Searching for Potent Masculinity

The Construction of Masculinities in Modern Chinese Literature

Hannah Oudman
S1298259
MA Media Studies
Cultural Analysis: Literature and Theory
Leiden University
Dr. Y. Horsman (advisor)
Dr. M.J.A. Kasten (second reader)

Table of Contents

Introduction

Blurred earlobes of male actors wearing earrings, primary school lessons on how to behave as real boys, heavy backlash to the popularity of more 'effeminate' male celebrities, also called *xiaoxianrou* 'little fresh meat'[1]. These are all recent examples of public and governmental concerns about a *nanhaiweiji* 'Chinese masculinity crisis'. They are contemporary examples, but the concerns have been troubling China for much longer. Where do these concerns about incompetent and effeminate Chinese masculinities come from? Within the context of modern Chinese history, the crisis is likely the result of social shifts in the role of the Chinese male: shifts within politics, the economy, and in relation to women.

In order to research this anxiety of Chinese men, their relation to women, and the economy and government for a lack of strong masculinity, my core question in this thesis will consequently be: how are Chinese masculinities constructed? I will examine this in relation to the social, cultural and historical situation in China from the 1960s up until the end of the 1990s, and focus on three novels that are literary studies of masculinity: *Half of Man is Woman* (1985) by Zhang Xianliang, *Beijing Comrades* (first published online in 1989) by Bei Tong, and *Shanghai Baby* (1999) by Wei Hui. Over the course of this timeperiod, we see quite an abrupt shift from a rigorous socialist society led by Mao Zedong to a globalized one that becomes more and more capitalistic.

In Chapter One, I will introduce my key theoretical concepts and assumptions, i.e. the idea that gender is performatively constructed. Gender relies on a performance that needs to be 'recognizable' for it to 'work.' The precise nature of these performances differs historically and geographically. Therefore, I will also look into the construction of gender and masculinities in a specific Chinese context. In China, as I will show, concerns about weak and effeminate masculinities relate strongly to concerns about national identity.

I will speak of 'masculinities' in plural form, as masculinities (rather than *a* masculinity) are at variance across groups of men, who differ for example in class, race and sexuality, and more often than not on the intersection of these groups. The term masculinities thus highlights "the diversity of identity among different groups of men" (Kimmel 503). Moreover, when speaking of 'China' and 'the Chinese', I refer to Mainland China and its inhabitants, and not Hong Kong and Taiwan, for the novels I will discuss are

[1] Young men who are slender built, look androgynous, and wear make-up.

set against the historical background of Maoist socialism and the period that followed, all within the People's Republic of China (established under Mao in 1949).

The following chapters will respectively deal with the analysis of *Half of Man is Woman*, *Beijing Comrades*, and *Shanghai Baby*. These (semi-) fictional works all concentrate on various periods in Chinese history and involve different social and political discourses. Therefore, I believe that these works are a meaningful and useful corpus to analyze Chinese masculinities in relation to their social context. All three works deal with issues of masculinity and contain explicit displays of sexuality that stirred up controversy, and they were consequently banned from the Chinese literary market. As the novels deal with topics that are considered sensitive in China, few critical academic texts have been written about them, and the academic literature I will use is therefore mainly from sources outside China.

The first novel I will discuss is *Half of Man is Woman* by Zhang Xianliang, a semi-autobiographical work of a man who spends decades in various Maoist re-educational labour camps during the Cultural Revolution. One of the main themes is the struggle of the protagonist, intellectual, poet, and political prisoner Zhang Yonglin, concerning his impotence which, according to him, stems from years of political repression. To analyze the effects of repression in the labour camps on Zhang Yonglin's masculinity, I will use Foucault's concepts of confinement and the docile body. Furthermore, I will explore the construction of and the struggle to regain a strong masculine identity in terms of inter-male relations with other characters, and in relation to Yonglin's view on female characters.

The next work I will analyze is *Beijing Comrades* by Bei Tong. The novel chronicles the love story of two men: successful businessman Chen Handong and the much younger migrant student Lan Yu. They struggle with their homosexuality in the rather heteronormative and traditional environment of Chinese society. The story is set against the student uprisings which called for political democratic reforms that ended in the massacre on Tian'anmen square on June 4th in 1989. For my analysis of *Beijing Comrades,* I will use the concept of entrepreneurial masculinity in the context of modernizing and capitalizing China. I will research how this idealized notion of masculinity haunts the two main characters, not only in their relationships with women, but also within their homosexual relationship.

The last work I will discuss is *Shanghai Baby* (1999) by Wei Hui. This – also semi-autobiographical – novel centres on Coco: a young female writer who roams around creative social circles in Shanghai. The plot focuses on her relation with her boyfriend Tian Tian, who she loves very much, but who is sensitive, impotent and an increasing drug user. Soon, Coco meets Mark, a successful and attractive German expat, with whom she starts an affair to fulfil her sexual desires. In this chapter, I will analyze masculinities in terms of globalization and cosmopolitanism, and the binary opposition that is suggested between the characters of Tian Tian and Mark, who embody East and West and corresponding oppositions such as traditional-modern and impotent-potent.

To summarize, in this thesis, I attempt to reveal the transformations of Chinese manhood and masculinitities in the broader context of the socio-political environment of contemporary China, and examine the concerns over the so-called masculinity crisis and emasculation of Chinese men in connection to sexuality and national identity.

Chapter One: Constructing Gender and Masculinities

In order to research and analyze Chinese masculinities in the novels I have selected, we must first look at what masculinity is, and how it is constructed. In the first section of this chapter, I will introduce some of the key notions in gender studies that play a role in this thesis. I will demonstrate that the notion of gender, opposed to biological sex, is formed within social and cultural boundaries and requirements. This is illustrated by the concept of the binary system and Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity. In the section that follows I will further look into masculinity as a social construct, by examining its construction in terms of inter-male relations, the 'masculine masquerade', and in relation to the female other. Lastly, I will explore gender and masculinity in a specific Chinese context.

1.1 Gender Constructed

In this thesis, I will follow the definition of gender as something that one *does*, not that one *is*, and I will be moving away from essentialist notions of biological categories. Simone de Beauvoir states that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (De Beauvoir 301). She makes the crucial distinction between sex and gender. Sex is often understood as an unchanging, anatomical given based on one's genitalia, while gender is the cultural meaning that the body gradually acquires. Moreover, according to Joan Scott, the notion of gender explicitly rejects biological explanations for female subordination, such as "the facts that women have the capacity to give birth and men have greater muscular strength. Instead, gender becomes a way of denoting 'cultural constructions' – the entirely social creation of ideas about appropriate roles for women and men" (Scott 1056). Scott proclaims that gender is merely a social creation with accompanying ideas on gender roles and a disregard for roles assigned to sexes.

Binary Oppositions

Central to standard Western thought about gender is the idea that the distinction of male and female forms a binary opposition. Binary oppositions are pairs of related terms that are deemed complete opposites, such as male/female; heterosexual/homosexual; rational/emotional; civilized/uncivilized. As far as gender is concerned, members of society are split into two sets of opposed gender roles and identities, according to one's biological sex. The male/female distinction is then emphasized by culturally ascribed

characteristics and roles. One example is that pink is considered a girly colour, and that blue is for boys, although Marjorie Garber comically describes the shocked reaction to the revelation that before World War II, clothing divided along gender and colour lines was the other way around (Garber 1). This proves that thinking about gender is indeed only based on ideas created by people, which are followed as truth. Garber further interestingly notes that signs on toilet doors "do not contain pictures of sex organs; they satisfy a desire for cultural binarism rather than for biological certainty" (Garber 13). Gender and its accompanying roles is not only socially constructed but has to fit within the norm of two existing sets.

Moreover, Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex,* argues that *all* binary oppositions are gendered, for example nature/culture, emotional/rational, domestic/public. Furthermore, she argues that such connotations associated with a specific gender are not merely binary oppositions, but relate to each other hierarchically:

> The terms *masculine* and *feminine* are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. (De Beauvoir 7)

Within the binary system, the male is not only dominant over the female; he is the norm, the invisible, the neutral one, while the woman is the 'Other'. Later poststructuralists like Foucault and Derrida continued the deconstruction of binary oppositions by arguing that structures are based in power relations and that the binary oppositions are the cause of oppression.

However, according to Gardiner, it is important to question binaries existing in feminist studies as well, such as the oppositions of victim/oppressor; difference/ dominance (Gardiner 12). Susan Bordo explains: "Within a Foucauldian/feminist framework […] it is indeed senseless to view men as the enemy [because] most men, equally with women, find themselves embedded and implicated in institutions and practices that they as individual did not create and do not control – and that they frequently feel tyrannized by" (Bordo 28). Men have thus not only been invisible in terms

of being the norm, but also because their suffering is not seen within the system of thinking about gender. I will come back to masculine invisibility in section 1.2, when I dive deeper into the construction of masculinity.

Judith Butler also discusses the male/female binary as an exclusive framework, and she agrees that "all gender is, by definition, unnatural" (Butler 1986: 35). She explains that the polarized gender distinction is produced by (Foucauldian) regulatory discourses of law, politics and language that try to govern gender (Butler 1990: 23). Unlike De Beauvoir, who sees people as 'becoming' one's gender, Butler believes that gender is never 'finished', but a continuous process that never ends. Instead of 'having' or 'being' one's gender, Butler defines it as 'doing' gender. She explains this through the concept of gender performativity, which I will further examine in the next section.

Performativity

Based on language philosopher J.L. Austin's term 'performativity', Butler expands the meaning of the speech-act theory[2] to all social acts performed by men and women. She introduces 'gender performativity': "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 1990: 33). Through this performative act, people, "including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (Butler 1990: 141). People thus perform and imitate cultural codes based on what is socially and culturally deemed masculine or feminine.

Moreover, these codes have to be recognizable and intelligible for others in order to exist and for a (gender) identity to be established. Butler explains that "the very notion of 'the person' is called into question by the cultural emergence of those 'incoherent' or 'discontinuous' gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined" (Butler 1990: 17). In this way, gender can be understood as constructed over and over again, at different times in different situations through the person's performative act, for "gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities" (Butler 1990: 3). Gender is thus not only constructed in accord

[2] A speech-act is an utterance that not only conveys information but also performs an action, for example a promise or the phrase 'I declare you hereby husband and wife'.

with socially and culturally given ideas of masculinity and femininity, but it also never stands on its own and is connected to other aspects of one's identity and the intersection thereof.

To summarize, gender, detached from the natural biological sex, is constructed through social rules constituted in binary oppositions and performative behaviour that have to be intelligible for others in order to be established. As these signs are socially determined, the expectations for masculinity and femininity can differ throughout different times and places. In the next section I will look into masculinity and its construction and performance.

