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# Martial Arts Films and Dutch–Chinese Masculinities

Smaller Is Better

YIU FAI CHOW

**Abstract** Starting with Bruce Lee in the 1960s, Chinese martial arts films have been gaining increasing importance in Hollywood. Amidst global fascination and the prevalence of male heroes in martial arts films, it is surprising to note that only a few studies engage the genre with issues of Chinese masculinity, and none by investigating how the audience makes sense or use of what they are seeing. Taking martial arts films as the research site, this study is about how Chinese men negotiate their masculinity in a context where their masculinity is marginal, that is, in a diasporic context. The findings of this research attest to the marginalization and subordination of diasporic Chinese men by two dominant and interlocking discourses in the West, namely that only certain White male characteristics would be considered masculine, and that certain Chinese male characteristics would be considered neutered or even effeminate. The male informants of this study, however, are never entirely marginalized, victimized, and oppressed; they are able to construct alternative, different versions of masculinities, by privileging what they can do with their “small bodies,” by downplaying the sexual and romantic dimensions of masculinity, and by emphasizing the importance of control and discipline. These Chinese men are garnering creative resources not necessarily by going into “indigenous” sources of historical or literary Chinese culture, as suggested by theorists on Chinese masculinity. Instead, contemporary transnational popular culture—in this case, Chinese martial arts films—opens up possibilities for them to articulate and construct different masculine ideals.

**Keywords** martial arts films, Chineseness, masculinity, Chinese diaspora, audience study

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Starting with Bruce Lee in the 1960s, Chinese martial arts films have been gaining increasing importance in Hollywood. Apart from a number of

Chinese stars (e.g., Jackie Chan, Jet Li) reaching Hollywood stardom, American as well as European cinemas have been opening their doors to an increasing number of international martial arts blockbusters including *Fearless*, *Hero*, and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Amidst such global fascination and the prevalence of male heroes in martial arts films, it is surprising to note that only a few studies engage the genre with issues of Chinese masculinity, and none by investigating how the audience makes sense or use of what they are seeing. Taking martial arts films as the research site, this article studies how Chinese men negotiate their masculinity in a context where their masculinity is marginal, that is, in a diasporic context. It explores how they gather resources from this genre to deal with their everyday struggles with the hegemonic White masculinity of the host society in which they live. Before going into further details of the background to this research question, we will examine the lacuna where this inquiry is situated, defined by the broader contours of Chinese gender studies and, particularly, studies on Chinese masculinity.

For a long time following the emergence of feminism as a fundamental organizing principle for social movement and academic knowledge, gender studies had been almost synonymous with women's studies. Chinese gender studies show a similar pattern. As pointed out by Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom<sup>1</sup> as well as Kam Louie,<sup>2</sup> a tendency to focus on women and concepts of femininity has persisted in Chinese gender studies<sup>3</sup> while men and concepts of masculinity were and still are severely understudied. Both Brownell and Wasserstrom's innovative reader and Louie's groundbreaking work were published as recently as 2002.

This time lapse is remarkable, considering that men became the object of academic gaze in the course of the 1980s, when the term "new sociology of masculinity" was introduced as a new paradigm to study the hegemonic power relations among men and women.<sup>4</sup> By the turn into the 1990s, Western academia witnessed a "surge of interest in the study of men and masculinity" when on both sides of the Atlantic, men were "starting to respond to the challenges of feminism."<sup>5</sup> While this surge of interest covered a variety of masculine practices in Europe, America, and Africa, men's studies have largely ignored Asian masculinities, whether in Asia itself or among diasporic members in the world.<sup>6</sup> The *Journal of Men's Studies*, for instance, published only two articles—one on Asian gay men and their bodies,<sup>7</sup> the other on Shanghai men and housework distribution,<sup>8</sup> both studies situated in Australia—during the last five years.<sup>9</sup>

## Confucius, Guan Yu, and the fragile scholar

The past decade saw a limited number of studies responding to this deficiency, resulting in two major trajectories of research on Chinese masculinity. The first trajectory investigates Chinese masculinity in the context of China or Chinese culture, invariably by delving into historical records, Chinese literary classics, and generally older Chinese texts.<sup>10</sup> In their attempt to mobilize an “indigenous” approach to understand Chinese manhood, they construct or reconstruct versions of Chinese masculinity which claim their legitimacy and authenticity simultaneously from the “past” and from its perceived segregation and therefore difference from the West. Kam Louie and Louise Edwards frame this notion of difference assertively into a question of theoretical urgency: “we need to conceptualize Chinese masculinities differently from those of the West.”<sup>11</sup>

The most typical and influential examples of this approach are the two book-length treatises by Louie and Song, respectively.<sup>12</sup> Generally considered the first comprehensive analysis of Chinese masculinity, Louie’s book puts forward the *wen–wu* (文武) dyad as the fundamental structure of Chinese masculinity. *Wen*, according to Louie’s analysis, is the paradigm of literary achievement, cultural skills, and all the attributes that belong to the realm of the mind. *Wu*, on the other hand, operates in the realm of the physical, manifesting itself in martial valor and martial skills. The two poles of *wen* and *wu* are ideally in harmony rather than necessarily competing, although historically, Louie argues, *wen* has always been more valued in elitist discourse on Chinese masculinity. After tracing the dyad to Confucius (孔子; the Sage, the Teacher, the Businessman, and the icon of *wen*) and to Guan Yu (關羽; the God of War, the icon of *wu*), Louie extends his analytical model to more recent cultural representations, including working-class heroes in post-Mao fiction and internationally popular male Chinese film stars.

Corresponding to Louie’s indigenous understanding of Chinese masculinity, Geng Song offers in *The Fragile Scholar* a “post-colonial reading of Chinese masculinity.”<sup>13</sup> As if to affirm *wen*’s primacy over *wu*, as alleged by Louie, Song argues that *caize* (才子), the fragile scholar, was constructed by the literary elite in premodern China to privilege their version of masculinity above other competing versions, for instance, the Confucian gentleman (君子). Song singles out in Chinese literary history two figures—Qu Yuan, the poet of the *Song of Chu* (楚辭), and Student Zhang in the *Story of the West Wing* (西廂記)—as archetypes of scholarly masculinity characterized by a delicate body and literary

acumen. Song continues to argue that Chinese masculinity, in embracing an effeminate male, distinguishes itself from the dominant Western conception of masculinity, which predicates on a rigid gender and sexuality division. According to Song, “the conceptual binaries of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual, which are central to the Western gender discourses and the signifying system as a whole, were largely absent in pre-modern China.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite—and because of—their theoretical ambition to understand Chinese manhood the Chinese way, to break away from hegemonic Western paradigms of masculinity that “would only prove that Chinese men are ‘not quite real men,’”<sup>15</sup> this trajectory of studies remains firmly in the sinocentric tradition, which has been scrutinized by critics questioning who holds the authority to claim “Chineseness,”<sup>16</sup> or in this case “Chinese masculinity.” In their insistence on the specificities of Chinese masculinity, this line of “indigenous” studies privilege historical and literary sources, which, notwithstanding the empirical insights they yield, reiterate, and reify China and traditional Chinese culture as the definitive center of Chineseness.

