Toward a Postcolonial Reading of Chinese Masculinities

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ABSTRACT

In view of the "postcoloniality" of Chinese society, the paper examines Chinese masculinities from a constructionist and multicultural perspective. Regarding postcolonialism as a reading strategy, it advocates a re-reading of Third World traditions in search of alternative symbolic orders before colonization and globalization. The reading is postcolonial not only because it takes place in a postcolonial world, but also because its fundamental method is motivated by postcolonialism, if we understand postcolonialism as "a process of dialogue and necessary correction." And taking into account the historical and political circumstances of Chinese society as different from the former colonial countries, such as the British Commonwealth countries, the paper argues that the significance of postcolonialism to the Chinese context is a more sober awareness of Western influence on today's discourse and a more astute reexamination of China's past. However, it does not imply that there exists a pure "Chineseness" since any reading has to be from the historicity of the reader. The second part of the paper attempts to identify certain characteristics of the historical and discursive construction of Chinese masculinity from comparative and cross-cultural perspectives. And in doing so, it advocates a conceptualization of Chinese masculinity within the *yin/yang* paradigm, instead of viewing it as a poorer, effeminate version of "normal" Western masculinity.

KEY WORDS

postcolonialism
masculinity
yin/yang
Chineseness
homosociality
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homophobia
homoeroticism
Confucianism

The study of Chinese masculinities has become an important field of study in recent years. The new interest in this topic is a sign of contemporary theoretical interest in gender issues and the increasingly open dialogue between cultures and disciplines. Re-reading Chinese masculinity from comparative perspectives means an attempt to address "Chineseness" in a postcolonial context. Studies have identified many distinguishing characteristics of the construction of masculinity in indigenous Chinese culture, including the *wen-wu* matrix, the fluidity of *yin/yang* identity, the interactions between politics and gender discourses and the relative absence of homophobia (See Zhong 2000; Louie 2002; Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002; Louie and Low 2003; Song 2004; etc). Findings have contributed to a more sophisticated conceptualization of the ideology of masculinity from a global perspective. This paper shows how "modern" gender discourse was appropriated from the West along with the Chinese intellectuals' quest for modernity, and how the Western discourse has been internalized as the universal, natural mode. The multicultural dialogue set forth in the essays of this special issue embodies the true spirit of postcolonial cultural studies. We therefore propose a "postcolonial" (re)reading of Chinese masculinities.

Postcolonialism as a Reading Strategy

In *The Empire Writes Back*, the authors have summed up two distinct strands of literary research under the rubric of "postcolonial studies":

> Post-colonial criticism appears to be following two major paths at

> present: on the one hand, via the reading of specific post-colonial texts and the effects of their production in and on specific social and historical contexts, and on the other, via the 'revisioning' of received tropes and modes such as allegory, irony, and metaphor and the rereading of 'canonical' texts in the light of post-colonial discursive practices. The former has been more closely associated with the traditional domain of the field, but the latter has begun, more recently, to produce powerfully subversive general accounts of textuality and concepts of "literariness" which open up important new areas of concern. (Ashcroft et al. 194)

What I am proposing here by "postcolonial reading" is closer to the latter path, but we may also see it as a third way, one particularly inspired by Edward Said's *Orientalism*. This means a re-reading of pre-colonial Third World traditions *per se* in search of alternative symbolic orders. This kind of study aims at decentering the Western hegemony, in part by revealing the process of internalization of Western discourse. In other words, instead of "applying" Western theory mechanically to Third World texts, this kind of reading seeks to enrich the theory itself by drawing from subaltern experiences. Such a reading employs a postcolonial method, that is, it works through "a process of dialogue and necessary correction" (Gugelberger par. 5).

But first I would like to note the special circumstances of Chinese history and thus the special significance of postcolonial criticism for Chinese culture. Postcolonial studies in the West derived from, and have been so far mainly focused on, the situations of former European colonies in Africa, Latin America and Asia, such as India, Algeria, Australia, etc. China, on the contrary, can be hardly called a former colonial country because she has never become the complete colony of a foreign power. In spite of foreign occupation of some parts of China, such as Hong Kong and Shanghai, the central government remained independent throughout modern history. History textbooks in the mainland labeled China during the period from 1841 to 1949 as a "semi-feudal and semi-colonial society," borrowing Lenin's notion of the "semi-colony."[1] China was a semi-colony in the sense that colonial

powers (such as Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Portugal, Japan, etc.) gained "spheres of influence" and/or "leased land" in China. People from these colonial powers enjoyed "extraterritorial rights." But none of the colonial powers established sovereignty over the whole of China. The Chinese government never completely lost its sovereign control over its territories to any colonial power. China was, therefore, never a colonial country. The westernization of Chinese culture came about through the move toward modernization beginning with the May Fourth New Culture Movement. The Chinese (especially the intellectuals) denounced their own cultural heritage and totally adopted Western modes out of their patriotic passion to "save the country and its people." This situation leads us to doubt whether the conclusions drawn from countries that were really "colonies" are applicable to Chinese culture.

