

CROSS-CURRENTS



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REVIEW ESSAY

What Does It Mean to Be a Man in China?

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Bret Hinsch. *Masculinities in Chinese History*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013. 208 pp. \$81 (cloth), \$31 (paper), \$30 (ebook).

Geng Song and Derek Hird. *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China*. Leiden: Brill, 2014. 296 pp. \$149 (cloth/ebook).

What does it mean to be a man in China? The two studies under review here, both valuable contributions, approach this question in different ways. Bret Hinsch offers a dynasty-by-dynasty overview of the broad sweep of Chinese history, whereas Geng Song and Derek Hird zero in on the contemporary urban scene. But the books have much in common. Both privilege “ideals of manhood,” as Hinsch puts it (10), over lived experience and focus on elites to the exclusion of the vast majority of Chinese men. Both titles employ the plural “masculinities” to emphasize the multiple and sometimes contradictory expressions of manhood found in Chinese culture. Despite that emphatic pluralism, however, the reader is startled to find that the working poor, the peasantry, imbalanced sex ratios, and same-sex desire are all more or less invisible in these accounts.

Bret Hinsch, who teaches history at Foguang University in Taiwan, is best known for his pioneering study of what he calls “the male homosexual tradition” in imperial China. That book, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve* (1990), had its genesis in the thesis Hinsch wrote at Yale University under the guidance of the late historian John Boswell. Hinsch’s new book, *Masculinities in Chinese History*, is based almost entirely on secondary sources and is written in a

straightforward, accessible style. It seems intended for undergraduate teaching and will probably be most useful in that context.

In his introduction, Hinsch emphasizes the polyvalence and dynamism of masculinities over China's long history, citing four influential factors: kinship (both actual and fictive), the state (as an important source of elite status), economic change (which fosters new elites who challenge established values), and foreign models of masculinity (e.g., the Buddhist monk, the steppe warrior, and the Western businessman). The chapters that follow are organized chronologically, with each treating a particular dynasty and a particular masculine ideal that was introduced into the mix during that era. Successive chapters address the separation of the sexes in the Zhou dynasty; honor and revenge in the Han; Buddhist monasticism in the Jin; the fetishization of female chastity in the Tang; the refined connoisseurship of the literati in the Song; the marginal, macho *haohan* in the Ming; and, finally (in a tightly compressed last chapter), the modern, patriotic businessman of the late Qing and the Republic, the socialist constructor of High Maoism, and the cosmopolitan metrosexual of contemporary urban China. The effect is to suggest that masculine tropes have piled up over time, yielding the complex repertoire available today.

This convenient organizational scheme requires simplification, omission, and anachronism. For example, much of the chapter on honor and vengeance in the Han dynasty actually discusses the nobility of the pre-imperial age. To be fair, Hinsch sometimes acknowledges this—for example, in his treatment of “precursors to the *haohan*,” in the chapter on the Ming (114–115)—and yet these digressions, helpful as they are, seem to call into question the utility of his linear dynastic scheme. It would have been helpful had he at least provided a clearly theorized justification for organizing his book in this way.

Among his omissions, it is especially perplexing that Hinsch chose to skip the High Qing, given several important developments of that era that impinged on masculinity both then and now: First, the Manchu conquest posed a crisis of conscience for elite men who were steeped in Confucian ideals of loyalty; some resisted unto death, but the vast majority were induced to collaborate with the alien warrior regime. The Manchus also imposed their peculiar hairstyle on Chinese men (requiring them to shave the front of the head, while braiding the hair in back into a long queue). This “tonsorial castration” was considered by some to be a fate worse than death.

Despite fierce resistance, however, it ultimately became the new norm for masculine appearance (Wakeman 1985, 649).

Second, over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, sex ratios worsened (along with overpopulation and rural poverty), and there emerged a burgeoning underclass of single, rogue men outside the normative family system—the notorious “bare sticks” (*guanggun*). A new judicial discourse demonized the figure of the “bare stick” as a multivalent social and political threat—and, in particular, as a sexual predator preying on the “chaste wives and daughters,” but also on the “sons and younger brothers,” of good families (Sommer 2000, 2002). We shall return to this point below.

