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NEGOTIATING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN POSTSOCIALIST CHINA

Grassroots Male Images in Cyberspace

Geng Song and Ran Xi

The emergence of men and masculinity as a field of study has rectified the common tendency of equating gender studies with women's studies. Today, the burgeoning field known as critical studies on men (CSM) draws scholars from diverse disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, literature, media studies, film studies and numerous other fields. Within this domain, Raewyn Connell's concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' has become the dominant discourse for studying men (1995, 2000). The theory of 'hegemonic masculinity' is central to the politics of masculinity and significantly exposes the class-based, hierarchical nature of masculinity as a discursive construction that perpetuates male dominance in society. However, the 'hegemonic masculinity' portrayed in Connell's and other scholars' (Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell 2005) works primarily focuses on modern European and American societies, which may not adequately represent the situation in non-Western societies. In response to this North-centric limitation, Connell (2007) later advocates for a reconsideration of masculinity issues in the context of Southern theory and global power dynamics in the postcolonial era.

The study of Chinese masculinity initially emerged as a response to the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity', with the aim of revising and broadening this idea from a de-Western-centric standpoint. Utilising indigenous frameworks, such as *wen/wu* (Louie 2002; 文/武, the traditional Chinese ideal of a well-rounded man who is accomplished in both literary and martial arts) and *yin/yang* (阴/阳: the balance of both feminine and masculine traits), an increasing number of research works examine the ways in which Chinese masculinity diverges from its Western equivalent. At the same time, however, the local context is shaped by global influences. The idea of a singular, unadulterated 'Chinese masculinity' is merely an illusion, as the Chinese discourse on masculinity has evolved as a reaction to the globally prevailing model with regional characteristics. Consequently, exploring glocalised neoliberal subjectivity can help uncover how masculinity is mobilised by the state to foster consent and complicity within society (Horton 2022, 4).

This chapter examines the portrayal and discourse of masculinity in digital entertainment within the realm of Chinese popular culture, in light of Stuart Hall's concept of 'regimes of representation' (Hall, Evans and Nixon 2013, 322). It explores the formation and negotiation of a hegemonic masculinity in the context of Chinese-style neoliberalism and a new politics of spectatorship,

highlighting the hierarchical power relations in these representations. Contemporary gender theory has distinguished between male/female and masculinity/femininity, viewing masculinity as a discursively constructed space. In today's China, there are forms of female masculinity that have been conspicuously endorsed and promoted by the state media. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that this chapter focuses on male masculinity. In the subsequent sections, we will first situate the hegemonic masculinity within the context of post-socialist China, and then move on to explore the grassroots masculinities that negotiate and show complicity with the dominant discourse.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Resistance in Postsocialist China

In an effort to embrace cultural relativism, scholars within the field of Chinese studies have endeavoured to reconstruct a 'Chinese masculinity' that significantly differs from the dominant Euro-American model. Existing literature points out that traditional Chinese masculine prowess was defined by the archetypal *wen/wu* matrix, which primarily prioritised the mind (knowledge, talents) over the body (physical strength) (Louie 2002). Furthermore, the *yin/yang* cosmology fosters a more fluid and dynamic gender discourse compared to the rigid male/female binary found in (Westernised) modern society. Consequently, masculinity in this context is predominantly defined within the homosocial male sphere rather than in opposition to women (Song 2004).

Although the distinct features of indigenous Chinese masculinity remain relevant today, the discourse of ideal masculinity in contemporary China must be examined as a result of cultural hybridisation in the era of globalisation (Song and Hird 2014). This hybridity reveals the combined influence of both nationalist ideology and the neoliberal subject-making. On the one hand, state-sanctioned heroic male masculinity, embodied by national heroes who save the country and even the world through their manly deeds, dominates state media and blockbuster films such as *Wolf Warrior II* (战狼 2, 2017), *Operation Red Sea* (红海行动, 2018) and *Home Coming* (万里归途, 2022). Celebrated as a signifier of China's rising national strength (Hu and Guan 2021), this phallocentric heroism, or 'patriotic patriarchy' as Geng Song terms it, denigrates the feminine and the queer, perpetuating both male and national chauvinism (Song 2022b, 37–71). In three of the aforementioned films, for instance, the hyper-masculine, mature primary hero is accompanied and assisted by an effeminate-looking young man.[1] Despite his soft appearance, the young man proves to be equally brave and patriotic when the need arises to protect national interests and his fellow citizens. This serves as a good example of how queerness and lad masculinity are co-opted and contained by the hegemonic, nationalist discourse of masculinity in state media.

On the other hand, in line with the neoliberalisation of society, the ideal masculinity is increasingly defined by material success and the spirit of self-entrepreneurship, giving rise to a consumerist hegemonic masculinity based on 'virility, power, and wealth' (Song and Lee 2010, 160). This aligns well with the 'manly capitalist pursuit' of the state (Luo 2017, 194), and the hybrid features of hegemonic masculinity reflect the paradoxical situation in which China is 'simultaneously a part of the global neoliberal system and yet distinct from it' (Zhang 2022, 5). The cult of 'successful' men is class-based and propagates a neoliberal subjectivity that emphasises self-improvement and entrepreneurial agency. As Ren puts it, a neoliberal subject is someone whose 'life is judged by making it on one's own and taking responsibility for one's own life' (Ren Hai 2010, xvi). Through an analysis of the popular TV dating show *If You Are the One* (非诚勿扰;), Wei Luo identifies two prominent components of hegemonic masculinity in postsocialist China: 'first, upper-middle-class status and its consequential versatility and mobility; and second, heteronormativity within

the cultural context where the biological reproductivity of contemporary singletons is considered a driving force for economic stability and neoliberal advancement' (Luo 2017, 195).

