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Excerpt

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# 1 Introducing *wen-wu*: Towards a Definition of Chinese Masculinity

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The Chinese characters for *wen* and *wu*. (Calligraphy by Kam Louie)

As we enter the twenty-first century, the proposition that race and gender are fundamental analytic categories in both academic and popular discourses is beyond dispute. Momentous social and political movements like the post-World War II Civil Rights campaigns in the USA and the numerous national independence struggles around the world highlighted injustices perpetrated on the basis of skin colour. Similarly the feminist movement has raised public consciousness about inequities based on gender. Feminist and postcolonial studies have refined and reinforced each other's methodologies such that the 'woman' and 'native' categories claim equal prominence with the now highly scrutinised 'Other'.<sup>1</sup> The insights and new knowledges to be gained from using gender as a tool for examining 'the natives' is clearly evident in Chinese studies. Since the 1980s a number of important works have been published discussing the position of women in Chinese society.<sup>2</sup> However, despite the attested interest in gender in China, there is an important lacuna in this work – masculinity. In effect, 'gender' has become synonymous with 'woman' because of the failure to focus on masculinity.<sup>3</sup>

Until the early 1980s, gender studies in the West was also equated with women's studies. Since this time, literature on men and masculinity has grown exponentially. While history everywhere has been mainly 'his-story', it is only in the last twenty-odd years that 'he' has been problematised and masculinity as a cultural construct theorised. Many perspectives approaching the problem of masculinity have been advanced, but there is still no comprehensive theorising of a universal set of defining characteristics of masculinity. In an influential cross-cultural study of masculinities, David Gilmore has produced a set of core masculine attributes such as self-direction and discipline which seem universal. However, he also notes that many variations exist along the cross-cultural continuum of male images and codes.<sup>4</sup> These variations prevent a theoretical structure that satisfies a definitive universal masculinity from being formulated. Instead, what has been produced is a plethora of apparently different kinds of masculinity, almost always from a Western perspective, ranging from the 'mainstream' – such as the profeminist or mythopoetic<sup>5</sup> – to those from the 'outside' – such as gay or black.

The poverty of theory on the generic man is understandable given the fact that 'man' as a universal signifier for huManity has not been questioned until recent years and the specificity of men's actual lives is so diverse even just in the Western world.<sup>6</sup> Empirical evidence suggests support for the social constructionist model of masculinity which argues that 'the meaning of masculinity is neither transhistorical nor culturally universal, but rather varies from culture to culture and within any culture over time'.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, a failure to theoretically reconstruct and deconstruct models of masculinity, whether they be 'Eastern' or

‘Western’, would only perpetuate the myth of a supra-sexual ‘mankind’,<sup>8</sup> placing all other kinds in the margins.

Even if we are to provide ‘perspectives’ on masculinity,<sup>9</sup> these perspectives should take account of non-Western possibilities. For China in particular, a general theoretical approach is important because, as Edward Said has argued, the Orient is feminised to such an extent that it ‘is penetrated, silenced, and possessed’.<sup>10</sup> In some respects, under the Western gaze, the portrayal of Chinese men seems to confirm this thesis. Images of Chinese men on billboards in the streets of Beijing or Hong Kong as well as in the American media do not conform to the ‘macho’ stereotype of masculinity currently circulating in the West.<sup>11</sup> In keeping with Orientalist tradition, Western descriptions of Chinese sexuality focus mainly on Daoist bedroom techniques and exotica such as bound feet and aphrodisiacs. Until very recently, there were very few academic studies devoted exclusively to Chinese masculinity. As Susan Mann opines, the poverty of studies on Chinese men is particularly vexing because ‘bonds among men were key to success and survival for rich and poor, elite and commoner, in Chinese history’.<sup>12</sup> The limited published studies of Chinese men are at their best when focusing on the non-mainstream such as homosexuality.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, books designed for the lay readership tend to provide anecdotal stories of unusual or sexually dysfunctional men.<sup>14</sup> By 2000, there existed only one scholarly book in English that dealt exclusively with ‘mainstream’ masculinity.<sup>15</sup> However, this book concentrates on the psychological state of men who feel ‘besieged’ in post-Mao China.<sup>16</sup> Masculinity is also a subject that occupies at least half of Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom’s forthcoming reader.<sup>17</sup> But most of the essays in their book take an anthropological or historical approach, and ‘evoke a sense of how femininity and masculinity in China are constructed and performed as *lived experience*’.<sup>18</sup> All these studies are invaluable for enhancing our understanding of Chinese masculinity, but as yet, there are no books that attempt to systematically conceptualise the theoretical underpinning of Chinese masculinities in general terms. The present book will fill this gap by developing broad paradigms facilitating the theorisation of Chinese masculinity.