At the same time, this trajectory of studies tends to present Chinese masculinity in a manner highly susceptible to problems of essentialization, self-exoticization, and homogenization. Both Louie and Song, for instance, seem to assume that *wen-wu* and *caize* masculinity can be generally applicable to all Chinese men, while their analyses are primarily grounded in pre-modern sources. Such general applicability is part and parcel of their eagerness to draw a clear and stable dividing line between Chinese and Western understanding of masculinity. One of the ways to achieve this clear and stable division is to delineate Chinese masculinity as a “collection of ‘interior’, self-defining qualities.”<sup>17</sup> The question put forward by Kwai-Cheung Lo, primarily to Louie but by extension to other scholars using the indigenous approach, is fundamental. Lo asks, “What is the significance of generalizing or systematizing Chinese men at this moment while many poststructuralist-inflected academic studies have been striving to analyze Western culture non-systematically?”<sup>18</sup>

## Hegemonic masculinity and the orientaling gaze

The second trajectory of studies on Chinese masculinity also engages with hegemonic White masculinity but in a different way. Instead of seeking to construct a different version of Chinese masculinity alongside the Western one, these studies locate Chinese men right in the space of hegemonic Western masculinity, both geographically and culturally. More specifically,

they take diasporic Chinese men as the focus of investigation, whose research field is located predominantly in North America and Australia, and to a much lesser extent in Britain. Without contesting, at least not explicitly, the sinocentric tendency in the indigenous approach of understanding Chinese manhood, these studies are primarily concerned with the struggles of diasporic Chinese men with what they are expected to behave as a man in and according to the Western cultural context they live in. Researchers are particularly interested in how Chinese men negotiate their masculine identity through two sets of interlocking, dominant discourses.

First, they have to live with certain “hegemonic masculinity”<sup>19</sup> in a White Western society, which, as Erving Goffman argues, will compel any man other than what he calls “the unblushing male” to perceive himself, at least momentarily, as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior.<sup>20</sup> In Michael S. Kimmel’s words, “within the dominant culture, the masculinity that defines white, middle class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standard for other men, against which other men are measured and, more often than not, found wanting.”<sup>21</sup> Second, they have to live with certain orientalizing constructions of Chinese masculinities, which, in both academic and popular discourses, are always neutered or feminized.<sup>22</sup> Quoting Canadian psychologist Philippe Rushton, Richard Fung points out the dominant Western construction of the hypersexed Black man and the undersexed Asian man who is “defined by a striking absence down there.”<sup>23</sup> Allan Luke describes diasporic men in the West as “something Other, something more feminine in the normative eye of Western sexuality: slender and relatively hairless bodies, differently textured and colored skin and straight hair.”<sup>24</sup>

Most of the studies on diasporic Chinese men choose to understand their negotiation with hegemonic masculinities by investigating their “lived experience” in a Western society.<sup>25</sup> Anthony Chen, for instance, has interviewed Chinese American men and concludes that they achieve their masculinity in the face of negative stereotyping through four main gender strategies: compensation, deflection, denial, and repudiation. Cliff Cheng, in his two studies published in 1999, investigated the Western stereotyping of Asian men as asexual nerds and how far it is internalized among Asian men themselves. Turning to Australia, Ray Hibbins similarly conducted interviews to tap the lived experience of Chinese male migrants and locate different markers of masculinity from Western males. Murray Drummonds adopted a life historical perspective to inquire how Asian gay men struggle “to fit in”<sup>26</sup> the gay culture, the Australian heterosexual culture, and the Asian masculinized culture.

Other studies on diasporic Chinese men scrutinize the issue through the prism of representation, mostly in recent or contemporary cultural products. Focusing on Western gay pornography featuring Asian actors, Richard Fung examined how Asian bodies are represented as asexual, denied, or incapable of sexual pleasure. In his provocatively titled book, David Eng travels through literature, drama, and film to explore how the West refuses to see “at the site of the Asian male body a penis that *is* there to see.”<sup>27</sup> Jachinson Chan traced the images of Chinese men in American popular culture, from Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee, leading to the false choice imposed onto Asian American men: either they emulate the American notion of masculinity, or they are not real men.<sup>28</sup> Tseen Khoo examined diasporic Chinese writings to see how they extend and challenge existing representations of Asian masculinities in Australia and Canada.<sup>29</sup>

### **Martial arts films and possibilities of negotiation**

The current study is an extension of the studies on Chinese men living in a diasporic context where their masculinity is being marginalized. It shares their focus on diasporic men’s struggle with hegemonic masculinity, and likewise it chooses to investigate contemporary cultural productions rather than historical, literary texts confined and defined sinocentrically. Instead of looking at representational issues, however, the attention is on reception dynamics, in how contemporary cultural products provide diasporic Chinese men with possibilities to negotiate their masculinity in a White cultural context, to articulate and construct alternative versions of masculinity, to deal with their everyday struggles.

Currently based in the Netherlands, I have observed the popularity of a particular transnational popular cultural product among young Chinese men—martial arts films<sup>30</sup> from Hong Kong and recently also from mainland China. Apart from fervently watching martial arts films, some of them even join classes to master the Chinese fighting techniques. In 2004, *Fighting Fish*, billed as the first Dutch martial arts film, was released nationally; the film project was initiated, coproduced, and starred by a native-born Chinese.<sup>31</sup>

Among studies on martial arts films, some would draw connections, explicitly or implicitly, to inquiries of masculinity<sup>32</sup> while fewer would situate (part of) their studies in the Chinese diaspora.<sup>33</sup> Invariably, these studies adopt a text-oriented approach, and audience experiences of martial arts film have yet to be explored. As Laikwan Pang argues, “mas-

culinity is bound to be received in multiple ways according to reception contexts and dynamics.”<sup>34</sup> In adopting a reception approach, this article underlines the importance of contextuality, agency, and therefore flexibility in identification processes, which concern not only the past, but equally the present and future. As Paul Gilroy aptly remarks, for the diasporic subject it is no longer “where you’re from” but “where you’re at.”<sup>35</sup> In Stuart Hall’s words, “Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*.”<sup>36</sup> In this infinite war—or, if one likes, play—of positions, Hall explains how popular culture serves as an important symbolic toolbox, providing imaginaries with which one can (dis)identify. Identities are constituted not outside but within representation, hence, cinema serves “not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak.”<sup>37</sup> Following this line of thinking, this research takes martial arts films as one of the symbolic reservoirs through which young Dutch Chinese constitute themselves, and in particular their masculinities.

