
The authors of this book provide a fascinating and multi-faceted description of narratives and self-narratives of ‘masculinities’ in contemporary China. They employ a variety of approaches ranging from a media-based discourse analysis that discusses the presentation of masculinities on television, in lifestyle magazines and in cyberspace, to an anthropologically-oriented approach in their chapters on masculinities at work, leisure and home. Nevertheless, the relationship between discourse and practice is emphasized throughout the volume and in this way links the different approaches.

The volume starts with a description of the common and contradictory stereotypes that are often presented by the ethnic Chinese themselves in the context of the discussion on whether ‘Chinese masculinity’ exists: while on the one hand the notion of Chinese men being ‘masculine’ is ridiculed, there is also a notion of strong male Chinese chauvinism which has re-emerged in today’s society. The introduction that follows offers a convincing and comprehensive literature review on Chinese masculinity as a field of study, both historically and in contemporary China. Here two broad research trends can be identified: firstly, the idea that Chinese masculinity has traditionally been constructed differently and that current Western discourses have only recently begun to flow into China, and secondly, the idea that interactions between the East and the West have transformed, tremendously influenced and challenged Chinese narratives of masculinity. The authors clearly formulate the paradox that with China’s rise, an outburst of ‘masculine’ nationalism has emerged, yet at the same time, as a result of international interactions and capitalist globalization, cultures of pluralism have entered the urban space in China, which has created space for non-traditional gender roles including new forms of masculinity (p. 11).

Chapter 1, ‘Masculinities on Television’, looks at popular drama series and how, in the reform and opening period, social changes are linked to new formations of power. A certain kind of homo-social bonding is shown, while at the same time nationalist-influenced male chauvinism plays an important role. Chapter 2, ‘Masculinities in Lifestyle Magazines’, describes how the narratives of the new, more urban elite, are presented in lifestyle magazines, which are popular with the new middle class, and present a kind of localisation of cosmopolitanism in China.
Chapter 3, ‘Masculinities in Cyberspace’, provides a different narrative of a young man, socially-awkward, but educated, who becomes the ‘ideal type’ for young women, thus combining Japanese influences from the ‘otaku’, the awkward young men living in a dream world, with traditional descriptions of scholars. The vast number of discourses on the internet makes it very difficult, however, to obtain a congruent image, as the authors show in their descriptions of the online nationalist behaviour of ‘angry young men’ which serve as a counter-model to the descriptions of ‘scholarly’ men found online.

Shifting to anthropological observations, Chapter 4, ‘Masculinities at Work’, starts with a general discussion on how the ‘worker’ image of the Mao period has been replaced with a more urban and cosmopolitan image of the business man. The authors provide a convincing explanation of how the discursive naturalization of men has led to them developing a new feeling of ‘superiority’ towards women in the business world, and how difficult it is for women to cope, when working on an equal basis with men, without being derogatively called ‘strong women’. An additional phenomenon that has been observed in China as well as in many other East Asian societies is discussed in Chapter 5, ‘Masculinities at Leisure’, the homo-social bonds between men who often accompany each other on visits to karaoke bars and saunas, and possibly also to sex workers. While partly frowned upon by society, this behaviour is still widely accepted, and presents particular difficulties for women who wish to take advantage of important guanxi connections.

Chapter 6, ‘Masculinities at Home’, describes the more recent narrative that has emerged of a caring, less chauvinist husband and boyfriend. Despite the fact that this image is also very often highlighted in television commercials, the authors express doubt as to whether this behaviour has become dominant, since husbands are often observed to adopt more traditional and chauvinist roles in everyday life. ‘The Epilogue: Performing Manhood in Contemporary China’ deals with questions of agency: does one choose how to act or – following Foucault’s ideas – is the influence of the power of the discourse so strong that gender performance is more or less determined by the social and political context?

The authors argue that Confucianism and Maoism are the two most important ideologies through which one should analyse discourses and performances in today’s China. Although ideas about the ‘new man’ and gender equality have been under discussion for over a hundred years, the power of patriarchal behaviour has not been eradicated, but has even been reinforced by
global exchanges and capitalism. One thing that certainly has changed is the greater plurality of discourses, which have opened up new possibilities for certain groups who previously did not fit into the dominant narrative. China however, still has a long way to go, with regard to overcoming patriarchal structures.

To summarize, although many works on gender often forget to consider changes in heterosexual male masculinities, this book offers a very comprehensive picture of various narratives, of their specific Chineseness, whether this derives from Confucianism or Maoism. It would also be interesting to have a closer look at other East Asians states in order to highlight the specific characteristics of the PRC discourse and to evaluate the longer-lasting influence of Marxist ideas which, at one time, shaped relations between the sexes in the official discourse.

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