1.2 The Masculine Performance

When discussing masculinities, it is important to note again that masculinity encompasses the performance of gender, and not biological sex. Subsequently, masculinity does not have to be merely performed by people of the male sex. Women can also be producers and performers of masculinity. In this thesis and my analysis of the three novels, however, I will mainly focus on masculinity performed by male characters. In this section I will elaborate on aspects that are specific to the study and performance of masculinity, which will be useful for my analysis of its construction in the following analytical chapters. Apart from it being socially and culturally constructed, I will look at the masculine performance in terms of its relation to women, and the relation to other men through the concept of the 'masculine masquerade', as discussed by Bryson and Van Alphen. First I will shortly discuss the importance of attention for the subject of masculinity.

The Invisible Man - the Importance of Masculinity Studies

Until the 1980s, studies on gender were mainly focused on the relation between gender and power and the subjugated position of women in history and patriarchal society. In the following years, gender studies began to include the study of masculinities more and more, and started questioning men and their relationship with patriarchal power and problematic normative notions of masculinity. As Michael Kimmel states: "Men are just beginning to realize that the 'traditional' definition of masculinity leaves them unfulfilled and dissatisfied" (Kimmel 268). Traditional notions of masculinity force men to fit into moulds of manliness in order to be socially and culturally accepted. Men have been

consistently considered neutral, natural, and therefore invisible, and it is important to note that:

> Although dominant or hegemonic forms of masculinity work constantly to maintain an appearance of permanence, stability, and naturalness, the numerous masculinities in every society are contingent, fluid, socially and historically constructed, changeable and constantly changing, variously institutionalized, and recreated through media representations and individual and collective performances. (Gardiner 11)

Putting it shortly, masculinity is not static, natural or neutral, and apart from dominating the hierarchy and benefiting from it, men, similar to women, suffer from the limiting discourse on gender and masculinity that establishes their domination in patriarchy. Therefore, I consider it important to examine the construction of masculinities, and in the following analytical chapters I will keep in mind the question of how gendered dominance is upheld, but at the same time how it constrains and limits the male characters and their masculinities.

Masculinity and the Female Other

First, it is important to note that in the construction of masculinity, the female other plays a significant role. Sedgwick explains that through their competition for the female, male rivals bond homo-socially, making the woman an object or commodity, establishing and ensuring the structure of patriarchal power (Sedgwick 3).

Bryson also asserts that men establish their masculine identity based on their relation to women. He uses works of the nineteenth century French painter Géricault to examine masculine identities in the specific context of his class and period: the aristocratic and upper bourgeois milieu of the Napoleonic years (1810-1823). Bryson explains that in the analysis of images, a gendered, heterosexual gaze has been dominant, and is "culturally constructed across a split between active (=male) and passive (=female) roles – where the man is bearer of the look, and the woman is the object for that looking" (Bryson 230). Van Alphen finds the Western tradition of the depiction of the female nude in art at the base of the cultural construction of masculinity. Similar to Bryson's discussion of the heterosexual male gaze, he explains that the female nude is entirely cultivated in

order to suit the male gaze and its desire: e.g. her body hair is removed. She is "a token of the masculine gaze, fetish of the Western eye, and the most characteristic representation of objectification" (Van Alphen 169). Hence, by objectifying and inferiorizing the female other under their male gaze, men establish their dominant masculinity.

However, attempts are made to obstruct the male gaze, and to "fight against stereotypical representations of the body" (Van Alphen 166). Van Alphen shows through the example of paintings of Francis Bacon, and in particular his distorted, 'wild' female nudes that do not answer to the male gaze, that they can preclude this traditional objectification, as "the viewer is implicated without being able to enjoy" (Van Alphen 174). In the literature I have selected we will also see this particular way of establishing masculinity through the objectification and fetishization of the female other, and that there are ways in which the objectifying male gaze can be obstructed.

The Masculine Masquerade and Inter-male Relations

Van Alphen also starts his discussion on the formation of masculinity through the relationship between the 'self' and the 'other', where the self, or subject, is objectified by certain discourse, and "the platitudes of public opinion" (Van Alphen 165). Instead of the relation to women, Bryson moves on to inspect another facet of masculinity: the male gaze that is casted upon other males. He describes masculinity as a construct in terms of the 'masculine masquerade'. Extending Butler's concept of gender performativity, this masquerade of masculine identity is (per)formed by a system of codes that male subjects introject and at the same time project on other males to maintain the system. Or, as Bryson pointedly asserts: "The male is thus not only the conveyer of the male gaze, but is also the object of that gaze" (Bryson 231).

Sedgwick explains that dominant masculinity privileges homo-social desire – friendship, mentorship or rivalry for example – as a structure of power (Sedgwick 1). Van Alphen also acknowledges the structuring of masculinity through "identification and projection between men" (Van Alphen 175). He studies Bacon's depictions of men in order to unveil the masculine masquerade. Male subjects in the paintings for example wear suits and ties, symbols that act as signifiers: "it *means*, symbolizes masculinity, and evokes super-masculine types such as gangsters or businessmen" (Van Alphen 175). Masculine identity is thus produced by an act that is performed, and men are expected to put up a

masquerade of masculinity, sending out signs that are intelligible for others, other men in particular.

To summarize, the male gender is not neutral and static as it is often considered, but quite the opposite is true. That is, masculinities are performed in line with signs that are expected in certain social and cultural contexts, and perhaps more importantly, similar to women, men suffer from normative ideas on gender as well, and the pressure they feel to perform a certain kind of masculinity. Specific to the construction of masculinity is its power relation with women, as well as inter-male relations, such as the male masquerade and homo-social bonding.

1.3 Chinese Masculinities

Thus far it has been established that gender and masculinity are determined and performed by means of cultural and social circumstances. I now wonder what performances of masculinities are expected in the specific Chinese context. Besides, it is noteworthy that all theories on gender that I discussed above come from Western thinkers. Although some theories seem or are universally applicable, it is important to keep in mind that they are established in a Western context and from a Western perspective, with corresponding judgments on gender and masculinities. At the same time, I do not want to dismiss valuable academic theories for no other reason than them stemming from the West. In order to carry out a balanced analysis of the three novels I have selected, I find it necessary to take into consideration a specific Chinese theoretical approach.

Similar to Western academia, research on gender within China studies has long been solely focused on women, but slowly academics started acknowledging the need for research in masculinity in particular (Louie 2). First, these researchers approached Chinese masculinity from a Western perspective and "attended to peripheral masculinities such as gay or black" (Zheng 2015: 348), but later theories on Chinese masculinity developed. In this part, I will give a short overview of Chinese notions on gender and masculinity, by starting with traditional concepts such as *yin* and *yang* and Confucian gender hierarchies. Consecutively, I will discuss several theories on the construction of Chinese masculinities, with a special focus on the crisis of masculinity and concerns over effeminate and weak men. I will continue discussing these concerns by

examining the relation between Chinese masculinities and national identity, for this will prove to be of crucial importance for my analyses of masculinity in *Half of Man is Woman*, *Beijing Comrades* and *Shanghai Baby*.

Traditional China

Important to note is that the traditional Chinese approach on gender was different from that in the West. Jun Lei in her discussion on changing femininities and masculinities in 20th century Chinese literature and culture explains that it was "comparatively free from the essentialized heterosexual binary often found in post-enlightenment Western gender hierarchies" (Lei 173). At the basis was the concept of *yin* and *yang*, the fundamental duality of Daoist philosophy, and the harmony of opposites. When viewed superficially, *yin* and *yang* appear to be similar to the male-female binary, whereby *yin* is female, and *yang* is male, and, among others, *yin* is often associated with earth, the moon, and darkness, and *yang* with heaven, the sun, and light. The opposition however is not static, as both essences are regarded as being in constant interaction, in an endless dynamic (Louie 9). Moreover, men and women can possess both *yin* and *yang*. However, "seen as part of the natural order, the male/female is understood as forming a binary relation, in which the male is different from and superior to the female, though they are independent" (Tam xi). When this cosmic hierarchy is then translated to society, it often results in inequalities that result in the subjugation of women (ibid.). So even though similar to the West, a hierarchy is established in the Chinese context, gender was not deemed static as it is "relative rather than absolute in traditional thinking" (Lei 173).

In traditional Confucian thinking, the concept of self (both male and female) is constructed in relation to others, similar to the ideas of Bryson, Van Alphen and Sedgwick that I discussed earlier. In Confucianism, a person is defined according to his or her familial and social status, and one has to behave along the lines of corresponding roles and duties (Tam xii), all part of the moral of filial piety. Power relations are established through a strict hierarchy of social roles. One has to always respect and obey parents, elders and superiors in general, and because the family is the building block of society, this hierarchical system of respect is by extension applied to the state. Hence, the same devotion in serving one's family has to be applied to the serving of one's country. Older men are superior to younger men, and older women to younger women, but those women are at the same time inferior to their husbands, fathers or emperor.

Lei asserts that in the late nineteenth century, a shift took place from this 'bestowed' masculinity to a more 'performative' masculinity, as it "was gradually detached from the familial and social relations based on Confucian hierarchies and turned more external and performative" (Lei 178). This shift contributed to a move in the view on Chinese masculinities, from strong to weak and effeminate, and a feeling of crisis. I wonder what ignited this change, and therefore, I will zoom in on theories on Chinese masculinities in the next section.

Weak Chinese Masculinities

Key to understanding Chinese gender and masculinities is to understand that it is constructed differently than in the West. Chinese masculinity theorist Kam Louie argues that the *yin-yang* model alone cannot sufficiently explain the specificity of Chinese masculinity. It would be inappropriate to apply the idea of the 'macho' man to the Chinese, because, he argues, in traditional China other notions of masculinity existed. Edward Said, in his renowned book *Orientalism*, asserts that under the Western gaze, the Orient is feminised to such an extent that it "is penetrated, silenced, and possessed" (Said 207). Chinese men are often portrayed as weak, or at least, not matching the macho stereotype of masculinity often found in the West. Current images of the Chinese man are either a soft image of a man with glasses behind a computer screen, or, closest to the stereotype of the masculine, a martial arts hero like Jackie Chan or Bruce Lee. But even the latter is not as big and muscular, as, for example, Arnold Schwarzenegger. However, as Louie argues, "contrary to popular belief, machismo is highly visible in Chinese culture when viewed through an appropriately 'cultured' lens" (Louie 4-5).

Thus, to study (representations of) Chinese masculinities merely with Western ideas of masculinity would only prove those men to be no 'real men' (Louie 8-9). Therefore, he introduces the Chinese paradigm of *wen*/*wu* – literary/martial – masculinity through which Louie conceptualizes historically hegemonic models of masculinity in Chinese culture. The definition of *wen* comes down to literary and other cultural attainment. *Wu*'s core meanings centre on martial, military, force and power. *Wen* and *wu* were both important traits of men with authority. Building on these definitions, Louie states that Chinese masculinity "can be theorised as comprising both *wen* and *wu* so that a scholar is considered to be no less masculine than a soldier" (Louie 11). Most

important about understanding Chinese masculinity in light of the *wen-wu* paradigm is that either was considered and accepted as manly.