Another circumstance that distinguishes China from other postcolonial countries is that China is ruled by a totalitarian communist party today. After the collapse of communist ideology in the late 1980s, nationalism has become the dominant ideology in China; through it the state power maintains its control over what people may think and say. While postcolonialism rose to prominence as a resistant discourse in the West, ironically it is being appropriated as part of the "conservative" nationalist and anti-Western discourse in China, that is, the official discourse of the totalitarian regime. Postcolonial theory was introduced to Chinese academia in the 1990s and has ever since provoked a heated debate on modernity, Chineseness, the relationship between China and the West, China's own critical voice (Chen and Wang 522–55). Due to the remarkably different political and cultural situations, misreading and misinterpretation of the theory have inevitably occurred. As Chen Houcheng observes, "Postcolonial criticism has become quite different in the Chinese context in terms of position and function. And a kind of 'variation' of it has come into being in critical practices" (Chen and Wang 553–54).[2]

Still, the Chinese scholars' enthusiastic interest in postcolonial criticism itself is a clear sign of the "postcoloniality" of contemporary Chinese culture. For although the Chinese were never really in a

"subaltern" position and their situation differs from that of, say, British Commonwealth countries as far as colonization is concerned, they have suffered a kind of cultural colonization by the West and so they, too, are experiencing cultural conflict and cultural dialogue, hybridity, a "searching for the roots," the paradox of globalization versus localization, etc. "To be colonized," according to Walter Rodney, "is to be removed from history" (quoted in Gugelberger par. 5). This seems to be different in the Chinese case for few people would agree that the China had been removed from history by the colonizers. Yet even if the discourse of China's glorious five-thousand-year history and great ancestral achievements like the "four great inventions" have remained at the core of the officially sanctioned nationalist ideology, the historical discourse used by textbooks today is itself a product of mimicry and appropriation of the Western discourse. To impose the Marxist 5 stages of social development upon the indigenous culture may be regarded as another form of cultural colonization. And studies show that even the notion of "nation" in the modern sense did not exist before East met West. In this sense contemporary China is essentially a postcolonial society and would be a potentially fruitful object of postcolonial criticism. China thus must re-examine its cultural heritage in order to rediscover itself in the face of intense westernization and globalization. And precisely because China was not a genuine colony, "writing back" to the West will be particularly helpful in revealing the process of internalization of Western (Eurocentric, late capitalistic) colonial discourse, of what Gayatri Spivak has called "our ideological acceptance of error as truth" (109).

A postcolonial China needs, then, to engage in a more astute reexamination of its own past by way of becoming more aware of the degree to which the West has influenced its present-day discourses. This reading of its own past and present situation must be, of course, a dialogical reading grounded in the historicity of the reader. And this kind of reading aims at mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence, not at confrontation between the East and West. Indeed, to combine Chinese studies with postcolonial studies will greatly broaden the scope of both fields and create a real global framework for postcolonial

criticism, which can after all no longer be narrowly regarded as an equivalent to British Commonwealth studies. As Gugelberger points out, "In a way, cultural and postcolonial studies are what comparative literature always wanted or claimed to be but in reality never was, due to a deliberate and almost desperate clinging to Eurocentric values, canons, cultures, and languages" (Gugelberger par. 8).

The postcolonial study of China's past, however, does not attempt to reconstruct its "original" past. Rather, this is a dialogical reading of the past which uses contemporary (Western) critical theory. Culture is by nature heterogeneous and dynamic; therefore pure "Chineseness" is but an illusion. As a rule for any interpretation, what we see "in" a text is, in many ways, an expression of our own culturally constructed vision. By situating the texts in their own historical context, we inevitably approach them from the perspective of our own historicity, acting as a critic who speaks from a particular position within time and culture, having been shaped by numerous institutions and discourses.

The postcolonial reading of Chinese masculinities that I want to engage in here will essentially attempt to construct the Western stereotyping of Chinese men as "effeminate"; this Orientalist construction is, according to Edward Said, the West's way of coming to terms with the experience of the Other. In fact post-Mao Chinese society has, according to many Chinese intellectuals, been marked by the rise of the feminine and the decline of the masculine (*yinsheng yangshuai* 陰盛陽衰), but clearly we would need to distinguish the domestic (purely Chinese) causes of this phenomenon from its international (cross-cultural) causes. The "crisis of masculinity" in contemporary China is best demonstrated by the cultural trend of "searching for real men" in the 1980s. In the New-era (i.e. since 1979) literary scene, Chinese men have been disappointedly described as weak, immature, selfish, and impotent, while real masculinity is embodied by "Rambo, Takakura Ken and the rural men from China's northwest" (Zhong 41; here "Takakura," a Japanese name, and "Rambo" bring in the cross-cultural dimension).