Neoliberal entrepreneurial masculinity has been praised as 'modern' and dominates in the realm of romance and marriage compared to 'traditional' Chinese values such as family-orientedness and filial piety (Feng and Yu 2022). Existing literature explores various ways in which 'entrepreneurial masculinity' forms business alliances through *yingchou*应酬 and *goudui* 勾兑 (business bonding in restaurants, karaoke bars or nightclubs, and sex consumption on these occasions) (Osburg 2013; Zhang 2001; Zheng 2012). It also examines how hegemonic masculinity disciplines and regulates 'leftover men'—the male singles of the one-child generation—against the backdrop of the 'marriage squeeze', particularly in rural areas (Driessen and Sier 2021; Lin 2017; Luo 2017; Yu and Nartey 2021). In TV dramas, the idealised 'tall, rich, and handsome' (*gao fu shuai*高富帅) type of masculinity, embodied by a 'charming victor of the neoliberal economy' (Song 2022b, 83), normalises the role of men as overbearing protectors and benefactors in heterosexual romances. Known as the 'bossy CEO' (*badao zongcai*霸道总裁), this image demonstrates both the transnational influence from Korean and Taiwanese popular culture and the entrenched hypergamy fantasy of Chinese female audiences. The male protagonists are successful men who appear cold and aloof to women, sometimes even rude and violent towards them, while remaining devoted to love. These reimagined Cinderella stories have inundated the small screen in recent years (Song 2023).

At the same time, hegemonic masculinity is encountering resistance and challenges in various ways. One significant factor is the shift in gender dynamics resulting from the consumerist empowerment of women. Popular culture has recently seen a surge in the popularity of young, effeminate male stars, referred to as 'little fresh meat' (*xiao xian rou*小鲜肉). This term, which suggests the objectification of the male body as a consumable item, dramatically subverts the traditional male gaze directed at the female body (Song 2022a). Fans of this male aesthetic are predominantly women in their 20s and 30s. Similarly, a reality show called *All Girls' Offer* (*Suoyou nüsheng de offer*所有女生的), hosted by the charming celebrity host Li Jiaqi, also known as the 'King of Lipstick', has gained immense popularity among young female viewers. In the show, Li negotiates with brand managers in real-time to secure the best discounts and products, primarily lipsticks and other cosmetics, for his audience. Utilising Taobao's live-streaming services, Li once sold over 15,000 lipsticks in a mere five minutes (He 2022). Instances like these clearly demonstrate that the increasing purchasing power of women in the new media era is fostering the emergence of a novel form of consumer-driven masculinity, distinct from the traditional, hegemonic model.

In accordance with this trend, the 'older woman-younger man' dynamic has emerged as a fresh heterosexual romance theme in digital entertainment, such as TV dramas and web series. Inspired by the *toshishita* romantic motif found in Japanese and Korean popular culture, the younger 'pet' boyfriend in such relationships, known as the 'milky puppy' (*xiao naigou* 小奶狗), represents a Chinese adaptation of *moe* culture and a temporary reversal of gender roles in a consumerist society. TV dramas in this category, like *Find Yourself* (*Xiayizhan shi xingfu* 下一站是幸福), *The Rational Life* (*Lizhipai shenghuo* 理智派生活) and *She and Her Perfect Husband* (*Ai de erba dinglü* 爱的二八定律), depict love stories between mature, independent career women in their early thirties and handsome, cheerful young men in their early twenties. With an age difference of over ten years, the man usually plays a subordinate or assistant role to the woman in their professional setting. Similar to a pet, he is a loyal companion without seeking to exploit her economic or social capital for personal gain. These male characters display a vulnerability that calls for women's motherly care, protection and companionship, while also exhibiting devotion to love, making them ideal partners. The reversal of gender hierarchy in these narratives, in terms of age and social status, highlights the empowerment of women, as they do not need to rely on their sexuality or

youth in relationships. The 'female gaze' (Li 2020) on the male body reflects middle-class women's aspirations for control, manipulation and even dominance within a relationship. However, the popularity of the 'milky puppy' subgenre as a fantasy also underscores the challenges faced by 'leftover women' in the marriage market. In these dramas, talented, resourceful and entrepreneurial womanhood is portrayed as a 'burden' for a woman seeking a spouse and being over 30 is considered a significant disadvantage. Consequently, this subgenre reveals both the prominent heteronormative female gaze and the resilience of the male gaze and patriarchal gender order.

