

Kam Louie. *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 239 pp. Hardcover £43.00, ISBN 0-521-80621-6.

In this thought-provoking book, Kam Louie applies the *wen-wu* framework as an analytical tool to conceptualize masculinity in Chinese culture. Drawing upon icons, symbols, and images from classic and contemporary Chinese literature as well as Hong Kong and mainland China films, Louie successfully outlines how *wen* and *wu* comprise Chinese masculinity. As Louie points out, while Chinese male sexuality is not entirely out of the radar screen of gender studies in the West, the limited published works often deal with nonmainstream concerns such as homosexuality. When mainstream sexuality is the focus, with a few notable exceptions, the treatment of the subject rarely goes beyond an application of Western models or the yin-yang framework. Even less frequent have been book-length discussions of the subject, and none has focused on defining male attributes utilizing the *wen-wu* framework. This book opens the door to a new terrain of the study of Chinese masculinity.

The book begins with a brief overview of the challenge in theorizing masculinity in general and Chinese masculinity in particular. As many scholars of gender studies have convincingly contested, theorizing masculinity is often problematic because masculinity has multiple and ambiguous meanings. Definitions of masculinity differ from one culture to another and even vary within the same culture. Louie highlights the need to analyze Chinese masculinity as an independent category because Chinese sexuality is constructed quite differently from that of the West. Within the framework of Western stereotypes, images of Chinese men do not conform to the macho model of masculinity. In scholarly books and mass media, Chinese men appear less “sexual” or “sexy” and more “intelligent” than both black and white men. To have a better understanding of Chinese masculinity, Louie argues for “adopting an indigenous theoretical construct” in an analysis of sexuality of Chinese men. This indigenous theoretical construct is the *wen-wu* dyad.

Although studies of gender and sexuality in Chinese culture have commonly employed the yin-yang paradigm, Louie argues that the *wen-wu* schema is more appropriate and enlightening in theorizing Chinese masculinity. This is so because, Louie maintains, while men and women can both be discussed in terms of the yin-yang model, the *wen-wu* construct of sexuality is applicable exclusively to men. Only when women have transformed themselves into men can they be “productively discussed in terms of *wen* or *wu*.”

What is the *wen-wu* framework? How does it help us unveil the meanings and practices of manhood in Chinese culture? In the Chinese language *wen* and *wu* each has more than twenty definitions. The core meanings of *wen* center around qualities such as scholarly, civil, mental, and genteel, manifested most commonly in the world of scholars and gentlemen. *Wu* attributes represent primarily ability in martial arts, military leadership, physical skills, and power, emphasized typically in the world of warriors and machos. *Wen* and *wu* represent two forms of masculinity. Even though both *wen* and *wu* embody masculinity, historically, however, *wen* attributes take supremacy over *wu* attributes. Not only do scholars enjoy a higher social status than do warriors, women also prefer *wen* men to *wu* men.

The next two chapters focus on the analysis of two *wen-wu* icons, Confucius and Guan Yu. Guan Yu is one of the three sworn brothers in the popular classic novel *The Three Kingdoms*, a man with a distinctive appearance (red complexion, long beard, and great height) and supreme ability in the battlefield. Being “the most glorified and worshiped of all characters in Chinese history and literature” (p. 26), Guan Yu is commonly considered to be a god of war and thus an embodiment of the *wu* attributes. Physical strength and military prowess alone, however, do not exemplify the *wu* ideals. An ideal *wu* man, like Guan Yu, must also have utmost self-control, integrity, honor, sense of justice, and loyalty. In addition, he must not be vulnerable to temptations of female beauty and material wealth. Louie then contemplates the origin and significance of *wen* and its transformation in contemporary time. The *wen* dimension is rooted in Confucianism. Confucius is considered an icon of *wen*. As the “*wen* Sage” in Chinese culture, Confucius stands for intelligence, knowledge, virtues, and proper etiquette. In imperial China, ruled with Confucian philosophy, all levels of positions in the bureaucracy were filled only by scholars who had successfully passed civil service examinations. These examinations were conducted at several levels (county, provincial, and national) and based on knowledge of tradition, classics, poetry, and calligraphy. Top scorers on national-level examinations were considered the most capable men and were appointed to key positions in the imperial court. Thus, education and knowledge were the most important attributes that defined masculinity.

