

Knowing male subjects: Globally mobile Chinese professionals and the aesthetics of the Confucian sublime

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Abstract: This article probes the sources, manifestations and significances of the ambivalences and contradictions in London-based Chinese middle-class male professionals' sense of their own gendered and cultural identities in the context of China's twenty-first century postsocialist modernity. In doing so, it shows how Chinese middle-class men's sense of themselves connects with wider national debates about China's orientation in the world. To make sense of the desire of some respondents "to become a Chinese gentleman", the article introduces the notion of the postsocialist Confucian sublime, a vision of a cultural order of increasing appeal to well-educated, middle-class Chinese men. The article argues that the Confucian sublime offers globally mobile professional Chinese men the opportunity to transcend their ambivalence towards Western modernity by providing a sense of wholeness and attainment both at a personal level and relating to China's place in contemporary globality.

Keywords: Chinese, professionals, middle class, men, masculinities, ambivalence, postsocialist modernity, Confucian sublime

Facing me across the table in a central London café was a tall, athletically built young man called Xianyang. He was from east China, in his mid-twenties, and working for a London-based multinational IT company when I met him. It was September 2014, and Xianyang was one of ten PRC-born Chinese male professionals that I interviewed at that time, their ages

ranging from early twenties to mid-fifties. I was curious to know their understandings of themselves as globally mobile Chinese men working in the heart of Western capitalism. Many of my participants had gained higher education degrees in the UK. Xianyang had left China for the UK to study as an undergraduate and had continued his studies at postgraduate level. His university memories mostly hinged around his quest for a white girlfriend and his envy of the success of his white male classmates in dating white girls.

Xianyang eventually found a UK-educated Chinese girlfriend, yet he had difficulty building friendships with his white British middle-class male classmates (although not his non-white classmates). He told me: “They were all very polite, very gentlemanly, but I sometimes wondered if what they said was deep down what they really thought.” Xianyang’s suspicions about the integrity of his white British middle-class classmates extended to misgivings about their sexual behavior, which he hesitantly described when articulating his goal for his own gendered subjectivity:

Appearance-wise, I want to be an English gentleman, but internally I prefer to be a Chinese gentleman. British guys dress well and are very polite, but internally I don’t think [pause], the way they treat girls [pause], and some of the things [pause]. I talked with my girlfriend [pause]; she doesn’t actually like British guys. She thinks some of them are playboys; I don’t know if it’s true. But I want to become a Chinese gentleman.

When previously analysing the masculinities of professional Chinese men in London, I mentioned the “ambivalences and contradictions” apparent in Xianyang’s and other men’s sense of their masculine identities (Hird, 2016b). This article probes further into such ambivalences: their sources, manifestations, significance, and consequences. It explores globally mobile, London-based Chinese middle-class male professionals’ sense of their own gendered and cultural identities in the context of China’s twenty-first century postsocialist modernity.¹ In doing so, it shows how Chinese middle-class men’s sense of themselves

¹ I recognize that “middle class” is a contested term, not least in China, and that the so-called middle class or middle stratum in China is particularly heterogeneous and inchoate however it is defined (see e.g. Li 2010). Most of my informants worked for private companies; three worked for state or third-sector organisations. None of them held managerial positions senior enough to warrant elite “gold-collar” status. Professionals (*zhuanye renshi* 专业人士) are generally considered one of the middle strata in prominent Chinese sociologies of class (see e.g. Lu 2010), hence my designation of my informants as middle class. I follow Zhang Xudong’s definition of postsocialism in the Chinese context, which captures how newly emerging formations are informed by a persisting mission of differentiation from a Western-inflected global capitalist order: “the post- in *postsocialism* indicates a new socioeconomic and cultural-political subjectivity which prefigures the new but is embedded in

connects with wider national debates about China's orientation in the world.

To make sense of the desire "to become a Chinese gentleman", I introduce the notion of the postsocialist Confucian sublime, a vision of a cultural order of increasing appeal to well-educated, middle-class Chinese men.² As I will demonstrate through the concept of the Confucian sublime, globally mobile professional Chinese men, in discursive representations and self-presentations, may transcend ambivalence towards Western modernity through embracing an imaginary of the Confucian sublime that provides a sense of wholeness and attainment both at a personal level and for China's place in contemporary globality.

Chinese masculinities and the nation

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Zhong Xueping diagnosed post-Mao Chinese male intellectuals as suffering from a "male marginality complex": a "preoccupation with the weakness of the country, the culture, and Chinese men" (2000, 37). Male intellectuals' sense of marginalisation was compounded by their feeling emasculated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Western men, and Chinese women. But, Zhong emphasises, male intellectuals were unwilling to remain in the margins; on the contrary, they harboured a desire to build a strong, potent Chinese masculinity recognised across the world. Indeed, in Zhong's view, the search for a reinvigorated masculinity has always been inherent to China's quest for a modern national identity (2000, 14).

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the response of China's male intellectuals to the imposition of Western modernity has taken the forms of cultural repudiation, such as the anti-Confucianism of New Culture intellectuals in the early 20th century, and cultural nationalism, seen in the 1980s' root-seeking movement and the post-Tiananmen revival of "traditional" culture. Yet both cultural "nihilism" and cultural nationalism share a "desire to 'masculinize' Chinese culture" (Zhong 2000, 169). The New Culture intellectuals sought ways to banish China's reputation as the "sick man of East Asia", the root-seekers celebrated a tough, earthy

an order of things that does not readily recognize the ideological claim, political legitimacy, and cultural validity of capitalist globalization for the totality of human history and its future horizon" (2008: 12).