The rise of feminist thought in China since the 2010s and its impact on masculinity can also be observed through gender confrontations and harsh criticism of men in cyberspace. Terms like 'trash man' (*zha'nan*) and 'king of the sea' (*haiwang*, a derogatory term for a Casanova) are widespread on the internet today, mocking men's promiscuous or irresponsible behaviour towards women. Following the #MeToo movement, recent sexual scandals involving male celebrities such as Wu Yifan (Kris Wu吴亦凡), Leehom Wang (王力宏) and Liu Qiangdong (刘强东) have ignited nationwide expressions of feminist outrage and disappointment with men on online forums like Weibo, which allegedly has more female than male users.[2] In cyberspace and cultural representations, another negative male image is the contemptible 'greasy man' (*youni nan* 油腻男), who, in contrast to the aforementioned 'little fresh meat', is characterised by a clumsy physique, large belly, receding hairline, glib tongue and unappealing sophistication. This term is often used to express disdain for middle-aged 'successful' men within the hegemonic discourse of masculinity, regardless of their accumulated social and economic capital. Similar terms include 'straight-man cancer' (*zhinan ai* 直男癌), which ridicules the hopelessness of men exhibiting sexist and misogynistic attitudes. At the same time, immature men are criticised as 'mommy's boys' (*mabao*妈宝), who are condemned for being overly reliant on and obedient to their mothers, making them undesirable boyfriends or husbands. These various expressions and criticisms in cyberspace demonstrate the influence of rising feminist and queer thinking on perceptions of masculinity and the challenges faced by traditional, hegemonic masculinity in contemporary society.

A prime example of the transformation of masculinity through women's desires and fantasies can be seen in the thriving *danmei* (耽美) subculture and its associated male aesthetics. Inspired by Japan's Boys' Love (BL) culture, *danmei* features homoerotic stories between attractive young men, predominantly written by women for women (Feng 2009; Luo 2022; Madill and Zhao 2021; Yang and Xu 2017). Female prosumers immerse themselves in the male characters of *danmei* fiction, transcending gender boundaries and envisioning a world with an inverted gender hierarchy (Feng 2009). In one variation of these stories, for example, the roles of *gong* (攻; the aggressor) and *shou* (受; the bearer) are interchangeable. The male characters not only assume responsibilities typically assigned to women, such as housekeeping, daily chores and child-rearing, but they can even give birth to children. These fantasy narratives often depict notably passive and vulnerable male figures, including 'whining boys' (*kubao shou*哭包受) and 'sickly boys' (*bingjiao shou*病娇受), which effectively challenge hegemonic masculinity. In summary, *danmei* provides a platform for women to express their (imaginary) retaliation against patriarchy and explore new representations of idealised masculinity that are rarely found in reality.

Indeed, *danmei* represents just one way in which heteronormative hegemonic masculinity is being challenged by the growing visibility of diverse, queer masculinities. Japanese ACG (Animation, Comics and Games) culture and the Korean Wave have had a significant impact on the transnational flows of queer imagery and expressions (Lavin, Yang, and Zhao 2017). The digital age has seen popular culture heavily influenced by Japanese ACG (Animation, Comics and Games) culture and the Korean Wave, both of which impact gender expression. Neologisms like *zhai* (宅; otaku), *ji* (基; gay) and *fu* (腐; fujoshi) demonstrate the transnational flows of queer

imagery and expressions, resulting in the increased popularity of androgynous masculinity in youth culture (Lavin, Yang, and Zhao 2017). The rise of effeminate male subcultures, such as *weiniang* (伪娘; fake girls), showcases a theatrical queerness that aligns with the fantasy of feminised cuteness among men (Chao 2017). While these images and discourses do not necessarily pose a direct threat to hegemonic masculinity, and are often contained within heteronormative discourse, they exemplify the increasing diversity of masculinity in contemporary China, particularly among younger generations.

Lastly, the negotiation of masculinity is intertwined with class tropes. Hegemonic masculinity typically represents elite men and official discourse that functions to maintain existing power structures and reinforce dominant ideologies, while the masculinity of working-class individuals, peasants and marginalised men in China remains largely understudied. In the following sections, we will explore the recently emerged grassroots masculinities in cyberspace, examining how they negotiate with hegemonic masculinity and neoliberal subjectivity.

Grassroots Manhood and the Matrilocal Husband

The scholarly focus on working-class and rural masculinities in China has primarily been from a sociological perspective. Existing literature has explored the 'masculine compromises' made by male workers who migrated from rural China to urban areas. These studies examine how these men redefine their roles as husbands, fathers and sons to maintain their symbolic dominance within the family (Choi and Peng 2016; Lin 2013, 2014; Cao 2019). In terms of cultural representation, pioneering research has investigated the portrayals of working-class men and those on the fringes of society in Jia Zhangke's films, including *Pickpocket* 小武 (1998), *The World* 世界 (2004), *Still Life* 三峡好人 (2006) and *A Touch of Sin* 天注定 (2013) (Lu 2016).

In the context of societal neoliberalisation, a salient example of marginal masculinity is the internet-forged male identity of *diaosi* 屌丝 in recent years. The term *diaosi*, which literally means male pubic hair, has become a popular word in cyberspace referring to 'losers' or 'worthless men' at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Many young men in China self-identify with this label in a self-mocking manner, displaying a defiant and satirical attitude towards elite masculinity. As a result, the term 'challenges hegemonic values by distancing itself from them' (Cao 2017, 220; Szablewicz 2014). However, in public discourse and popular entertainment, *diaosi* is often associated with the fantasy of turning the tables and changing one's fate overnight (*nixi* 逆袭). *Nixi*, a computer game slang derived from Japanese, represents not only the every-dog-has-its-day dream but also the neoliberal ethos of self-value and self-improvement. In keeping with neoliberal subjectivity, the discourse of *diaosi* reflects the desire for upward mobility among men with limited resources and opportunities. Consequently, this discourse paradoxically reinforces the hegemonic discourse of masculinity by emphasising the importance of self-improvement and success.