Rather than analysing the representations and performance of Chinese masculinity as ‘lived experience’, my objects of analysis are the concepts, icons and symbols which have evolved as a consequence of that ‘experience’. In this regard, my approach emerges from within a social constructionist schema. As social constructs, icons and symbols are rarely stable. My aim is to develop paradigms – primarily Chinese but also Western – that will enable us to generalise these evolving constructs in their proper contexts. Thus, while I examine social constructs as icons,

symbols and paradigms, I am fully aware that they can be discussed as discourses, so that contained within each, we have contradictory and subversive elements that in turn change the constructs themselves. Furthermore, while I do not adopt an empirical method, I am informed by insights derived from the social sciences. In addition to Susan Brownell's work, a number of excellent anthropological and sociological accounts of gender and sexuality (mostly female) in China have appeared in recent years.<sup>19</sup> Their informants range from factory workers to university professors, and the problems discussed are as diverse as these participants. However, to date no study has explored one of the single most important Chinese paradigms explaining the performance of gendered identities – in particular masculinity – the dyad *wen-wu* (cultural attainment–martial valour).

Despite its importance, the *wen-wu* construct has received very little attention in discussions of Chinese gender or masculinity.<sup>20</sup> This chapter outlines some of its main features. The different manifestations and implications of *wen-wu* as a defining feature of Chinese masculinity will be discussed in the rest of the book. While I have glossed the term as 'cultural attainment–martial valour' above, this rendition is only very approximate. I will elaborate on the definitions later in this chapter. I first should emphasise that by advancing an indigenous definition of masculinity, I do not pretend that the mind–body, mental–physical, cultural knowledge–martial arts dichotomies implicit in the *wen-wu* dyad are the sole preserve of the Chinese conceptualisation of masculinity. Variations of the *wen-wu* paradigm could be applied to other cultures, particularly those in East Asia.<sup>21</sup> For example, the Japanese author Yukio Mishima aimed to achieve an idealised balance between the literary and the martial in his regimen of building bodily strength before committing *seppuku*.<sup>22</sup> Similarities with other cultures are less direct, but some such as the ancient Greek and Roman are renowned for stressing both body and mind,<sup>23</sup> with others such as Jewish culture emphasising the intellectual aspect.<sup>24</sup>

Again, while I utilise comparisons with other cultures, my project never strays far from its China focus. Cross-cultural studies are simply better left to comparative anthropologists.<sup>25</sup> However, intensive case studies such as this current book can supplement more general observations across cultures. For example, David Gilmore relates the beginnings of his study of comparative male images to his discovery of the Andalusian *machismo*, which he 'believes exists to a degree in many societies'.<sup>26</sup> Yet, while *machismo* forms an integral part of his descriptions of many masculinities ranging from the Mediterranean to the Indian, he believes that the Chinese performance of masculinity 'is often manifested more subtly than in the macho societies'.<sup>27</sup> However, contrary to popular

belief, machismo is highly visible in Chinese culture when viewed through an appropriately ‘cultured’ lens, as chapters 2, 5 and 8 reveal below. Before I outline the main features of *wen-wu*, two interrelated points should be made explicit. The first is related to the importance of including masculinity in so-called ‘gender’ studies and the second is why we need to conceptualise Chinese masculinity as an independent category.

### Sexual Difference

The importance of including studies of masculinity in the valuable work being carried out on sexual difference in Asia is paramount. Previous histories of the world, including China, have frequently been criticised for being dominated by the narration of events that were of male concern. But in effect the ‘maleness’ of these events remains undisclosed. As stated above, because the writing of these histories has always portrayed ‘man’ as the universal, normative subject, the effect has been a neat deflection of any analysis of male dominance by having the man as ‘male’ evade the spotlight. It is the intention of this current project to remove the normality of Chinese ‘maleness’ as subject. To problematise the notion of masculinity within patriarchal society is to bifurcate the two concepts – masculinity is not patriarchy but rather part of the discourse of a gender order that has been constructed within a patriarchal society. In this respect masculinity requires closer examination.