The differences between *wen* and *wu* are also apparent when we look at the relationship of men with women. Contrarily to Western stories, the *wu* hero must show his strength through resisting his desire for the woman, while romances between scholars and beauties were common: "Containment of sexual and romantic desire is an integral part of the *wu* virtue [while] the *wen* male usually more than fulfils his sexual obligations to women" (Louie 19). Although *wen* and *wu* are both applicable to elite men as well as men from lower classes, *wu* is generally associated with the male masses, who have less social power, while *wen* is more clearly the masculinity of the elite, who have the possibility to study, read and write. Similar to the *yin-yang* scheme, "the most perfect being is one who has harmonised the two categories" (Louie 15). So, the ideal man holds both *wen* and *wu* in their masculine identity. However, Louie shows that the relationship between the two has not always been equal; during most dynastic periods of traditional China, *wen* enjoyed primacy over *wu*: "While there is a macho tradition in China it is not the predominant one[. I]n the Chinese case the cerebral male model tends to dominate that of the macho, brawny male" (Louie 8).

Sun Longji discusses the image of the weak Chinese male from another perspective. Using examples from May Fourth literature – a revolutionary intellectual movement that resisted Western imperialism, and at the same time acquiring inspiration from Western ideas on modernity and equality – Sun attempts to demonstrate the specific Chinese familial structure that produces dependence of men on their mothers. He argues that men have long suffered from a close relationship with their mothers, a phenomenon that he calls 'wombnization': where the – metaphorical – umbilical cord between men and their mothers is intact, which makes them unable to successfully deal with heterosexual relationships, modernize, and become independent and masculine men (Zhong 2000: 30-31). Zhong Xueping, however, is critical of the theory, because Sun "characterizes the Chinese model as 'abnormal'" (Zhong 2000: 30) and his argument "is based on the premise that for China to modernize itself, Chinese *men* must be modernized first. Because, for Sun, modernization equals Westernization" (Zhong 2000: 31).

In short, although Chinese men – in the West as well as in China – are often depicted as less sexual or macho and more intelligent and soft, as my analyses of the novels will illustrate, by using a (traditional) Chinese perspective, Louie and Sun show that thinking

in terms of this binary opposition to analyze Chinese masculinities does not suffice. In order to properly analyze them, these theories come in handy to complement the Western notions of gender and masculinity that I have discussed earlier in this chapter. In the next section, I will further look into the image of the Chinese male, and discuss the apparent connection between masculinity and the nation.

Masculinity and the Nation: The Body as National Symbol

When searching for causes of concerns over a Chinese masculinity crisis, we must look at concerns over national identity. As Zheng Tiantian explains:

> The crisis of masculinity in effeminate men is considered a peril to the security of the nation because it reflects powerlessness, inferiority, feminized passivity, and social deterioration, reminiscent of the colonial past when China was defeated by the colonizing West and plagued by its image as the 'sick man' of East Asia. (Zheng 2015: 349)

As the 'century of humiliation' started at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Western countries forced themselves into China, the belief rose that 'soft' masculinities were the cause of China's trouble. Although in the beginning China's weakness was related to the physical weakness of women "who were kept bound-footed and in a condition of virtual servitude" (Brownell 209), the focus soon shifted to the image of the scholar in his robe emasculated and feminized by Western and Japanese imperialism (Brownell 209-10). After the nationalist revolution in 1911, the New Culture Movement – that wanted to abolish all that was traditional in order to make up for the industrial and social decline China went through – accepted Western culture and with it Western definitions of masculinity. According to Lei, "the [Confucian] authority of the father/male/elder was challenged by the evolutionary thinking that considered younger lives superior than the old" (Lei 174). Based on 'science', a new gender hierarchy was created, but it still placed women on the bottom (Lei 176). When at the beginning of the twentieth century translator Yan Fu read "a country is like a body" in Western books on Social Darwinism, the idea rose that in order to be strong, it must have citizens with strong bodies (Brownell 209).

It is clear that concerns over national identity arose after Western interference, but why is this linked to masculinity in particular? Gill Plain, in his analysis of John Mills, British cinema, and the relation between the performance of masculinity and the nation, explains that gender and national identity are intertwined:

> National identity itself is a gendered construct: historically 'woman' could, and frequently did, embody the nation, but she cannot be said to have a national identity comparable to that of a man[.] Nation as landscape and territory is gendered female, while national identity and by extension patriotism, are male. (Plain 4)

Chinese men thus embody the national identity of China and serve to guard the nation by protecting its women. As Brownell summarizes: "nationalist ideology might draw upon images of the suffering, self-sacrificing Chinese woman, but it was really all about men: women suffer because men are impotent to right the injustices done to men through their women" (Brownell 210).

In the Mao Zedong era (1949-1976), a state policy of gender equality was introduced. Although this gender equality was mainly mythical[3], Brownell argues that this state policy of gender equality may have felt as emasculation to many Chinese men, and dominant masculinity was affected. They not only felt emasculated by the new power structure in which they had little to say, but "men who themselves feel impotent are likely to feel threatened by images of powerful women" (Brownell 219). After Mao's death, China started what is called the reform era: radical economic reforms that led to a social and political change. This, once again, led to a rejection of an emasculated masculinity and need for a macho, Western-style masculinity. Zheng states that "the powerful driving force in the post-Mao reaffirmation of a Western style masculinity was a new capitalist economy that emphasized a masculine entrepreneurial spirit" (Zheng 350). Although this shift in masculine ideals with the change in political and social discourse seems legit, I struggle with this repeatedly naming a change in the masculine ideal 'Western'. As I have shown above, China did have a more macho form of masculinity itself, even before it had

[3] Women were supposed to both think and work like men, instead of maintaining a female identity that was equal to their male counterparts. Moreover, even though women could work, at the same time they still were the one that took care of the household and children at home.

been in contact with the West. To summarize, Chinese men in post-Mao China felt 'besieged' and experienced a strong concern over a male lack of masculine identity, which suggested an attempt to negotiate an image of strong men vis-à-vis women and the state as a part of the effort to create a geopolitically strong Chinese nation (Zhong 2000: 15).

To conclude, gender and thus masculinity are culturally and socially constructed notions. Masculinity is 'done' through performative acts corresponding with normative notions of gender. Aspects that regulate this are the binary system, binary oppositions, subjugating the female other, and inter-male relations and the masculine masquerade. Although Chinese masculinity is often viewed as weak and effeminate or even emasculated, when examining traditional Chinese notions of masculinity, the Western normative notion of a 'strong masculinity' is complicated. The link between national identity and weak Chinese masculinities can be traced back to China's (colonial) history. With this in mind, in the following chapter I will analyze the semi-autobiographical novel *Half of Man is Woman*, by Zhang Xianliang, that deals with emasculation as an effect of the Cultural Revolution.

Chapter Two: Political Emasculation in *Half of Man is Woman*

In this chapter, I will analyze *Half of Man is Woman* (1985) by Zhang Xianliang in order to examine the way Chinese masculinity is constructed, and what gender performances are expected against the background of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-76), under the rule of Mao Zedong. Part of a semi-autobiographical trilogy, *Half of Man is Woman* centres on the intellectual and poet Zhang Yonglin[4] who is imprisoned for his political beliefs and sentenced to work in various 'reform-through-labour' camps. The novel stirred up national controversy through its explicit writing on sex, sexuality, and impotency. Anne Sytske Keijser, in her review of the novel, states that the novel reflects "on the effects of the labour camps and 'reform-through-labour' on the mental and physical health of the individual, and on the consequences of the long separation from the other sex" (Keijser 75). In this chapter, the main issue I will examine is the effect of repression and confinement on the construction of masculinity. In order to do so, I will analyze in more detail the intersection of gender, national identity, and ideology, and how they are intertwined.

The work of Zhang Xianliang belongs to a tradition of writers that started writing after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. This meant the end of the Cultural Revolution – the campaign that aimed at banning everything that did not meet the standards of the Marxist/Leninist/communist party ideology. It was an episode of domestic political violence, the dismantling of traditional culture and the re-educating, banishing, or even killing of intellectuals, because Mao wanted an economy driven by farmers and the working class. *Half of Man is Woman* is part of *shanghen wenxue*, 'literature of the wounded' or 'scar literature', in which writers made their first attempts at critical reassessment of the period led by Mao.

According to Zhong Xueping, post-Mao literature in the 1980s "witnessed a particularly strong concern over a male lack of 'masculine' identity", which "suggested a sense of siege and a desire to break out" (Zhong 2000: 15), as a reaction to the political oppression of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) and its policy of gender equality. In my discussion of masculinity in *Half of Man is Woman*, I will follow Zhong's notion of what she

[4] Hereafter, I will use his given name, Yonglin. In Chinese, the family name is stated first, and consists of one monosyllabic character, followed by the given name, almost always consisting of one or two characters. Zhang is thus the protagonist's family name, Yonglin his given name. In the following chapters I will be using protagonist's given names as well.

calls the male 'marginality complex': the preoccupation with and desire to overcome a lack of a male power position, with a focus on a presumed male weakness. In doing so, I will use a Foucauldian framework using his concepts of confinement and docility to analyze the labour camp as an institution and its effects on Yonglin, with a focus on his masculinity and (im-)potency. I will then look at the novel from a psychoanalytical perspective by using Norman Bryson's study of Géricault's Napoleonic paintings to examine the hierarchical structures and accompanying masculine performances within the camp and the inter-male relations of prisoners and party cadres.[5] Then, I will examine the construction, diminishing, and restoring of Zhang's masculinity in relation to women, and his wife Huang Xiangjiu in particular. In the next section, I will first shortly situate the novel historically, and put it in the context of post-Mao literature. I will proceed with my analysis of the novel, starting with the impact of Maoist confinement on the protagonist Zhang Yonglin and his fellow (intellectual) inmates.

2.1 Reform Through Confinement

In the novel, intellectuals, "capitalist roaders", "rich landlords, baddies" and "rightists", as Yonglin sums up (Zhang 10), are detained in reform-through-labour camps, where they have to work on the farmlands, herd cattle, and write critical self-reflections on their political thought. The goal of these camps is not to merely punish its prisoners, but to re-educate and discipline them as well – a process that Foucault examines in the European context.

In *The Great Confinement*, Foucault discusses the history of the confinement of all people deviating from society's norm. He describes that from the mid-seventeenth century on, at the dawn of the era of reason, a change could be noticed: the mad, who had been at the margins of society until then, had to be separated from society. Along with others who deviated from the norm, such as criminals, the poor, and the unemployed, who were confined in newly created institutions (Foucault 124). Foucault asserts that confinement was not only meant as punishment, but had a productive and reforming goal in mind, as it resulted from the condemnation of idleness and the weakening of discipline and the relaxation of morals. People were locked up because they did not contribute to society, and confinement was meant as a moral correction (Foucault 130-137). Moreover,

[5] A 'cadre' in the Chinese communist context refers to a public official holding a responsible or managerial position in the Chinese Communist party – it is originally a French word for 'frame' that was adopted by communists and used as 'the best of us' or 'dedicated'.

this served as an example for others, to remind them what would happen to them if they would not act conform the norm. People were thus expected but also forced to give a certain performance in order to not be seen as an outcast.