The male fantasy of *nixi* is exemplified by the popularity of a subgenre of known as 'matrilocal husband' (*zhuixu* 赘婿) stories. These stories were initially published in installments on channels targeting male audiences of various cross-media flows and adaptation. The settings of such stories vary—from modern-day cities to ancient times and fairylands. However, the formulaic patterns of narrative and characterisation remain consistent. The male protagonist lives humbly with his wife's family, facing belittlement and contempt from her family members and friends, until one day his true identity (e.g. a wealthy princeling or a hidden powerful man) and abilities are revealed. At this point, he is suddenly overwhelmed by his wife's family's obsequious attitude and, more importantly, his wife's admiration. This turning point, called the 'pleasure point' (*shuang dian* 爽点), provides readers with an emotional outlet or a 'Goldfinger', borrowing an internet

slang term. While there is a long-standing tradition in Chinese literature of masculinity revalida-tion, stories with the matrilocality motif began to gain popularity in mid-2020 with the wide cir-culation of short videos adapted from Waizui Longwang's 歪嘴龙王 (literally, the wry-mouthed Dragon King) online novels. The popularity of the subgenre reached a new peak in 2021 with the high-profile premiere of the web drama series *My Heroic Husband* (*Zhuixu* 赘婿, literally, a mat-rilocal husband), based on a homonymous web novel. The rise of this particular story pattern and its reception have attracted media attention, though scholarly inquiry on it remains scarce. Unlike previous popular online literature in China, which primarily targeted a young female readership, this subgenre appeals to male audiences who take pleasure in seeing the male protagonist turn the tables and exact revenge. This phenomenon invites fruitful analysis from the perspectives of crisis of masculinity, class stratification and the 'face' mentality in contemporary China.

According to an online survey, the majority of readers of matrilocal husband stories are male (73%), with an average age of 41.4 years old, and 81% are above 30. Most of them are low-income consumers from small cities and towns (third tier and below) in China, namely, the so-called 'sinking market', as it is termed in Chinese cyberspace (Wu 2021). They read online fiction mostly during lunchtime and before bedtime. This reading habit determines the characteristics of this subgenre—shorter chapters but more 'pleasure points'. Indeed, many readers first come across the matrilocal husband motif through short videos on platforms such as Kuaishou, instead of online fiction portals. These hastily produced videos typically last for around one minute and feature a recurrent figure with a wry-mouthed smile. The man is humiliated by his wife's family until one day his true identity as a powerful figure is revealed. At this turning point, the male protagonist without exception shows a signature expression, a wry-mouthed 'Nike smile', which implies both a plot twist and malicious revenge. The ending is the climax of the video, at which point a promotional link is displayed for readers to follow up on the plot by reading the online novels.

The matrilocal husband motif articulates the frustrations, fantasies and desires of men who identify themselves as *diaosi*, namely, powerless and thus emasculated men in reality. It targets a readership of grassroots middle-aged men, a cohort that has been largely neglected or even denigrated by the hegemonic masculinity discourse. The reading/viewing experience is a redemption of manhood for them. At the same time, the fantasy of *nixi* through the male protagonist's revenge projects 'positive energy' on the male readers/audiences and effectively serves the function of cultural governance in line with the neoliberal subject-making project.

Bumpkin Men from the Margins of the Society

Another image of grassroots manhood alternative to the hegemonic masculinity is the bumpkin man from the rural areas, exemplified by the popular comedian star Wang Baoqiang. Wang, who grew up in poverty in the countryside of Xingtai, Hebei Province, gained fame in Beijing as a film extra and eventually landed lead roles in various films, portraying characters such as a village boy in *A World without Thieves* (2004), a soldier in *Soldiers Sortie* (2007) and a man-child in both *Lost in Journey* (2010) and *Lost in Thailand* (2012). Despite being subject to ridicule due to his rustic image and accent, Wang's portrayal emphasises great kindness and serves as a counter to mainstream notions of masculinity. In the 'lost series' films, his interactions with the anxious middle-class character played by Xu Zheng highlight the rural-urban divide in China, providing important insight into the cultural dynamics of relationships between these two areas (Lai 2022).[3]

At the same time, however, the media often portrays Wang as a model of traditional masculinity, embodying financial success and filial piety. This image is reinforced in the face of Wang's emotional reaction to the loss of his mother, where he is reported as deeply grieving but not

shedding a single tear in the aftermath of his ex-wife's betrayal and their subsequent divorce (Sohu 2022). These representations conform to societal expectations of masculinity, upholding prescribed emotional norms for men. Overall, Wang's personal story aligns with the neoliberal dream of the self-made entrepreneur.