² In current Chinese aesthetic discourses, 崇高 (*chongggao*, "lofty and towering") is the most common way of rendering the sublime; other terms include 壮美 (*zhuangmei*, "magnificent and beautiful"), 宏壮 (*hongzhuang*, "great and magnificent"), 至大 (*zhida*, "extremely grand"), 至刚 (*zhigang* "extremely strong") and 雄伟 (*xiongwei*, masculine and mighty). Comparative concepts include 阳刚之气 (*yanggang zhi qi*, "manly and unyielding spirit"), 风骨 (*fenggu*, "wind and bone"), 雄浑 (*xionghun*, "masculine whole") (Wang 1997, 8, 10). However, my focus in this essay is not on how the sublime or its equivalents have been or should be rendered in Chinese, but in tracing the sublime, through the lens of contemporary Chinese masculinities, as a movement towards transcendence of male anxieties and desires and ultimately emancipation in a masculine-gendered realm. Exemplifications of this sublimation process abound in Chinese philosophical writings, literature, and film (Wang 1997, *passim*).

peasant manhood, and today's Confucian revivalists acclaim retro-models of masculinity from China's classical canon. It is hard to disagree with Zhong's observation that "issues of masculinity constitute an intrinsic part of our understanding of Chinese modernity" (2000, 12).

Why might Chinese intellectuals show such conflicted feelings towards Western modernity? Reworking a proposition found in Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*, the Russianist Frank Seeley (1952: 92-4) suggested that in their role as localising conduits of Western culture under the unequal terms of Western expansionism, non-Western intelligentsias are inherently conflicted in their identification with Western and local cultures and feel alienated from both. Toynbee's mistake, in Seeley's view, was to overestimate the allegiance of non-Western intelligentsias to Western cultural imperialism. In similar vein, Werner Meissner (2006: 42-3) notes that Russian, German, Arab and Chinese intellectuals, among others, were and/or are equivocal in their endeavours to modernise their societies, caught between Western and local "spiritual cultures".

Do Chinese male professionals feel caught between two cultures, alienated by both? Do they veer between cultural nihilism and nationalism? Are they explicit—or tacit—male chauvinists? Many Chinese male professionals have been educated in Western countries and are often regarded as being the most 'Westernised' segment of China's population. According to modernisation theory, the middle class are the ever-Westernising and ever-expanding vanguard of China's developing society: they are the ones who will ensure that China and the Chinese become more like the "advanced" economies and societies. Yet the spirit of the Chinese male intellectual tradition, of which some of my participants portrayed themselves as the inheritors, informs the views of today's highly educated middle-class male professionals. I argue in this paper that some – perhaps many – Chinese middle-class men feel highly ambivalent about their cultural affiliations; and, some of them seek to transcend their quandary through the aesthetics of the Confucian sublime: the seductive vision of an idealized Confucian political order, ruled over by virtuous men.

The split subject of non-Western modernising nations and his affiliations with local value systems are analysed below through the postcolonial approaches of Homi Bhabha (1994) and Partha Chatterjee (1993), and via the notions of the "cosmopolitan patriot" and the "cosmopatriot" offered by Kwame Anthony Appiah (1997) and Jeroen de Kloet (2007) respectively. My understanding of ambivalence and its transcendence in the Chinese context is informed by Zhong Xueping's (2000) concept of the "knowing subject", whose male paranoia is sublimated into a universalizing vision of the world. To aid my theorization of the Confucian sublime I have turned to Ban Wang (1997).

Cosmopolitanism, ambivalence, and the Confucian sublime

Notions of cosmopolitanism and ambivalence are useful for examining gender, class, cultural and national dimensions in middle-class Chinese masculinities. Kwame Anthony Appiah has written of the “cosmopolitan patriot”: a “rooted cosmopolitan”, the cosmopolitan patriot has his or her own sense of cultural home, yet also enjoys the differences afforded by cultural homes of others (1997, 618). Jeroen de Kloet has developed the figure of the Chinese “cosmopatriot” who imbues Chineseness with a sense of cosmopolitanism and vice versa (de Kloet 2007, 134). For De Kloet, Chinese cosmopatriotism occurs in three ways: cultural struggles that localise globally circulating ideas and practices (exemplified in Chinese hip hop); cultural criticism that disrupts notions of cultural purity (as in the art of Xu Bing); and playful anticulturalism that abandons any pretensions towards cultural essences (as in Stephen Chow’s *Kung Fu Hustle*). Cultural struggle is the category that most aptly fits the ambivalence of Chinese middle-class men’s conflicted aspirations to, on the one hand, globally circulating ideals that include progressive gender attitudes, and, on the other hand, embedded notions and practices of masculinity that perpetuate national and male chauvinisms. Lisa Rofel (2007, 111) conceptualises this general phenomenon as “domestication of cosmopolitanism by way of renegotiating China’s place in the world”, and provides an example of her young Chinese female informants, who desire to be single, autonomous global consumers, yet simultaneously wish to inhabit the conventional role of the “respectable, married woman” (Rofel 2007, 125–6). For De Kloet and Rofel, Chinese localizations of globally circulating notions and practices are characterized by ambivalence and contradiction.

The works of Homi Bhabha and Partha Chatterjee on the formation of colonial subjectivities and the cultural sphere in the historical context in India provide helpful perspectives on the formation of middle-class masculinities and claims to national cultural identities that are occurring in contemporary China. Bhabha (1994, 55) proposes that colonial subjectivities are typified by a split subject that exhibits ambivalent and divided identifications, rendering the notion of pure cultural identity unsustainable. On the one hand, the colonial subject wishes to mimic the behaviour and lifestyles of elite metropolitans; on the other hand, he or she also wants to forge a cultural identity that differs from the colonisers’. These tugs in contradictory directions in the subjectification process reveal “the boundaries of colonial discourse” (Bhabha 1994: 96).

