CHAPTER SIX

MASCULINITIES AT HOME

In this final ethnographically informed chapter, we turn our attention to masculinity at home and in the family. As we have already shown, many family issues also intertwine with work or leisure issues. Even in imperial China, despite the prevalence of the notion that “men control the outside, women control the inside” (nan zhu wai nü zhu nei), there was not a rigidly gendered compartmentalization of private and public space in everyday life; rather, “the boundaries between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds were also relational and fluid” (Bray 1997, 54). Although the title of this chapter suggests a specific locus—the home—as the site of our investigation of masculinities, our approach does not confine itself to the spatial confines of the dwelling place. The families that inhabit homes are social units composed of relationships, processes, acts, and events that inevitably overspill the physical boundaries of the home. David Morgan (2011, 2, 9), a specialist on the sociology of the family, argues that an analytical perspective on family practices allows for an understanding of how the family is involved in a wide range of social practices that are not necessarily confined to the home, and helps enrich our perspectives of what we might think of as predominantly work or leisure activities. We intend in this chapter to locate family practices within such larger contexts.

Besides engendering a “sense of fluidity,” this more capacious understanding of families also enables other sensibilities to be kept in mind, argues Morgan (2011, 6–8), including “a sense of the active,” so that we approach family life as a set of activities; “a sense of the everyday,” which recognizes the significance of the unremarkable happenings of daily life as well as more notable life-events; “a sense of the regular,” which appreciates that family practices often occur at regular daily, weekly, or longer intervals; and finally “a linking of history and biography,” which understands the actions of individuals in families as formed in historically and culturally specific conditions. Morgan’s approach resonates with our attention in the ethnographically informed chapters of this book to the mundane, repetitive

---

1 In his study of masculinity and the middle-class home in Victorian England, John Tosh (2007, 2) similarly argues that masculinity is interconnectedly constructed in three main areas: “home, work and all-male association.”
habits, routines, processes, and interactions of everyday life, which, in uneven and unpredictable engagements with assemblages of discourses, objects, and environments, constitute gendered subjectivities, identities, and practices. We hope that this kind of fine-grained and wide-reaching ethnographic approach to exploring lives as they are lived, rather than a narrow focus on statements of what relationships should be like, reveals a fuller picture of the topologies of power and inequality in family and intimate relationships (Jamieson 1999, 478–82).

Prominent anthropological models of the family in China include Maurice Freedman’s “lineage paradigm,” which emphasizes patrilineal descent at the expense of the contribution of women and the study of marriage; Myron Cohen’s “corporate model,” which focuses on the economic arrangements of the family unit, thereby obscuring gender and generational inequalities; and Marjery Wolf’s concept of the “uterine family,” which highlights mothers’ bonds with their sons, although it overshadows women’s other relationships and activities in the family (Greenhalgh 1994; Evans 2008a, 17, 36–37nn48–50; Brandstätter and Santos 2009, 6–7, 15–16). Neither the lineage nor corporate models attend to emotional practices and ties. With our gendered focus on the multiple influences shaping masculine identity, subjectivities, and practices in the realm of the family, we aim to broaden the discussion on family men so that it includes affective aspects of masculinity, while at the same time also recognizing the patriarchal ideology and economic forces coproducing it. Recent sociological debates about the family in contemporary life have highlighted the issue of intimate relationships, in particular whether there is a trend in modern societies towards “pure,” egalitarian relationships based on “disconnecting intimacy” (Giddens 1992), or whether inequalities, hierarchies, and gendered behaviors still pervade couple relationships (Jamieson 1998). In this chapter, we examine evidence from informants, journals, and self-help literature to see how these arguments might help us make sense of the Chinese case. And what is to count as an intimate couple relationship that falls within the “family” category? For our purposes, we cover intimate relationships between unmarried couples as well as those within legally recognized marriages. As a justification, we cite the tendency of young, unmarried men in China to refer to their long-term girlfriends as laopo (wife)—an anticipation of family relations is already built into the relationship. This is in line with Morgan’s “sense of fluidity,” which acknowledges the ambiguity of who counts as a family member or what counts as a family practice in various circumstances (Morgan 2011, 7).

With the above as our underlying framework, we set out in this chapter to investigate the most prominent subject positions associated with familial