Inclusion of popular culture and its reception as a site to investigate the experience of Chinese diaspora in the West, I will also argue, is not only useful but also necessary. While lamenting the historical reliance of Asian American studies on materially based analyses, David Eng draws the distinction between the material and symbolic aspects of life.<sup>38</sup> Although the two aspects are intricately intertwined, the distinction is relevant in laying bare certain contradictions and tensions in diasporic life. As diasporic Chinese continue to be perceived to function, in material terms, smoothly and unproblematically (such as in areas of education, employment, and entrepreneurship), their symbolic position in the White sociocultural hierarchy remains by and large marked by invisibility and ambivalence. In the case of Chinese men, even if they share similar material characteristics as their Western peers, they are, for instance, seldom similarly active participants of pub, sport, and beach cultures, the dominant construction sites of Western versions of masculinity<sup>39</sup> while they may be preoccupied with their own cultural pursuits such as watching martial arts films. Popular culture, the realm of the symbolic, and in the current case martial arts films, should be a prime site to explore how Chinese men live their lives as men in a symbolic order that seems to continue putting their manhood under duress.<sup>40</sup>



## Interviews, focus groups, and participant observations

Data for this research was collected through a multimethod approach. First, 20 face-to-face interviews were conducted with Chinese who were either born or otherwise grew up in the Netherlands. Aged between 18 and 34, most of the informants (14) were recruited from a survey undertaken earlier while the rest (6), all self-proclaimed fans of martial arts films, were recruited through the author's personal network. One of them was the initiator, coproducer, and main actor of *Fighting Fish*. In terms of gender, half of the informants were female, and the male half of the informants included the six fans. Female informants were included as their perceptions of Chinese men would inevitably impact on how Chinese men see themselves. Among these 20 informants, 15 were pursuing or had completed tertiary education. Two exceptions aside, the informants were either students or working in professional or managerial/administrative positions. Informants of the focus groups share similar education and occupation profiles. Given the lack of official statistics on the Chinese population in the Netherlands, it is impossible to ascertain whether this sampling is representative. Suffice it to say that these informants are likely to enjoy material advantages, and they make good informants for an inquiry over their possibly unfavorable symbolic position in the Dutch cultural order. The in-depth interviews took the form of semistructured, guided conversations between the researcher and the informants.

Second, the same six martial arts film fans were asked to invite friends and organize groups to view and discuss four film fragments, one chosen by the fans themselves and three others selected by the researcher. They included fragments from three martial arts films *Fearless*, *Fighting Fish*, and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, portraying respectively a Chinese male protagonist fighting White opponents, having a first encounter with a White woman, and teaching a young Chinese pupil. While these three fragments were selected to probe into the Chinese experience of living in a Western world, the self-selected fragment was intended as a means of foregrounding any theme the informants might find relevant. The focus group methodology was used to explore possible themes that transpired from the interviews, while particular attention was paid to the social dimensions of the Chinese masculinity construction through martial arts films. Pre-existing groups, rather than purpose-constructed groups, were deployed as this approach is believed to be effective in tapping into group life and understanding group meanings, processes, and norms as in their everyday group practices. Altogether five

group discussions were held, although one informant declined because he was too busy. It is noteworthy that none of the informants invited White friends to join, while the only two non-Chinese group members, participating in two groups, are of Moroccan and Surinamese origin respectively. Furthermore, none of the informants invited female friends to join in the group discussions. Dutch and Chinese were used in the interviews and group discussions, depending entirely on the choice of the informants. All the exchanges were recorded, transcribed verbatim in, and, whenever necessary, translated into, Dutch.<sup>41</sup> The transcripts were subsequently coded and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis program MaxQDA, which is particularly helpful in organizing, evaluating, and interpreting qualitative data in a more systematic manner.

Third, the author joined two martial arts classes in two Dutch cities, run respectively by a Dutch man with an Italian background and a Chinese man who migrated from Nanjing some 20 years ago. Insights gained from such an exercise of participant observation thickened the analyses carried out on data collected by the first and second methods already described. Guided by objectives of triangulation, multiple methods of data collection were employed for this research to “modify the weaknesses of each individual method and thus greatly enhance the quality and value of interpretative research projects.”<sup>42</sup> However, given the essentially random nature of informant recruitment, group formation, and participant observation, any findings from the analyses throw light on the everyday life experience of the Chinese diaspora in the Netherlands, without claiming to be representative or conclusive.

## Body and movement

As pointed out by researchers in Western masculinity, central variants of such masculinity are centered on pub, sport, and beach cultures.<sup>43</sup> The Dutch context shares the first two named cultures and would arguably include a DIY culture, all of which constitute a cultural context where, similar to other Western societies, physical prowess is celebrated as the quintessential masculinity and a “real man” should have a body big, strong, and muscular enough to consume alcohol, build houses, and excel in sports. Chinese men are seldom seen in Dutch drinking venues, sports clubs, or DIY shops. Physical absence, however, does not imply cultural immunity. That Chinese men do not partake in such Dutch male cultures does not mean they do not subscribe to the hegemonic versions of such masculinities. Male informants in this

research generally take the body as a significant marker of their experience and representation in the Dutch society, commenting on the smaller, shorter, and more slender build of Chinese male bodies in negative terms—either they admit such a physique is inferior or they know they would be considered inferior in the Dutch society. Very often they feel intimidated and “susceptible to being bullied,”<sup>44</sup> as a respondent put it. Some of the male informants admitted being bullied, as in the following:

I was really small. I was the smallest of the class. I must admit I am still not really big. It is such an intimidating feeling, right? Because, well, all my classmates were bigger than me. And there was a group of classmates who bullied me, I would say, because I was Chinese. But I have learned to live with it.

In addition to specific bullying incidents, male informants generally recounted during their interviews how their bodily experiences and perceptions affect the way they are treated in the Dutch society. A respondent recalled playing football with his Dutch classmates when he was young:

We Chinese would very seldom play up front or as forwards. Usually we would stand at the back, in a corner. I was simply passing the ball to my fellow players. I was not as big as the others. I didn't have as much strength as the others. My condition was not as good as the others. That's why the Chinese always got the minor role:

And sometimes their smaller bodies would be associated with weaker personalities. The Chinese men I talked to tended to conflate the negative perceptions of their bodies with the stereotypical gaze the Dutch society casts on them, compelling them to feel wanting. Kim Ho, the initiator of the film *Fighting Fish*, also a professional actor, complained how difficult it is for him to get a serious role:

Well they think Chinese are always quiet, they never get angry, they are always friendly and they are always busy with their own things, their own culture and they never venture out of their culture. The image they have is often, yes, very stereotypical, also a bit insulting. You know, the take-away Chinese or people who work in a Chinese grocery store.... [In the television drama I am auditioning for] I will play a criminal. That is fun, you know what? At least that is more interesting than playing again someone working in a grocery store or take-away restaurant.

Although relatively free from the burden of a smaller physique, female informants, like their male counterparts, seem to have internalized the hegemonic demands of White masculinity, as illustrated by the following comments:

Chinese men are small.... That is always the case. My father is incidentally somewhat taller. But if you look around.... Here in the Netherlands all the men are incredibly big, I am used to it ... Dutch men are 1.80, 1.85 meters tall.