In the current era, notions of cosmopolitanism premised on Western metropolitanism rework the discourses of colonial times, inscribing an otherness in non-Western contexts that

is simultaneously desired and derided. Chatterjee (1993) points out that the search for postcolonial modernity inevitably connects with historic struggles against Western modernity. Using the example of Bengal, Chatterjee (1993, 7–9) argues that from the mid-19th century—before the political challenge to imperialism—colonized non-Western elites asserted an inner domain of spiritual culture built on difference from the West. Key elements in the spiritual-cultural sphere were the family, the position of women, and national forms of literature and art, which were to be wrought modern yet simultaneously marked by national essence.

In semi-colonised China in the second half of the 19th century, the earliest generation of modernizing figures associated with the foreign-learning faction (*yangwu pai* 洋务派) or self-strengthening movement (*zhiqiang yundong* 自强运动), such as Zeng Guofan 曾国藩 (1811-1872), Li Hongzhang 李鸿章 (1823-1901), Zuo Zongtang 左宗棠 (1812-1885), and Zhang Zhidong 张之洞 (1837-1909) similarly made a division between spiritual and material spheres. “Chinese learning as substance, Western learning for application” (*Zhongxue wei ti, Xixue wei yong* 中学为体, 西学为用) became their core guiding principle. In postsocialist China, Zeng Guofan has become a totemic model of a patriotic, well-educated Chinese man, due to his welcome of Western technology where it strengthened the nation, but also his cultivation of a strongly Confucian moral image (Meissner 2006: 49). Zeng’s association with the foreign-learning faction marked him as a cosmopolitan-like figure of his time. A hero of Chiang Kai-Shek’s, Zeng became a taboo figure during the high socialism of the Mao years, but since the 1980s has been acclaimed by cultural nationalists as “an exemplary Confucian man of literary and professional achievements and moral excellence” and a seminal modernizer of industry and education (Guo 2004: 53, 55).

Zeng’s case is but one example of how male Chinese scholars throughout Chinese history have striven to bring themselves and Chinese society towards an idealized realm of Confucian-based order of harmonious social relations. As a process, this involves the containment of sexual desire and the perfecting of one’s moral character through self-cultivation (Louie 2015: 113). If sublimation is “the converting of libidinal energies to serve culturally acceptable goals” (Wang 1997: 13), then this is the Confucian sublime.

From its earliest days, the Confucian sublime has been associated with lofty visions of political rule by virtuous men: “Grandeur belonged to men’s vigorous enterprises and moral pursuits” (Wang 1997, 105). It was thus coded masculine (*yang* 阳) in the dominant *yin-yang* cosmological system. According to Mencius, the Confucian gentleman was distinguishable for

his cultivation of “an infinitely magnificent and strong” masculine vitality: 阳刚之气 (*yanggang zhi qi*, manly and unyielding spirit) (Wang 1997: 106).³ This masculine grandeur has been maintained for millennia through misogynistic suppression of the feminine (Wang 1997, 118). During the Republican Era, China’s foremost twentieth-century Chinese aesthete, Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜 (1897-1986), built on this rejection of the feminine in his hybrid Chinese-Western conceptualisation of the sublime (Wang 1997: 114-22). In his highly influential *Psychology of Literature* (*Wenyi xinli xue* 文艺心理学, 1936), Zhu equated the Western sublime with the notion of *yanggang zhi qi*, emphasizing its correlation with strength (*gang* 刚); he aligned the beautiful, in contrast, with the idea of (feminine) gentleness and softness (*rou* 柔) (Wang 1997: 115).⁴ Maoist discourse continued the elevation of a masculine aesthetic, albeit in socialist hues, as a means of containing the feminine at a time when women were enjoined to “hold up half the sky” (*ding banbian tian* 顶半边天) (Wang 1997: 107-14).

Chinese male intellectuals’ sense of besiegement and ambivalence towards “body and self” in the shifting contexts of the immediate post-Mao era led them to search for a new sublime to transcend their sense of conflictedness and in which to locate a “new self” (Zhong 2000: 12). In the root-seeking literature of the 1980s, nature is the sublime state into which male writers projected their idealized selves, expressed through earthy, untamed, free-spirited—and male dominated—peasant-farmer lives and values in works like Mo Yan’s *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang* 红高粱 1986) and Han Shaogong’s *Da Da Da* (*Bababa* 爸爸, 1985) (Zhong 2000: 159). Han’s “manifesto” for root-seeking literature posits ancient Chu culture as a mysterious, half-primitive, yet strongly masculinist pre-Confucian idyll (Zhong 2000: 154-5). It was through such imagined cultural roots that the root-seekers fashioned strongly patriarchal and patrilineal accounts of uncontaminated Chinese cultural identity (Zhong 2000: 163). These re-masculinised and re-racialised fantasies of the Han people’s rural origins provided refuge from male intellectuals’ despair with their personal and China’s realities; and replaced as cultural ideal the (by then discredited) urban socialist utopia promised by the Great Helmsman.

Male paranoia was transcended through its sublimation into a “universal wholeness” based on “an internal whole self”, constituting a male subject that refused to acknowledge

³ “Manly and unyielding spirit” is Haun Saussy’s translation of *yanggang zhi qi*, which Wang Ban commends for encompassing “both the literal surface and deep cultural connotations of the phrase” (1997: 272 n. 9).

