Geng Song and Derek Hird


While there is no shortage of scholarship focused on the words and deeds of Chinese men, it is only recently that scholars have begun to examine these same men as gendered beings. In the past decade or so, several important studies of masculinity in Chinese literature and film as well as ethnographic and historical accounts of Chinese masculinities have emerged. With the exception of the groundbreaking work of Kam Louie, most studies have been focused on Chinese men of a particular class and/or of a particular time or have examined representations of masculinity in a particular medium. *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China* provides a much-needed synthesis of recent work on masculinity in the contemporary PRC and offers multiple original contributions based on the authors’ own analyses of contemporary media discourses and representations as well as their interviews with dozens of Chinese men and women. Just as new, naturalized discourses of femininity have been reconstructed and reimagined from the “gender erasure” of the Mao years, Song and Hird document the emergence of new configurations of masculinity that reflect the radically transformed social landscape of post-Mao China.

The introduction provides the most useful overview of scholarship on Chinese masculinity that I have encountered. The authors situate their approach to masculinity in China within influential theoretical approaches to gender and demonstrate a command of the burgeoning scholarship on masculinity in the West. Despite their firm grounding in this literature, they avoid blindly applying terms derived from critical studies of masculinity in Western societies to China or presuming parallels where they might not exist. Rather, phenomena such as the emergence of the “new lad,” the “new man,” and the metrosexual in the West serve as useful comparative backdrops for understanding the making of urban masculinities in China.

The first half of the book examines diverse representations and images of masculinity across different media – television dramas, lifestyle magazines, and a groundbreaking analysis of masculinities in cyberspace. Just as publishers in the West figured out that they could prey upon men’s anxieties about their bodies, social status, and sexual performance to market a new genre of magazines (not to mention a whole new category of men specific products) to a male audience, men’s magazines predicated on the anxieties of a nascent middle class have flourished in China as well. Yet as Song and Hird deftly demonstrate, these texts reflect somewhat different sets of anxieties than their Western counter-
parts such as how to balance Chineseness with cosmopolitanism or debates over the qualities of “Chinese style sexy.”

All too often, contemporary work on globalized masculinities tends to emphasize homogenizing forces over local particularities. One of the many strengths of this book is that it documents the impact of globalized images, discourses, and institutions on the production of Chinese masculinities while still taking seriously practices and traditions specific to China. Their analyses also remind us that gender dynamics in contemporary China cannot be reduced to the negotiation of a simple China versus the West binary. Rather, in certain domains, cultural flows emanating from Japan and Korea and elsewhere in East Asia are far more significant. For example, Song and Hird’s discussion of Chinese netizens’ appropriation of the Japanese term *otaku* おたく [オタク] (an obsessive, often socially isolated, fan of Japanese anime and manga) to create the Chinese category of *zhainan* 宅男 (a young man who spends most of his time at home and online) provides an excellent illustration of such flows and underscores the importance of online communities in generating new discursive categories of gender. Furthermore, the authors point out affinities between contemporary *zhainan* images and earlier versions of *wen* 文 (literary) scholar masculinity in imperial China. Another key contribution of this book is the nuanced discussion of the linkages between evolving configurations of masculinity and nationalism. We see this theme play out in anti-Japanese television dramas as well as in online postings by the nationalist *fenqing* 憤青 (angry youth).

The second half of the book looks at Chinese men in the contexts of work, leisure, and home respectively, and draws upon interviews and field research conducted by the authors in Beijing between 2004 and 2011. Their interview data is supplemented by analyses of popular self-help books, online discussions, and lifestyle magazine articles. The chapter on work employs a case study approach, in which each interviewee serves to exemplify different aspects of the discursive and institutional configuration of gender. We encounter an electronics salesman, a successful woman lawyer, a “*Jianguomen* 建國門 Man” – the embodiment of white-collar respectability, and a well-connected employee of a state-owned enterprise, among other examples. Particularly illuminating are Song and Hird’s discussions of men’s diverse reactions to the increased status and earning power of women in China. Despite being more likely to espouse a rhetoric of gender equality, wealthy men are also more likely to fall back on reimagined patriarchal gender roles that include a breadwinning husband accompanied by a nurturing, caregiving wife. Increasingly, this domestic arrangement has become a key marker of high status and class position in urban China.