Anxiety about the weakening male identity, according to Xueping Zhong, signifies Chinese intellectuals' quest for a modern masculine

identity, one congruent with "the collective masculine identity imagined by the CCP" (46). This concern with the quality of Chinese men has been echoed by the essentialist critique of the "national character" of the Chinese. For instance, Sun Longji 孫隆基 has claimed that Chinese men's tendency toward "emasculation" is a universal (Chinese) phenomenon and manifests a certain femininity in the "deep structure" of Chinese culture. Taking a Freudian psychoanalytical approach, he also describes Chinese men as "not yet weaned." The image of "soft" young men (*naiyou xiaosheng* 奶油小生, "butter boys") is used to describe, and "disqualify," the contemporary (younger) Chinese men: it symbolizes the lack of masculinity (*yanggang zhi qi* 陽剛之氣) in the Chinese cultural heritage. Ironically, the Chinese intellectuals' reading of their own cultural past in an effort to achieve a "stronger" male identity, and not be predetermined by current nationalist sentiment, reinforces the Western (Orientalist) stereotype, the construction of Chinese men as effeminate, weird, evil, the Other. Both discourses overlooked the hegemonic nature of the "normative masculinity." The question as to whether this Chinese concern with the masculinity of Chinese men has a purely Chinese (monocultural) core—or whether cross-cultural gender discourse inevitably intrudes—remains an open one.

The construction of masculinity is, of course, historical and ideological; it functions as a site of power negotiations. The stereotype that considers Chinese men to be inferior to Western men in terms of masculinity is a product of colonial discourse. According to Edward Said, "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony. The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be 'Oriental' . . . but also because it *could be*—that is, submitted to being—*made* Oriental" (5–6). The feminized Chinese male is therefore nothing but a strategic construction of the Western imagination. It is common for colonial discourse to use the masculine/feminine binary to refer to colonizer/colonized relations. For instance, Robert Young has noted the British discursive strategy of constructing the image of a masculine colonizer in the minds of its colonial subjects:

> With the expansion of the empire in the eighteenth century, there was a clear move in Britain to develop a particular Protestant stereotype of masculinity as the basis of British political and socio-economic dominance. This patriarchal ascendancy, associated with action and the violence of colonial conquest, operated over an increasingly restricted "home and colonial" ideology of women and femininity. . . . Imperial culture was also augmented in the nineteenth century by racial theories that portrayed Europeans as masculine and non-Europeans as feminine races; the cult of masculinity is hegemonic. (325–26).

Leela Gandhi has also discussed the British disdain for the Indian "apology for maleness" from a postcolonial perspective (99–100). The colonial construction of "disqualified" Indian men bolstered the ideology that "India is colonizable because it lacks real men" (Gandhi 100). Frantz Fanon concludes, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, that the colonized black man is the real Other for the colonizing white man. In a sense, gender discourse has been intertwined with racial and national discourses. The colonial cult of masculinity is a political discourse which describes the colonizers as hyper-masculine men and the colonized men as effeminate. Ashis Nandy describes this strategy as the "colonial homology between sexual and political dominance" (4). The unquestioned "natural" dominance of men/masculinity over women/femininity is used to legitimatize the Western dominance over non-Western peoples. Hence, masculinity stands for power and through the discourse of hegemonic masculinity the West retains its patronizing superiority over the "quaintness" of the East. This superior Western masculinity discourse has been largely internalized in the postcolonial context. A revealing example would be the critique of their "national character" by Chinese intellectuals who lament the lack of masculinity in their own culture.

Masculinity or Masculinities?

According to the constructionist theory of gender, there is not a

universal masculine model that is valid in every time and in every place because masculinity, as a cultural construct, is subject to change. Michael Kimmel notes that "[m]anhood means different things at different times to different people. We come to know what it means to be a man in our culture by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of 'others'—racial minorities, sexual minorities, and above all, women" (Kimmel 120). As a relational concept, "masculinity" does not exist except in contrast with "femininity." Anti-femininity is therefore at the heart of the dominant Western masculinity, i.e., being a man means *not being like a woman* so that masculinity is defined more by what one is not rather than by what one is. Masculinity is therefore not an essence but an *ideology* that tends to justify male domination. It is inherently historical, and its making and remaking is a political process affecting the balance of interests in society and the direction of social change. Schoene-Harwood reads the hegemonic version of masculinity in the dominant discourse as not only an ideology but also a *myth*:

> This hegemonic configuration of masculinity is always bound to constitute an impossible, phantasmatic ideal that ultimately no man can live up to or fulfill. As a result, all flesh-and-blood masculinities must ineluctably find themselves in a position of either complicity, marginality or subordination. (Schoene-Harwood xii)

Studies in sociology and cultural anthropology have further revealed the fact that masculinity differs remarkably from culture to culture. For instance, Elisabeth Badinter has listed some examples of notions of masculinity totally different from those of the West, despite the process of Westernization and colonization (26). Masculinity is never a monolithic notion even within one culture. Given the interplay among gender, race, class and age, multiple masculinities coexist in any given culture. For example, in contemporary American society the conception of masculinity differs between black and white, working class and middle class, youth and old people, and so on. R. W. Connell categorizes masculinities in a given society into the hegemonic, the

subordinate and the marginalized; he argues that "these two types of relationship—hegemony, domination/subordination and complicity on the one hand, marginalization/authorization on the other—provide a framework in which we can analyze specific masculinities" (81). Despite the existence of diverse masculinities, the Western, white, middle-class, early middle-aged, heterosexual concept of masculinity is today the normative and hegemonic one. It sets the standard against which other forms of masculinity are measured and evaluated. Hegemonic masculinity is the masculinity of the men who hold power, that is, the dominant group in society. The relationship between different masculinities in a given society is also a reflection of power relations; as Michael Kimmel says, "The hegemonic definition of manhood is a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power" (125).