By focusing on masculinity we can ‘sexualise’ men in the same way androcentric scholarship and some feminist-inspired scholarship sexualised women. This is important for studies of China because Chinese men are often depicted in both the West and China as less ‘sexual’ and more ‘intelligent’ than both black and white men.<sup>28</sup> In the literary domain, this view is particularly apparent in comparisons of the chivalric traditions, as we shall see in the next chapter. In recent years, popular texts in the West such as advertisements have begun to sexualise the Chinese male body. However, these glossy presentations, with the objects commonly in vulnerable and passive poses, only confirm Said’s view that the Orient has been metaphorically feminised. They are consumer products for the eyes of the (Western) buyer, and are not intended to reflect the worldview of the objects themselves.

In this chapter, a general paradigm for the Chinese masculine ideal is proposed in order that the actual representations and implications of this ideal can be better understood. Stereotypical male types such as the effeminate scholar and the macho soldier will be examined in the next four chapters, while the impact and transformations of *wen-wu* over space and time will be analysed in chapters 7 and 8. In this chapter, I aim only

to provide a model that captures the Chinese masculine ideal. *Wen-wu* is introduced from the outset because it is central to all discussions of Chinese masculinity.

Because it captures both the mental and physical composition of the ideal man, *wen-wu* is meant to be constructed both biologically and culturally. Clearly my position here is one which rejects the early feminist theorists' division of sex and gender whereby the former was regarded as referring to the biological aspects of masculinity and femininity and the latter to the cultural aspects.<sup>29</sup> While these theories developed from the need for feminists to counteract biological reductionism, they are themselves in danger of reducing everything to cultural determinism. Culture does have marked effects on the physical development of the biological body,<sup>30</sup> as is evident in the effect of modern technologies upon men's bodies. The effects of body-building and weight-lifting on the male form are evident.<sup>31</sup> In the sexuality stakes, the drug Viagra literally produces physical changes in the user and this in turn produces psychological and 'cultural' changes.

Our biological bodies therefore also shape our cultural-psychological beings. While idealists such as Stoltenberg may suggest that the penis is not significantly different from the clitoris,<sup>32</sup> such suggestions are too simplistic to explain male/female differences. For men, a notion of self draws upon and interacts with the ideals, stereotypes and models of masculinity circulating in society. But it is also drawn from a man's experience of how his sexual pleasure is produced and his prowess perceived. Male sexuality may be socially constructed, but our bodies do more than passively accept the culture inscribed upon them – they alter and transform themselves in response to their environments and generate patterns of change within cultural trends.<sup>33</sup>

This concept of 'mutual referencing' and 'mutual interactiveness' explains changes in perceptions of 'manliness' and 'the manly physique' across the lengthy Chinese past. Van Gulik notes the ideal of masculine beauty changes over the dynasties and relates this to the fluctuating importance of physical activities. Men of the Tang period 'cultivated a virile, even martial appearance. They liked thick beards, whiskers and long moustaches and admired bodily strength. Both civilian and military officials practised archery, riding, sword fighting and boxing, and proficiency in these arts was highly praised.'<sup>34</sup> Van Gulik continues by contrasting the Ming and Qing with previous dynasties saying,

Instead of the middle-aged, bearded men of the T'ang and Sung periods, ardent lovers are now preferably depicted as younger men without beard, moustache or whiskers. At that time [Ming] athletics were still admired, young students practised boxing, fencing and archery, and riding and hunting were

favourite pastimes. Thus bodily strength was one of the recognized attributes of a handsome man. They are depicted as tall and broad shouldered, and the nudes of the erotic albums show them with heavy chests and muscular arms and legs ... Under the Manchu occupation the martial arts were monopolized by the conquerors, and as a reaction the Chinese, and more especially the members of the literary class, began to consider physical exercise as vulgar and athletic prowess as suited only to the 'Ch'ing barbarians,' and Chinese professional boxers and acrobats. ... The ideal lover is described as a delicate, hyper-sensitive youngster with pale face and narrow shoulders, passing the greater part of his time dreaming among his books and flowers, and who falls ill at the slightest disappointment.<sup>35</sup>

The male body, then, is culturally inscribed within discourses of masculinity and as such is much more than a product of *perceived* 'essential' biological difference. At the same time, it also determines that culture and discourse interact in subtle and dialectical ways.<sup>36</sup> Recognising that biology as well as culture is vital for the study of masculinity is especially important for the disclosing of Chinese masculinity because I argue that both race and ethnicity are essential for understanding how the concept is constructed. Van Gulik has already made some conjectures on the implications of Han–Manchu differences on masculinity. In recent years, anthropologists have researched the Han-minority dialectic on questions of gender.<sup>37</sup> Han-minority interaction and its significance for masculinity will be briefly discussed in chapter 7. However, as readers of this book are most likely to be based in English-speaking countries, and Western impact remains the most important foreign influence on Chinese living in and outside China, I will concentrate on how this impact affects the constructions of Chinese masculinities. Both chapters 7 and 8 deal mainly with Chinese perceptions and representations of masculinity in the context of the 'yellow–white' interactions.