Confinement and the Cultural Revolution

Turning to the context of the Cultural Revolution, millions of people who deviated from the communist norm were confined, including criminals and the mad, but the vast majority of the prisoners/labourers were detained for political reasons. In *Half of Man is Woman* it is expressed that the worst crime one could commit was to deviate politically: "On the Outside, a person of dubious political leanings is shunned. He is an outcast who cannot be trusted. Those who have committed some moral offence, on the other hand, are considered merely unfortunate" (Zhang 5). In short, the reform-through-labour camps in *Half of Man is Woman* can be perceived as a Foucauldian technique of power through confinement. The punishment of body and soul has a combined ideological and pragmatic goal, as the prisoners have to reform their thinking and at the same time engage in production in order to contribute to society.

Additionally, Yonglin reflects on a specific aspect of confinement in the context of the Cultural Revolution:

> Work creates man, bringing out an instinct long ago submerged in advanced culture. It takes man back to that primitive state when he gloried in the process of creation: the feeling that he was emerging and changing, that his essence was being enriched. Go to a labour camp and try it for yourself! Step back in time, to a process of modernization. Feel again the satisfaction of being so far back you are moving forward. (Zhang 8-9)

Yonglin discusses the intended effect of the communist approach of (forced) labour: stripping the inmates of their 'advanced culture' and intellect, in order to fit into the norm of the CCP. Although it seems paradoxical to create docile prisoners through removing rather than teaching civilization, in addition to Foucault's analysis of confinement as disciplining and productive, specific for the Chinese camps in *Half of Man is Woman* is the goal of removing prisoners' cultured and intellectual identity, and returning them to a rather primitive and animalistic state.

2.2 Repressed Feelings

Apart from the novel's criticism on the stripping of advanced culture in the labour camps, its main criticism is how political oppression has deprived political/intellectual inmates of their feelings, sexual identity and masculinity. In the first prison camp, the women are separated from the men, and Yonglin has no contact with women for years, remaining a virgin until he is 39 years old. He meets his future wife Huang Xianjiu when he sees her bathing in a stream. For a moment, making love to her runs through his mind, but when she sees him he runs off confused and embarrassed. The following day, he sees her again, and she threatens to kill him, pointing the blade of her sickle towards his face. He does not see her again until eight years later, when they meet at a farm where they are both doing forced labour. Xiangjiu by then has been married and divorced twice – and was interestingly convicted for sexual misconduct – and after a while, she and Zhang Yonglin decide to get married.

Yonglin describes that the men in the camp dream of a woman's touch, but that their imprisonment and hard work have destroyed their emotions:

> Pure love, the fear and trembling of first love, the fragrance, the illusions of romance, where were they now? Eradicated by prison clothes. Eradicated by lining up, yelling out a number, being counted, marching to work. Snuffed out by bitter struggle.
>
> The physical needs of an animal were what remained. What frightened me was not that around us there were no women to love, but that if put to the test I could not have found love left in me. My emotions had grown as coarse as my skin. There was as much gentleness in my eyes as in an eagle's stare. Sex is, after all, a native talent: with the loss of love we return to the physical. (Zhang 23)

By completely erasing personality and not allowing any outward characterization the humane is repressed. Moreover, under pressure and discipline of their confinement, the prisoners' emotions and feelings have disappeared; only the physical is left. Interestingly, Yonglin relates this to animals: as if the remaining 'physical needs of an animal' are the result of the stripping of culture and civilization. They have hardened, and the only emotion they have left is physical lust. The novel suggests that the labour camps of the

Cultural Revolution demolished and paralysed the Chinese – intellectuals and political dissidents in particular – both physically *and* emotionally.

Impotency Through Inhibition

Not only does Yonglin suggest that in the camp, his sexuality has become animal-like, for love and emotions have been completely eradicated, but he also demonstrates that his sexuality has been completely 'inhibited'. On his wedding night, Zhang finds out that he is impotent, and claims afterwards that politics have killed his sexual instincts:

> 'Maybe I'm just too excited.'
>
> I said it only to cover my shame, which I was struggling to get out of; this was the hot magma of a volcano, magnificent and terrifying; this was a beautiful nautilus, suddenly stretching out sticky tentacles from the walls, wrapping around me and trying to draw me down; this was a shimmering sponge, attached to white coral, trying to soak out the fluids of my body; this was a giant's garden in a children's story; this was the most ancient of folktales and also the most fresh, the most desirable… The first struggle of mankind was not between man and man, or man and beast. The earliest struggle was that between man and woman. It was a struggle that was unceasing and that still continued. It demanded not only strength, but a vital spirit, using emotions and some innate artistic sense in its struggle to find balance, to reach unity and harmony, to achieve wholeness while maintaining its own separate self.
>
> In this struggle, I had failed. I had also lost my individuality and my independence. […] I smoked half a cigarette before saying, 'I think it's probably because I've been inhibited for so long.'
>
> 'Inhibited! What does that mean, inhibited?' […]
>
> 'Inhibited, it means… suppressed, held back.' (Zhang 118-122)

Yonglin, inexperienced in sexual relationships, is nervous and self-conscious, and fails to perform. He describes the experience using examples that all depict struggle in terms of nature. Moreover, these natural phenomena have a grandiose feel to them, but at the same time evoke feelings of terror, despair and being lost, it reminds me of the 'sublime' – the

ideal in art history of nature as an overpowering force that mankind has to surrender itself to. Yonglin is unable to surrender completely to these natural urges.

Not only have his instincts been killed, but Yonglin also claims that for his sexuality, 'vital spirit' and 'artistic sense' are necessary to create a balance. This balance is also referred to in the title; *Half of Man is Woman*, which implies that a man needs a woman to be complete, but here it is more complex. It is suggested that male sexuality is not merely established by inferiorizing women and by inter-male relations based on women, as I have mentioned in my discussion of Bryson and Van Alphen in Chapter One. Male sexuality and masculinity are not just established by having phallic potency, but it is important to find a balance in natural instincts and civilization, precisely those two that have been repressed in the labour camps.

Kwok-kan Tam asserts that Yonglin's "failure in the 'struggle' […] brings about a feeling of death in him" (Tam 1989: 62). Zhang mentions that he is anxious to lose his individuality and independence because of the relationship, but it can also be read as a metaphor for loss of identity within the political system and labour camps. While being imprisoned, his feelings have been repressed, and thereby, his potency, an important aspect of his manhood, has been lost.

Sexuality as Regulatory Force

The repression of emotions and sexuality through imprisonment and separation of the sexes are another technique to convey power. By revisiting Foucault, Butler argues that "the category of 'sex' is, from the start, normative" and that it "is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce – demarcate, circulate, differentiate – the bodies it controls" (Butler 1993: 1). By regulating sexuality, bodies that can be categorized and thus controlled are produced.

In *The Repressive Hypothesis* Foucault explains that in the modern Western context, it is a myth that sexuality was repressed. Because more importance was attributed to penance in Catholic contexts, all had to enter "into the process of confession and guidance" (Foucault 303). Sex(uality) had to be spoken of in order to be able to not only condemn it, but also to shape, regulate and normalize it, in order to decide what was normal and what was abnormal (Foucault 307).

Zhong argues that in order to understand issues of sexuality it is important to "recognize the power and discursive mechanisms at work within a specific locale socially and historically" (Zhong 2000: 57). Repression of sexuality – a myth according to Foucault – in the Chinese context is a major technique of power, and is charged with political implications, "often used interchangeably with the word 'oppression'" (Zhong 2000: 58). Contrarily to what Foucault argues sexual repression in China is no myth, but an actual repressive technique that was exercised in personal lives of individuals, and existed discursively in official CCP discourse, in order to regulate sexuality.

In an episode of despair, Yonglin holds long (hallucinatory) philosophical conversations with a horse he is herding and the spirits of important figures from history: Marx, Othello, and Daoist thinker Zhuangzi. He discusses the notion of castration with the horse, who explains: "You know as well as I do why people have castrated us [horses]: it's to remove our creative force, make us tractable. If they didn't we would have our own free-will, and our superior intelligence could never be kept in the traces" (Zhang 131). The conversations with the horse serve as a reflection of Yonglin's situation: the superior intelligence refers to Yonglin's intellect, and the castration to his impotence. Although Yonglin is not literally castrated, through this metaphor, the way in which the government has repressed him and his sexuality is criticized and emphasized.

Yonglin's impotency is also connected to the state of the country, when the horse that he converses with in his episode of hallucination expresses his concern over the weak state China is in: "I even wonder if your entire intellectual community isn't emasculated. If even 10 percent among you were virile men, our country would never have come to this sorry state" (Zhang 129). Here, the obsession with a masculine lack is linked to the lack of national strength, similar to what I have discussed in the first chapter, but the focus is now on intellectuals in particular. The horse expresses that those who should lead the country, are too weak or effeminate to do so. The obsessive sense of masculine lack is linked to the lack of national strength: the 'sorry state' that China is in is due to the emasculation of its (intellectual) men.

To conclude, in order to regulate and govern the bodies of the prisoners, to mould them in a way so they will eventually fit into their norm, as Butler and Foucault argue, people are politically oppressed, confined and subsequently sexually repressed. The goal is to create docile bodies: Foucault explains the docile body as the sight of regulation, "which joins the analyzable body to the manipulable body. A body is docile that may be

subjected, used, transformed, and improved" (Foucault 180). Interestingly, the results of confinement and the repression of emotions and sexuality in *Half of Man is Woman* seem paradoxical: in the quote above, the re-education is compared to the domestication and taming of an animal through castration. However, as I have discussed above, at the same time Yonglin suggests that through political repression and ridding of emotions and culture, 'animalistic' sexuality is what remains. Then again, sexual impotence is yet another result. In *Half of Man is Woman*, the effects of confinement on Yonglin are multi-layered and complex, and seem rather contradictory. I wonder how the re-education and disciplining of prisoners keeps ending in images of impotence; in the next section, I will answer this question by using a psychoanalytical perspective.

2.3 Camp Hierarchy and the Inter-male Performance

To understand the recurring image of impotence, we need to look at inter-male relations. An important relation is that of Yonglin and the party cadres, because a power structure and hierarchy is at play. Bryson, in his discussion of Géricault's Napoleonic paintings, analyses why structures of hierarchy and political order are so deeply integrated in male subjectivity. He turns to the contradictory position in regard to identification with the father: Freud's Oedipus complex. He explains that the male must produce masculinity, but that at the same time he cannot produce it. Bryson discusses the taboo that lies on men seeing the genitals of their fathers or other men who are in a position of power over them, because the male: "is enjoined to be like the father, […] but he cannot possess the father's sexual privilege and power" (Bryson 233). In short, when viewed psychoanalytically, men always feel a certain sense of lack in their masculinity, for they always aspire to the position of their superior, father or other man that ranks higher than him, but cannot, and perhaps never will, possess his same (phallic) power (ibid.).