In addition to Wang Baoqiang's well-known success story, people's self-representation afforded by new technologies for each access and participation in the digital era are shedding light on other grassroots and marginalised masculinities. Major media platforms like Kuaishou and Weibo have gained immense popularity in China among people of diverse genders, classes, education backgrounds and ages. In this section, we explore how these platforms are affording visibility to these often-overlooked voices.

Kuaishou, a video-sharing platform known for its ability to capture the daily lives of ordinary people, particularly those residing in small towns and rural areas, has amassed an impressive 598 million monthly active users.[4] Its success has created a natural market for e-commerce, generating quarterly revenues of 21.1 billion *yuan*.[5] While Kuaishou has played a key role in promoting grassroots entrepreneurship and supporting China's 'digital infrastructure construction' and 'Internet+' initiatives to alleviate poverty, the platform also implements digital governance mechanisms. In this section, we examine the experiences of a group of rural *wanghong* (网红; Internet celebrities), identified through 'digital snowball sampling' (Wang 2023, 285), to shed light on how this new form of masculinity is being exploited as digital labour in the name of entrepreneurship and innovation.

The neoliberal subjectivity that pervades digital labour in China often prioritises swift and profitable success. This is evident in the promotion of the Chinese dream, which encourages digital labourers to adopt an entrepreneurial mindset (Craig, Lin, and Cunningham 2021). Many labourers conform to this ideal by performing a curated version of rural authenticity, unsophisticated humour and calculated aggression on the platform. This performance is often characterised by what is often considered as a lowbrow aesthetic, vulgar language and emotional vulnerability, which further reinforces the stereotypical representation of rural masculinity. Despite facing significant economic, educational, cultural and physical disadvantages, many digital labourers deliberately manifest their underprivileged status to appeal to a wider audience. This phenomenon demonstrates the complex relationship between digital labour, neoliberal subjectivity and masculinity in China.

One of such celebrities, Xiao Xian[6], has posted 81 short video clips on Kuaishou portraying rural life and grassroots rural masculinity. Most videos were shot in front of run-down cottage houses, unpaved country roads or rural landscapes, while only three vignettes featured him in small-town hospitals or engaging in charity work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Xiao curated an exaggerated depiction of rural life with a heightened sense of ruggedness. In over half of the videos, Xiao appeared alongside another self-claimed rural single man as they collaborated to snatch a beehive without any protective gear (Figure 20.1). He often uses a rhythmic doggerel to initiate frenzied and primitive performances, explaining that he has nothing to do after meals.[7] Rather than performing routine activities, Xiao risked his life to undertake precarious tasks, aiming to gain his audience's empathy, curiosity and admiration to retain his popularity on this platform. Either ignorant or oblivious of the structural inequality, however, his reproduction of lower-class practices further resigns him to marginality. In these short videos, Xiao co-produced clips with his neighbours, gradually networking rural life authenticity into a powerful and significant force that deviates from the hegemonic masculinity that emphasises materialist success. At the same time, however, his life-threatening skill of beehive hunting (as seen in Figure 20.1) paradoxically confirms the money-driven mindset of hegemonic masculinity that he ostensibly avoids.

Figure 20.1   Xiao Xian snatching a beehive (2.44 million followers, Guizhou).

Within this specific lower-class online community, audiences are fostering male camaraderie by referring to each other as *laotie* 老铁 (old fellow), which signifies a mutual recognition, understanding and appreciation of their performative identities. The *wanghong*'s portrayal of their impoverished, monotonous and ludicrous lifestyles in a consistent manner shows their collaborative efforts to preserve a shared identity characterised by intentional crudeness and shabbiness. The videos often juxtapose rural masculinity with the widely admired 'tall-rich-beauty' femininity, emphasising societal stratification and their paradoxical willingness to adhere to mainstream culture that values wealth and success. Indeed, this collective masculine identity and its ideological implications function as a strategy to secure financial gains from their captivated audiences.

With a staggering 962 million short-video users in China alone (CNNIC 2022, 49), the governance of platforms is subject to state regulatory power, which both facilitates and restricts cultural production on the platform (Lin and de Kloet 2019). This has led to a new form of digital governance that aligns with the state's agenda to promote rural products, alleviate poverty, enable self-employment and expand job opportunities through the Internet Plus Initiative. The affective and digital labour are melded into a neoliberal subjectivity driven by the economic prospects of the platform, transforming them into rural *wanghong* through constant posting, skilful editing and frequent updates. However, due to the entrepreneurial logic of the platform ranking facilitated by the algorithm, they are trapped in climbing the virtual social ladder under an entrepreneurial empowerment. Once they stop catering to their audience and posting, the fleeting profitable entrepreneurship will disappear, leaving them with limited opportunities for advancement.

The convergence of the state, platform and digital labour has thus created a neoliberal subject-making that is driven by triangulated forces. The state propagates successful stories of rural *wanghong*, enticing more rural workers to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams in an affordable and convenient manner. However, this approach fails to address the underlying structural inequality or assist the less fortunate individuals who are physically challenged or lack resources. Instead, the platform's capitalist logic lures them into performing an augmented rural identity that reinforces their backwardness, poverty and lower-class aesthetic by commodifying their unique characteristics such as zaniness (Figure 20.1), queerness (Figure 20.2), intimacy (Figure 20.3) and vulner-

Figure 20.2 The cross-dressing queer performance (25, 1.13 million followers, Guizhou).

