
Book Review

The Cosmopolitan Dream: Transnational Chinese Masculinities in a Global Age

Ting-Fai Yu ^{1*}

Published: September 10, 2019

Book's Author: Derek Hird and Geng Song

Publication Date: 2018

Publisher: Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press

Price: HK\$450

Number of Pages: 260 pp. hardback

ISBN: 978-988-8455-85-0

Setting out to explore Chinese masculinities as cosmopolitan configurations, Derek Hird and Geng Song's edited volume *The Cosmopolitan Dream* is a timely contribution to both the scholarly understanding of China's growing presence on the global stage and the transnational turn in men's and masculinity studies.

In demonstrating 'how Confucian masculinities and elite practices, reworked and hybridized, echo across the discourses and everyday lives of contemporary Chinese men and masculinities' (p. 1), this edited volume's chief objective is two-fold. On the one hand, by drawing on and expanding the scholarship on Chinese masculinities, the volume as a whole spotlights the continuity and transformation of the historical male gendered expressions of *wen* 文 (literary) and *wu* 武 (martial) (Louie 2002, 2015) 'in China's post-socialist era with transnational dimensions' (p. 1). On the other, the diverse but theoretically intermingled case studies presented in many of the chapters decenter and, in turn, provincialise the model of 'transnational business masculinities' (Connell and Wood 2005) that has (previously) defined what we (used to) conceive as the hegemonic ideal in global gender hierarchies. As a result, the volume not only exemplifies a 'localising' intervention to the development of men's and masculinity studies but also sheds important light on how male privilege is produced vis-à-vis other social relations such as class, ethnicity and parenthood both within and extended beyond China.

Varied in their disciplinary approaches (e.g. media studies, anthropology, history) and methodological strategies (e.g. textual analysis, ethnography, oral interviewing), the chapters altogether paint a broad picture of contemporary Chinese masculinities under China's transforming political economy. Starting off the discussion by defining the very subject of inquiry, Geng Song's chapter 'Cosmopolitanism with Chinese Characteristics' deploys a number of Chinese TV dramas to demonstrate how the kind of cosmopolitanism relevant to contemporary China is rooted in and constructed through post-socialist consumer culture. Distinguished from Haiyan Lee's (2015) definition of the cosmopolitan subject as one that 'honors the humanity of the stranger' (p. 243), Song points out that in 'the construction of idealized masculinity, cosmopolitanism as a desirable quality is always coupled with a distinctive class background and hierarchy' (p. 35). Echoing Song's observation of Chinese cosmopolitanism as classed configurations, Hongwei Bao's chapter also highlights the class connotations – both contemporary and traditional, at times converged – that are manifested in male same-sex intimacies through an intertextual analysis of the online novel *Beijing Story* (1996) and Stanley Kwan's film adaptation *Lan Yu* (2001). For example, Bao argues that while the protagonist Handong, a successful businessman who made his wealth through international trade, engages in

¹ Monash University Malaysia, MALAYSIA

*Corresponding Author: tingfai.yu@monash.edu

gay sex as a means to demonstrate his “new rich” class distinction’ (p. 83) in his public life, he alternatively utilises the cultural reference of *nanfeng* 南風 (‘southern/male style’) – meaning male homoeroticism understood as ‘simply a hobby [...] among the socially privileged’ (p. 82) – to maintain his respectability when seeking family’s tolerance.

One of the other remarkable strengths of this volume are the critical efforts made to trace the transformation of Chinese masculinities across time and space. By analysing the representation of mainland Chinese men in transnational spaces, Sheldon Lu’s chapter chronicles the formation of Chinese male subjects in relation to the world impacts of three historical events: namely, the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, the transfer of sovereignty of Hong Kong to China in 1997, and China’s ascendancy to an economic superpower in the 2010s. In examining the films of Hong Kong directors Clara Law (*Farewell China*, 1990) and Peter Chan (*Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, 1996; *American Dreams in China*, 2013), what Lu offers is an empirically substantive and critically engaged delineation of “a trajectory from an incapacitated, suffering male figure, to a questing, inquisitive male around 1997, and finally to a figure of empowered confident male in the twenty first century (p. 60).

Departing from much of the existing scholarship on men’s migration and the transnational construction of Chinese masculinities that is based on the experiences in Western societies, James Coates examines how Chinese masculinities are negotiated in Japan through the life trajectory of the labourer-turned-celebrity-turned-politician Li Xiaomu. The chapter highlights the entrepreneurial pliability of Li’s masculine performances – from an underworld figure to a ‘consumerist cosmopolitan’ (Song and Lee, 2010) – that is instrumental in appealing to Japanese and Chinese audiences at different stages of his career.

Aside from the abovementioned chapters’ multidisciplinary approaches to theorising cosmopolitan Chinese masculinities, other chapters exhibit a number of detailed case studies that underscore the diverse trajectories of global gendered formations vis-à-vis transforming social relations both within and extended beyond China. Based on field research of birth tourism in ‘maternity B&Bs’ in Los Angeles, Tingyu Kang’s chapter engages in dialogue with the concept of ‘flexible citizenship’ (Ong 1999) and in doing so, articulates new configurations of Chinese masculinities as emerged through a new gendered division of labour spanning across the Pacific. Kang wrote:

“The formation of migrant elite masculinities in flexible citizenship is not isolated but, rather, constituted in relational interactions among actors with diverse class, gender, and ethnic identities (p. 205).

As male helpers are required to perform masculinised care labour for the pregnant women such as driving and moving help, Kang observes that this outsourcing of ‘husbandhood’ has generated anxieties for the China-based husbands who ‘express a persistent need to reassert their dominant position over their wives and the male helpers’ (p. 201). Because, Kang argues, ‘the spatial distance between the husbands and their families de-stabilises their sense of masculinity with regard to their wives’ spatial mobility, infidelity, and power over household decision-making’ (p. 205). Exploring the timely topic of contemporary parenting practices, Miriam Driessen’s study investigates how Chinese men working in Africa negotiate their fatherhood away from home. Living in a time when ‘[e]arning respectability as a blue-collar worker has become harder in present-day Chinese society’ (p. 184), her chapter incisively scrutinises the tensions arising from the ways in which the research subjects are caught between the social expectations of fathers as both financial providers and caregivers.

This volume as a whole constitutes an important contribution for understanding the transformation of Chinese masculinities in transnational contexts and toward consolidating such global gendered formations as a field of inquiry. However, some of the chapters epitomise a lack of integration between their descriptive and analytic accounts. For example, while Feng’s chapter provides a specified overview of the historical construction of culinary masculinities in China and a detailed biography of Cai Lan, the subject matter of transnational Chinese masculinities as related to the broader theme of the volume is only discussed briefly at the end in its conclusion section. As a result, readers who expect to learn about cosmopolitan ‘Chineseness’ or the changing configurations of global masculinities, rather than the life and career of Cai Lan, might feel somewhat disconcerted. Despite some of these minor shortcomings, this book is certainly a timely intervention to the study of Chinese masculinities as well as an approachable text for students, scholars and a general readership interested in gender studies and contemporary China.

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Citation: Yu, T.-F. (2019). [Review of the book *The Cosmopolitan Dream: Transnational Chinese Masculinities in a Global Age*, by Derek Hird and Geng Song]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 3(1-2), 21. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/5927>

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