Third, the High Qing witnessed the elaboration of the official cult of female chastity to unprecedented extremes. This policy represented a fundamentalist effort to cope with the social and demographic developments cited above, by enlisting women to defend the family order against the forces that threatened it (Sommer 2000; cf. Theiss 2005).

Finally, in Beijing, there developed an elaborate homoerotic opera scene and a closely related sex industry that catered to elite men (Wu 2004). This last item is worth considering more closely, given its direct impact on the construction of masculinities in the modern era (including those treated by Song and Hird’s book). Same-sex desire is vital to any historical understanding of Chinese masculinities because such desire was not nearly so marginal or despised in the long imperial era as it is in China today. (Hinsch himself advanced this argument in *Passions of the Cut Sleeve*, so it is all the more puzzling that he chose to ignore same-sex desire entirely in his new book. He does not even cite his previous book.) Wu Cuncun, Sophie Volpp, and other scholars have shown that homoerotic connoisseurship was central to the masculine self-fashioning of many elite men in the Ming-Qing era. The extreme manifestation of this trend appeared in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the male youths who played female roles in Beijing opera were the objects of intense erotic fascination and worked offstage as high-end escorts and prostitutes to service their elite patrons. All of this was quite risqué and even scandalous, and sex between males was actually prohibited by Qing law (which also forbade banner elites and government officials from keeping company with actors). Nevertheless, these social conventions and legal prohibitions were flouted by many men whose privileged positions enabled them to get away with doing so, in a remarkably open demimonde

where they bonded with one another through shared appreciation and exploitation of these youthful sex objects (Volpp 2001, 2002; Wu 2004; Sommer 2005).

In the Republican era, this homoerotic scene was erased and forgotten, because the reinvention of Beijing opera as a “national,” classical art form required its heterosexualization and de-eroticization. (In a parallel process, vernacular novels that had recently been banned as “licentious books” were reinvented as China’s “classic” novels, to stand on the same footing as Balzac, Dickens, and Tolstoy.) The broader context for this development was China’s beleaguered, semi-colonial status, in which leaders experienced profound anxiety about Western claims of Chinese “backwardness” and perceived an urgent need for modern heterosexual citizens who would constitute and defend the nation. The sex industry associated with the opera was first suppressed and later denied; eventually, the cross-dressing male youth who had been the focus of connoisseurship vanished altogether, being replaced onstage by female actors (Kang 2009; Sommer 2012).

The construction of modern masculinities took place against this historical background. The several iterations of masculine modernity that have taken hold since have all been emphatically heterosexual; their construction has depended on the prior denial and erasure of same-sex desire and on the invention of an exclusive heterosexuality. Even the Maoist paradigm of the socialist constructor, which seems drained of all overt sexuality, was built on this same foundation of homoerotic denial (although the masculine “iron girl” might inspire subversive lesbian desire) (Min 1994; Honig 2003).

Modern masculinities are the focus of the second volume under review here. *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China*, by Geng Song and Derek Hird, provides a valuable guide to the new configurations of manhood that have emerged in urban China over the past couple of decades of explosive economic growth and dizzying social change. The authors’ focus is on the ideals and images that influence white-collar men’s self-perceptions and self-fashioning in the postsocialist world of work and consumption.

Song is a specialist in literature and media studies at the University of Hong Kong whose previous publications include an important study of the “fragile scholar” (*caizi*) ideal in late imperial fiction (2004). Hird, in contrast, is a social scientist at the University of Westminster, and his research has focused on intimate relationships in contemporary urban China. This new book’s organization and methodology reflect its authors’ respective areas of expertise: the first

half (on discourse) explores images of men in mass media, while the second half (on practice) draws on interviews and participant observation the authors conducted in Beijing.

The book's first three chapters survey how men are portrayed in television dramas, lifestyle magazines, and cyberspace. The dramas promote a mix of the traditional values associated with "martial" (*wu*) masculinity (honor, loyalty, and physical toughness), along with newer, postsocialist values (such as entrepreneurship and chauvinist patriotism). Together, they convey a message of rugged self-reliance in a hostile world. In contrast, the magazines promote upward mobility through conspicuous consumption and through self-fashioning with the consumer goods thus acquired. The chapter on the Internet outlines how the Japanese *otaku* (obsessive Internet geek) has morphed into the far more benign image of the Chinese *zhainan*, whose intense focus, sensitivity, and honesty may appear admirable and even attractive to women.

