-term stay. The public media referred to migrant workers negatively as the “floating population” and “blind drifters.” But in 2003, the state ended the temporary-residence certificate requirement for rural migrants, and began to call them “peasant workers” (*nongmin gong*) and introduced policies to protect their interests, especially their labour rights.

After providing the historical context, the authors begin to explore the changes that migrant men showed in their understanding of masculinity vis-à-vis conventional gender norms in China. Chapter 3 focuses on the perspective of male migrants as boyfriends. Leaving home enabled these young men to meet and date young women from different parts of the country and experiment with their romantic and sexual fancies, but their parents insisted that they marry women from the same area. Meanwhile, the urban environment also made evident their disadvantageous economic position when competing with better-off urban peers. Reconciliation with parental wishes, the authors argue, is the common solution for these young migrant men. Most of them later married local girls with their parents’ approval, and romantic love became less important than family obligations and practical arrangements.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine migrant men’s understanding of masculinity through their role as husbands. Conventional gender norms require that a woman move into her husband’s family’s home after marriage, and men work outside while women stay home to act as caretakers. But financial

pressures forced husbands and wives to migrate together to look for salary jobs in the city, where they had to negotiate their roles within the conjugal relationship. Migrant men wanted to maintain their dominant position by making distinctions between big and small issues and insisting on making the final decisions on big issues, such as where the family should eventually settle. Most men avoided living with their wives' families because they believed that a uxorial marriage would be a disgrace. On small issues such as the family's day-to-day finances, men were willing to compromise and let their wives be in charge. The authors also found that men making less money than their wives were likely to resort to physical violence in conjugal disputes to compensate for their sense of inferior manhood. Migrant couples also had to negotiate their housework responsibilities since both of them worked outside the home. While some men still tried to avoid household chores, which they thought were women's work, those who participated actively in domestic work and childcare legitimized their unconventional role by "developing a discourse of masculinity that stresses men's dedication to and care of the family, and their responsibility for maintaining family happiness and marital harmony" (103–104).

Chapter 6 looks at migrant men through their role as fathers and argues that emotionality is the most important component. Migrant fathers who left their children behind did not hide their pain, guilt, anguish, worry, or sorrow. Mobile phones also made it possible for them to stay connected with their sons and daughters. This image forms a sharp contrast with the stereotypical unemotional, commanding, and authoritarian father. Migrant men usually left their children to the care of their parents. Chapter 7 examines how migrant men understood their role as sons. They agreed that filial piety, which means being able to take care of aging parents, comprised the core of masculinity. But their migration status made it difficult for them to personally attend to their parents in times of need. The compromise they found was to obey their parents from afar.

In their conclusion (chapter 8), the authors provide a definition of the concept "masculinity compromise," which is also the title of the book: "they [migrant men] strive to preserve the gender boundary and their symbolic dominance within the family by making concessions on marital power and domestic division of labor, and by redefining filial piety and fatherhood" (152).

The book is very well organized and clearly written. What I wish the book could have explored further is the following question: What do these changing gender dynamics tell us about the contemporary Chinese state? As a historian, I also want to ask: Should we attribute the change in gender relations and understandings of masculinity entirely to the migration process beginning in the mid-1980s? What about the achievements in gender equality made during the Mao era, despite the pitfalls pointed out by feminist scholars? These questions aside, I recommend this book to students and

scholars of gender studies and Chinese studies, and anyone interested in contemporary China.

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REINVENTING CHINESE TRADITION: The Cultural Politics of Late Socialism. *Interpretations of Culture in the New Millennium.* By *Ka-ming Wu.* Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015. xv, 186 pp. (Figures, maps.) US\$25.00, paper. ISBN 978-0-252-08140-8.

In late January 2017, just as the whole Chinese nation was set to celebrate the Spring Festival, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council of the PRC jointly issued a set of guidelines on preserving and developing “excellent traditional culture,” with major achievements to be registered in traditional culture-related research, education, protection, inheritance, innovation, and exchange by the year 2025. While nothing new, this document culminates the post-Mao late socialist Chinese state’s renewed emphasis on promoting Chinese traditional culture as it strives to consolidate a Chinese national identity at home and boost China’s soft power abroad.

But how does this statist agenda hit the ground, especially in a region such as today’s Yan’an in northern Shanxi province, the heartland of Yellow River agrarian civilization and the cradle of the CCP’s communist revolution, where Maoist revolutionary culture had once prevailed over traditional or folk culture, part of which was rejected as feudal, superstitious, and backward? What are the relationships between Beijing-based urban intellectuals and national culture promoters on the one hand, and local government officials, local intellectuals, and above all, indigenous artisans and ordinary peasants in this process of tradition, cultural protection, and promotion? Furthermore, what is traditional Chinese culture anyway and who is to define it, protect it, and benefit from it? How do multiple actors, various political, economic, and social forces, and initiatives of different scales and purposes interact, intermingle, and interpenetrate each other in the processes of traditional culture making? These questions and many more have never been so important and pertinent in today’s China studies, especially Chinese cultural studies, and anybody who is interested in these questions would want to read Ka-Ming Wu’s brilliant, insightful, engaging, and extremely timely book, *Reinventing Chinese Tradition: The Cultural Politics of Late Socialism*, a volume in the University of Illinois Press series “Interpretations of Culture in the New Millennium.”

Based on the author’s doctoral dissertation and drawing upon extensive ethnographic work in Yan’an, including a twelve-month residency and follow-up visits spanning from 2003 to 2012, the book embodies Chinese