.....

Like Tom Cruise, Keanu Reeves, they are simply more masculine than a lot of Chinese actors.

The following remark sounds like a typical articulation by Westerners on the difficulty in recognizing Chinese people: "I think they [Chinese men] look all the same." Talking about her perception of attractive men, a female respondent immediately said, "He must be a bit tall, indeed, well at least 1.80 perhaps."

Such marginalization is hardly surprising given the context of living in a White-dominated society, where Chinese men are not only physically smaller, but also represented as less masculine because of their more slender bodies.<sup>45</sup> While dominated by the physical and perceived superiority of fellow White Dutch men, the male informants of this study, however, seem to be articulating and constructing a different variant of physical masculinity when they talk about martial arts films: agility and swiftness. In particular, male viewers tend to shift from the body itself to how the martial arts hero uses his body. In fact, they would often claim that the muscular, big bodies of Western men actually put Westerners in a disadvantageous position as far as martial arts (films) are concerned. A male respondent, when comparing Bruce Lee with his Western opponents, said, "Bruce Lee is more slender. Those Westerners, if they are muscular, appear as if they are really fat." By privileging agility and swiftness, as desirable qualities of martial arts and hence downplaying a bigger build and sheer strength, the informants are subverting the commonly held assumptions of what a male body should be and do. At the same time, their subversion, that smaller is better, precisely predicates on the (perceived) biases about their bodies—a mechanism not unlike what Viet Thanh Nguyen locates in his study on more recent Chinese American literature, which seeks to dismantle stereotypes of Chinese people precisely by predicating on the biases about their bodies. According to Nguyen, "In the Chinese American novel, Asian American masculinity Americanized itself in the most ironic fashion, by affirming patriarchy through violence that had previously been directed at Asian Americans *en masse*."<sup>46</sup> The tactic of subversion is therefore at the same time an act of reification. One respondent's remarks are typical:

I find [Western action stars] too big to watch. I believe people who are so tall and big are not suitable for martial arts.... When they fight, they make very clumsy movements. I

think the very fact that they have a large build makes their movements less beautiful to watch.... Those who are smaller are better because they are small and move very quickly. The movements are more beautiful to watch.

During focus group discussions on martial arts films, informants and the friends they invited generally employed the same tactic of subversion and subscribed to the superiority of smaller Chinese bodies in terms of agility and swiftness. Those groups which consisted entirely of Chinese members tended to establish quickly their group norms on what a Chinese body can achieve in martial arts and reinforce their norms with further agreement and examples extracted from their viewing experience. They were also eager to use the social occasion to articulate the superiority of Chinese fighting bodies over the Western ones, sometimes to the extent of ridiculing the latter, achieving an act of reversed racism. For instance, while talking about *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, a group member made a comment that the male protagonist looks like a man, which sparked off the following conversation in focus group two:

- R1: I think Chinese men are generally more feminine than Western men. Men in the West are real men. Simply—how do you call that?
- R2: Tough hairy blokes.  
(Everybody laughs.)
- R1: Yes, just like the hairy Neanderthal men, let's say. And the women in the West are also often men, you know.  
(Everybody laughs.)

Such internalization of Chinese men as being more feminine underlines the power of hegemonic masculinity as well as of the emasculinizing construction of Chinese men in a Western context. At the same time, it is remarkable how they are discursively turning this disempowering perception into ridicule, by pinpointing and twisting hirsuteness—conventionally considered to be a feature of Western men and masculinity—into something inferior and primitive. Furthermore, while Chinese men would be perceived to be more feminine under the Western gaze, their discussion also demonstrates how Chinese men reverse the racist fortunes, rather obliquely, by masculinizing Western women.

If all-Chinese groups are eager not only to establish their norms but also to reinforce their agreement on the superiority of Chinese male bodies, discussions by groups which included non-Chinese members often led to an interrogation of norms, particularly between Chinese and non-Chinese group

members. The following discussion in focus group three on martial arts and Chinese bodies is exemplary:

- R1: Martial arts is more designed for Chinese. You have to have that kind of body. Others, like non-Chinese, can do it and they may reach a very high technical level through hard training. But they don't have the content. That's what the Chinese ...
- R2: What sort of content then?
- R1: Simply what martial arts means. There is a difference between doing the technique and being the technique, let's say [...]
- R2: But then it is not about the body, right? That your body can do it better? I can't imagine that a non-Chinese is too stupid to master the content.
- R1: No, no, it becomes complicated—just imagine a Chinese and a non-Chinese doing martial arts. They are both technically good, but the Chinese would do it more beautifully.
- R2: OK, but that is not the content.
- R1: If you go further, if you really look at the very very high level.
- R3: I think it's got to do with the muscles. These other people have simply other kinds of muscles.

As in the rest of the discussion, respondent R2, a young man with a Moroccan background, would often assume a challenging, almost provocative role, responding to what his group members would call “Chinese” with questions and follow-up questions and coproducing a context where they would assume an explanatory, if not defensive, role. Such a contestation of cultural positions is indicative of how obliged the Chinese may feel to defend or explain themselves in the larger social context.

It is also of interest to note how the two martial arts classes I observed seem to attract male pupils who do not have the taller, bigger body build, usually associated with Dutch White men. In the martial arts school run by the Chinese master, there were, in addition to a large number of Chinese pupils, many others from visibly non-White backgrounds and of smaller build, definitely not “the unblushing male” in the Dutch society, while the few White men in those classes were also far from muscular or macho-looking. Similarly, although the other martial arts school is more oriented to a White clientele, the White male pupils appeared to be what would generally be described as “nerdy” or skinny. “Some macho guys would come here and try out. But after a few lessons, they would disappear,” a veteran White martial arts pupil, himself tall but slenderly built, told me. It seems that the subverted hierarchy of the normative masculine body, that smaller is better, that agility and swiftness are far more essential than a bigger stature and

sheer strength, is forming its boundaries of exclusion and inclusion in the martial arts space.

### **Sex, romance, and control**

Besides physical prowess, a closely connected component of dominant Western masculinities is sexual conquest.<sup>47</sup> Under this paradigm, Chinese men living in Western societies would often be perceived as sexless or effeminate.<sup>48</sup> In an article written in Dutch and published in a Dutch–Chinese bilingual newspaper, Patrick Chan invited “White women” readers to think of first, two white men they find very attractive; second, two dark-skinned men they find very attractive; and finally two very attractive Chinese. “The answer to the last question is very difficult, isn’t it?” asked Chan rhetorically.<sup>49</sup> While none of the female informants offers any remarks on the sexual and romantic aspects of Chinese men, one could assume either that they do not associate Chinese men with sexual or romantic activities, or they do not consider them significant markers of Chinese masculinities. Rather tellingly, a female respondent commented on the subplot of *Fighting Fish*, which involves a romantic affair between a Chinese man and a blonde Dutch woman, with the following observation: “Usually it’s the other way round, that is Chinese girls with Dutch boyfriends.” Among male informants, particularly those who have watched *Fighting Fish*, there are clear articulations that underline the marginalization of Chinese men in terms of erotic and romantic desirability in the Western context. For instance,

[*Fighting Fish*] is interesting because it shows something you don’t expect, right? A Chinese man and a blonde woman getting involved. You don’t see that in any other films, right? You often see a White guy pairing up with, eh, an Asian woman, but not the other way round.

