



Derek Hird and Geng Song (editors)

*The Cosmopolitan Dream:  
Transnational Chinese Masculinities in a  
Global Age*

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reviewed by [Horas T.H. Wong](#)

1. As a result of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) economic reform and 'opening up' of markets, Chinese people have become more mobile across national borders since the 1970s. As we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, the PRC has become one of the world's leading source countries of migrants. In the USA, for example, the number of immigrants from the PRC has increased seven-fold from around 300,000 in 1980 to two million in 2016.<sup>[1]</sup> In Australia, the PRC is the second-most reported country of birth among the overseas-born population, accounting for around 3 per cent of the nation's population in 2018.<sup>[2]</sup>
2. The increasing transnational mobility and global interactions of Chinese people have opened up new opportunities for men to explore and experiment with new forms of masculinities. However, few studies have examined contemporary Chinese masculinities in the context of globalisation and international migration. Classic research of Asian masculinities has largely been influenced by the work of Edward Said and other post-colonialist scholars and tends to focus on the dichotomy between the 'exotified Oriental' and the 'dominating West.' From the notorious Fu Man Chu of the yellow peril to the Kung Fu master Bruce Lee, and to the effeminate Chinese spy, Song Liling, from the play *M. Butterfly*, Chinese masculinities have often been understood in relation to the western notion of masculinity which glorifies physical strength and virility.
3. *The Cosmopolitan Dream* is a timely and important contribution in this regard. As the second book in Hong Kong University Press' Transnational Asian Masculinities book series, this volume broadens the scope offered by its predecessor, Kam Louie's edited *Changing Chinese Masculinities* (2016), by providing diverse perspectives on transnational Chinese masculinities across different nation states. The volume gathers a good collection of humanities and social sciences articles written by renowned scholars and early career researchers in the field. Echoing the burgeoning literature on contemporary transnational sexualities, a clear thematic message emerges from *The Cosmopolitan Dream*: Chinese masculinities are never fixed but deeply transgressive of existing national borders. The meanings of being a man in post-Mao China are constructed, not only in relation to the *wen-wu* masculinity of traditional Confucian culture, but also by international politics, global capitalist markets and processes of globalisation and migration.
4. The volume opens with a very detailed introduction by the editors, followed by twelve individual chapters. The twelve chapters are organised into two parts. The six chapters in Part I, 'Representing

Chinese Men Transnationally,' focus on how Chinese masculinities are (re)imagined and represented in contemporary television dramas, films and fiction. Unlike traditional approaches to the study of Chinese masculinities, which tend to emphasise the misrepresentation of Asian sexualities in western media, the chapters mainly focus on the Chinese media that is created or consumed by Chinese people, including: the TV dramas *Go Lala Go!* and *Love Me, If You Dare* (Chapter 1); the films *Farewell China*, *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* and *American Dreams in China* (Chapter 3); the queer online fiction *Beijing Story* (Chapter 4); the Chinese American novelist Ha Jin's English-language novel, *A Free Life* (Chapter 5); and the series of fictions written by China-based author Feng Tang (Chapter 6). The only exception is Chapter 2, which analyses Chinese roles in a long-running German-language TV drama series, *Tatort*. Together, the chapters point out that Chinese cosmopolitan masculinities are closely associated with elitism, social class and existing gender hierarchies, against the backdrop of socioeconomic reform and nation-building in post-Mao China, vis-à-vis the conception of western culture as an icon of modernity. An example of these masculinities is 'transnational business masculinity,' which is practically mentioned in all chapters. Chinese manhood, as Lezhou Su in Chapter 5 (p. 94) directly points out, is now characterised with 'depoliticisation, commercialism and consumerism.' An ideal Chinese man in the contemporary era is considered to be confident, wealthy, middle-classed; he has to have a cosmopolitan (or 'westernised') taste, while retaining his 'Chineseness' which is rooted in Chinese nationalism and patriotism.

5. The six chapters in Part II, 'Enacting Transnational Chinese Masculinities,' focus on the transnational masculinities of various living Chinese men. Through case studies and qualitative analyses, Part II provides empirical data for readers to better understand how transnational Chinese masculinities are negotiated and enacted in the 'real' world. Chapters 7 and 8 examine the lives of Li Xiaomu, a prominent Chinese immigrant in Japan, and Cai Lan, the Hong Kong-based food critic and TV personality, respectively. The authors argue that both men represent masculinities which are highly associated with class privilege, echoing the central theme of Part I of the volume. Nevertheless, being aware of class differences in the formations of masculinities, a few chapters in Part II touch on more 'blue-collar,' 'unsophisticated' versions of masculinities among the Chinese diaspora from less privileged backgrounds (Chapters 10, 11 and 12). One example is Miriam Driessen's, 'Just Fathers' (Chapter 10), which reveals the predicament of migrant Chinese fathers living in Ethiopia. On the one hand, these fathers redeem their sense of masculinity by overcoming harsh working conditions alone in Africa. On the other hand, they feel guilty at not being able to be with their families in China, which in turn destabilises their sense of masculinity as capable fathers. In fact, fatherhood is also a main focus in Part II. For example, in Lin Song's 'Idealizing Masculinity through Representation of Fatherhood' (Chapter 9), the author examines three sets of father-son relationships presented in the Chinese reality show *Dad! Where Are We Going?*. For Song, these relationships not only reflect the constant influence of transnational (western) parenting styles on Chinese fathers, but are also carefully tailored to attract young female media consumers in today's China. In response to the first half of the volume, the chapters in Part II shed light on the resilient practices that men adopt to shore up their masculinity which is being constantly contested by the globalising world. They also reaffirm the book's central idea that Chinese masculinities are shaped by both local and transnational forces.
6. One slight weakness, though understandable, is the volume's overconcentration on heterosexual men who were born and bred in mainland China. The types of masculinities explored in the book might thus be only applicable to men in certain political and sociocultural contexts. My own background is that of a queer migrant researcher who grew up in Hong Kong during the postcolonial transition and I study Chinese diasporic gay men in Australia. Therefore, I paid close attention to chapters in relation to the experiences of diasporic men from the Sinophone world and those with non-normative sexualities. I appreciate the editors' decision to include Hongwei Bao's analysis of a

Chinese queer novel (Chapter 4), and Jin Feng's case study of a Singapore-born Chinese TV personality (Chapter 8). The two chapters expand the scope of the volume and give readers a broader, albeit brief, understanding of masculinities among Chinese men of different sexualities and migration histories. However, I would have welcomed more discussion on the intersection of sexualities, migration and masculinities, for example, through case studies of the non-heterosexual Chinese diaspora. I hope these areas will be explored more comprehensively in the third book of Hong Kong University Press' Transnational Asian Masculinities book series.

7. Having said that, the clear structure and interestingly written chapters make *The Cosmopolitan Dream* an excellent starting point for academic researchers and students who are interested in studying Chinese masculinities in a globalised context. Together with its predecessor in the series, *Changing Chinese Masculinities*, the volume offers alternative perspectives on the understanding of masculinities which so far has largely been overshadowed by western ideas of manhood. It would be exciting to imagine however that successive authors/editors in the book series might continue to expand on the theme of the volume, and generate new ideas to the theorisation of Chinese and Asian masculinities in a transnational context.

## Notes

[1] [Jie Zhong and Jeanne Batalova](#), 'Chinese immigrants in the United States,' in *Migration Information Source* (September 2017) (accessed 21 December 2019).

[2] [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#), 'Australia's Population by Country of Birth,' in *Migration, Australia, 2017–2018* (Catalogue number 3412.0) (April 2019) (accessed 21 December 2019).

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