⁴ Zhu’s friend, the poet Liang Zongdai 梁宗岱 (1903-83), attempted to construct a feminine- (*yin* 阴) based theory of the sublime, which anticipated some avant-garde literature attempts in the late 1980s to de-masculinize the sublime (Wang 1997: 118-22).

himself as a fragmented self, but rather saw himself as a “knowing subject capable of eventually returning to the center of an orderly world” (Zhong 2000: 100). In this knowing subject’s view, the external world is fragmented, not himself. The features of the orderly world or sublime realm within which the knowing subject aspires to exist are influenced by the “dominant fiction” of the subject’s discursive and social environments (Zhong 2000: 98).

The Confucian moral order was the sought-after sublime for the majority of “knowing male subjects” in China’s imperial era; since then, dominant notions of the sublime in China have demonstrated commingling of Western and Chinese conceptions, such as in Zhu Guangqian’s theoretical assemblage, the convergence of socialism and Confucian paternalism in Mao, or the return-to-nature romanticism of the root-seekers. In the idealised Confucian sublime, postsocialist knowing male subjects mix together yearnings for Confucian moral order and hierarchy, cultivated personhood, and globally projected Chinese male power. Yet their attraction to a Confucian cultural-spiritual ethos coexists with their desire for recognition at a global level as enlightened modern male subjects committed to gender equality. Not accepting of marginalisation in the world’s eyes and tugged ambivalently between “Chinese” and “Western” modernities, some eventually find a sense of completeness in a Confucian-inflected moral order with global reach.

Methodology

In the following pages, I explore ambivalence and its transcendence in political and cultural representations of Chinese masculinities and in Chinese middle-class men’s self-narrations. My primary sources include contemporary Chinese news articles, TV drama, literature, and data from interviews that I conducted with professional Chinese men in London. I investigate diverse spheres because of my conceptualisation of masculinities as fluid assemblages of multiple discursive practices that individuals negotiate in subjectification processes (Song and Hird 2014). My analysis is informed by critical masculinity studies, which insists upon a focus on gendered power relations (O’Neill 2015). For the interviews, I followed methods associated with narrative inquiry, a methodological approach that is particularly suited to exploring the experiences of a single person or a small number of people (Cresswell 2012: 73-4; Kim 2015: 161). Narrative inquiry can be used to investigate personal experiences of an event or phenomenon, such as this paper’s exploration of gendered transnational mobilities and imaginaries. The interview data that is generated through narrative inquiry methods is itself the result of an assemblage of multiple contingent elements, including “dominant and changing

discourses, [...] biography, perspective, interests, and the immediate pertinences of the process” (Gubrium and Holstein 2012: 40).

Through bilingual adverts in Chinese and English circulated by community organizations, friends and associates, I recruited ten research participants, all of whom were professional Chinese men living in London. London was chosen as the site of inquiry because of the significant numbers of highly educated Chinese men from the PRC living and working there, many of them graduates from universities in the UK.⁵ Most of my participants had come to the UK to study and were educated to at least Master’s level. Their ages ranged from early twenties to mid-fifties; and they had lived in the UK for between three and twenty-six years. Four were married (all to Chinese women and all had children), three were partnered (including one civil partner), and three were single; eight identified themselves as straight and two as gay. They worked in media (three), architecture (two), and the others in finance, design, computing, commodities research (in large British private-sector companies) and academia. I interviewed each participant for between one and two hours between October 2014 and March 2015 and subsequently had follow-up discussions with five participants in informal social situations.

My approach builds a story of transnational Chinese masculinities shaped by my involvement in the co-creation of interview data, selection of discursive instances, choice of theoretical lens, and ultimately interpretation of all these elements. I do not seek to claim that my findings are “representative” of all transnational Chinese professional men. In the spirit of constructivist grounded theory, the scholarly value of this paper may rather inhere in its provision of “concepts and hypotheses that other researchers can transport to similar research problems and to other substantive fields” (Pace 2012: 9, drawing from Charmaz 2000).

Political and cultural representations of Chinese masculinities

Masculinist Confucian tropes have found their way back into political and popular discourse during the reform era. It is significant that since taking power in 2012, Xi Jinping has emphasised the importance of the moral order of the family to Chinese society, calling for attention to “the family, family education, and family values” (*zhuzhong jiating, zhuzhong jiajiao, zhuzhong jiafeng* 注重家庭, 注重家教, 注重家风). Explaining the “unique role” of women in the family, Xi has identified their main service to the country as caring for the elderly and educating children (Nehring and Wang 2016: 4). By describing the perfect wife as

⁵ The UK is the most popular destination for overseas study among the Chinese middle class besides the US (Xue 2019).

“virtuous” (*qi xian* 妻贤) and the perfect mother as “kind” (*mu ci* 母慈), Xi has reproduced the well-worn trope that the stability of the household, headed by a patriarch, rests on the shoulders of the virtuous wife and good mother.⁶ As examples of good mothering, Xi has cited two stories that every Chinese schoolchild knows: the devotion of Mencius’ mother to her son, and General Yue Fei’s mother’s insistence that he defend the country rather than care for her. Xi has recounted that his own mother seared the story of Yue Fei into his memory when young.⁷ His message is clear: a good mother sacrifices her own interests for those of her son.