The constructionist and multiculturalist understanding of masculinity has opened up new avenues for a critical study of the interplay between power relations and the discourse of masculinity. The emergence of men's studies in the late twentieth century was initiated by men's response to feminism, which questioned the traditional notion of male power and superiority over women. "Masculinities" have become a major topic for gender studies in various disciplines, ranging from sociology to literary criticism. This interest has also been reinforced by the increasing popularity of queer studies, which aims at destabilizing the notion of normative sexuality and gender. However, studies in the West have so far largely ignored Eastern men and the dialogue between Eastern and Western masculinities, which is essential to a global understanding of the notion of masculinity. As Kam Louie points out, "even though there have been more studies of Asian men (usually by the men themselves) living as minorities in the United States or Canada, their results tell us very little about Asian masculinities as understood by Asians in Asia" (2).

Again, however, this does not imply that there existed a monolithic, "original" Chinese masculinity. Chinese masculinities evolved historically and were constantly changing, even before Westernization in the late 19th century. And within the pre-modern

Chinese culture, different or even conflicting discourses on masculinity coexisted. In literary representations, for instance, we can find that the frail and sentimental scholar is the "ideal man" dreamed of by girls from noble families; yet at the same time, there are macho warriors and outlaws such as Li Kui 李逵 and Zhang Fei 張飛, who are hyper-masculine according to today's (Westernized) standard but could never become the protagonists in love stories. The masculine ideal is embodied in Confucian discourse by the *junzi*, who lives mainly in the public arena. In Chinese history and historiography men who sacrificed their lives for the benefit of their sovereign and country have been eulogized as *da zhangfu* 大丈夫 (great men), for example Yue Fei 岳飛 and Wen Tianxiang 文天祥. But again, a sexual dimension has been largely absent from their stories. For Mencius, to be a Confucian *da zhangfu* means "to be above the power of riches and honors to make dissipated, of poverty and mean condition to make swerve from principle, and of power and force to make bend: —these characteristics constitute the great man 富貴不能淫，貧賤不能移，威武不能屈，此之謂大丈夫" (6, 2). In the official discourse masculinity is the moral quality of being loyal to the sovereign and obedient to the highest political principles, to the Way; a great man should seek to realize and put into practice the (ethical-political) Way under any circumstances. In this rather idealistic sense, then, Confucian masculinity is mainly validated by political achievements. But in the scholar-beauty romance, the *caizi* or talented scholar puts women and love above his political career. Therefore in studying Chinese masculinities as represented in literature, we must take account of the different genres in order to avoid generalization. We must also differentiate between the dominant discourse and marginal discourses according to their locations in the power network of a society. In any given culture, there are changing dialectical relations between the dominant discourse and marginal discourses, including those of conflict and negotiation. The dominant discourse sometimes even produces marginal and oppositional discourses in order to contain them. For instance, the *caizi* could be seen as subversive with regard to the official ideology on masculinity but he is also tolerated and co-opted by that official discourse.[3] Above

all, the discourse of masculinity in today's Chinese culture is a *hybrid* discourse.

Yin/yang and *Wen/wu*

Kam Louie insightfully points out that the notion of masculinity in pre-modern China "permits the production of a greater number of possible expressions of the secular male self than would be possible in the contemporary West" ("Chinese Masculinity" 147–48):

> Chinese masculinity, then, is not a poorer, effeminate version of "normal" Western masculinity. Nor is its "difference" from the "norm" derived from the domination of a more submissive, childlike (more easily oppressed) Chinese femininity. Chinese masculinity has evolved in a historical and cultural context that required no inspiration and gained no benefit from comparisons with the West. Moreover, current notions of the "impotence" of Chinese men have developed within the "Neo-Orientalism" of the late twentieth century where money represents power, and maleness without economic might signifies impotence. *Wen* and *wu*, as references for creating the male self, evolved outside the scheme of things where "oriental" meant inferior, or at best "exotic." The right to define, describe, and name has in recent times been a Western cultural prerogative, but just as this was not the case two hundred years ago, it may not necessarily be the case a hundred years from now. (148)

In my recent book entitled *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture*, I argue that the most fundamental characteristic of pre-modern Chinese masculinities would be the relative absence of the male/female, masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual dichotomies which are at the center of Western gender discourse. The concept of masculinity in pre-modern China was conceived within the network of hierarchical social and political power in a homosocial context rather than in opposition to

"woman" in a heterosexual/sexist matrix. In other words, gender was more power-based than sex-based in pre-modern China. And this can be fully explained by a political reading of that discourse so essential to the Chinese understanding of the universe and human society, the *yin/yang* discourse.