The Masculine Masquerade

When applied to *Half of Man is Woman*, the Oedipus in the social- instead of the family domain can be seen between Yonglin and the party cadres that are in charge. In the Chinese communist context, it is important to keep in mind that the more educated one is, the lower on the hierarchy one finds oneself, as farmers and labourers are the (masculine) ideal. However, because Yonglin shows to be a good leader, he is transferred

on request of the gang leader, local cadre Wang, and made the leader of a small but rowdy group of male labourers:

> I didn't know what he was thinking, but I knew the pose: it was the inevitable prelude to giving a prisoner a special job. Deep thought displayed great seriousness, and emphasized the boundary between him and you. It showed that he had carefully thought through the coming assignment. It even hinted that he might have changed the verdict on you, a verdict imposed by a higher order of collective wisdom. […] Cadres with no schooling, who felt uncomfortable talking, often used this silent technique to increase your respect. […] Gang leader Wang was silent, and as long as he felt like it, I had to be silent too. I had done hard labour twice before, and I was thoroughly versed in the laws of the camps. It was because of knowing these unwritten laws that now, in my third sentence, I had been honoured with the management of four Divisions: sixty-four men in the Main Brigade. (Zhang 4-5)

Yonglin, who has already spent years in labour camps, knows the ways in which he has to act towards his superior. Wang performs signs of masculinity that are 'readable': his silence. The prisoner recognizes all the signs of masculine (but uneducated) superiority and knows which signs to return: be silent too. His performance to fit within the communist norm is then at the same time a disciplining in male hierarchy. Yonglin (deliberately) puts up a masquerade of signs that his supervisors can read in order to establish their superiority.

Another cadre that Zhang deals with is Party Secretary Cao Xueyi. Soon after Yonglin and Xiangjiu get married, Cao keeps circling around her, telling others "how tiny her waist is, and how soft her cheeks feel" (Zhang 140), and in the end Xiangjiu cheats on Yonglin by sleeping with Cao. Cao defeats Yonglin in his masculinity by taking his wife, who Yonglin himself cannot please due to his impotency and lack in 'manhood'. When considering this in terms of the *wen*-*wu* dichotomy, Yonglin as a *wen* man loses his wife to the party cadre who embodies a more *wu* masculinity, which is clearly preferred in the context of the Cultural Revolution. As a member and representative of the CCP, Cao serves as a personification of the Communist Party. Especially with regard to his potency, he might even function as an Oedipal father figure, for he is the dominant authoritative

figure. In this case, it is not the son who is required to identify with the father and at the same time can never fully achieve the same phallic power, but Yonglin who can not achieve the power of his superior. His power in general, but his sexual power in particular, for Cao sleeps with his wife, while Yonglin is impotent. When viewed psychoanalytically, Cao functions here as the father figure that Yonglin aspires to but cannot be, for he cannot possess Cao's sexual privilege and power.

Breaking the Hierarchy

There is a moment, however, when Yonglin is able to turn things around. During a flood, he becomes a hero, as he is a good swimmer – and Cao cannot swim – and is able to single-handedly close the breach in the dike. At this point, he is the one giving orders:

> 'No resting,' I yelled. From my commanding position I gave Cao Xueyi a hard look. 'The greatest danger right now is if the water seeps through the outer bank of the canal. If a hole just the size of a finger appears in the bank, the whole thing will go.'
>
> 'Correct.' Cao Xueyi hurriedly put away his cigarette, 'everybody spread out and look for any holes…' (Zhang 173)

The hierarchy is hereby broken: Yonglin, even though it is only for a moment, has subjected the party cadre who slept with his wife, and therefore for a moment he – metaphorically – mastered the Communist Party. It is after this occurrence that Yonglin's relationship with Xiangjiu improves because he sees his sexual potency returning: when he returns home after the flood, his wife takes care of him and prepares a bowl of ginger soup for him. In this specific cultural context, when offered by a female, this serves as a sexual symbol, "for ginger has the medicinal effect of restoring vitality and strength to a man" (Tam 1989: 65), and that night, he is able to make love with his wife for the first time. Yonglin's overcoming of the existing power structure and the subsequent repression of his sexuality causes him to retrieve his self-confidence. This is the moment when Yonglin becomes 'complete', as the title of the novel suggests; half of man is now woman. Without his wife he is not complete:

> Since I ceased to be 'half a man', ceasing to be a 'cripple', a fire had burned in my chest. All my previous behaviour, including making allowances for her –

> 'understanding' her – was not, as I had thought, the result of education, but the cowardice of a castrated horse. I now realized that the comfort and orderliness of her small household, were designed to swallow me up. Now I wanted to smash it and escape: I had obtained what I desired, and now I rejected it. I thirsted for a bigger world. (Zhang 184)

Now that he has regained his potency and confidence, he soon decides to leave and divorce her and run away from the camp, partly not to implicate her with his participation in political struggles, but also because he still cannot commit to her completely. The political climate is better, as Mao has died and Deng Xiaoping has been rehabilitated, so intellectuals have regained some of their lost power and privilege so Yonglin can make a comeback in the political spheres of China. It seems cruel that Yonglin leaves his wife as soon as he has regained his potency. Louie however, looking at the novel from the perspective of the traditional *wen* and *wu* dichotomy, finds Yonglin's actions rather comprehensible. He sees a parallel with a Tang hero, Scholar Zhang, who casts aside his wife Yingying, for she "would be a dangerous woman to have around if he were to succeed in life" (Louie 73). This brings to light a different perspective, as Louie suggests that Yonglin merely behaves accordingly his *wen* intellectual masculinity, instead of the idea that his behaviour is a result of the repression of the Cultural Revolution. In the next section, however, I will further look into Yonglin's relation with his wife, for I remain critical of the fact that Yonglin's retrieve of masculine and political power occurs at the expense of his wife.

2.4 Masculinity and the Female Other

In this section, I will examine the construction of Chinese masculinity in relation to women, and female characters in *Half of Man is Woman* in particular. During the Maoist years, regulating sexuality was part of the Communist Party's agenda. They introduced an emphasis on gender equality, and part of their policy was to eliminate gender differences. Women wore their hair short or tied back and they wore the same uniforms as men, "which not only made them look alike, but also contributed significantly to the suppression of sexuality, as little of the body was left exposed and its shape was completely blurred" (Baranovitch 108). By eliminating differences, the government attempted to control men's sexuality by suppressing female sexuality (Zheng 2015: 351).

All women in China were thus desexualized, but in *Half of Man is Woman*, the female prisoners are still at the focus of their male gaze. They are objectified and subsequently despised because their femininity is hidden. Their waists, breasts and buttocks are not visible in their prison suits: "A baggy top like a cloth sack and a pair of pants stubbornly covered all that was specifically female. Sexless, these women had descended to a state even lower than ours. The term 'woman' was used only by habit" (Zhang 31). Women are objectified for men's desire, but similar to Bacon's distorted female nudes that Van Alphen discusses, the men watching cannot (per)form their masculinity, for the women cannot be fulfilling objects of desire to the men. As a result, they are looked down upon.

Returning to the moment that Zhang Yonglin sees Huang Xiangjiu for the first time in the novel, casting his male gaze on her as a female subject functioning as his desire. Huang is bathing naked in the river:

> With cupped hands, she teased the water up over her body, splashing her neck, her shoulders, her waist, her hips, her stomach. Her body was lithe and firm. From between the two walls of green, the sun shone straight on her, making her wet skin shine like stretched silk. To a man, that skin was exceedingly touchable – especially her breasts, shining with a wet lustre, moving as her body moved. Two delectable shadows curved under those breasts.
>
> Her whole body rose and fell as she splashed, sporting like a dolphin. Curving in an arc in the air, it would unfold in a beautiful motion. The skin was milky ivory, and glowed with a natural beauty. She vigorously rubbed wherever the water fell on her, until her whole body was exuding life.
>
> At each shock of the cold water, her face would flash with pleasure. It was a face that invited, a face of happy vitality. (Zhang 38)

Xiangjiu serves as a sexual subject for Yonglin's gaze. What strikes me when reading this part is the emphasis on the beauty, softness, and liveliness of Xiangjiu, words such as "beautiful", "curves" and "lustre" are understood as natural feminine qualities and "the erotic implications provide an immediate source of pleasure for a male imagination (a constructed male imagination), all suggest the 'bodiness' of woman" (Zhong 1994: 180). Moreover, the materials – such as silk and ivory – he uses to describe Xiangjiu are not only

soft but also makes you think of wealth. Yonglin is forming an image of her in his mind that contrasts with his hardened body and loss of self: his 'dead' emotions.

Furthermore, as soon as Yonglin is married, he repeatedly compares his marriage with death and suffocation:

> Life is made up of just things such as these: a bed, a bedcover, a bookshelf made from a door, a hook for clothes with its white paper underneath, 'Snowflower' skin-lotion. The world she had created was engulfing me, so that I had the feeling of losing my identity. She had cut into me, just as we had sawn through the wooden door. Slicing straight down the middle, she had cut away my past. (Zhang 115)

In contrast with the rich materials Yonglin used to describe Xiangjiu, those in this depressed passage are simple and rough: paper and wood. They can easily be connected to a feeling of poverty. The idea of the woman was alluring, but now Yonglin is married to that woman he feels suffocated. Zhong argues that "the dichotomy between desire and fear is employed not only to indicate the tension between him, the man, and her, the woman, but also to indicate the tension within himself" (Zhong 1994: 181). Yonglin cannot only satisfy the needs of his wife, but he can also not "satisfy his belief in what a man should be like" (Zhong 1994: 182). In short, while inter-male relations are used to establish hierarchy within masculine identities, in Yonglin's case, an inferior position within that hierarchy, the overcoming of this inferior and repressed state of (intellectual) masculinity is transferred onto women's bodies and constructed by female subjugation. I would thus argue that the novel is written *within* the notions of patriarchal power instead of, by discussing the oppression of masculinity and thus gender, breaking with it.

To conclude, in their search for a new masculine identity, men returned to ideas of traditional superior masculinity and patriarchy in order to strengthen and recover their position (Zhong 2000: 11). "Women are objectified, scrutinized, and patronized in the service of a male desire whose real object is to restore 'male dignity'" (Zhong 1994: 179). By reasserting his potency and consequently his masculinity, Zhang falls back on misogyny and the status of women as inferior opposites.

2.5 Conclusion

Masculinity in *Half of Man is Woman* is constructed – or rather reconstructed – in an attempt to overcome the feeling of emasculation that was a result of the Cultural Revolution. Protagonist Yonglin and his fellow political prisoners are confined in a Foucauldian sense in order to punish and reform them to fit into the reigning ideological and political norm. Through political repression, men are metaphorically castrated in order to keep them docile and thus controllable. Specific to the context of the Cultural Revolution, is that the prisoners are stripped from their advanced culture and emotions. The result seems paradoxical, for an animal-like sexuality is what remains, but at the same time Yonglin becomes impotent. To understand the latter, I emphasized that the disciplining of intellectuals also includes them adhering to the hierarchy of the camp in which a masculine performance and masquerade play a key role. When Yonglin for a moment overpowers his superior, he regains his masculine strength and potency, is able to make love to his wife, and finally, re-join the political struggle. As Zhong Xueping explains, "the sexual overtones found […] are a reaction against the 'desexualising (hence dehumanizing)' practices of the CCP; to (re)sexualize, therefore is to humanize. To humanize, in this context, is also to be oppositional politically" (Zhong 2000: 53). Although Yonglin is the object of oppression throughout the novel, he re-establishes his dominant patriarchal masculinity by objectifying and inferiorizing women and he uses them as the site at which his masculine struggle is staged.