Xi’s approach to the family emphasises Confucian and nationalist elements. His choice of Mencius and Yue Fei as masculine models underlines the ancient ideal that Chinese men should balance 文 (*wen*, cultural attainment) and 武 (*wu*, martial valour) and also seizes the chance to laud the fervent nationalism with which Yue Fei is associated. In speeches, Xi has encouraged hierarchal Confucian family relationships by exhorting younger brothers to respect elder brothers (*di gong* 弟恭) and all children to be filial (*zi xiao* 子孝). According to Xi, Confucian family morals were espoused and practiced by socialist heroes such as Zhou Enlai, Zhu De and Mao Zedong.⁸

Xi clearly values the moral order of Confucianism as a means of promoting cultural nationalist, masculinist, and generational hierarchies; and he undoubtedly recognises how Confucianism served the interests of imperial rule for 2000 years. In this context, the aesthetics of the sublime envisioned by Xi, evidently a knowing subject in this regard, take on a strongly Confucian hue. Yet Xi has also stressed his commitment to gender equality before the United Nations General Assembly⁹ and the All-China Women’s Federation.¹⁰ His pronouncements on gender and the family exemplify the kind of ambivalence to modernity and linkage of the spiritual-cultural sphere with national identity that Chatterjee outlined.

Besides political discourse, popular culture is a prominent vehicle for the propagation of masculinist and cultural nationalist values. A recent development in TV drama is the

⁶ Xi Jinping 习近平. 2016. “在会见第一届全国文明家庭代表时的讲话” (Zai huijian diyijie quanguo wenming jiating daibiao shi de jianghua, Address at the first national meeting of representatives from civilized families), *Xinhuanet*, 15 December 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-12/15/c_1120127183.htm (accessed on 6 May 2019).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Somini Sengupta. 2015. “Xi Jinping Vows to ‘Reaffirm’ China’s Commitment to Women’s Rights,” *The New York Times*, 27 September 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/28/world/asia/china-united-nations-womens-rights.html> (accessed on 6 May 2019).

¹⁰ “习近平：组织动员妇女走在时代前列建功立业” (Xi Jinping: zuzhi dongyuan funü zou zai shidai qianlie jiangong-liye, Xi Jinping: organise and mobilise women to walk in the forefront of the times to render meritorious service and build successful careers), *Xinhuanet*, 2 November 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2018-11/02/c_1123654725.htm (accessed on 31 July 2019).

blending together of cosmopolitanism, male privilege and Chinese cultural exceptionalism. As Geng Song (2018) has pointed out, the online novel turned hit TV series *Love Me, If You Dare* (*Ta lai le, qing bi yan* 他来了，请闭眼), broadcast in 2015, presents an interesting case study through the cosmopolitan characterization of its male lead, Bo Jinyan 薄靳言, a Western educated Chinese professor of criminology who helps the police with murder cases. Bo is both intellectual and middle class, as much at home in Western societies as in China. And yet *Love Me, If You Dare* reproduces a stereotypical pattern of sexual relationships in reform era Chinese films, as a hierarchal relationship exists between the globe-trotting, highly educated Bo and his girlfriend Jian Yao 简瑶, in which Bo is unquestionably dominant and Jian is subservient and uncomplaining (Song 2018: 32-3). Bo is also the dominant party in his relationship with his close male friend, Fu Ziyu 傅子遇, who plays an almost feminized role in supporting Bo's ambitions. As Song points out, this "is reminiscent of the yin/yang hierarchy in same-sex relationships in the Chinese space" (2018: 36). A Confucian-inflected framework of family and social relationships is at work in the background here.

A further relevant point is that Bo's immense mental acuity and work ethic enable him to outperform Westerners and solve tough murder cases with ease. Bo's confident outsmarting of his white counterparts, coupled with his cosmopolitan fluency in Western languages and cultures, positions him as a master of the global stage. Behind this triumph of Chinese male intellectuality there lies a vindication of the value given to education in the Chinese tradition, and the notion that self-disciplined scholarliness is the route to success. Bo vanquishes Chinese men's emasculation by Western men and Chinese women with ease, resolving the anxieties and ambivalence that well-educated Chinese men feel about their place in the world. He is an idealized model of Chinese masculinity in early 21st century globality: a cosmopolitan, privileged, and confident knowing male subject, who inhabits a Chinese masculinist and culturalist sublime.

A confident, cosmopolitan, middle-class intellectual Chinese masculinity also animates the persona and writings of the novelist Feng Tang 冯唐 (b. 1971). Medically trained, possessing an American MBA, and an ex-consultant for an American management consulting firm, Feng lauds the sexual openness of Western writers such as D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller, and interacts with his fans in sexually suggestive ways. Referring to Feng's activity on his hugely popular page on the social media platform Weibo, Pamela Hunt writes:

Reading his posts, one cannot fail to miss a trend on his page, wherein young women

(and very occasionally, men), post pictures of themselves posing with one of more of his books. The photos are clearly intended to be cute or even provocative, with the occasional inclusion of pictures of partially nude women. They are frequently accompanied by emojis of hearts or kisses, and references to Feng Tang as their “Dream boy.” These pictures are then reposted by Feng with the suggestive phrase “Tonight we are really enjoying ourselves.” (Hunt 2018: 118)

Hunt discusses the rampant male sexuality in Feng’s work through Sheldon Lu’s (2000) notion of the transnational libidinal economy, which produces “masculinist, macho and sexually aggressive” Chinese men, especially desirous of white women, as seen in Chinese TV dramas and other cultural works since the 1990s (2018, 107).