An equally surprised but less enthusiastic comment was made by another respondent:

In that film there is a romance between a Chinese man and a Dutch woman. I think the audience won’t believe that the two match each other. Their taste is somewhat more Western.

When imagining the possibility of a Dutch television series featuring a Chinese man, a male respondent voiced a similar doubt over Chinese men’s desirability in the Dutch society:

I don't think they would do that. I don't think the image is right. A group of Western girls will never gather around a Chinese man. That is impossible.

According to Kim Ho, the scriptwriter of *Fighting Fish*, the inclusion of a romantic subplot between a Chinese man and a Dutch woman was deliberate. His explanation, however, puts the burden more on Chinese than on Dutch culture:

Well, when I was growing up, you know, in those days this kind of thing, let's say, was less accepted in the Chinese culture. It was some time ago, though. I know it's more accepted now. But I grew up in a time when it was less accepted. I found it interesting for the story.

Despite Kim Ho's intentions, this particular interracial romance remains highly contrived, unrealistic, if not downright ridiculous in the eyes of most of the informants. In fact, while watching the fragment about the first encounter between the male and female protagonists, all the focus groups break up in laughter. The subsequent discussions generally yielded similar disbelief as voiced by the individual informants. Furthermore, driven by the group dynamic, informants of the all-Chinese groups tended to become increasingly cynical and harsh regarding the romantic subplot, as if they were trying to outdo one another in terms of criticism. All the discussions invoked the physical aspect to explain why the romance failed to convince. The following is an extract from a discussion in focus group five:

- R1: No, no ... Chantal Jansen [the female protagonist] looks like a girl who would fall for smart guys with lots of muscles.
- R2: Someone like her elder brother [in the film].
- R1: Yes, she looks like that, she looks like she wants to have that kind of boyfriend. And not someone who looks just a bit tough and also small.... Yeah, in the film she looks like: I am not looking for such boys, I am looking for someone who is muscular, taller than me.
- R2: Two heads taller.
- R1: Well, not two heads, but just like her brother, you know. Someone like that. She has that kind of look. You can see from the way she dresses. She really doesn't look like she would go for someone who is a bit Asian. You can see from her style of dressing what kind of men she would go for.
- R3: Perhaps because she is a lot bigger.

As mentioned earlier, the groups which included non-Chinese members tended to have a greater contestation of views, which compelled the Chinese informants to explain, defend, and articulate their experience of manhood in the Dutch



society more explicitly. In any case, it is evident that the Chinese men here generally reiterated their lack of desirability in the host society. For instance, focus group three discussed the romantic subplot of *Fighting Fish* as follows:

- R1: I have the feeling that Chinese men wouldn't date a Dutch woman that easily. I think most Chinese men think they are not good enough. They regard themselves somewhat inferior to a Dutch man. In general, that is.
- R2: Is it really true?
- R1: Yes, I think so. They still feel like a foreigner, not Dutch enough. Perhaps not so conscious, but still they wouldn't, I think, go for a Dutch woman that quickly.
- R2: So what he does is actually not ...
- R1: Yes, I think so.
- R3: I think the only reason why that girl likes him is that he has saved her life [in the film], not because he looks good. I have such a feeling that [I don't attract Dutch women] not because I look bad, but because I am Chinese. Dutch people, not necessarily White people—Dutch people are not interested in Chinese people. When I was in France, I noticed the difference. My appeal was much better there. The barrier was smaller.
- R2: I think it depends on both sides.... There are enough Dutch people who go out with Moroccans and enough Dutch people who go out with Chinese. So, to me, it really depends on both sides.
- R3: Look, blacks and Moroccans, they are still better than Chinese. Chinese have less masculinity. And these women desire masculinity.

If the interracial romance in *Fighting Fish* foregrounds the Chinese men's experience of being (perceived as) less masculine and less desirable, martial arts films provide them with raw materials to negotiate with the hegemonic ideals and subvert the hierarchy to their empowerment. Referring to martial arts films, male informants of this study tended to admire the hero for acts that are not only nonsexual or nonromantic, but acts that possibly require the hero to be (come) nonsexual and nonromantic. Some of the qualities cited are fighting for one's brothers and country. Above all, the most celebrated quality, however, is that he is in control. The following observation is telling:

In the West, a hero can do anything he wants. He can simply kill people. Eastern films are mostly not like that. Bruce Lee, Jet Li, and Jackie Chan, they never really kiss a girl or have sex in their films.... In those Western films, you see Jean Claude van Damme, and he has sex with women in every film. That is not allowed in Eastern martial arts.

Similarly, focus groups, whether all-Chinese or not, agree favorably on the element of control in martial arts heroes. Group five's discussion on a fragment from *Fearless* is illustrative:

- R1: What I want to say is that fragment shows us that Chinese martial arts are not only with hands, but also with weapons. It's very broad.
- R2: Yes, you must master everything before you become a master.... Weapons, feet, and more.
- R3: You see a lot here. You see principles. You must make use of your weaknesses. And that's why I find the director very good. In such a scene, I see his spear and I see that his spear is longer than mine, how am I supposed to beat him?
- R2: In the end it doesn't really matter any more.
- R3: Yes, so first he stands closer and then pulls his spear. And he's doing the same with the other opponents.
- R2: The entire fight is under his control. With all parties.
- R1: And he is not making only bodily movements, but also mental. He has to think about what the best approach is.
- R3: He has his emotions under control, but his opponents haven't.

### Hard work, perseverance, and restraint

Michael Kimmel puts forward the hegemonic definition of manhood as “a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power.”<sup>50</sup> The male informants of this study, however, generally choose to compliment the martial arts heroes precisely for not using the power they are supposed to possess. Notions of control and discipline appear to be significant markers of what a Chinese man is or should be. Instead of indulging in himself, body, or mind, he should pride himself in hard work, perseverance, and restraint. The informants of this research, both male and female, invariably referred to an important control martial arts heroes have over their bodies, namely they work hard to refine their fighting prowess and techniques. The following comments, made by three respondents, explain in a typical manner why they find the fighting scenes in Chinese martial arts films so special:

The way of fighting is very refreshing. The filming is very difficult and for every fighting scene they have to create something new ... [the fighting scenes] are very intense, very realistic, and they do their best to make it good.... Of course I find [the male characters] very cool. They give everything to make it good. Actors in Europe won't easily do something like that.

.....

[The Western action heroes] always have a gun. They always use weapons in fighting scenes. That is the difference. When the bullets are finished, then they will use their hands.

.....

Jackie Chan has developed his own style because of the stunts he does. Isn't that incredible? He has broken all the bones in his body to be able to do certain stunts. I find that very interesting.

