



Geng Song and Derek Hird

## *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China*

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reviewed by [Andrew Lea](#)

1. The story of contemporary Chinese culture is, to a large degree, a story of amalgamation: cultural identities in China form in relation to a number of competing discourses and traditions—from consumerism and nationalism, to Maoism and Confucianism. In their compelling work *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China*, Geng Song and Derek Hird carefully examine the production and performance of masculinities through the prism of these dynamic social, cultural, and economic traditions.
2. That Song and Hird refer in the book's title to 'masculinities' as opposed to a singular 'masculinity' is demonstrative of their most central points. To understand men and manhood in modern China, Song and Hird contend, requires that one move beyond a restricted focus on a monolithic Chinese masculinity and towards an acknowledgement of the pluralities of masculinities: 'notions and practices of masculinities in contemporary China,' they write, 'are constituted through "assemblages" of masculinity, composed of transnationally circulating images and practices, and locally situated identities, practices, and locales' (pp. 6–7). These masculinities in China, however heterogeneous and distinctive, also interact in important ways—they are defined, described and performed in reference to one another. In this way, Song and Hird achieve in bringing light to the 'highly hybridized and diversified' nature of masculinities (p. 13).
3. Song and Hird unpack these masculinities at two predominant analytic sites: in the context of other identities like class and at the nexus of global and local forces. The authors underscore the importance of tangential identities and of local and global forces over six chapters. Chapter 1 explores representations of masculinity in Chinese television and emphasises the significance of nationalism, homosociality, and commercialisation in these representations. Moving from television to print, Chapter 2 focuses on depictions of masculinity as they appear in magazines. The authors demonstrate how masculinities tied to global notions of consumerism and masculinities tied to more local notions of 'Chineseness' merge and interact in these magazine depictions. Song and Hird delve into this transcultural circulation and hybridisation of masculinities even further in Chapter 3, which provides a reading of Chinese masculinities in cyberspace. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 depart from the preceding chapters in their methodological approaches, introducing ethnographic data as a way of understanding how real individuals engage with these discursive representations of masculinity. Specifically, these final chapters situate masculinities within three different locales—'at work,' 'at

leisure,' and 'at home'—and contribute insights into the complex processes by which discursive norms of masculinity are refracted through the realities of daily life.

4. While each chapter nominally centres on a discrete aspect of masculinity in China—whether in professional, recreational, or domestic contexts—Song and Hird are careful to point out the ways in which these seemingly discrete spheres in fact overlap and interrelate. In, for example, their chapter on masculinities in the recreational sphere, Song and Hird stress that leisure time cannot be cleanly delineated from professional interests. Nowhere is this integration more apparent than in Song and Hird's analysis of sex consumption in saunas and karaoke bars. In particular, Song and Hird show that while such leisure activities are 'ostensibly conducted for the purpose of enjoyment,' they also have 'the very serious purpose of building trusting business relationships between men through shared experiences of heterosexual flirting and sex' (p. 181). Clearly, although the authors rely on conventional boundaries in structuring their analysis, they also expose how permeable these boundaries can be.
5. As Song and Hird move among these different facets of masculinity, they simultaneously move among different methodological traditions: where the first three chapters offer critical readings into the representations and discourses of masculinity, the final three chapters are more ethnographic in character, based on interviews and engagements with actual men in contemporary China. In this structure lies one of the book's principal strengths. By considering media representations of masculinity in tandem with ethnographic fieldwork, Song and Hird not only sketch out the discursive depictions of masculinity, but also explore the ways in which these depictions unfold in the realities of everyday life.
6. Some might question whether Song and Hird's granular focus on particular case studies permits them to draw conclusions about contemporary China broadly. To fault the book, however, for its rich and grounded focus is to overlook its underlying argument. Indeed, among the book's most important contributions is the recognition that male-oriented identities and subjectivities are contingent, effervescent and entangled. Song and Hird, therefore, deviate from previous works of scholarship that consider masculinity along a single dimension in favour of a more synthetic approach: masculinities emerge not merely through discourse or through practice, but rather through their complex interaction. Song and Hird, then, attend to the connections between discourse and lived realities without ignoring the slippage that often occurs between the two. In other words, it is 'through the tension between discourse and everyday conditions' that masculine subjectivities are forged (p. 124).
7. As much as Song and Hird deal overtly with manhood, the authors demonstrate that masculinities cannot be fully captured if detached from considerations of women and femininities. As the authors note in the chapter on men in the workplace, 'men take on working identities...in distinction to women' (p. 165). Such observations speak to Song and Hird's insistence that masculinities cannot be studied or understood in isolation; their existence depends on their relationship to other socio-political forces and their positions within broader networks of meaning.
8. Impressive in its depth and complexity, this book stands as a critical entry point into studies of men's identities and practices in present-day China. In short, to write a compelling and coherent book on a topic as broad and diffuse as masculinity would alone be a notable achievement; to do so in a way that not only respects but embraces the contingencies, the multiplicity, and the heterogeneity inherent to this topic is more impressive still.

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