Yet while Feng and his characters are formed through enthusiastic exposure to Western women, brands and popular culture, the spirit of the historical figure of the talented and libidinous young male scholar (*caizi* 才子) simultaneously permeates Feng and his fiction (Hunt 2018: 114). For instance, Feng’s protagonist in his Beijing Trilogy attributes the “lascivious” air on Peking University’s campus to the presence of *caizi* there for centuries, and Feng has written about sharing an enjoyment of “white-skinned women” with Li Yu 李漁 (1611-80 CE), author of the erotic classic, *The Carnal Prayer Mat* (*Rouputuan* 肉蒲团), whose protagonist is a philandering young scholar (Hunt 2018, 115, 117).

Feng’s evocation of the well-educated and highly sexed *caizi* locates Feng within a long-standing Chinese male-centric tradition that marginalizes and objectifies women. In Feng’s works, Maoist high socialism is presented as inhibiting; it is the “historical culture of sensuality” to which Feng returns (Hunt 2018, 115). Feng’s authorial persona and fictional protagonists share the cosmopolitanism of Bo Jinyan in *Love Me, If You Dare*, but they inhabit the Confucian traditions of the privileged male scholar in even more pronounced ways. Ultimately, Feng presents himself as a knowing male subject, nested in a *caizi*-inflected, male-centred imaginary of the sublime, a fantasy realm where both men and women can apparently reach a state of bliss.

Chinese professional men’s self-narratives

I return now to Xianyang’s account of his life in the UK as a Chinese man, with which I began this article. We have already established that Xianyang desired a white woman for a girlfriend, which can be understood in the wider context of globally mobile Chinese men, in everyday life

and on the television screen, seeking affirmation of their sexual attractiveness from desirable white women. Viewed through the lens of the Chinese male marginality complex discussed above, this quest can be understood as globally mobile Chinese men's desire to possess as strong and potent a sexuality as that of white men, and to overcome their and China's history of emasculation. As Joane Nagel (1998) has influentially argued, the strength of a nation and its men are inextricably linked in modern nation-building.

Although Xianyang wanted to cultivate the attributes of a Chinese gentleman, he still wished to look like the sophisticated young middle-class men in his university classes and had sought to mould an outward appearance that reflected the sartorial elegance and refined manner that he admired in British middle-class men. But he emphasized that "dressing is a very superficial thing: what matters more is how you think – your inner content (*neihan* 内涵)". In that sentence, Xianyang revealed his ambivalence towards the "modern" masculinity that he aimed to emulate. On the one hand, Xianyang admired his classmates' suave demeanour, he wanted to look like them, to possess their social skills, to be as sexually attractive as they seemed to be; on the other hand, he had a sense of an inner, cultural, Chinese masculinity, that did not square with the masculinity projected by his classmates. Revealingly, Xianyang confided that one of his heroes was the author and ex-management consultant Feng Tang, saying that Feng combined the historical attributes of Chinese *wen* masculinity with savviness in contemporary global business culture.

Xianyang added that what he meant by "Chinese gentleman," (a term he had said in English hitherto), was the *junzi* 君子, the archetypal moral exemplar of the Confucian canon. He elaborated:

Like in more ancient times, Tang, Song: the scholars of the Confucian school (*rujia* 儒家) were polite, they took care of their family, they cared about society's problems, they took care of the whole universe. I think that's the most important thing – they always considered the well-being of the whole people, regardless of nation. I don't really like the notion of nation, government, party, Chinese Communist Party. *Junzi* care more about the people and focus on internal cultivation. A good definition of the *junzi* is that they do not do immoral things that they could do when they are alone; they could benefit from doing them, but they decide not to do them. I think the basic idea combining external and internal gentlemanly characteristics works regardless of country. If you're a good man, you have these good characteristics, and if you treat

people that way, people will like you. I don't just see myself as Chinese, I like to be a global citizen. In high school I wrote an article and developed a theory to prioritize things in my mind – the first thing I wrote was I would die for was “all under heaven” (*tianxia* 天下), then parents, then country (*guojia* 国家), then my woman, then myself.

Xianyang sets out here a cosmopolitan model of *junzi* masculinity that transcends national boundaries in its use of the Confucian concept of *tianxia*, “all under heaven”. Within this larger global context, Xianyang retains a strong sense of the distinctive characteristics of scholarly Chinese masculinity, its strengths, priorities and its goal of sublime self-perfection encapsulated in the *junzi* ideal. Indeed, the way of the *junzi* has historically been considered “the foundation of the sublime spirit” (*chonggao jingshen de genji* 崇高精神的根基) in Chinese aesthetics (Zhu 2016: 42-3).

Xianyang's reconstruction of the *junzi* as an idealised transnational figure forges a confident Chinese male cultural identity in a sublime vision of a global *tianxia*. It combines the polished, urbane “external gentlemanly characteristics” that he observed in his British classmates with a steadfast attention to “inner cultivation” of lofty moral practices. The inner spiritual dimension to Xianyang's masculinity encompasses precisely those elements that Chatterjee identified as the chief concerns of postcolonial elites: paradigms from national literatures, the family, and marital relations. Xianyang's domestication of a cosmopolitanism masculinity reveals his ambivalence and unease about the masculinities of Western modernity, and his need to transcend this ambivalence – and his fragmented self – by seeking the harmonious order of *junzi* and *tianxia*. Xianyang is far from alone in this: in recent Chinese political discourse, both concepts have been promoted as counterpoints to established Western frameworks of world order. Elsewhere, I have analysed the presentation of *junzi* as Chinese national archetype and leaders of an imagined “*junzi* nation” (Hird 2017). William Callahan sets out how *tianxia* is formulated as “a patriotic form of cosmopolitanism”, offering a top-down “hierarchical system that values order over freedom, ethics over law, and elite governance over democracy and human rights” (Callahan 2008: 753, 759).