Chapter Three: *Beijing Comrades* and Entrepreneurial Masculinity

Beijing Comrades centres on the decade-long tumultuous love story of successful business owner Chen Handong and the young architectural student Lan Yu. Over the course of their relationship, they experience fights, affairs, and a big break up when Handong marries a woman, Lin Ping. The marriage soon ends and they restore their relationship. In the end, Lan Yu tragically dies in a car accident, and Handong moves to Canada where he lives a married life with a daughter. Central to the story is Handong's struggle with his homosexuality within the context of Chinese society. The novel shows Handong as a complex character that almost completely conforms to the post-Mao ideal of entrepreneurial masculinity, but at the same time does not meet its standards at all, for he is (a closeted) homosexual.

The novel is set against the backdrop of the shifting social and political mores of post-socialist urban China, including the major economical reforms and the 1989 Tian'anmen incident. In this period "the economic reforms […] required the formation of a new capitalist class, now under the new name of 'entrepreneurs', legitimized by the state slogan 'to get rich is glorious'" (Bao 78). The Tian'anmen incident, also known as the June Fourth massacre, followed student protests against the purge of liberal, reform-minded Secretary General Hu Yaobang that escalated in a widespread movement expressing a desire for political reforms. This ended on June 4th when military forces started a bloody crackdown on Tian'anmen Square where the protesters had gathered for weeks. Afterwards, the structure of the CCP remained – and still remains – stable. According to Zheng, the new capitalist economy and its upcoming entrepreneurs "emphasized a masculine entrepreneurial spirit" that was similar to a macho Western masculinity (Zheng 350). Through the opening up and entering of a new ideology in China, a new gender ideology and new ideas on masculinity followed. In this chapter I will analyze the construction of masculinity from the concept of entrepreneurial masculinity, and the problems it evokes for the male characters in *Beijing Comrades*.

The story is controversial in China with respect to two elements: it has a homosexual relationship as its focus, and the incident of June Fourth is openly discussed. This incident has been made invisible and was almost erased from history by the government, and the novel consequently had no chance to be published in print in Mainland China. *Beijing Comrades* was first published in 1998 as an online novel, for "the Internet allowed writers and readers new forums for expression, discussion, and debate."

(Berry 313-14). The anonymous author writes under the pseudonym of Bei Tong, which translates to 'Beijing Comrade'; "borrowing a term infused with both proletariat political connotations and the homoerotic imagination" (Berry 314). The word 'comrade' or *tongzhi* was a common form of address in socialist China, and from the 1990s on has been appropriated by Chinese gay communities "as a synonym for 'queer'" (Berry 314). Thus, as Berry sharply notices, the name of the author combines state politics and homoerotic desire (Berry 314), the two themes that are central to the novel. In order to analyze the novel and these themes, I will first examine the concept of entrepreneurial masculinity and how this ideal affects the main characters. For this, I will look into Handong's relation to women and his homosexual relationship with Lan Yu. I will also research the shift in ideology, politics and society that Lan Yu and Handong both represent, and discuss what effects it has on their masculinity.

3.1 Entrepreneurial Masculinity

In order to examine the construction of Handong's masculinity, I will first elaborate on the concept of entrepreneurial masculinity and the masculine performance that is expected with it, as discussed by Susan Brownell and Tiantian Zheng. During the late 1980s and 1990s, "men were judged not by birth status or even education but by their competitive abilities" (Zheng 351). Following the emasculation of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese men, with the rise of the capitalist economy, were able to reassert their masculine identity as strong and potent through entrepreneurship, trade and money: "masculinity is related to state power, nationalist ideology, the free market, and the marriage/sex markets" (Brownell 230). The fear of impotence that I discussed in the previous chapter, resulting from the political and sexual repression during the Cultural Revolution, moved to the background.

As Brownell explains, within entrepreneurial masculinity, people – or rather, men – who have an excess of economic and political power, consequently have an excess of sexual power (Brownell 230). However, the return of potent masculinity is constructed at the expense of women, as it was "proceeding hand in hand with the return of male privilege and female disadvantage" (Brownell 230). Similar to my analysis of the 'desire to break out' in the Cultural Revolution, as I discussed in Chapter Two on *Half of Man is Woman*, in order to re-establish their potency, men in post-socialist China returned to patriarchal notions of gender and accompanying gender roles. Moreover, in the context of

a post-socialist China that was characterized by consumerism and commercialism, women and sex were deemed commodities that were tradable and consumable. The consumption of sex actually served as "an institution for bonding activities between entrepreneurs, to ensure social trust (Zheng 2006: 10).

Chen Handong the Entrepreneur

In *Beijing Comrades*, the protagonist and narrator Chen Handong is a clear example of this new gender ideology of entrepreneurial masculinity. Handong is a successful businessman who at the age of twenty-seven is the head of his own trading company that is worth millions. He trades with Asian and Eastern-European companies, and sells "whatever people would buy, I sold: food, clothes, anything I could get my hands on short of human beings and weapons. I would have sold plastic bags of shit if I had thought people would buy them" (Bei 2). Handong demonstrates his commercial abilities (with help of his party member father's connections) and thereby establishes his entrepreneurial masculinity. He discusses the possibilities that the new era brings: "In principle, even those without powerful family backgrounds could jockey for successes never before thought possible. All you needed was some guts and determination, and entry into the get-rich-quick class was yours for taking" (Bei 37). In the novel, his success indeed comes with sexual power:

> Financially successful and well known in the business world, my arrogance was insufferable. Never one to spend much time alone, if I wasn't in my office working I was hanging out with friends or whomever I happened to be sleeping with at the time. (Bei Tong 9)

Handong is a successful entrepreneur, confident, has plenty of money. He has the nonchalance of someone who does not have to care about money, he can buy whatever he wants, and therefore sleep with whomever he wants, both men and women; sex and money are inextricably linked. Further, the discovery of new forms of economic and sexual potency, that Brownell discusses, is expressed in the novel through the extreme commodification of bodies; boys and girls are bought for sex, or exchanged as gifts between Handong and his business partners and friends. Handong, with his economic and

sexual power, is the perfect example of entrepreneurial masculinity of the 1980s and 1990s in China.

3.2 Women as Commodities

As I mentioned above, after the Maoist era, which was characterized by the erasing of gender differences, men needed to reinforce their hegemonic masculinity by returning women to the subjugated position they found themselves in before. In this section, I will examine how the ideal of entrepreneurial masculinity defines Handong's relation to women, and how women help establish this masculine identity. In *Beijing Comrades*, Handong's misogynist remarks and pronounced sexism are omnipresent, for example, when he sees his future wife, Lin Ping, for the first time:

> What a fucking body! Slim, slender, and tight – so different from Hao Mei with her big, clunky ass. She was just the right height for me, the perfect complement to my tall, masculine frame. […] It was good for me to have a woman by my side, and especially a woman like her. […] If I had been eating her up with my eyes when she first walked into my office, I was now slowly gnawing at the bones, extracting every drop of marrow I could from the exquisite flesh before me. I didn't know whether she had noticed the way my eyes penetrated her, but I felt that she was gazing back at me periodically. Was there more going on than the attentiveness required of an interpreter? Her smiling eyes were as gentle as a doe's. (Bei 156-161)

Lin Ping, working as an English translator for an American business partner of Handong, is instantly measured by merely her outer appearance. Her intellect and successful career are not necessarily a part of her attractiveness. Handong immediately returns to the all too familiar objectifying male gaze. From the jump, Lin is compared to other women Handong knows, and judged in terms of being a match to his body and social status, without questioning what Lin desires. She is merely an object, an accessory that complements him.

Describing her as a 'doe', a beautiful and innocent animal, demonstrates the way Handong thinks of her: a defenceless object, an animal that he is hunting and will devour; he is eating her up with his eyes. His male gaze even 'penetrates' her. In the quote above, looking is connected to devouring and penetrating, words that have an aggressive tone to

them. These are aggressive deeds, in which the other is not merely observed, but even demolished or violated.

Over the course of *Beijing Comrades*, Handong's sexism becomes crystal clear:

> And that, I think, is the difference between men and women. When a woman has sex with you, it's because of something you have – genius, money, or whatever – or because they want to find someone who will let them be a parasite forever. After they get what they want, they use sex as a way of rewarding men. But when men have sex there's no rhyme or reason. They're just satisfying a primitive need. (Bei 70)

Here, Handong shows the contrast between his contact with women and men. He describes women as money-eager, manipulative beings. Again, he thinks in terms of sex as commodity, for women trade sexual intercourse for wealth and marriage. In a way, these – in Handong's eyes – gold digging women see rich men as commodities too, and he despises them for it. Moreover, this exposes an asymmetry between male and female desire: a man 'owns' a woman, he consumes and devours her, and she becomes an object that he owns. Female desire, however, is here not seen as a desire to 'own' a man or make an object of him, but she desires something that the man has, for example his phallic power. In the novel, female sexuality does not consist of choosing a man, but is always about offering herself and her sexuality to someone else.

Another double standard is uncovered: women here are actually performing according the entrepreneurial ideal, by looking for a man who can help them obtain genius or money they merely do smart business. However, according to Handong, this is merely reserved for men. A critical reader might be triggered by sexist passages such as this one: "'Your English is exceptional.' I had no idea if her English was good or crap"(Bei 157). Handong merely compliments Lin Ping in order to flatter and eventually seduce her. The novel however does not seem to distance itself from his male gaze. Because Handong is both the narrator and focalizer, the reader is invited to take over his gaze on women.

To summarize, when viewing Handong's relation with women in the novel with the concept of entrepreneurial masculinity in mind, he shows that this masculinity is indeed supported by positioning the female characters as objects that are inferior under his male gaze. Sex and bodies are tradable commodities; and those bodies are even consumable;

they can be devoured by rich men. He creates his self-identity and subjectivity through contrasting himself with objectified others: women.

3.3 The Struggle of a Gay Entrepreneur

While Handong's relations with women are characterized by subjugation, commodification and objectification, his (sexual) contact with men is contrastingly driven by pure desire. However, his relations to men are problematized by Chinese society, traditional Confucian values and the post-socialist ideal of entrepreneurial masculinity. Central to the novel is Handong's struggle of coming to terms with his homosexuality. Even though Handong maintains sexual relationships with both women and men, only the latter has to be done in secret, as homosexuality is not generally accepted in China. While, as described in the novel, (underground) gay bars are upcoming in Beijing, it is not possible for the characters to be out in public, and Handong therefore takes Lan Yu on a trip to Thailand, where they can walk hand in hand for the first time. Handong sends Lan Yu to the psychiatrist Dr. Shi, who devoted his career to the study of homosexuality. Dr. Shi explains that Lan Yu sees himself as a girl and that he suffers from a sexual perversion, but that he "would be cured of the disorder" (Bei 170). This illustrates the discomfort of both China and Handong regarding homosexuality. In this section, I will examine how society and masculine standards affect Handong's homoerotic desires.