### **From Machismo to *yingxiong haohan***

Men's studies are burgeoning in Western universities, reflecting a growing popular interest in the topic. The appearance of increasing numbers of 'men's' magazines such as *FHM*, *GQ* and *Men's Health* attests to this cultural shift.<sup>38</sup> But these courses and magazines deal exclusively with European and American cultures and primarily adopt a contemporary vision. It is my goal to broaden this discussion to include Chinese masculinity. Subaltern studies have convincingly demonstrated the partiality and even the insularity of many Western feminist paradigms by revealing their inapplicability to women of Africa or Asia.<sup>39</sup> Similarly we can show that male dominance is manifested and perpetuated in a multitude of ways beyond the Western model. Indeed, if female subordination has

a multiplicity of forms, then male domination must necessarily be capable of similar variance.

It is clear from even the briefest visit to China that contemporary Chinese sexuality is constructed differently from that of the West.<sup>40</sup> This is particularly evident when one looks at the construction of masculinity. Western stereotypes of the ‘real man’ have described the Occidental male as forming his notion of male-self within images of toughness, courageousness, and decisiveness. An adventuresome spirit, a proclivity to violence, a tendency towards physical rather than oral expression of thoughts and a callous attitude to sexual relations would also be important components of a Western male’s self-image.<sup>41</sup> This is not to say that Western notions of masculinity are clear-cut or static, or that all, or even many, Western men really want to live in ‘Marlboro Country’. Indeed, ideals of the ‘real man’ are changing, and hardly a month passes without some book being published or television documentary being screened exhorting men to behave in very different ways.<sup>42</sup> While some white men may feel there is a ‘masculinity crisis’<sup>43</sup> and attempt to reorient themselves as ‘sensitive new age guys’ of the Steve Biddulph mould or neo-masculinist macho men of the Robert Bly type,<sup>44</sup> men of colour ask ‘why is this men’s movement so white?’<sup>45</sup> In particular, Chinese men living in Western countries, whether straight or gay, feel keenly the difference skin colour makes to their sense of identity and masculinity,<sup>46</sup> and their sense of alienation finds no relief in these new ‘men’s movement’ groups. I will indicate in chapters 7 and 8 the degree to which the Chinese diaspora has contributed towards such changes.

The application of the contemporary Western paradigm of the ‘macho man’, whose power is made manifest in brute physical strength and unerring silence, to the Chinese case is largely inappropriate, because while there is a macho tradition in China it is not the predominant one. Thus, the Chinese tradition of macho hero represented in terms such as *yingxiong* (outstanding male) and *haohan* (good fellow)<sup>47</sup> is counter-balanced by a softer, cerebral male tradition – the *caizi* (the talented scholar) and the *wenren* (the cultured man). This is not found to the same degree in contemporary Western conceptions of maleness. Moreover, it will become apparent as we discuss the *wu* heroes later that, unlike the contemporary West, in the Chinese case the cerebral male model tends to dominate that of the macho, brawny male. While the philosophers of ancient Greece, the English gentlemen in colonial times or the recent computer nerds do provide alternative models of masculinity, these images have not been described as desirable and attractive in the same way that the *wenren* have been depicted throughout Chinese history.

The Western paradigms of masculinity are thereby largely inappropriate to the Chinese case: their application would only prove that Chinese



men are ‘not quite real men’ because they fail the (Western) test of masculinity. On a cross-cultural survey where Western visions are adopted as the norm, Asian men can be described as inadequate. For example, Sun Longji’s study of masculinity concludes that Chinese men are effectively eunuchs and proposes that the ideal masculine form is that of the Latin American and Mediterranean male.<sup>48</sup> It is as if the opposite of ‘masculinity’ is not ‘femininity’ but ‘impotence’ within the matrix of cross-cultural comparisons. In this schema, the West sets the ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ standard of masculinity and it is against this template that other cultures are compared. This analytical path is clearly misleading. The point should rather be to develop questions or paradigms that are generated from within the Asian context rather than to simply mimic work designed for the West a decade earlier and conclude that Chinese men are feminised or neutered.<sup>49</sup> This is what I will attempt to do in this book.