Rather than a male/female dichotomy, the *yang/yin* binary functioned as the defining and fundamental framework of the Chinese symbolic system regarding gender, and is particularly helpful in explaining where the Chinese discourse differs from the (modern) Western one, and why. The characters *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 originally mean the northern and southern faces of a mountain—the slope facing away from the sun, therefore mainly in the shade, and the slope facing the sun, therefore mainly lit up. Like the two sides of a mountain, the *yin* and *yang* are two opposite aspects of an object. They are set against each other; yet at the same time neither side can exist without the other. The first known mention of *yin-yang* in a philosophical context is made in a commentary on the *Yi jing* 易經 (*Book of Changes*): "One *yin*, one *yang*, that is the Dao 一陰一陽之謂道." The Dao (Way) arises from the interaction of *yin* and *yang*. In ancient Chinese cosmology, the *yin* refers to the darkness, the moon, cold, the private world, receptivity, passivity, and femininity. The *yang* is associated with light, the sun, heat, the public world, generative force, activity, and masculinity. It is through the dialectical interaction between these two natural forces that everything in the world is created and developed. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770–221 BC), the theory of *yin* and *yang* was mainly used by Daoists and by the *Yin-yang* School, whose doctrines stress the balance, interdependence and mutual transformation of *yin* and *yang*.

However, the two terms were borrowed by Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (?179–?104 BC), a Confucian scholar-minister in the Han dynasty whose efforts helped Confucianism to become the orthodox ideology; Dong used the *yin-yang* polarity to illustrate the Confucian teaching on achieving harmony by sustaining the hierarchical social order. Fung Yu-lan, in his *History of Chinese Philosophy*, has noted the Han Confucianists' application of the *yin-yang* theory to the existing social

order:

> Tung Chung-shu [Dong Zhongshu], by linking subject to ruler, son to father, and wife to husband, makes subject, son, and wife secondary appendages of ruler, father, and husband. In so doing, he gives these relationships metaphysical support by saying that they "are all derived from the principles of the *yin* and *yang*." The same reasoning is followed by the *Po Hu T'ung*. Thus we see the Han Confucianists accepting the existing social relationships of ruler and subject, man and woman, father and son, and applying them by analogy to their discussions of the *yin*-and-*yang* relationship; conversely, this postulated relationship gives them a basis for upholding these social relationships. (43)

Therefore the connotation of *yin/yang* was radically changed in the Han Confucian discourse. For Dong Zhongshu, *yang* and *yin* referred to the dominant and submissive parties in the five relationships (*wulun* 五倫)—those between father and son, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, (older) friend and (younger) friend, ruler and subject, which together form the basis of human interaction. By properly observing or "keeping" the *wulun* people may achieve order in their personal lives and, by extension, the community as a whole may coexist harmoniously. In each binary (e.g. father-son) the first plays the dominant, *yang* role, and the second the submissive *yin* role. But unlike the terms of the biologically determined male/female dichotomy, *yin* and *yang* are fluid identities depending on a person's position in the social hierarchy. A man can be expected to show both *yin* and *yang* qualities. At home he is the *yang* in relation to his wife, while at the court he is the *yin* in front of the king. This theory of parallelism between the family and the state thus relegates the male *shi* 士, who were actual or potential administrators of the state, to a submissive, passive and dependent position in their relations with the ruler, like that of a wife to her husband within a family. Therefore certain male characters speak in the voice of a female persona when addressing the emperor or superiors in Chinese literature.

One clear example of the different gender ideology at work in pre-modern China is that of the eunuchs. While technically castrated men, the eunuchs were in effect a kind of "third gender"; it would be difficult to categorize them as either male or female. However, it is obvious that their physical "deficiency" as men did not keep them from enjoying a high social position and holding political power. In other words, they were also able to play the *yang* role in the social and political hierarchy. Throughout Chinese history numerous eunuchs climbed to the top of the political ladder and even monopolized state power with the help of imperial favor. Sometimes they even became the *de facto* policy makers in court. Their "gender identity" by no means prevented them from being honored by the emperor and even worshipped by the people below them. In their private life they had a wife, concubines, and adopted children. They were also the *yang* patriarch of their family. It is true that few eunuchs are depicted favorably in Chinese literature, but they were despised mainly due to their transgression of the Confucian virtue of filial piety—they failed to fulfill the duty of carrying on the family line—and not due to the biological fact that they were castrated males. As Brownell and Wasserstrom point out, "the castration of a eunuch was not primarily perceived as an injury to the manhood of the eunuch but rather as an injury to the father who had created him" (27). For "unlike the modern West, the possession of a penis was not *primarily* important because of male sexual pleasure, but rather because of what it represented" (27).

The *yin/yang* approach to gender will help to explain not only the effeminacy we find in Chinese literature but also the Confucian preference of *wen* over *wu*. The slender and weak body of the scholar is associated with knowledge and civility, and is the body-type "safest" to those in power. In light of the grounding of gender in power-based *yin/yang* theory, we can also better understand why the masculinity of the *shi* is constructed through "textuality," and how a textuality-based masculinity requires, or can be reinforced by, the physicality of the *shi*.