Homosexuality and Traditional China

Handong further struggles with his homosexuality in relation to his family, and does not dare to tell his parents that he is gay. He asks himself "how could I be their son and be with Lan Yu at the same time?" (Bei 108). Handong represents Confucian values in the sense of his struggle with filial piety – the honouring of parents, based on strict principles of hierarchy, obligation and obedience, as mentioned in Chapter One. Handong's parents insist on him marrying someone that matches the family social status and provides offspring to continue the family name. Because of this, Handong finally breaks up with Lan Yu and marries Lin Ping, but they get divorced soon when Handong finds out that Lin Ping found out about Lan Yu, told Handong's mother and Lan Yu's boss about him, after which he got fired for 'hooliganism' and 'inappropriate activities'. When his mother finds out that Handong maintains homoerotic relationships, he explains it as one of his upper-class hobbies:

> ‘Listen, Ma. You’ve misunderstood! What you don’t know is that this kind of thing is a big trend for rich people[.] ‘I mean, some people actually compete with one another to see who can have the most fun! But nobody takes it seriously[.] Anyway, I’m over it now, so it doesn’t even matter,’ I continued. ‘I’m into horse racing now. I mean, it’s kind of the same thing. It’s just a hobby.’ It took a while, but I eventually managed to convince her. (Bei 199)

Handong’s sexual relations with men are explained as a wealthy (consumerist) hobby, similar to gambling on horse racing. His mother only accepts his gay encounters when they are presented as an aspect of his entrepreneurial masculinity, and when he promises her to also marry a wife. This can be related to ancient China, where men of higher social status also had homoerotic relations, always with younger boys of lower classes, similar to the relation of Handong and Lan Yu. For example, in erotic fiction of the late imperial period, bisexual libertines were married to a wife, often had several (female) concubines, but also had sexual relations with an attendant boy, as Giovanni Vitiello explains in his historical analysis of gay and lesbian literature in Chinese history (Vitiello 128).

In this light, Eve Sedgwick’s concept of inter-male connections through homo-social desire is interesting to take into consideration. As I have mentioned in Chapter One, dominant masculinity privileges homo-social bonding as a structure of power (Sedgwick 1). Handong’s (entrepreneurial) masculinity is indeed established through inter-male relations, for example by the exchanging the bodies of men and women with his friends as gifts. However, among men, the homo-social relationship cannot seemingly exist without it carrying homosexual overtones, but at the same time it fears homosexual desire (from an anxiety for losing the penis or being penetrated) (ibid.). Handong’s situation is complex: he remains a closeted homosexual while simultaneously trying to hold on to an identity of (heterosexual and entrepreneurial) dominant masculinity, with the accompanying fear of homosexual tendencies within the context of inter-male relations. As a part of his performative entrepreneurial masculinity and inter-male relations that establish dominant masculinity, homoerotic relations are on the border of being accepted, but a loving same-sex relationship will not be recognized or accepted in Chinese society, and therefore cannot exist.

Gay Sex vs. Heterosexual Sex

Although sex with men and women are both presented as consumable commodities, there is a substantial difference. Women are mere objects of lust, while Handong views sexual intercourse with men as natural and primitive, as pure. He for example states that "the intensity of two men making love can never be matched by straight sex" (Bei 43). He later asserts:

> When a woman has sex with you, it's because of something you have – genius, money, or whatever – or because they want to find someone who will let them be a parasite forever. […] But when men have sex there's no rhyme or reason. They're just satisfying a primitive need. (Bei 70)

Handong discusses the difference between sex with women and men, and creates an opposition between them, in which he speaks negatively of women. This illustrates that if he had the option, he perhaps would not be with women. His statements lean towards misogyny and at the same time give us insight into his thoughts and true desires: his preference for sex with men. This demonstrates Handong's struggle with his sexuality: his effort to fit in the idealized norm of post-socialist masculinity obstructs the performance of his real identity, his sexual identity is basically forced into a mould of entrepreneurial masculinity.

Entrepreneurial Masculinity and Gender Roles within Homosexuality

Entrepreneurial masculinity also plays a role *within* homosexual relationships, for example when men are compared to women as an insult: Lan Yu does not want to be brought home, because he is "not a girl" (Bei 34). When Handong cries, he cries "just like a woman" (Bei 204). When they have their first fight because Lan Yu suspects Handong of having affairs (which he does) he has to "stop acting like a woman" (Bei Tong 69). Dependence, display of emotions, and worrying – viewed by Handong as whining – are considered negative traits, because they are gendered female, and of course, boys don't cry. In this section, I will examine what role masculinity plays within the homosexual relation of Handong and Lan Yu.

In the relationship, Handong quite overtly tries to take up the traditional male role, and Lan Yu is, traditionally viewed, more feminine. Handong, for instance, is the

breadwinner, and while Lan Yu studies, he works to provide for him and his partner – which at the same time unveils a power imbalance. When discussing the risk of the political unrest for his company, Lan Yu states that he can provide for Handong: "'Hell no,'" replies Handong, "'I'd *rather* be a beggar!'" (Bei Tong 110-11). He is the entrepreneur, and the man in their relation, so he should be the one that is taking care of his partner. To be taken care of by his partner is his worst nightmare, for the roles in their relation would be reversed.

Regarding their character traits, I noticed binary oppositions in terms of gender. Handong's character is rational and strict, bossy. When a warehouse burns down because of a problem with the electrical wires that his colleague Liu Zheng had to fix earlier, he fires him. Lan Yu, however, talks him into milder measures. In contrast with Handong, Lan Yu represents an image that is more compassionate. When thinking in binary oppositions, these might be considered more feminine traits. Moreover, Lan Yu plays a passive role in their sex life:

> With men the only problem is that getting fucked is damaging to their self-respect. Girls go through something similar when they lose their virginity, but it might be worse for a guy. […] I had always refused to be penetrated; my stubborn nonreciprocity disappointed no small number of my lovers. […] I realized just how easy it is to dominate a woman. Dominating men is much harder, and only some of us can do it right. I can't deny that when he climaxed, it left me with a strong feeling of triumph. (Bei 56 - 62)

Handong, aiming to take up the masculine position in his relation, has to guard his dominant position, and can therefore not be penetrated. Although Lan Yu takes a more feminine position, he is not female, and therefore harder to dominate, as Handong explains above. Similar to the bisexual libertines of imperial China that I have discussed earlier, who had relations with younger, lower-class boys on the side: "he rigorously takes the insertive prerogative in his sexual dealings […]; in other words, he is the impenetrable penetrator of women and boys" (Vitiello 128). Moreover, when viewed in light of entrepreneurial masculinity, this shows once again that even when it has come to a homosexual relationship, it is important to be the 'man'. The power relations are clear: Handong has to remain the dominant one, in order to maintain his hegemonic masculinity,

his economic superiority. Handong cannot show to be sensitive, and has to take up the sexual role that he considers manly, for he cannot risk to damage his entrepreneurial masculinity. Despite the apparently transgressive nature of homosexuality, a rather traditional notion of masculinity prevails.

Breaking with Gender Roles

As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, Handong repeatedly compares sex with women to that with men, and states that "the intensity of two men making love can never be matched by straight sex" (Bei 43). Bao thinks it too easy to dismiss Handong's statements as merely misogynistic. Using Ernst Bloch and Frederic Jameson's theory on utopia, he argues that queer love is posed as utopian, opposed to "the commercialization of heterosexual love, sex and even marriage" (Bao 80). He argues that Lan Yu possesses both masculine and feminine qualities and that "the gay subject represented by Lan Yu thus expresses the utopian wish of making a perfect human being that crosses the gender binary" (Bao 81). Although Lan Yu may represent a man crossing the gender binary, by possessing qualities that are considered both masculine and feminine, he himself has little agency, due to the inferior position he holds in his relation with Handong: in age, class and gender role within their relationship.

It is only when their power relations are reversed, that Handong can finally break with the male role he held onto. After their break up, Handong and Lan Yu meet again years later. Handong, now divorced, tries to resume their relationship, but this time it is Lan Yu who decides the terms: he decides when they meet and what they do. Their positions in the relationship have changed, and Handong is not the one bearing the power anymore as he shows when describing their newly adjusted sexual relationship:

> Lan Yu looked down at me in a way I had never seen before: controlling, dominant. It was the cold stare of contempt, the look of someone who intended to dominate. And for the first time in my life, I wanted to be the object of that domination. It was damaging to my self-respect, but it was precisely this humiliation that propelled me to further extremes of wanting to be degraded and even abused by him.
>
> 'Yes', I thought. 'I'll be the bitch tonight.' I was going to give him what I owed him. (Bei 249)

For the first time, Handong lets himself be penetrated by Lan Yu, and immediately speaks of himself in feminine terms, and in a derogatory sense that is: he will be the 'bitch' this time. This also unveils a binary opposition: now Lan Yu is dominant, Handong has to be submissive, they cannot both be dominant at the same time. Now that he has to earn his place back in Lan Yu's life, he has to give up his superior masculine position, and let go of the things he attributed to this position. This is his break-through, only when moving away from the traditional gender roles that accompany the entrepreneurial masculine ideal; he can slowly come to terms with his homosexual identity.

To conclude, Handong's struggle of coming to terms with his homosexuality is complicated by the post-socialist ideal of entrepreneurial masculinity, and corresponding gender roles that Handong tries to uphold. He is occupied with what he expects or wants himself to be, as his homosexuality does not match the signs that are expected of his masculine performance, as well as what he expects Lan Yu to be in their relationship. The concept of entrepreneurial masculinity does thus not only play a crucial role in heterosexual relations and the position of women compared to men, as Brownell and Zheng have argued, but I have demonstrated that in *Beijing Comrades* this masculine ideal has a major role in the structuring of homosexual relations as well.

3.4 Ideology and Masculinity

As the son of a high-ranking CCP-cadre, Handong is placed in a political context. His name, Handong, translates to "Defend Mao Zedong Thought" (Bei 44). He has two sisters: Aidong and Jingdong – "Love Mao Zedong Thought" and "Respect Mao Zedong Thought" (Bei Tong 59). Although he is traditional in the sense of his Confucian values of filial piety and CCP background, Handong – with his private cars and self-made fortune – is the portrayal of the shift towards a capital-driven society. In this section I will examine what this shift in ideology means for his masculinity.

Tian'anmen and Masculinity

A sign that points towards the approaching changes, is that Handong's "aging father had long lost his iron-fisted control over the family" (Bei 59). This can easily be read as a metaphor for the iron-fisted control of the CCP over the Chinese people, and the loosening grip of the changing political and economical environment. The death of Handong's father, quite early in the book, suggests that (sexual) freedom for Handong is imminent, and

serves as a harbinger for the approaching protests calling for democratic reform. As "men with economic and political power become sexually potent, whereas men who have lost such power feel emasculated by the market reforms" (Zheng 351), this loss of power can be explained in terms of, again, potency.