### From *yin-yang* to *wen-wu*

In discussions of Asian sexuality, the most commonly invoked ‘Chinese’ paradigm is that of *yin-yang* in a notion of the harmony of opposites. Within the common superficial appreciation of *yin-yang* theory, femininity and masculinity are placed in a dichotomous relationship whereby *yin* is female and *yang* is male.<sup>50</sup> This binary operation is similar to the Pythagorean opposition between light–dark, male–female, right–left and so on. Real men are supposed to have plenty of the *yang* essence. For example, in a recent handbook for men, which covers a wide range of material from sexual etiquette to fatherhood, the first section begins by explaining that what ‘makes a man a man’ is his possession of a strong *yang* essence (*qi*), defined vaguely as ‘determination, strength and good self-control’.<sup>51</sup> We will return to these qualities, especially the last one, in later chapters.

The difference between the Pythagorean opposites and *yin-yang* theory is that in the latter, both essences are regarded as being in constant interaction where *yin* merges with *yang* and *yang* with *yin* in an endless dynamism. This suggests that every man and woman would embody both *yin* and *yang* essences at any given moment and during sexual intercourse, the two sexes exchange sexual essences. For the male, the ideal situation is one where he absorbs *yin* essence from the woman, without losing his precious *yang* essence to her. For the woman the reverse is true – she must absorb the man’s *yang* essence without losing her *yin* essence. This sexual vampirism implies some form of expanding capabilities wherein one maintains one’s original essence (which in men would be *yang* and in women *yin*) and yet holds the potential to

absorb additional essences that expand vitality and natural powers.<sup>52</sup> This renders the reductionist understanding of *yang* being male and *yin* being female only partially accurate. Indeed, since both sexes can be either or both *yin* and *yang*, the performance of sexual difference is not wholly explained by *yin-yang* theory. However, in a cross-cultural analysis one could propose that Chinese masculinity is ultimately more all-encompassing than Western masculinity as a result of this acceptance of the merger of *yin* and *yang* essences in one corporeal form.

By asserting that both men and women embrace both *yin* and *yang* at any particular point in time, this paradigm has proven to be so all-encompassing that it effectively maps the universe on a sexual male–female grid. In this study, I want to isolate general categories which serve as coordinates for maleness only. Discarding *yin* and *yang* is crucial because the potential for interminable interactiveness implicit within *yin* and *yang* prohibits gender specificity. Incisive theorising of masculinity is inhibited by the fluidity of the *yin-yang* binary because each statement should equally be applied to femininity as well. However, the gender order implied by the Confucian strictures on social organisations, clearly placing male above female, implies that the mutuality of *yin* and *yang* must have been counteracted with an alternative sex-specific discourse legitimising and naturalising the imbalance in power between the sexes.<sup>53</sup>

The Chinese paradigm that serves as a prompt to further analysis of masculinity alone is the binary opposition between *wen*, the mental or civil, and *wu*, the physical or martial. These terms have numerous meanings. The *Great Chinese Dictionary* lists 26 definitions for the word *wen*,<sup>54</sup> with the core meanings centring around literary and other cultural attainment. Herrlee G. Creel seems to have captured the gist of its import when he states that *wen*

appears to have originally had the sense of ‘striped’ or ‘adorned’, and it may be by extension from this that *wen* came to mean ‘accomplished’, ‘accomplishment’ and even ‘civilization’: all of those adornments of life that distinguish the civilized man from the untutored barbarian.<sup>55</sup>

*Wu* also has over twenty definitions listed in the *Great Chinese Dictionary*, with the core meanings centring around martial, military, force and power.<sup>56</sup> In a recent book on the history of the *wuxia* (the chivalrous *wu* fighter), Chen Shan contrasts the *wuxia* with the European knights and the Japanese samurai. He believes that the adherents of *wu* fight for righteousness (*yi*) and are loyal to men in their group and eschew women. By contrast, the European knights have more aristocratic values and fight for religious or other more lofty ideals, and the samurai retain a military spirit (*bushido*) and are loyal to their *daimyo* or lord.<sup>57</sup> Chen Shan