In pre-modern China, then, *yang*-masculinity was "embodied" by political achievements and cultivation in the official moral ideology of Confucianism. This power-based definition of masculinity is

characterized by the absence of a sexual dimension and women. In Western culture, women have been regarded as the Other in the Self/Other binary and thus function as a signifier of material, earthly nature, as something to be conquered by the rational and spiritual power of men. Masculinity is defined by the ability to conquer women. Male sexual potency is a major characteristic of masculinity: it means being virile, aggressive, and penetrating. The Chinese representation of masculinity, however, was characterized by the remarkable absence of sexuality. Even in the heterosexual *caizi-jiaren* romances, sexual potency was never a constituent of masculinity.[4] In the Chinese space, not only are the figures in Confucian classics and official historiographies largely ungendered; the macho heroes in many popular fictions and dramas are also, to a certain extent, desexualized. In other words, they have been represented as morally superior and/or politically powerful people, but never as physical, gendered men who possess a bodily existence. This also reflects the complete exclusion of women from the signifying system, as David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames argue:

> In China the realized person has been broadly defined as an achieved harmony of the full range of human traits and dispositions. Male dominance is a consequence of sexual differentiation into male and female that has tended to exclude the female from the achievement of becoming human. Thus, the male has been free to pursue the task of realizing his personhood through the creation of an androgynous personality. (81)

The desexualization of men in the dominant discourse makes the presence of sexuality in the scholar-beauty discourse particularly interesting. The discourse of the *caizi* (talented scholar) displays the characteristics of pre-modern Chinese masculinity, yet it is a peculiar version of masculinity that deviates from the official model. The tension between the *caizi* and *junzi* signifies the conflict between the private and public. The *caizi-jiaren* romance constitutes a subversive gesture within the Confucian symbolic order not only because of its

representation of heterosexual love, women and sexuality but also because of its fashioning of the poetic, creative, sentimental version of masculinity, which constitutes an alternative model to that of the official *junzi*. On the other hand the *caizi* is, in a sense, a not-yet-realized *junzi*; ultimately heterosexual love and moral transgression are inevitably contained within an encompassing homosocial, patriarchal discourse.

The *yin/yang* matrix also explains the well-known homoerotic tradition in China. In Western culture, homophobic discourse is central to the construction of masculinity. Masculinity's most telling enemy is effeminacy. This is shown in the expression of male anxiety, the fear that too much contact with women, or with culture conceived as feminine, renders men emasculated. This centrality of homophobia to masculinity did not exist in pre-modern China. The construction of the ideal male body in representations of heterosexual love is therefore heavily indebted to the homosexual aesthetic tradition and the "male culture," as I have termed it, in traditional Chinese society. The Chinese male anxiety came mainly from frustration in the pursuit of political power. It would be very interesting to explore the relationship between the representation of the male body in the *caizi-jiaren* model and same-sex desire and behavior in pre-modern China. If we trace the literary and dramatic variations of the rhetoric of homoerotic, effeminate masculinity, we will find that its dominance as a mode of the masculine imaginary actually informed the representation of male-female relations in fiction and drama. Cultural icons such as Song Yu 宋玉 and Pan An 潘安 have long been regarded as exemplars of male beauty in the heterosexual scholar-beauty romances. However, the "true" stories of these historical figures reveal the homoerotic origin of this bodily rhetoric (Song 125–56). There was a relative tolerance of homosexual behavior in pre-modern China because the articulation of same-sex desire reinforced gender hierarchies, and thus did not threaten social order. *Yin/yang* was a power hierarchy. The higher-level party was placed in a *yang*/husband/penetrant position, the lower-level party in a *yin*/wife/penetrated position; whether this relation involved (hetero) sexuality was not really important.

This politicized *yin/yang* dichotomy also helps one understand the homosocial ("male-social") nature of Chinese masculinity. The nature of homosocial desire and its roles in Chinese culture is an extremely complex issue. However, it seems to me that one of the most distinctive features of Chinese masculinities is that they must be studied within the context of homosexuality, bisexuality and homosociality. Because the pre-modern Chinese society, according to Susan Mann, was primarily a homosocial (segregated, all-male) society with the inter-male bonds as its basic structure:

> . . . China's late imperial society was even more sex-segregated than contemporary societies in the West or, for that matter, in the rest of East Asia. Thus any historian of China whose subject lies outside the domestic sphere—in the bureaucracy, in trade and commerce, in secret societies or rebellions, in scholarly academies or the civil service examination—will find himself or herself studying almost exclusively men and their relationships with each other. Yet no one has thought to ask what sorts of homosocial bonds these various sex-segregated social networks gave rise to or how they might be understood. (par. 3)

A potentially fruitful way to read Chinese men as men, then, is to take into account both heterosexual and male-male relations, which were much more common and significant in pre-modern China.

Closely related to the absence of (male/female) "physical sexuality" in the Chinese gender discourse is the absence of a mind/body dichotomy. According to the dominant Western gender ideology, men's domination is upheld by this dichotomy: men are superior to women because they represent the more rational part of the body—the soul, while women represent purely material existence. The Chinese patriarchal symbolic order, however, was characterized by the complete exclusion of women from the signifying system. Femininity was therefore a constructed space within the homosocial culture and was not necessarily the Other of masculinity. The conception of the self was, so to speak, that of a "bodiless self" (Hall and Ames 31), and

consequently the material body is largely absent from narratives. Gender and sexual differences are mainly represented by the correlative *yin/yang* polarity in classical China. Again, however, *yin/yang* covers a much wider field than that of the male/female duality. In Chinese culture, especially after the Han dynasty when Confucianism became the ruling ideology, *yin/yang* was interpreted as a matrix of different positions in the power hierarchy. *Yin/yang* was a highly politicized notion, referring to different subject positions in a political culture that defined people's social being and even their inner sense of themselves.