This notion of working hard with one's body is often conflated with the notion of authenticity, namely that the Chinese martial arts stars have refined their fighting skills and that they do their own stunts. For instance, a female informant observed:

[Jet Li] always makes very beautiful fighting scenes because he knows that he can do it. He does not use wires or whatever. Everything he does is real.

The meaning respondents attach to the fighting men's exercise of control and discipline with regard to their body and bodily impulses sometimes crosses over to their own practices, by learning martial arts themselves. Among the female informants, half of them professed to have training experience, while all but one of the male informants have been pupils of martial arts at least at some point of their lives. Kim Ho, like most other informants, alluding to a wish to be able to do the same, started learning martial arts after watching many films:

So they can do all these different things in the air and you think "Wow!," you know, and you think "I also want to do that!" I think that's how it started.

Very often, the male informants would point to the hard work, the perseverance it requires during the training:

I didn't continue training for too long. Perhaps I didn't have much perseverance.... When I was taking martial arts lessons, it was obviously much more difficult than I thought. We had to repeat every movement, time after time.... Maybe I didn't have the necessary drive.

During one of the martial arts classes I attended, the Dutch-Italian master gathered his pupils around him to give them a short lecture on "concentration" and "hard work." "Imagine how easily one can spend five to six hours a day in front of a computer. If you spend the same amount of time on practicing martial arts, you would soon become a master yourself," he said. In the same vein, the other martial arts class devoted half of its two hours on practicing basic movements. A Chinese pupil, also a member of the Dutch national martial arts team, told me that it took an American professor one full year to

command those movements. In addition to the need to work hard, some of the male informants, particularly those who have been training for some length of time, also stressed the importance of restraint. A respondent summarized the wisdom of martial arts in one sentence, “I fight until I have learned how I should fight.”

Their admiration of hard work, perseverance, and restraint is occasionally attributed to their Chinese background (“something Chinese,” “we are always hardworking”), similar to the Chinese men in Hibbins’s Australian study<sup>51</sup> who also explained the importance they attach to hard work and education in terms of Chineseness. In addition to such apparently nonreflexive acts of essentializing Chineseness, some of the informants would also frame it in more fashionable terminology in contemporary Western popular culture: earning “respect.” In short, when recounting their experience with martial arts heroes and training, the male informants of this study tended to agree that the ability to exercise control over one’s body and bodily impulses is a desirable quality of being a man. Inadvertently, they are, if only momentarily, questioning the bigger, taller Western male bodies, which are considered to be more capable in fulfilling certain bodily impulses, such as drinking and sex. More importantly, they are constructing a set of masculine ideals quite distinct from what discourses of hegemonic masculinity would privilege, namely a celebration of sheer bodily strength and the expression of bodily impulses.

### **Who are the Chinese men?**

In their excellent introduction to the studies on (Chinese) femininities and (Chinese) masculinities, Brownell and Wasserstrom note the importance of research that shows “how men can also be marginalized, victimized, and oppressed by hierarchical gender systems that legitimate power only in certain categories of men.”<sup>52</sup> The findings of this research attest to the marginalization and subordination of diasporic Chinese men by the two dominant and interlocking discourses in the West, namely that only certain White male characteristics would be considered masculine, that certain Chinese male characteristics would be considered neutered or even effeminate. On the one hand, the experience reported in this study generally agrees with the experience of other Chinese men negotiating with hegemonic masculinities in other Western societies.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, the male informants of this study are never entirely marginalized, victimized, and oppressed; they are able to construct alternative, different versions of masculinities, by privileging what they can do with their “small bodies,” by downplaying the sexual and romantic dimensions

of masculinity, and by emphasizing the importance of control and discipline. By and large, they are not confined by the false choice imposed on them by hegemonic masculinity: either they try to attain the dominant White versions of masculinity or accept the fact that they are not really men.<sup>54</sup> Rather, these Chinese men demonstrate a complex process whereby their bodies, or the perception of which, are constituted by dominant discourses and yet provide the very markers to distinguish their own versions of masculinity.

Indeed, the study testifies to the Dutch–Chinese men’s resistance to modeling their manhood after the dominant versions. However, they are garnering creative resources not necessarily by going into “indigenous” sources of historical or literary Chinese culture, as suggested by theorists on Chinese masculinity such as Louie or Song cited earlier. Instead, contemporary transnational popular culture, in this case Chinese martial arts films, opens up possibilities for them to articulate and construct different masculine ideals, which predicate and contest on the bodily, quite apart from the *wen–wu* dyad or the *caizi* paradigm. I would also like to take it further by arguing that the experience of these diasporic men is not only illustrative of Chinese men’s experience in the West, but also indispensable in understanding Chinese masculinity at least in two ways.

First of all, by including the diasporic constructions of masculinity, our understanding of Chinese masculinity will be more challenged, destabilized, and disengaged from the sinocentric shackles that define what Chinese masculinity is, or at least where it should be studied. In other words, the experience of diasporic Chinese has the potential to trouble any monolithic conceptualization of Chinese masculinity, to multiply it into Chinese masculinities, to make any claim of “a true Chinese man” more problematic. If one of the reminders from current theories on masculinity is that one should be sensitive to structures that may privilege certain categories of men, theorization that conflates Chinese masculinity with “indigenous” sources is to privilege Chinese men in the cultural center over Chinese men on the cultural margins, or, in other words, to privilege a certain conceptualization of Chinese masculinity into another form of hegemonic masculinity among the Chinese themselves.

Second, in this globalizing era where Chinese in China itself are exposed to greater flows of Western cultural products, Chinese men there are subjected increasingly to struggles with Western hegemonic masculinity, not unlike those experienced by fellow Chinese in diaspora. Joining current debates on the so-called “crisis of Chinese men” in mainland Chinese intellectual circles, Zhongtian Yi calls for the construction of “a real man ‘with Chinese charac-

teristics” to counter popular worship of “foreign stars,”<sup>55</sup> hinting therefore at confrontation with hegemonic masculinity propagated by global popular culture. Responding to the search term “the most masculine men” (最有男人味的男人), the internet shows, for instance, China-based sites reporting, with images, on “the world’s 10 most masculine men,” among whom two are dark-skinned, while the rest are White. To which an anonymous person reported in Chinese, “Is there really no masculine Chinese man?”<sup>56</sup> A Chinese music critic, echoing the feminizing discourse over Chinese men in the West, hailed the music by a popular Chinese singer as “the proof of a man’s erection” against numerous effeminate singers of the current generation.<sup>57</sup>

In this sense, the diasporic experience of manhood is not only challenging sinocentric theorizations of Chinese masculinity; it may well be more central to our understanding of how Chinese men in China feel about themselves as men. The diasporic men’s negotiation about their body perceived too small, their desirability being questioned, their manhood under duress, and their use of popular culture to subvert the hegemonic masculine ideals and the orientaling gaze, as transpired in this study, may be part and parcel of the everyday experience of many Chinese men not living in the West. I would therefore urge for more studies that would take popular culture and its reception as a prime site to understand Chinese men and their masculinity, whether in China or elsewhere. While historical and literary texts are valuable sources to configure a possible historical and cultural context, popular culture should unpack, to repeat Hall’s words, the “symbolic toolbox” and yield insights into Chinese men’s experience of themselves in the contemporary, globalizing world. To summarize, the diasporic narrative contests not only what “masculinity” is about in theories of Chinese masculinity, but also the epithet “Chinese” which tends to be defined geographically by the mainland and culturally by historical, literary texts in current theorizations.

