CHAPTER 5

On Women and Love

眼望妹子一身藍，
The girl everyone stares at, all dressed in blue.¹
手中提個草花籃。
In her hand she carries a basket full of flowers.
一朵送給你亲丈夫，
One ear she gives to her dearest husband,
一朵送給我野男漢，
The other ear is for the wild macho man,
看你難言不難言。
Trying to find out [about her], people are embarrassed to speak.²

In the predominantly masculine society of the Sichuan rowers, sailors, and trackers, there was still a place for women. Yet women were confined mainly to the sphere of the imagination, encoded in love songs, fantasized, dreamt about, peeped at, or occasionally enjoyed as prostitutes. This chapter dwells on such visions. In the following pages, we shall explore them and through them search for the boatmen’s own reflections. How did the river workers imagine interaction with the other sex? Did they see themselves as attractive or repulsive? Were they scared of women or did they feel themselves at ease? How did they account for their frequent social handicap of not being able to afford marriage? What did these images mean?

All these questions, which on the surface pertain to inner feelings and choices, in reality depict, perhaps better than anything else, the vision of society and self-held by Sichuan river-laborers. The songs analyzed here, strictly speaking, cannot be treated as expressions of individual emotions. Boatmen sang about women, love, sexual conquests, or frustrations at the same time as they chanted about work, cruel bosses, marvelous cities, and hair-raising rapids. It was something they did together, perhaps even when meeting girls along the way, certainly when bored or while working. Like all other haozi, the songs treating about women and love were not only a form of entertainment, but also a way to strengthen a common ethos—to create, disseminate, and

¹ This may be understood either literally or symbolically. According to Eberhard, blue “may . . . be a harbinger of high office and social preferment—with added worries and difficulties. Blue eyes are regarded as ugly [associated with northern nomads].” Eberhard, Chinese Symbols, 42. Blue also symbolizes sky and celestials; this sentence could therefore be read, “she looks like a celestial.” Williams, Chinese Symbolism, 76–79. Any other translation apart from the literal is highly speculative.

² “Yanwang meizi” 眼望妹子, Duan and Hu, Chuan, 926–927.
fortify a view of themselves, their social position, and their professional code, which—for better or worse—was how they made their way in the world.

Before we embark on a detailed reading of the songs, two questions need to be addressed. First, how are we to understand the concept of masculinity in China and how does it apply to our inquiry about the boatmen’s culture? Second, what interpretative tools do we have for reading Chinese love songs, and more particularly those elements of love songs that are threaded among the Sichuan work songs? In recent years both masculinity and love songs in China have attracted a large scholarly interest, and we should therefore examine how the boatmen may enrich our knowledge on these issues.

There are a number of interpretative lenses through which scholars of China have framed a problematic of historical masculinity. Some of the most enticing insights into this question are offered by a model presented by Matthew Sommer, in which masculinity was understood as a “normative” notion, namely an idealized fulfillment of the assumed, enforced, and protected male roles within a society. In Sommer’s words a “normative male” was “a married, adult householder with a stake in the familial order so valorized by the Confucian state. He was a commoner, a man of respectable family and occupation.” Such men constituted a fundament of late imperial society. They were privileged within it as its representatives and defended by the state and its institutions: “[the] household of the normative male, that microcosm of imperial order, was under siege; the purpose of law was to strengthen its defense.” On the opposite pole of the social and moral spectrum lay the so-called guanggun 光棍 (frequently guanggunr 光棍儿)—usually translated as “bare stick,” the epitome of a “dangerous male.” Sommers stated that “Qing lawmakers used a number of terms in various combinations to characterize him. He was ‘violent’ (xiong [凶]) and ‘wicked’ (e [惡]) and was described as one who ‘habitually fights’ (hao dou [好斗]); he was a ‘worthless, wicked reprobate’ (bu xiao e tu [不孝惡徒]), a ‘depraved rouge’ (diao tu [刁徒]). But most important he was a ‘guang gun’: literally, a ‘bare stick.’” Such people were seen as rootless, acting against the law and social order, without families or any other social ties. “Bare stick” also had the connotation of a “bare penis,” signifying a sexual predator and a

4 Ibid., 84.
5 Ibid., 69.