Another important discursive dyad that distinguishes Chinese masculinities is that of *wen-wu* 文武 (cultural attainment-martial valor). Kam Louie has written extensively about using the *wen-wu* matrix as a paradigm for conceptualizing Chinese masculinity. An exemplary man is well-versed in both *wen* and *wu* (*wenwu shuangquan* 文武雙全), where either *wen* or *wu* by itself is a masculine quality. For centuries *wen* has enjoyed priority over *wu*. Louie maintains that the *wen-wu* framework "is central to all discussions of Chinese masculinity" (*Theorising Chinese Masculinity* 11) and is closely linked with power relations in pre-modern China:

> Male leaders of every persuasion and historical period therefore try to demonstrate both *wen* and *wu* prowess. That is, all ambitious males strive for both *wen* and *wu*, and those who achieve both are the great ones. Lesser men may achieve only one or the other, but even this partial success will bestow upon them the aura of masculinity and the right to rule over a certain domain, however small. (17)

Undoubtedly the *wen-wu* matrix is of great importance in the discussion of Chinese masculinities, and can help us better understand the plural nature of masculinity. However, it would be reductionist to claim that the *wen-wu* matrix is all-encompassing, that it could be used to explain all possibilities of Chinese masculinity. For one thing, as Kam Louie notes, "*wen* and *wu* realms are the *public* preserve for men"

(Louie 12, emphasis added). Both *wen* and *wu* are public accomplishments and as such are hardly applicable to the private world of sexuality. Secondly, to divide the pre-modern Chinese discursive construction of masculinity into *wen* or *wu* categories would oversimplify the problem, for issues such as (literary) genre and ideological stratification have to be taken into consideration. That is, neither *wen* nor *wu* is a monolithic concept. With regard to sexuality, for instance, within the *wen* category we have both the amorous *caizi* and the self-restrained *junzi*; the scholars' attitudes toward sexuality and women vary drastically in different kinds of textual representation. By the same token, within the *wu* category one can find not only macho warriors such as Zhang Fei and Li Kui, who will never be the target of love for women, but also handsome heroes like Guan Yu 關羽 and Yan Qing 燕青, who are supposed to be attractive to women but are self-restrained with regard to sexual desire. Thus, the *wen-wu* dyad alone could not sufficiently explain the different types of masculinity in the representations of love and sexuality. Gender relations have been determined by power and genre at different historical moments.

Kam Louie proposes that we replace the *yin/yang* binary with the *wen/wu* binary because "the performance of sexual difference is not wholly explained by *yin-yang* theory" (10). For him, "[d]iscarding *yin* and *yang* is crucial because the potential for interminable interactiveness implicit within *yin* and *yang* prohibits gender specificity" (10). In other words, *yin/yang* has to be abandoned because, as a metaphysical polarity which is also (ultimately) a unity, it cannot encompass two incommensurable (or at least fully distinct) sexes. However, Louie still assumes as norm the Western gender paradigm here, and in effect interprets in terms of it the Oriental conception of gender. For we must remember that a definitive feature of pre-modern Chinese gender discourse was the absence of the male/female dichotomy. It is not that male and female sexual categories did not exist in traditional China, but that this binary's position in the Chinese gender ideology could not be compared to that of the *yin/yang* binary. In the signifying system, *yin/yang* functions as the equivalent of the Western masculine/feminine dichotomy. Gender was *yin/yang* in pre-

modern China, where *yin/yang* covers a much wider, and perhaps somewhat different, symbolic field from that of male/female.

The absence of a masculine/feminine dichotomy in the Western sense in Chinese thinking can be seen from the fact that, as cultural constructs, the words "masculinity" and "femininity" cannot find equivalent expressions in the Chinese language.[5] Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom have pointed out the primacy of social role over anatomical sex in Chinese culture:

> The Western tendency to take male/female as a fundamental, immutable opposition may lead scholars to assume that the female/male distinction is the central organizing principle in all symbolic systems, but this has not always been the case in China . . . in Chinese gender symbolism, sex-linked symbols are often secondary to other, more fundamental principles of moral and social life. . . . Rather than being an irreducible polarity in traditional Chinese cosmology, sex was one concept caught up in a network of other, perhaps more basic, concepts. This was because sex was simply one principle among many (e.g., kinship, generation, age, and class) that determined a person's position in the family and in society. (26)

I, therefore, take the view that, precisely because the *yin/yang* is not restricted to the sexual connotations of male/female, it is of paramount significance in the interpretation of sexual difference in Chinese culture. *Yin/yang* demonstrates the fluidity and politicization of gender identity in pre-modern China. Therefore, although the *wen/wu* dyad is admittedly also important in the study of masculinity-construction in the public sphere, I still regard the *yin/yang* dyad as the most fundamental paradigm by which to read a Chinese gender discourse which is more power-based than sex-based.