Before concluding, it must be pointed out that amidst all the negotiation and construction of alternative masculinities, the tendency to essentialize Chinese culture and to reverse the racism diasporic Chinese men in the Netherlands experience vis-a-vis Dutch White men and women is palpable. While none of the informants reflect on their own (discursive) racism, there are, however, articulations that their versions of Chinese masculinity may in turn become hegemonic among the Chinese. A number of informants, both male and female, have expressed their anxiety that Chinese men will always be seen as “practicing martial arts,” “hardworking,” and “restrained,” some

of the markers that precisely help them usurp, however fleetingly, the symbolic order privileging White males. In that sense, it is important to conclude this article with two interconnected remarks. First, the experience drawn from individual informants to shed light on their collective identity as Chinese men living in the Dutch context should never become a homogenizing, blanket understanding of all diasporic Chinese men. Second, as urged by Patton, it is imperative to view Chinese masculinities indeed “as a set of relationships ... rather than as a collection of ‘interior,’ self-defining equalities.”<sup>58</sup>

## Note

The author would like to thank the editor and anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, as well as the David C. Lam Institute for East–West Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University, for supporting this research project.

<sup>1</sup> Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, “Introduction: Theorizing Femininities and Masculinities,” in *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities*, ed. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 1–42.

<sup>2</sup> Kam Louie, *Theorizing Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Rey Chow, “Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem,” in *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field*, ed. Rey Chow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 1–25; Harriet Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China: Discourses of Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997); and Gail Hershatter, *Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee, “Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity,” *Theory and Society* 14, no. 5 (1985): 551–604.

<sup>5</sup> Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne, eds, *Dislocating Masculinities: Comparative Ethnographies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Kam Louie, “Chinese, Japanese and Global Masculine Identities,” in *Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan*, ed. Kam Louie and Morris Low (Oxon and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 1–15.

<sup>7</sup> Murray J. N. Drummonds, “Asian Gay Men’s Bodies,” *The Journal of Men’s Studies* 13, no. 3 (2005): 291–300.

<sup>8</sup> Wei-wei Da, “A Regional Tradition of Gender Equity: Shanghai Men in Sydney, Australia,” *The Journal of Men’s Studies* 12, no. 2 (2004): 133–49.

<sup>9</sup> It should be added that Asian masculinities are not the only underrepresented areas in men’s studies. Despite its ambitious title, *Cultures of Masculinity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006) by Tim Edwards is only concerned with masculinities in English-speaking cultures.

<sup>10</sup> Martin W. Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006); Louie, *Theorizing Chinese Masculinity*; Geng Song, *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University

Press, 2004). For a comprehensive overview of historical and literary studies on Chinese masculinity, see Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities*.

<sup>11</sup> Kam Louie and Louise Edwards, “Chinese Masculinity: Theorizing *Wen* and *Wu*,” *East Asian History*, no. 8 (1994): 135.

<sup>12</sup> Louie, *Theorizing Chinese Masculinity*; Song, *The Fragile Scholar*.

<sup>13</sup> Song, *The Fragile Scholar*, 8–9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Louie, *Theorizing Chinese Masculinity*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); Chow, “Introduction”; Allen Chun, “Fuck Chineseness: On the Ambiguities of Ethnicity as Culture as Identity,” *boundary 2* 23, no. 2 (1996): 111–38; Jeroen de Kloet, “Crossing the Threshold: Chinese Cinema Studies in the Twenty-first Century,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 1, no. 1 (2007): 63–9.

<sup>17</sup> Simon Patton, “Desire and Masculinity at the Margins in Gu Cheng’s *Ying’er*,” in *Asian Masculinities*, 192.

<sup>18</sup> Lo Kwai-Cheung, review of *Theorizing Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*, by Kam Louie, in *Philosophy East & West* 56, no. 3 (2006): 497.

<sup>19</sup> Robert W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> Ervin Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963).

<sup>21</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, “Masculinities as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity,” in *Theorizing Masculinities*, ed. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 124–5.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, eds, *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1975); King-kok Cheung, “Of Men and Women: Reconstructing Chinese American Masculinity,” in *Other Sisterhoods: Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color*, ed. Sandra K. Stanley (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 173–99; David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2001); Richard Fung, “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” in *Q & A: Queer in Asian America*, ed. David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998), 115–34; Morris Low, “Conclusion,” in *Asian Masculinities*, 244–7; Louie, “Chinese, Japanese and Global Masculine Identities”; and Allen Luke, “Representing and Reconstructing Asian Masculinities: This Is Not a Movie Review,” *Social Alternatives* 16, no. 3 (1997): 32–4.

<sup>23</sup> Fung, “Looking for My Penis,” 171.

<sup>24</sup> Luke, “Representing and Reconstructing Asian Masculinities,” 32.

<sup>25</sup> See Anthony S. Chen, “Lives at the Center of the Periphery, Lives at the Periphery of the Center: Chinese American Masculinities and Bargaining with Hegemony,” *Gender and Society* 13, no. 5 (1999): 584–607; Cliff Cheng, “On the Functionality of Marginalized Masculinities and Femininities: An Ethnography on Organizational Power and Gender Performance,” *The Journal of Men’s Studies* 7, no. 3 (1999): 415–30; Cliff Cheng, “Marginalized Masculinities and Hegemonic Masculinity: An Introduction,” *The Journal of Men’s Studies* 7, no. 3 (1999): 295–315; Drummonds, “Asian Gay Men’s Bodies”; Ray Hibbins, “Male Gender Identities among Chinese Male Migrants,” in *Asian Masculinities*, 197–219; David Ip, “Reluctant Entrepreneurs: Professionally Qualified Asian Migrants in Small Business,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Review* 2 (1993): 57–74; and Tseen Khoo,



“Angry Yellow Men’: Cultural Space for Diasporic Chinese Masculinities,” in *Asian Masculinities*, 220–43.

<sup>26</sup> Drummonds, “Asian Gay Men’s Bodies,” 299.

<sup>27</sup> Eng, *Racial Castration*, 2 (italics in the original).