The latter three chapters use case studies of white-collar men to explore the performance of masculinity at work, at leisure, and at home. Here we get an even stronger sense of the multiplicity of contradictory ideals and messages to which these men are being exposed. A complex mix of both modern cosmopolitan and more "traditional" patriarchal elements serves to define and mark status for these men. In the leisure sphere, for example, playing golf and working out in the gym now complement the kind of male bonding traditionally associated with the "martial" masculinity of the underworld. The latter takes place through a highly instrumental kind of "socializing" (*yingchou*) that is often a basic part of getting business done. The typical setting for *yingchou* is the sexual service industry (hostess bars, massage parlors, karaoke clubs, and brothels), where the only women present are there to serve men. At the same time, it has become commonplace for men to advocate gender equality (at least in conversation with an interviewer); however, this cosmopolitan ideal conflicts with anxiety about female competition in the job market, and with an increasing sense that a successful man should be the sole breadwinner for his family, supported by a doting wife.

Song and Hird's book reads like an ethnographic guide to the images of masculinity that a foreign visitor might encounter in Beijing or Shanghai today. Its strength, for this reader, is less its analysis than its detailed narrative descriptions, many of which are both informative and entertaining (although the long list of cyberspace prototypes in chapter 3 could have been

relegated to an appendix). The literature review in the introduction is also extremely useful. This book will be welcome in graduate seminars on gender and sexuality in modern China.

However, a more strictly accurate title might have been *[Straight, Urban, White-Collar] Men and [Their] Masculinities in Contemporary China*. To be fair, the authors openly acknowledge that they ignore rural and working-class men and pay scant attention to same-sex desire—they plead that those topics deserve separate studies of their own, and no doubt they are correct.¹ Where the authors do address same-sex relations (247–251), however, their analysis leaves something to be desired. For example, a section of chapter 6 subtitled “Queering Family Relationships” compares closeted gay men’s efforts to accommodate the filial imperative to marry to the practice of wealthy, powerful men taking a mistress (*bao ernai*). It is not obvious what “queering” means in this context, nor does there seem to be much of a parallel between the practices being compared. The former resembles the scenario of the film *Brokeback Mountain*, whereas *bao ernai* is a risqué but potent symbol of privilege to be flaunted. In this respect, *bao ernai* actually resembles elite men’s patronage of actors in nineteenth-century Beijing far more than the secretive behavior of marginalized gay men in Beijing today. But also, the whole panoply of erotic leisure available today seems to recapitulate the old practice of polygyny, the common theme being that a man who can afford it may enjoy the services of many young women.

What is the “big story” of masculinity in China today? Until very recently, the vast majority of Chinese men were peasants, and even today, many of the men in cities are actually dislocated peasants working at menial urban jobs. The percentage of China’s population living in cities did not exceed 50 percent until 2011. As recently as 1983, more than two-thirds of China’s workforce was still employed in agriculture; that percentage fell below 50 percent for the first time in 2003, and it is now down to about 33 percent (compared to 2 percent in the United States).² As much as any other factor, this massive transfer of underemployed labor out of inefficient agriculture into construction and factory jobs is what has fueled China’s dramatic economic growth over the past thirty years. But the unprecedented speed and scale of this epochal transformation have produced enormous social and environmental stresses.

Moreover, the persistence of imbalanced sex ratios—what some call “the demographic masculinization of China”—has created a surplus of tens of millions of single, poor men (Attané 2013). Increasingly, these men are being scapegoated as a security threat, in a weird return of

Qing judicial discourse; in fact, the old, pejorative term “bare stick” has been revived by social scientists (in think tanks that advise government ministries), who identify such men as a specifically sexual threat to social order. In this new social science policy discourse, poor, single men are demonized as rapists, child molesters, and homosexuals, even as they are also blamed for the proliferation of prostitution.³ This discourse has spread abroad, with foreign commentators now warning of the dire implications for international security of China’s teeming horde of sexually frustrated single men (e.g., Hudson and den Boer 2004; Hvistendahl 2011). Once again, as in the Qing, the “bare stick” has become the scapegoat for a host of problems of which, I would argue, he is among the principal victims.