我不喜欢花，但是我喜欢送花的人，因为浪漫至死不渝...
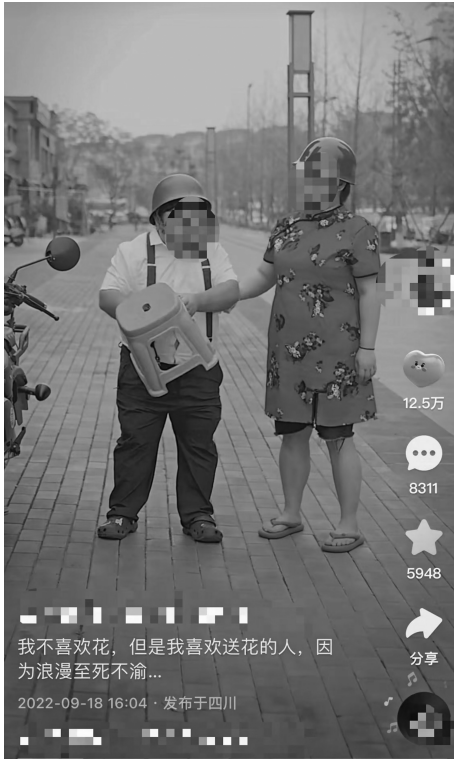2022-09-18 16:04 · 发布于四川

12.5万
8311
5948
分享

Figure 20.3　A romantic story featuring two plus-sized protagonists (31, 2.57 million followers, Sichuan).

ability (Figure 20.4). This commodification renders a free expression and genuine representation of oneself impossible, making it difficult to achieve equality in society.

In contrast to their urban counterparts and in opposition to the glamorous Instagram influencers, those *wanghong* living in rural areas face limited prospects for upward mobility due to the rural/urban divide. Their lack of access to education and economic resources makes it difficult for them to migrate to the city, leaving them physically constrained in their rural communities. This perpetuates a cycle that is difficult to break. To cope with the scarcity of employment opportunities, many turn to digital entrepreneurial labour on platforms such as Kuaishou. This enables them to negotiate their identity and make a living despite their limited circumstances. However, most rural male *wanghong* are forced to perform affective digital labour that reinforces their lower-class position. Their bumpkin and ludicrous behaviours and attitudes serve as a clear indication of their marginalised manhood, which is often overshadowed by the hegemonic masculinity. As they are exploited by the inherent algorithms to ensure a profitable audience base, they gradually become resigned to their commercialisation, leading to the shaping of a new hegemonic masculinity that they are complicit in.

Figure 20.2 illustrates a cross-dressing *wanghong* known as Jade Lin, a name that combines various aspects of his identity, reflecting his rural origins, ethnic references and an association with adorable young boys. Collectively, this name serves as a self-explanation of his identity as a rural cross-dresser. In his performances, he embodies an ultra-feminine persona, marked by innocence, coquettishness and vulnerability, to explore the challenges and disappointments faced by women

Figure 20.4   'A story of a boy diagnosed with Down's syndrome' (0.63 million followers, Hebei）.

in relationships, marriage and divorce. Through this portrayal, he depicts women as victims of non-verbal violence, clashes with their mothers-in-law, and male chauvinism within patriarchal relationships. The performer appropriated femininities to express his dissatisfaction with his own romantic prospects as a single man, allowing him to construct his own sense of masculinity and achieve temporary popularity as a star. This rural Chinese-style queerness unveils the performer's imagination of female bodies, identities and gendered relationships, while also emphasising the prevalence of bachelorhood in rural regions and his awareness of his own limitations in terms of economic, cultural and emotional resources. However, the performer's self-deprecating narratives and dramatic transgender performances inadvertently perpetuate gender stereotypes and further define gender boundaries. While the depiction of a more vulnerable masculinity may assist the performer in reconciling with reality, the cross-dressing videos primarily serve to entertain and captivate audiences, which ultimately align with the interests of the market.

Similarly, in Figure 20.3, a plus-sized woman partners with a shorter man, using their shared identity to amass social and cultural capital, ultimately monetising the attention and sympathy they receive. Their public displays of affection transform into a commodified intimacy that captivates audiences and attracts monetary rewards from the platform. The woman establishes a new aesthetic—plus-size positivity—that diverges from the conventional 'white-slim-young' standard of beauty in contemporary China. In this video, they purposefully use a close-up shot that elicits sympathy and automatically associates them with dysmorphia and self-deprecating love. The man is portrayed as shorter in stature and reliant on the female protagonist's assistance

to disembark from an outdated mode of transportation—an old-fashioned motorbike, which hints at their constrained circumstances. In this scene, the woman negotiates a new norm where she becomes the man's patron, empowering marginalised women by further exploiting marginalised masculinity.

Another popular *wanghong* influencer has captivated millions of hearts by sharing relatable narratives that often begin with 'I have a friend'. These stories involve her genuine connections with her family members, such as her uncle, late father and understanding sister-in-law. Among these videos, those featuring a young man with a physical disability have garnered the most attention, receiving over two million likes (Figure 20.4). The influencer claims to be the aunt of this young man, who has been diagnosed with Down's Syndrome, emphasising their close relationship and strong bond. Despite his congenital disability and limited financial resources, he is represented as leading a carefree and easily contented life, embodying positive energy—a living representation of state-endorsed ideology. The emotional resonance these videos create among viewers shows their success in touching millions of hearts. In this process, both video creators and viewers mutually empower each other emotionally and financially.

