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Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China

GENG SONG and DEREK HIRD

Leiden: Brill, 2014

x + 296 pp. €115.00; \$149.00

A study of men and masculinities in contemporary urban China, this book argues that, as a result of combination of global and local forces, new types of masculinity have emerged in post-Mao and especially post-2000 China that are characterized by “class, generation and ethnicity” (p. 17). The book maps well the various kinds of masculine ideals presented in mass and social media and the different types of men the authors encountered, but it fails to deliver a nuanced analysis of the historical formation of these new masculinities. In places where such an analysis is called for, the authors tend to invoke studies of similar topics in other cultural contexts (such as the UK), positing a parallel between a hastily introduced work and their own study. Consequently, the reader misses precisely what the book needs to establish: the specific historical context required to understand Chinese masculinities. It is important to remember that the issue of class in contemporary China is very different from that in UK, and that the relationship between masculinity and China’s new social and economic stratification demands a very different conceptualization.

The book is divided into two parts according to the authors’ distinction between “discourse” and “practice.” One of the problems is indeed that this division is difficult to maintain. While the first part (chapters one to three) deals with media and cyber-space representations of masculinities in contemporary China, the second part (chapters four to six) discusses how masculinities are understood and embodied in men and women whom the authors interviewed and observed during their recent stay in China. Chapter one identifies new qualities that are represented as masculine in four recently made Chinese TV dramas: entrepreneurship, patriotism, toughness, sexual restraint, as well as virtues that are celebrated in classical Chinese literatures such as loyalty and righteousness. Chapter two examines the masculine images that are promoted in the emergent lifestyle magazines that cater to urban middle-class men and aspiring ones, arguing that “elitism and nationalism are two distinct features of the consumerist masculinity in China revealed by critical reading of the magazines” (p. 78). But neither nationalism nor consumerism is seriously explored in this chapter. The beginning of chapter three provides a useful discussion of the semantic transformation of the term *hanan* from Japanese to Chinese, but the chapter soon devolves into a list of recently emerged neologisms that describe different types of men in the cyberspace.

Based on interviews and participatory observations, the authors argue in chapter four that the work place is still a man’s world in China. Despite the fact that some “strong women” hold important positions, they are considered an exception. The belief that gender differences are biologically determined is very much prevalent in contemporary China. Men achieve their sense of masculinity and middle-class status by distinguishing themselves from women and other men. Chapter five argues that leisure activities are important occasions for men to perform their masculinity, demonstrate their social status, build male bonds and conduct business transactions. In those activities, women are either sexually objectified or socially excluded. Chapter six introduces a narrative of linear progression that Chinese men are becoming more compassionate and emotionally responsive as fathers and husbands, and that marriages are now more egalitarian and power-sharing, but the authors also question this narrative by presenting different opinions. At the beginning of the book, the authors make it clear that the book for the most part deals with

heterosexual adult men” (p. 3). Chapter six, however, suggests that some Chinese gay men fake heterosexual marriage with lesbians in order to conform to the heteronormative social expectations. In the same section, the authors force a confusing analogy between gay men’s relationships and heterosexual extramarital affairs known as *bao nai* 包二奶 in contemporary China. The section is inappropriately called “Queering family relationships” (p. 247). It is not clear what the meaning of “queer” is here.

The book could have benefited from deeper conceptual work and better editing. In both chapter one and chapter five, the authors invoke Eve Sedgwick’s concept of “homosocial desire” and her discussion on male bonding and men interested in men, but fail to provide an analysis of the relationship between homosocial desire and homosexuality within the cultural context of contemporary China. The anecdote of the young woman who publicly declared that she would rather cry inside a BMW car than laugh riding on the backseat of a poor man’s bicycle appears more than once in the book, but this is only one example of the book’s problem with repetitiveness. Overall, for readers who do not follow the Chinese media on gender issues, this book provides some useful information.

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