The two books under review here ignore these developments and their implications for Chinese masculinities. Non-elite men tend to appear in both books only under the sign of “martial” (*wu*) masculinity. Without doubt, the most influential theoretical framework for understanding Chinese masculinities today is the dichotomy of *wen* and *wu* (usually translated as “literary” and “martial”), first proposed by literature scholars Louise Edwards and Kam Louie (Louie and Edwards 1994; Louie 2002). Both of the books under review employ this dichotomy to some extent (and both back covers carry blurbs written by Professor Louie). But it is important to bear in mind that both *wen* and *wu* are, above all, literary paradigms. Throughout the imperial era, both the “civil” (*wen*) and the “military” (*wu*) branches of government evaluated candidates for office primarily through written examinations that tested knowledge of the classics. Literary scholars have used the *wen/wu* dichotomy to identify two masculine archetypes that appear in Ming-Qing fiction and drama. *Wen* characterizes the refined, cultured, and somewhat androgynous masculinity of the *caizi* (translated as “fragile scholar” by Geng Song), who appears in scholar/beauty romances such as *The Story of the Western Wing* (*Xixiang ji*). *Wu* masculinity, in contrast, characterizes the superhuman violence and appetites, as well as the steadfast fraternal loyalty, of the *haohan* (“good fellow”), who appears most famously in the novels *Outlaws of the Marsh* (*Shuihu zhuan*) and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*San guo yanyi*) (e.g., Louie and Edwards 1994; Louie 2002; Song 2004; Huang 2006). It is the publication of these novels in the Ming that leads Hinsch to devote his chapter on that dynasty to “marginal heroes” (chapter 6).

The values of the *haohan*, who substitutes collective brotherhood for normative family, and whose milieu is the open road and wilderness, are the very antithesis of the Confucian

virtues promoted by the imperial state. But the *wu* masculinity of the *haohan* is as much a text-based paradigm (or fantasy) as the *wen* masculinity of the *caizi*. The literati who produced (and consumed) these novels had little if any direct experience of life on the margins, and to the extent that they comprehended *wu* masculinity at all, they did so as outsiders (Sommer 2015, chapter 2; cf. Boretz 2010). But few men in late imperial China had sufficient literacy to read novels, and it is an open question to what extent the literary *haohan* reflected the lives of genuine marginalized men in late imperial China—let alone the great majority of men, whose time and energy were consumed by subsistence family farming, and to whom neither the *wen* nor the *wu* paradigm of masculinity would seem to apply.

One of the most fascinating developments related to masculinity in China today is the embrace by entrepreneurs and government officials of the countercultural idiom of *wu* masculinity idealized by the classic novels (and now more widely disseminated in the form of films, comics, and computer games), especially that of collective brotherhood. Song and Hird have an interesting discussion of the performance of this kind of *gemenr* (brotherly) masculinity in their section on *yingchou* (185–203). As anthropologist John Osburg has shown, this idiom now frames the highly corrupt networking that links government officials, businessmen, and organized crime, whose socializing and negotiations typically take place in a sexual entertainment setting (Osburg 2013; cf. Zheng 2009). This phenomenon—which is a bit like mafiosi taking their lines from the film *The Godfather*—seems terribly ironic, in light of the way poor, single men have been blamed for the ubiquitous sex industry and rising crime rate.

Hinsch, Song, and Hird are to be congratulated for their useful contributions to the rapidly growing body of scholarship on Chinese masculinities. Their books should be required reading for anyone interested in this field. But by their exclusions, they indicate a rather different agenda that other scholars may pursue with profit.

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Notes

- 1 Song's previous work on the *caizi* does explore same-sex desire in some depth (2004, chapter 5).

- 2 These figures are from the World Bank (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS>, accessed August 10, 2015).
- 3 See, for example, a series of analyses produced by Xi'an Jiaotong University's Institute for Population and Development: Jiang and Li (2009), Liu et al. (2009), Li Shuzhuo et al. (2010), and Jiang and Sanchez-Barricarte (2011).

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