* * *

The six papers in this special issue present readings of Chinese masculinities from various perspectives. They engage in dialogues between the past and present, the indigenous Chinese heritage and the

hybridity of a diasporic culture. Their common feature is an awareness of the "postcoloniality" of Chinese culture, in the light of which they pursue their readings.

Kam Louie's paper focuses on the masculinity discourse in the works of Brian Castro, an Australian writer partly of Chinese descent who prides himself on writing in a postmodern manner. Louie argues that Castro uses such Chinese cultural emblems, popularized and commercialized in the West, as philosophical Taoism and *yin-yang* thinking, and such legendary Australian figures as Clancy of the Overflow, to destabilize the accepted masculinity ideals of both China and Australia. This debunking produces the (perhaps fanciful) conception of a masculinity that is neither Chinese nor Australian as traditionally understood—a hybrid masculinity.

Another paper addressing the problem of hybridity is Jin Feng's "The Great (Surrogate) Mother of the West." Yung Wing (1828–1912) was the first Chinese national to graduate from an American institute of higher education. By reading his autobiography, *My Life in China and America*, from the perspective of the construction of masculinity, Feng explores the conflicts and negotiations between the Confucian conception masculinity and a new, "modern" version of masculinity, the 19th century New England Protestant version. Feng shows how this 19th-century Chinese life story (autobiographies) illustrates a Chinese man's internalization of the ideology of "masculine West vs. feminine China."

Mark Stevenson and Cuncun Wu's paper attempts to show how male homoeroticism was a very natural part of the Confucian, power-hierarchy-based culture of pre-modern China. This coincides with my own argument that the dichotomy of heterosexual/homosexual did not exist in pre-modern China because "gender" was based primarily not on the biological male/female binary but on the political-power-based *yin/yang* duality. Stevenson and Wu also argue that Western scholars who see pre-modern Chinese homoeroticism as a "problem to be explained" are misled by the uncritical, unreflective application of pre-given Western categories and assumptions.

Zuyan Zhou examines the popularity of the Mencian *da zhangfu*

大丈夫 ("great man") discourse in Ming culture and shows how the *da zhangfu* ideal lay behind the trend toward increasing "masculinity" on the part of scholars who took a stand against orthodox tradition and imperial power; this new sense of oppositional masculinity led also, in Zhou's view, to the cult of *qing* (passion) and to literary innovation. The ideal *nüzhong zhangfu* 女中丈夫 ("heroes among women") is interpreted as a counterpart of the *da zhangfu* ideal.

Finally, Jincai Fang explores the impact of the Confucian ideology of the *junzi* ("gentleman," "cultivated man") on the construction of masculinity in Zhang Xianliang's 張賢亮 *Half of Man Is Woman* 男人的一半是女人, a significant text in the study of contemporary Chinese masculinity. Taking a feminist perspective and noting the dominance of a misogynist discourse in this novel, Fang argues that women and politics seem to play their traditional roles in the construction of the gender-identity of male Chinese intellectuals: the *junzi* rejects women and familial life in the quest for a homosocial public life and political power.

NOTES

[1] Lenin has ruled out three countries as "semi-colonies," namely Persia, Turkey and China. See his "Report of the Commission on the National and Colonial Questions" (July 1920).

[2] According to Zhang Kuan, "Not only the Chinese institutional discourse such as represented by *Liaowang* tries to utilize some of the postcolonial thinking, but also the general reading public shows great interest in this 'new perspective'. The liberal *Dushu*, the nationalist *Zhanlüe yu guanli* (Strategy and Management), the semi-dissident *Dongfang* (Orient) and the marginal *Tianya* (End of the World), as is the popular *Zhong Shan*, all these magazines have participated extensively in the Orientalism vs. Occidentalism debate which greatly promoted the new nationalist sentiment in the middle '90s when the nationalist wave once rose so high that the mainstream had to downplay it and keep it within its own control, or at least avoid being hurt by its blind vigor." (http://mason.gmu.edu/~kzhang/predicament.html, accessed on 17 March 2004.)

[3] For a detailed study of the dialectical relationship between *junzi* and *caizi*, see Song 87–124.

[4] In *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (The Story of the Western Wing), Student Zhang's 張生 potency is poked fun at by Hong Niang 紅娘 as the "wax spear-head 銀樣臘槍頭." However, the satire remains at the symbolic level and, after all, Zhang's standing as the exemplar of the ideal masculine has not been impaired by the implication of his impotency.

[5] For instance, I have been trying to translate "masculinity" into Chinese but have not been able to find a proper rendition so far. *Nanzihan qigai* 男子漢氣概 or *yanggang zhi qi* 陽剛之氣 would be too commendatory and poetic, and deprive the word of its neutral connotation. As the noun form of "masculine," the word probably should be rendered as *nanxing xing* 男性性, but nobody will understand it because there is not such a word in Chinese. In academic papers there is a recent coinage *nanxing jiangou* 男性建構, which is used to refer to masculinity as a cultural construct. But I am afraid people not familiar with the constructionist theory of gender might still find it unintelligible.

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