<sup>28</sup> Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> Khoo, “Angry Yellow Men.” It is of interest to note the increasing popularity of Asian cinema in the West, particularly “masculine” genre films—gangster, horror, thriller—from Japan and South Korea. How these films impact on the construction of Asian masculinities among both Western and diasporic audiences may provide a different or comparative model, but for the time being it is beyond the scope of the current project. See, for instance, Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> For this investigation, I have chosen to mobilize a somewhat loose and therefore inclusive term “martial arts film” (*wudapiao*). While distinctions could have been made between, for instance, “Kung Fu” films (fighting with fists and legs, normally situated in more modern and realistic contexts) and films involving fighting with swords (*wuxia*; normally situated in the fictional world of *jianghu*—literally “river-lake,” which is generally understood as a subcommunity and an alternative universe coexisting with the actual historical one), a more generic term should provide the informants more space to articulate what they experience in what they themselves define as a martial arts film.

<sup>31</sup> *Fighting Fish* was directed by Jamel Aattache, who wrote the script together with the project initiator Kim Ho Kim. Kim and Aattache were school mates in Rotterdam and shared a common interest in film-making. Before *Fighting Fish*, they had already collaborated in several short film projects. While this investigation is primarily concerned with martial arts films and Chinese youth, it is worth pointing out possible connections between the genre and youths of other ethnic minority backgrounds. The Dutch-born Aattache, for instance, has an Algerian background and the other two non-Chinese friends, as observed later in the article, who were invited to join the focus groups come from a Moroccan and Surinamese background respectively.

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, Chris Berry, *Stellar Transit: Bruce Lee’s Body or Chinese Masculinity in a Transnational Frame* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006); Stephen Chan, “The Fighting Condition in Hong Kong Cinema: Local Icons and Cultural Antidotes for the Global Popular,” in *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, ed. Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li, and Stephen Chan (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 63–79; David Desser, “Making Movies Male: Zhang Che and the Shaw Brothers Martial Arts Movies, 1965–1975,” in *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema*, ed. Laikwan Pang and Day Wong (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 17–34; Agnes S. Ku, “Masculinities in Self-Invention: Critics’ Discourses on Kung Fu-Action Movies and Comedies,” in *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema*, 221–37; Kwai-cheung Lo, *Chinese Face/Off: The Transnational Popular Culture of Hong Kong* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005); and Meaghan Morris, “Introduction: Hong Kong Connections,” in *Hong Kong Connections*, 1–18.

<sup>33</sup> See Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities*; Leon Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters: From Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003); Sheng-mei Ma, “Kung Fu Films in Diaspora: Death of the Bamboo Hero,” in *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema*, 102–18.

<sup>34</sup> Laikwan Pang, “Introduction: The Diversity of Masculinities in Hong Kong Cinema,” in *Masculinities and Hong Kong Cinema*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Gilroy, “‘It Ain’t Where You’re From, It’s Where You’re At ...’: The Dialectics of Diasporic Identification,” *Third Text*, no. 13 (Winter 1990/1): 3–16.

<sup>36</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 395 (italics in the original).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

<sup>38</sup> Eng, *Racial Castration*.

<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, Robert W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1987); Don Edgar, *Men, Mateship, Marriage: Exploring Macho Myths and the Way Forward* (Sydney: Harper Row Publishers, 1997); and Luke, “Representing and Reconstructing Asian Masculinities.”

<sup>40</sup> In this connection, I also want to point out briefly two important possibilities of inquiry on Chinese masculinity, which I have to leave out given the scope of the current study. First, this article does not investigate the experience of Chinese men vis-a-vis the Chinese community or other Chinese men; its primary concern stays with their experience in and with Western society. Second, this study does not attempt to locate and include homosexual Chinese men as a separate analytical category, although some of its findings may apply to both homosexual and heterosexual Chinese men. Considering that gay identifications may have a different impact on how Chinese men live their lives in a Western context, I would suggest that any inquiry on homosexual Chinese men and their experience with hegemonic masculinities deserves a study of its own.

<sup>41</sup> At the beginning of every interview and discussion group, informants were asked explicitly to use Dutch or Chinese whenever they wanted. In the end, 13 of the interviews and four of the discussions were conducted either entirely or predominantly in Dutch, while the rest were entirely or predominantly in Chinese. Most of the Chinese respondents used Cantonese, supplemented at times by Mandarin. Although some informants did claim better fluency in other regional variants of Chinese, my own linguistic capability limited them to Cantonese and Mandarin.

<sup>42</sup> Liesbet van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies* (London: Sage, 1994), 139.

<sup>43</sup> Connell, *Gender and Power*; Edgar, *Men, Mateship, Marriage*; and Luke, “Representing and Reconstructing Asian Masculinities.”

<sup>44</sup> All the quotations are translated by the author from transcripts in Dutch.

<sup>45</sup> See Cheng, “On the Functionality of Marginalized Masculinities and Femininities”; Cheng, “Marginalized Masculinities and Hegemonic Masculinity”; and Luke, “Representing and Reconstructing Asian Masculinities.”

<sup>46</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen, “The Remasculinization of Chinese America: Race, Violence, and the Novel,” *American Literary History* 12, nos. 1 & 2 (2000), 134.

<sup>47</sup> Hibbins, “Male Gender Identities among Chinese Male Migrants.”

<sup>48</sup> Chin et al. *Aiiieeeee!*; Cheung, “Of Men and Women”; Eng, *Racial Castration*; Fung, “Looking for My Penis”; Low, “Conclusion”; Louie, “Chinese, Japanese and Global Masculine Identities”; and Luke, “Representing and Reconstructing Asian Masculinities.”

<sup>49</sup> Patrick Chan, “De Spiegel van de Samenleving” (The mirror of society), *Huaqiao Xintiandi* (Asian Times), 5 October 2006. Original Dutch-language text translated by the author.

<sup>50</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

<sup>51</sup> Hibbins, “Male Gender Identities among Chinese Male Migrants.”

<sup>52</sup> Brownell and Wasserstrom, “Introduction,” 10.

<sup>53</sup> See Chen, “Lives at the Center of the Periphery”; Cheng, “On the Functionality of Marginalized Masculinities and Femininities”; Cheng, “Marginalized Masculinities and

Hegemonic Masculinity”; Fung, “Looking for My Penis”; and Hibbins, “Male Gender Identities among Chinese Male Migrants”.

<sup>54</sup> Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities*; Louie, “Chinese, Japanese and Global Masculine Identities.”

<sup>55</sup> Yi Zhongtian, *Zhongguo de nanren he nüren* (China’s men and women) (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2007), 38. All the Chinese texts quoted in this article are the author’s translation.

<sup>56</sup> “Quanqiu zuiyou nanrenweide nanren TOP10” (The world’s most masculine men TOP 10), <<http://comment4.news.sina.com.cn/comment/skin/default.html?channel=nx&newsid=133-3-39905&style=0>>, accessed 21 November 2007.

<sup>57</sup> “Yang Kun yi ‘Mumaren’ zhengming yige nanrende boqi” (Yang Kun’s “Horseman”: proof of a man’s erection), <<http://fashion.big5.enorth.com.cn/system/2007/09/25/002045579.shtml>>, accessed 18 January 2008.

<sup>58</sup> Patton, “Desire and Masculinity at the Margins,” 192.

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