Xianyang was not the only admirer of *junzi* masculinity that I met. Bradley, the son of officials, in his mid-twenties, and a design professional, had moved to the UK from south China for his secondary school education. In similar fashion to Xianyang, he emphasized self-cultivation of a *junzi* masculinity:

Mencius put it clearly: life is about self-cultivation. Confucianism puts it as cultivation of personal morals. Yu Qiuyu¹¹ says the *junzi* is the cultural ideal of China, like the samurai is for Japan. China needs more self-cultivation to be taught; the attention paid to creams, designer clothes, hairstyles, doesn't make for interesting character.

The different perspective that Bradley gained from living in the West led him to pinpoint what he saw as a major problem with contemporary Chinese society, namely the lack of a culturally specific moral counterbalance to the hyper-consumerism that has spread in recent years. He continued:

What's missing is that self-cultivation is not being taught. I realized the importance of that after I came to the West. I think self-cultivation is a natural thing. The way you explore knowledge, change your views, have an ideal that you want to become. You want to become good at this and that – you are cultivating already.

Bradley's choice of words – “what's missing...” – reveals his sense of his own and Chinese society's incompleteness. Bradley's search for meaning beyond consumerism and a sense of wholeness in his life led him to Confucian practices of self-cultivation, which he explicitly linked to national cultural identity discourses propagated by public intellectuals such as Yu Qiuyu, who argues that the *junzi* model of self-cultivation is the core of Chineseness. Bradley's transcendence of his sense of incompleteness as a Chinese man, his becoming a knowing subject, is linked very clearly into a vision of a strong national culture for the Chinese nation.

I had asked Bradley, as I did Xianyang, for an account of his life in the UK as a Chinese man. Instead, he propounded his views on the weakness of China and the need for Chinese men to embrace their cultural destiny through walking the path of the *junzi*. As he saw it, the antidote to the amoral hyper-consumerism imported from the West was the practice of self-cultivation. In Bradley's view, Chinese gentlemanly masculinity was crucial not only for his own sense of manhood, but also for the health of the Chinese nation as a whole: masculinity and national culture came together for him through the sublime figure of the *junzi*.

The promotion of a masculinity founded on Confucian self-cultivation was not merely

¹¹ Yu Qiuyu 余秋雨 (1946–) is a well-known writer and commentator on – and strong proponent of – Chinese cultural heritage. In Hird (2017) I analyse his conceptualization of the *junzi*.

desirable, Bradley argued, but vital, due to China's political system. He posited Chinese political difference on a cultural foundation:

I guess the Chinese way is harsher, more strict. Because Confucian self-cultivation cultivates one towards power, like a man who can hold so much power without being corrupt – that's a much higher standard. I don't think Western men need to, because you have factions in government, you have independent trade unions, you will never give a man that much power, therefore there is no need for one single character to have such high moral standards as Xi Jinping 习近平 (1953–); or Wen Jiabao 温家宝 (1942–). Wen Jiabao is considered a man of strong morals. And no Western man will ever be equal to him in the amount of power he can amass.

Bradley's notably male-centred rendering of Chinese politics asserted that the stability of the system hinged on the moral self-cultivation of its leaders. As Guo Xuezhi points out, in the Confucian tradition the combination of a ruler's active ethical responsibility for self and society is conceptualized through the figure of the *junzi* as moral model and ideal political leader (2001: 55-7). The connection between politics, morality and the sublime is present in China most canonical Confucian texts: "The tendency to render political rule and moral integrity as an experience of the grandiose and the lofty is quite pronounced in the Confucian *Analects*" (Wang 1997: 105). Exhilarated by Xi Jinping's anti-corruption drive, Bradley talked of the CCP staying in power, like a dynasty, for two or three hundred years, provided that its leaders successfully fostered *junzi* morality.

The qualities that Bradley wished to see in elite Chinese men came together for him in the figure of the nineteenth-century general Zeng Guofan, whose popularity among contemporary cultural nationalists I discussed above. Bradley emphasized that Zeng cultivated a masculinity that incorporated Confucian (and some Daoist) principles, while advocating strengthening of the nation through adoption of Western technological, military and educational innovations. Besides admiring Zeng for saving the nation from the chaos of the Taiping rebellion (1850-1864), Bradley most appreciated Zeng's strength of moral character; which Guo Yingjie has summed up as "the four principal ideals of the Confucian man (achieving self-perfection, managing the family, governing the empire, and bringing order to all under heaven)" (2004: 62). For Bradley and other contemporary well-educated cultural nationalists, it is Confucian self-cultivation, coupled with a globally informed perspective, as

exemplified by Zeng, that produces the moral fibre and vision in elite men that is required to safeguard China's political and cultural integrity, social stability, and economic prosperity.

The assertion of a superior moral core at the heart of Chinese masculinity and Chinese national culture, particularly with regard to the family, women, and self-control, was a prominent feature of the opinions of another four of my research participants, all professional Chinese men, during the interviews I carried out in London in 2014. These participants expressed disappointment with aspects of British men's behaviour, especially in family contexts and relations with women. They felt that there was an unacceptably high level of absent fathers in UK families, and that British men were not as filial (*xiao* 孝) as they should be. They contrasted this with their sense of Chinese men's acceptance of responsibility for their families, especially in terms of duties of care towards their children and parents. My participants also felt that British men were unacceptably sexually lewd towards women on the streets and even in the workplace. Further examples of irresponsible behaviour that they gave included British men's public drunkenness, aggressiveness, and football hooliganism.