In summary, the emergence of *wanghong* performances in present-day China underscores the complex relationship among marginalised masculinities, market forces and state ideology. For the first time in the country's history, men from rural and peripheral backgrounds can profit by showcasing their daily lives and perspectives on sex and marriage. Although these videos primarily convey a message of positivity, their success largely depends on captivating viewers' curiosity and compassion. With the ongoing advancement of cyber platforms and social media, grassroots masculinities are gaining visibility, presenting a stark contrast to the hegemonic masculinity typically portrayed on mainstream media outlets such as television. This phenomenon provides a valuable opportunity for in-depth analysis concerning the interplay between gender and social class.

Ethnic Masculinities: The Case of Tenzing Tsondu

In China, alternative forms of masculinity also encompass those of ethnic minorities living in remote and underdeveloped regions. There has been significant scholarly focus on the construction and representation of non-Han Chinese masculinities. For example, Hillman and Henfry argue that media portrayals of Tibetan masculinity align with the *wu* masculine type, considered inferior to the *wen* model within the *wen/wu* dichotomy (2006). As a result, Tibetan masculinity contributes to a form of 'internal colonization' that reinforces Han superiority within a gendered hierarchy (261). In recent years, several ethnic male figures have gained widespread popularity in China, such as the Mongol singer Ayanga, who performed at the country's most watched TV program, the Spring Festival Gala. Online images of Tibetan and Mongolian ethnic masculinity often feature horse-riding, knife-wielding, bare-chested and warrior-like men on social media platforms. Accompanied by themes of danger, combat and sexual conquest, these representations construct a version of manhood that diverges from the dominant form of masculinity.

Tenzing Tsondu, also known as Ding Zhen 丁真 in Chinese, is a young Tibetan man born in 2001 who gained internet fame in November 2020, after a seven-second TikTok video clip of him went viral. Chinese netizens affectionately dubbed him the 'Sweet Wild Boy'. Within a few days, his related posts were viewed by millions of people on Sina Weibo, China's popular microblogging platform. Tenzing's charm and charisma caught the attention of officials who quickly began promoting him as a symbol of Tibetan culture. He was later hired by the Litang Culture, Tourism and Sports Investment Development Company, a local state-owned company in Sichuan province's

Litang county, to endorse the local tourism industry. Even Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying 华春莹 shared photos of Tenzing on Twitter, further solidifying his status as an officially sanctioned figure. The 'Tenzing phenomenon' has led to a surge in Chinese tourists visiting Tibetan areas. There has been a significant increase in bookings at destinations such as Kangding and Daocheng Yading as a result of his newfound fame (Zhao 2020).

There are several possible explanations for Chinese officials endorsing Tenzing's social media posts. One perspective suggests that this endorsement may be seen as a reformation of the infamous 'Wolf Warrior' masculinity concept. As mentioned above, in 2017, the blockbuster film *Wolf Warrior II*, which featured a Rambo-esque Chinese action hero, epitomised an idealised form of Chinese masculinity through its portrayal of a strong, heroic and patriotic military warrior. Wu Jing's 吴京 depiction of this character, characterised by toughness, a powerful physical presence and unwavering patriotism, quickly gained popularity throughout China, representing the officially sanctioned hegemonic masculinity. However, its aggressive nature drew criticism and concern from many Western countries. In contrast, Tenzing exemplifies a more youthful and gentle form of masculinity. He embodies a blend of masculine attributes, such as youthfulness, candour and exuberance. His eco-friendly persona is evident in his sun-kissed angular facial features, harmonious physique and proficient horse-riding abilities showcased in his posts. Furthermore, Tenzing consistently upholds a politically correct stance in his posts. He exhibits his patriotism by savouring Chinese cuisine, conversing in the Chinese language and making a finger-heart gesture on the National Day, accompanied by the hashtag 'I draw a heart for my country'. He also references Communist historical events such as the 'Long March' and patriotic icons like the Olympic Games. This display of nationalism contributes to his 'positive energy' and presents a more appealing and acceptable representation of Chinese masculinity. Indeed, the endorsement of his image by the Foreign Ministry spokesperson suggests that this depiction of a Tibetan man is the image the government wishes to present to the world.

As an officially sanctioned influencer, Tenzing has garnered an impressive fan base of 2.34 million, with 199 posts on his Weibo account.[8] An analysis of these posts unveils key themes the government seeks to promote, such as nature, ethnicity, heritage preservation and poverty alleviation. His posts typically showcase his interactions with expansive landscapes, stunning sunsets, open grasslands and snow-covered mountains while singing Tibetan songs. His involvement in various social welfare and patriotic activities is also highlighted in his posts. In addition, the popularity of his content transcends the tourism industry and extends to the consumer market, as he also endorses domestic beauty products as a spokesperson.

