INTRODUCTION

CHINESE MASCULINITY: IS THERE SUCH A THING?

It was in a newly renovated high-class conference room, a few minutes before a faculty meeting. A female senior colleague, a Singaporean Chinese who was educated in English, approached one of the authors and asked about his area of research. Upon hearing the answer “Chinese masculinity,” she sneered and said, “Chinese masculinity? Is there such a thing?” The remark was followed by gales of laughter in the conference room; most of the people were local Chinese. This happened several years ago when one of the authors first came to a university in Singapore to teach. Even today he does not know whether the woman's open disdain for Chinese men extends to himself, who happens to be Chinese.

This disappointment with Chinese men, however, is not uniquely found in a “postcolonial” and “conservative” society like Singapore. It is, for instance, echoed in Yi Zhongtian's (1998, 1–2) fierce criticism of the “unqualified” men and women in China:

There are men in China and there are women in China.

It is a shame, however, that at certain times, and in certain ways, Chinese males apparently do not act quite like men, and Chinese females do not exactly act like women....

If the men in China are all very manly, then why do we hear calls for a “search for real men” in China? If Chinese women are all very feminine, then why do we hear phrases such as “where have all the women in China gone”? ... Chinese culture and traditional values have always placed importance on the relationship between male and female, emphasizing the distinction between the two genders. That is to say, based on traditional Chinese culture, the hope and ideal is for men to be very masculine and women to be very feminine. Yet ... in reality we find awkward situations, such as “weepy men and women who swear out on the street” or “women without allure and men with impotence,” and other similarly inappropriate circumstances. Isn't this an irony? Isn't this a joke?

If this were merely a joke, then it might be all right. What makes it worse, however, is that as it directly reflects the basic inner qualities of a nation's people, it has already affected the nation's prosperity, strength, and ethnicity. Because a strong and prosperous state depends on a civilized people to build, a flourishing nation can only be made by healthy citizens. ... For the past century, our nation has undergone some severe disasters. The causes of these disasters are of course evident to all; one hundred years of bloodshed can be
blamed on the Western powers, a decade of turmoil can be blamed on Lin Biao and Jiang Qing. Yet, the dog- or lamb-like fear that many people possess when faced with foreign invaders, and their tiger- or wolf-like cruelty when they are with fellow countrymen—is this more or less connected with the above-mentioned phenomenon that “men are not like men and women are not like women”?

Do the “Chinese” have “masculinity”? How does Chinese masculinity compare with its counterpart in the West? Are the “unhealthy” Chinese men a cause or a result of China’s failure and humiliation during the last century? Questions like these reflect entrenched stereotypes and essentialist understandings of both masculinity and Chineseness and unfortunately still have wide currency in mass media and popular discourse today both in and outside of China. The “crisis of masculinity” in China remains a constant topic of concern. At the same time, however, globalization and rapid social transformations in the country have opened up numerous new possibilities for gender and sexuality in China, and these new options have significantly challenged and changed traditional notions and discourses. Although Chinese masculinity has attracted growing scholarly interest in the last decade and a number of theoretically informed works have emerged in this field, interdisciplinary critical studies on men and masculinities in contemporary China are lacking.

This book, exploring the social, economic, and cultural factors that have affected men and representations of men in China over the past few decades, represents our combined efforts in this field and brings to fruition our research activities of more than ten years. Our approach to men and masculinities is “historical, cultural, relational, materialist, deconstructive, and antiessentialist” (Pringle et al. 2011, 2). As an interdisciplinary attempt, the study synthesizes research methods of both the humanities and social sciences, including textual reading, content analysis, interviews, participant observation, and so on, and interrogates the links between practice and discourse.

The study, however, makes no pretence to be exhaustive. The time frame of the “contemporary” period covered in the study refers to the post-Mao era (since 1976), with particular focus on the recent decade (since 2000). Our discussions on the social practices of men in China are mainly confined to urban China. It also needs to be pointed out that, although the chapters entail investigations of interesting topics such as homophobia, gay identities and visibility, and, in particular, the implicit homosexual

1 All Chinese texts are translated by ourselves, unless otherwise stated.