In light of an outline of these *wen* and *wu* masculine ideals, Louie continues in the following three chapters to examine the representations of *wen* and *wu* characters in classic and contemporary Chinese literature. The practices and ideals of the *wen-wu* dichotomy are, of course, ever evolving and changing. Louie illuminates how the portrayal of various characters reflects the two different forms of masculinity and how internal and external forces such as communism and capitalism brought transformation and change to the two ideals.

Louie finally examines Chinese masculinity by providing an intriguing analysis of how the dynamics of *wen* and *wu* are manifested in the Chinese diaspora. While the high education attainment of recent Chinese immigrants in Australia,

North America, and Europe is attributable to the *wen* ideals, kung fu films that feature Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li certainly promote the *wu* form of masculinity. Increasingly, the globalization process is making these forms of masculinity more acceptable to the non-Chinese population.

The *wen-wu* framework is a welcome new approach to theorizing and understanding Chinese masculinity. Louie makes a compelling case study of gender construction in Chinese context. He is also to be commended for drawing carefully from such a wide range of sources as Chinese classics, modern and contemporary Chinese fiction and drama, and Hong Kong and mainland China films. This book excels in its broad scope, richness of material, sound methodology, eloquent argument, and plentiful insights.

There are, however, some imperfections in this remarkable book. First, it does not give an adequate substantive discussion of Confucian teachings on *wen*. Though chapter 3 covers the topic, it is rather preliminary and sketchy. As a core ideal in the Confucian tradition, *wen* is indispensable to achievement of the moral ideal of *ren* 仁, and one cannot adequately understand *wen* without investigating it in connection with *ren*. Furthermore, it can be argued that Louie has misinterpreted the Confucian ideals of loyalty and obligations between men as brothers (p. 36). Brotherhood is mutual, but mutual is not equal. In the Chinese language, the concept of “brother” is expressed with two separate words: 兄 (*xiong*, elder brother) and 弟 (*di*, younger brother). By Chinese definitions, 兄 (elder brother) signifies senior and leading, while 弟 (younger brother) means junior and yielding. The moral relation between elder brothers and younger brothers is 悌 (*ti*)—that is, the *di* obeys the *xiong*. Thus a bond between brothers may be strong, but it is also a hierarchical bond. This is the practice for both *wen* men and *wu* men.

The book is unclear in its illustration about the relationship between *wen* and *wu*. For the most part, *wen* and *wu* are said to be opposite to one another, implying that they are the two opposite ends of Chinese masculinity continuum (p. 10). In other places, especially in the analysis of Guan Yu, the god of *wu*, *wen* and *wu* are said to be complementary to each other. Guan Yu is shown reading a book by candlelight. His physical attractiveness and military skills, the defining qualities of *wu*, are enhanced by his ability to read, a core *wen* attribute. Similarly, Confucius, the god of *wen*, is also portrayed to have both *wen* and *wu* attributes. This suggests that *wen* and *wu* are not the end points of a single bipolar dimension in Chinese male sexuality; they can coexist in one person. If this is the case, then *wen* and *wu* are not binary opposition in Chinese male ideals. They should certainly not be considered two dichotomous ideals. Perhaps *wen* and *wu* are just two distinctive qualities that can be possessed by the same person. One could think of Wang Yangming 王阳明 and Zeng Guofan 曾国藩, both of whom were significant military generals and accomplished Confucian scholars, as examples of this integrated ideal of *wen* and *wu*.

Some of Louie's translations of Chinese terms are questionable. For instance, he renders *keji fuli* as "self-control and returning to righteousness" (p. 91). As a key concept in Confucian philosophy, *li* (礼) in (*keji fuli* 克己复礼) can be translated as "rite," "ritual," or propriety." It is simply a mistake to translate it as "righteousness." Louie's interpretation of homosexuality in the world of warriors is certainly original and provocative, but further evidence is needed to make it a convincing argument. As it stands now, there is no substantial proof beyond speculation.

Finally, it would have been beneficial if Chinese characters had been provided for key Chinese concepts and terms. In this age of China studies, they are almost a must in serious scholarly work. Without these terms in the original language, readers are sometimes left to guess which words are referred to throughout the text.

Notwithstanding these weaknesses, this book overall is a thoughtful, intriguing, and important analysis of Chinese masculinity. The *wen-wu* framework offers a new and refreshing perspective on gender construction in Chinese culture. It provides a unique look at ideals and practices of Chinese masculinity that have been largely unexamined. I highly recommend it to students, scholars, and the public.

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