According to Connell's definition, hegemonic masculinity subjugates femininity and nonheterosexual masculinities, which is perpetuated through media images that dictate male behaviour, reactions to surroundings, interactions with others and overall lifestyle (Connell 1987). In contrast, 'marginalized masculinities' mainly arise from exploited or oppressed groups, such as ethnic minorities (Connell 2000, 30). Additionally, Connell suggests that gendered semiotics operate in aspects like dress, makeup, gestures and other cultural forms, including constructed environments (2009). Drawing on these gendered semiotics, Tenzing's Weibo posts effectively create a new form of hybrid masculinity in the digital age. While his image is closely associated with Tibetan culture and landscape, both geographically and symbolically remote within China, his posts offer interpretations and 'ideologically coloured angles' (van Leeuwen 2008, 136) that align with the central objectives of both the state and capital. In this regard, it can be argued that Tenzing embodies both hegemonic and marginalised masculinities in the Chinese context.

In terms of the *wen/wu* matrix, it is also notable that Tenzing constructs an ideal manhood based on the long-standing popular discourse of 'being accomplished in both literature and martial

arts' (*wenwu shuangquan* 文武双全). His image, crafted through a semiotic assemblage on Weibo, embodies both the *wen* and *wu* aspects of masculinity. For example, his posts frequently showcase Chinese calligraphy, remarkable singing and horse-riding in the prairies, depicting a hegemonic masculinity that embraces both literary talent and martial arts expertise.

Conclusion

Male images are continuously evolving and are not static or fixed; rather, they are historically specific. The above analysis focuses on the emergence of a multitude of masculinities in the Chinese media sphere. While the construct of *wen-wu* still has its currency today, contemporary representations have become more diverse, hybrid, mobile and contested. These plural masculinities correspond to the plural forms of feminisms in China, and both act as potent forces in challenging systemic oppressions (Zhu and Xiao 2021; Wu and Dong 2019). The construction of masculine identities is now under constant surveillance and spectatorship of the female gaze. For instance, the rise of matrilocal husbands in online literature reflects an increased women's dominance and men's retreat from the patriarchy. Grappling with the nuances of modernisation and the self-claimed 'bare sticks' in the marriage crunch, the rural men on digital platforms are performing zany, queer and idle masculinities that toil themselves in the capitalist algorithms yet their relationship with women are largely imaginative, unattainable and fictional. Another case in point is Tenzing Tsondu's rise as a 'little fresh meat' celebrity among female fans' online discussions and official commentaries, which challenges the stereotypes of the hegemonic masculinity. Taken together, it is argued that plurality of Chinese masculinities is shaped by constant surveillance, spectatorship and dialogue with the varied Chinese feminisms, rendering both of them mutually constitutive, manageable, less threatening or even useful in society.

This chapter delves into the negotiation of hegemonic masculinity in post-socialist China through an analysis of grassroots male images in cyberspace. By examining the representation of male figures on digital platforms such as Kuaishou, the study investigates how digital technologies mediate and shape the construction of masculinity in contemporary China. It highlights the role of state regulation, platform algorithms and digital labour in shaping the rural *wanghong* phenomenon and their representation of rural masculinity. The chapter contends that the capitalist logic of these platforms leads to the commodification of rural masculinity, resulting in a paradoxical conformity to the mainstream culture that celebrates wealth and success embodied in hegemonic masculinity.

Notes

1 This fixed pattern of duo heroes can be seen in the pair of Leng Feng 冷锋 (Wu Jing 吴京), an ex-serviceman, and Zhuo Yifan 卓亦凡 (张翰 Zhang Han), a 'rich-second-generation' young man in *Wolf Warrior II*. Other examples of the pair include Zong Dawei 宗大伟 (Zhang Yi 张译) and Cheng Lang 成朗 (Wang Junkai) in *Home Coming*, Yang Rui 杨锐 (Zhang Yi 张译) and Xu Hong 徐宏 (Du Jiang 杜江) in *Operation Red Sea*, and Gao Gang 高刚 (Zhang Hanyu 张涵予) and Fang Xinwu 方新 (Peng Yuyan 彭于晏) in *Operation Mekong* (2016), just to name a few.

2 Wu Yifan, a Chinese-Canadian singer and actor, was arrested and sentenced to 13 years in prison after a college student posted allegations of sexual assaults involving multiple females. Leehom Wang, a Chinese-American singer, actor and film director, faced public criticism following his highly publicised divorce and custody disputes, during which his wife accused him of serial infidelity, solicitation of prostitutes, verbal abuse, bullying and having underage sex with her. Liu Qiangdong, the CEO of JD.com, was castigated on Weibo after being charged with rape in the US, although he eventually reconciled with his accuser. For a survey report on the demographics of Weibo users, please see https://data.weibo.com/report/reportDetail?id=456 (accessed October 26, 2022).

3 'Lost series' films refer to *Lost in Thailand* 泰囧, *Lost on Journey* 人在囧途, *Lost in Hong Kong* 港囧.
4 See https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20220529A05TX200 (accessed April 12, 2023).
5 See https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20220529A05TX200 (accessed April 20, 2023).
6 The names Xiao Xian and Jade Lin are pseudonyms.
7 '大家好我是 Xiao Xian，吃饱饭找不到事干' (Hi everyone, I am Xiao Xian. After meals, I do things as I can).
8 This is according to the statistics of 23 November 2021.

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