Contrasting with such adherence to mainstream Confucian values, one man whom I interviewed, Zhen Feng, articulated the alternative vision of the Daoist-inflected Chu cultural sublime proposed by Han Shaogong in the mid-1980s. A media professional, at fifty-four years of age Zhen was the eldest participant in my study. His adolescence had coincided with the Cultural Revolution, during which he was sent to the countryside, as was the case with many of his contemporaries. During his twenties, in the first decade of the reform era, he was strongly influenced by root-seeking literary works' focus on masculine subjectivities coloured through images of song, dance and union with the natural world. After coming to the UK in the late 1980s for postgraduate study, this self-styled "man of Chu" refused to return to post-Tiananmen China. Yet despite his opposition to mainstream Confucian and CCP discourses, he was also a knowing subject whose resolution of his internal conflicts rested on the inherently patriarchal vision of untamed Chu culture sketched out by root-seeking writers.

With the exception of the "man of Chu", most of my participants' critiques of British masculinity cohered around the notion of self-control and responsibility, which they believed that they, as Chinese men, possessed, whereas British men did not. Their views, including those of Xianyang and Bradley, echo historical Confucian expectations of self-restraint in men on the *wen* (literary) path, including the containment of sexual passion, as noted above, and the deeply embedded characterization of non-Chinese people as relatively unrefined (Dikötter 1990). Their insistence on the superiority of a distinctly Chinese approach to family and gender

relations, often through concepts central to the Confucian tradition, designates them as knowing male subjects; and, further, demonstrates their commitment to a Chinese spiritual-cultural sphere built on a vision of a sublime Confucian moral order clearly differentiated from perceived Western values and practices.

Conclusion

The Confucian sublime is one of a number of alternatives to the Christian sublime of equality before God that continues to inform Western visions of societal perfection. In the face of globalization and the failures of socialism, people across the world are resorting to distinctive cultural identities to understand themselves and gain a sense of belonging to a particular society (Thomas 2005). In China, the urban middle class is increasingly turning to Confucianism (Pang 2019: 197-228). The Confucian sublime offers an attractive vision for those well-educated Chinese men who feel the pain and humiliation of emasculation at personal and national levels. Its cosmopolitan, universalising tendencies, promulgated through concepts such as *junzi* and *tianxia*, provide a transcendent solution to the love/hate relationship they have with Western culture. Perceiving themselves as marginalized and emasculated by the CCP, Western men, and women's "rise",¹² Chinese male intellectuals and highly educated professionals in the reform era are turning to deeply historically embedded models of masculinity to regain a sense of manhood and male privilege compatible with Chinese cultural identity in the modern world. As I have discussed above, this trend manifests in recent TV drama series, literary works and authorial personae, and in middle-class men's self-representations. It is facilitated discursively at the highest levels of the CCP.

Educated Chinese men's "cosmopatriotic" domestication of aspects of Western business masculinities and cultivation of embedded Confucian masculinities constitutes a strategic effort to insert themselves more advantageously into local and global power relations of gender, class and nation. But the turn to a Chinese spiritual-cultural sphere also re-animates yearnings for the Confucian sublime (or minority alternatives such as the Chu cultural sublime), in which the lofty and the grandiose is associated with male power and integrity. While some contemporary proponents of the Confucian sublime may genuinely believe in its "magic power" to solve the world's problems, their enthusiasm for it contributes to "a hegemonic practice calculated to reinforce the discursive formation of Confucian values and

¹² For analysis of Chinese white-collar men's anxieties about women's demands for gender equality, see Song and Hird (2014) and Hird (2016a).

thereby empower themselves in the contest for influence and control over national identity and the future directions of the nation” (Guo 2004: 88). The self-cultivating moral vision expressed through *junzi*, *tianxia*, and *xiao* ideals, propounded by Xianyang and Bradley and other “knowing male subjects” among my participants, echoes and reaffirms a culturalist, masculinist sublime that intrinsically disavows and represses the feminine. In this light, espousals of a *junzi* masculinity, no matter how principled their presentation, reflect and contribute to discursive practices and power relations that effect classed, gendered and sexual privileges for well-educated Chinese men. As I have shown, the culturalist and masculinist nationalism that has grown out of feelings of resentment and humiliation often facilitates or espouses male and Chinese chauvinism.

Modernisation narratives argue that modern societies are typified by the disappearance of “tradition” and progressive change, resulting in greater individualism, social equality and democracy. Yet, the evidence shows the continuing significance of historical modes of masculinity for Chinese men today, and the persistence of patriarchal hierarchies in contemporary gender relations. These findings undermine modernisation narratives that posit China’s globalisation process as inevitably resulting in the jettisoning of “traditional” gender identities and practices and the disappearance of gender discrimination. The role of Chinese middle-class men in perpetuating class, gender, and other hierarchies complicates professional Chinese men’s claims of moral integrity, undermines the idea that the middle class is inherently progressive, and challenges the notion that economic development unproblematically delivers social democratisation.

Envisioning Chinese middle-class masculinities as ambivalent, ambiguous, and contradictory helps facilitate a clearer view of China’s postsocialist modernity—the context in which these masculinities have emerged—as inherently conflicted; the latest iteration, as it were, of a process that began in the middle of the nineteenth century. In other words, ambivalent masculinities point to wider societal ambivalences. Indeed, it could be argued that China’s postsocialist modernity is constituted upon ambivalence, ambiguity and contradiction. Yet there are growing numbers of well-educated, knowing male subjects who now believe that the Confucian sublime resolves their anxieties about their own subjectivities and their nation’s place in the world. The Confucian sublime is an imaginary of increasing appeal to China’s middle-class men.

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