The Tian'anmen incident that ended the protests serves as a turning point, not only for CCP who reclaimed their power, but also for the relationship of Handong and Lan Yu. Lan Yu, refusing to listen to Handong's objections, joins the protests on that violent June 4th, and Handong anxiously drives around the city looking for him. When Lan Yu, unharmed but covered in blood from others, finally returns in the morning, Handong realizes that he loves him and acknowledges that their relationship is not merely of a sexual nature. According to Berry, Tian'anmen not only plays an essential role in the narrative structure by bringing the two men together, "but also as an integral part of their development, especially Lan Yu's. He is dually marginalized by society for his political (dissident) and sexual (homosexual) identities, both deemed equally "deviant" by the government" (Berry 332). The suppression of the protest, then, serves as a symbolic "act of castration," through which "the government restored traditional order and power relations, reasserting its own power and masculinity, and denying it to those [i.e. Chinese intellectuals] who challenged it, plac[ing] China's intellectuals back in their traditional position of woman-like state subjects" (Baranovitch 141). Lan Yu's protest did not succeed, and he is returned to the inferior 'female' position. This whole incident drives home the message that Lan Yu has lost in terms of power relations, including the one with his loved one.

To summarize, interestingly, a link is made between the restoration of CCP power, and Handong's epiphany of love and acknowledging of homosexual identity. When Handong's father dies and the democratic movement rises, it is suggested that he can finally be himself, free from outside pressure. This dream, however, is immediately crushed by the CCP by means of the massacre, and Handong marries Lin Ping. As I have discussed above, the marriage does not last long, and Handong eventually restores his relationship with Lan Yu, be it in changed roles.

Lan Yu and Capitalist Society

As I mentioned above, Handong represents the unravelling of communist values and the rise of the entrepreneurial community. Lan Yu, on the other hand, serves as a symbol of

virtuous and traditional behaviour. Handong showers Lan Yu in money and gifts, but Lan Yu refuses to accept them, and repeatedly expresses his aversion to money, luxury, and being 'bought'. He explains his view on money through a story about his mother, who committed suicide. She left a letter for her husband and son, which "said she hated money – that money can make people cold, selfish, unfeeling. She said the truly precious things in life weren't silver or gold, but passion, conviction […]'" (Bei Tong 103). Love and money here are presented as opposing aspects of life: Lan Yu represents a "'non-commercial' and 'pure' gay love [that] is juxtaposed with the commercialized heterosexual love and marriage in the story" (Bao 80). Later on in the novel, however, Lan Yu accepts the clothes he receives from Handong, and moves into a place that Handong paid for. Pampering Lan Yu, Handong has a hidden agenda:

> What Lan Yu didn't know was that I also had a second, slightly more nefarious agenda, albeit one that was largely unconscious at the time: to make him shake off the cultural and intellectual arrogance of the old world and learn to enjoy the material pleasures of the new one. […] I wanted Lan Yu to enjoy this [luxurious] life and to appreciate that it was I who was giving it to him. (Bei 57)

By involving him into the luxurious life he knows, Handong wants to remove Lan Yu from the traditional values he represents. He tries to turn Lan Yu into the entrepreneur that Handong already is. For example, Handong cannot bear to see Lan Yu return from his work at a construction site:

> Lan Yu peeled off his clothes and collapsed onto the bed, covered in dirt and sweat. A feeling of revulsion rose in me. 'Oh, come on!' I said. 'Get up, Lan Yu. What are you, some kind of migrant worker? Go take a shower.' I pushed his shoulder a few times. (Bei 79)

Handong constantly comments on Lan Yu's appearance, telling him to cut his hair in a certain way, or criticizing him for looking too tan – for in China this is associated with a lower class, tanned from performing manual labour outside. Paradoxically, apart from pushing Lan Yu into a 'female' role in their relationship, at the same time he tries to mould Lan Yu into a copy of himself, to fit into the norm of his own class and ideal masculinity. Handong obsessively tries to change the fact that the man he loves does not match the

high-class, capitalist and heterosexual identity he tries to maintain. Ideas on gender are thus present in two different ways: i) how Handong sees himself and what kind of masculinity he expects from himself and ii) what he expects of Lan Yu as his partner.

After their reconciliation, Handong is put into jail because of fraud, and Lan Yu pays an enormous amount of money to buy him out of prison. He is now willing to use money to get his lover out of prison. As they are finally ready to live a happy life together, Lan Yu dies in a car accident, leaving Handong heartbroken. The tragic death of Lan Yu is particularly ironic because when he finally gives into Handong's attempts to persuade Lan Yu to live a high-class life by taking a taxi instead of public transport, he dies. When he finally performs the signs that Handong wants him to, it means his death and the end of their relationship. Berry argues that through Lan Yu's death, "implied sacrifice for democratic freedom is transmuted, devolving into a random consequence of taking advantage of new forms of capitalist freedom" (Berry 318). The death of Lan Yu thus serves as an ultimate criticism of capitalist society.

To conclude, love and money are presented as a binary opposition, Handong has to choose between the two. Having both at the same time is not an option and will lead to death. His and Lan Yu's homosexual relationship is affected by heteronormative ideas on masculinity, but this time the masquerade of masculinity that Handong tries to uphold is projected on Lan Yu.

3.5 Conclusion

At first sight, Chen Handong perfectly matches the ideal of entrepreneurial masculinity of the new Chinese political and social situation of the late 1980s and early 1990s. This masculinity is constructed through his success in business, and Handong's misogyny that confirms his male superiority. Central to the construction of masculinity in this time period is the commodification of gender and sexuality, and its exchange between fellow entrepreneurs, as an inter-male transaction. But at the same time, traditional Chinese values on family as well as the ideal of entrepreneurial masculinity problematize his homosexuality. However, when his homoerotic relations are presented as an aspect of his entrepreneurship, they are easier accepted, because this suggests that he meets societal expectations.

Entrepreneurial masculinity is also structuring for Handong's homosexual relations. In his relationship with Lan Yu, his aversion to feminine behaviour illustrates

his fear of not matching this masculine ideal, even though the homosexual relationship itself already undermines this ideal. Moreover, Handong tries to maintain his dominant masculinity by positioning himself in the traditional gender role of the man and Lan Yu in the traditional role of the woman. Additionally, he tries to turn Lan Yu into someone similar to his own entrepreneurial and high-class masculine identity, but when Lan Yu, who symbolizes traditional Confucian principles and opposes capitalist and consumerist values, dies, his death symbolizes the sacrifice for economic and political change. These opposing masculine, political and economic identities that Lan Yu and Handong portray, serve "as a critique to the post-socialist present when capitalism transforms people's social relations and their traditional ways of life" (Bao 84).

Although *Beijing Comrades* paints the struggle that gay people in China face and unapologetically shows gay sex, and therefore challenges heteronormative masculinity, I do believe however that it merely does so by using gender stereotypes and thus depicting not only harmful images of women, but also upholds limiting standards for masculine identities. In the modernizing context of *Beijing Comrades*, masculinities are constructed along the lines of strict requirements that problematize and limit sexual freedom.

Chapter Four: Binary Oppositions in *Shanghai Baby*

Shanghai Baby (first published in 1999) chronicles the turbulent lifestyle of protagonist and narrator Nikki – who goes by the nickname Coco (from Coco Chanel) – and the people surrounding her. Hers is a world full of socialites, artists, writers and stylists, who move around the café's, bars, nightclubs, shops, and private apartments of cosmopolitan Shanghai. The novel centres on Coco's relationships with two men: her Chinese boyfriend Tian Tian, and her German lover Mark. The former lives off money from his overseas mother, is impotent, takes up a drug addiction and eventually dies of an overdose. To fulfil her sexual desires, Coco starts an affair with German businessman Mark. During the affair, they start to fall in love, but in the end, Mark returns to Germany, where his wife and children are. My main focus for this chapter will be Coco's female identity and sexual self-discovery in the newly globalized and cosmopolitan Shanghai, and the opposition between Tian Tian and Mark's masculinities. In this chapter the protagonist and main focalizer is a woman, which is a different approach and provides another perspective for my analysis of (Chinese) masculinities.

First issued in September 1999, *Shanghai Baby* "had sold at least 80.000 copies and was in its seventh printing by March 2000" (Knight 639-40), which shows its immense popularity among Chinese readers. Soon after it was banned by the government for its explicit depiction of sex and sexuality, and was labelled as 'porn' and 'spiritual pollution for the minds of the people'. The government had 40.000 copies burnt "due to both the book's perceived threat to cultural integrity and the government's uneasiness with the widespread influence brought about by such market success" (H. Lu 41). Nevertheless, its popularity kept increasing as pirated versions and unauthorized copies appeared. This 'underground' popularity sparked overseas interest, and the novel was translated and sold in many countries (Knight 640). Within China, this gave rise to criticism on the assumption that it only allured to Western media *because* it was banned by the government. Chinese critics saw the novel as "shameless commercial erotica and titillating spectacle that caters to a voyeuristic mass market interested in sexual consumerism" (H. Lu 41). Indeed, Wei Hui and other writers did make use of the demand of and interest in sexual consumerism, but they did it consciesly, using sexuality to create female agency.

Wei Hui belongs to the Chinese literary category of 'beauty writers': beautiful female authors, born in the 70s, who have not experienced the Cultural Revolution and

"by the time of their adolescence, China's modernization and open-door policy were already in full swing" (S. Lu 168). The semi-autobiographical novels typical of the beauty writers are part of a new type of women's writing that counters depictions of Chinese women as passive objects, as we, for example, have seen in *Half of Man is Woman* and *Beijing Comrades.* Beauty writers such as Wei Hui write about their urban life in a globalizing world full of sex, drugs and partying. Essential to the work of these beauty writers is what they themselves call 'body writing': "Exposing the body, the body's private parts, private sensations, and private thoughts" (S. Lu 169). Female characters are now looking at men and casting their gaze upon them. They flaunt female sexuality, the body, and seductiveness in order to construct female subjectivity, agency, and power over the male (S. Lu 176). This calls to mind the notion of what is in the West called 'post-feminism'. In her seminal article on post-feminism and popular culture, Angela McRobbie argues that from the 1990s on feminist gains from earlier years have been undermined by elements of popular culture, and tropes of freedom and choice which make feminism seem redundant (McRobbie 255). We see a 'double entanglement': "the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life […] with processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations" (McRobbie 255-56). Feminism is shown to be no longer necessary because women seem to flaunt their sexuality not by means of exploitation anymore, but "out of choice and for her own enjoyment" (McRobbie 259).

While the novel is usually analyzed in terms of female emancipation and sexuality, I on the other hand will examine it with regard to the relation between the globalizing Chinese society and masculinity. As discussed in section 1.3, throughout Chinese history, the Chinese female body as a victim of foreign men has been the centre of attention, with the passivity and impotence of Chinese men on the opposite side. In *Shanghai Baby*, this same issue is at play, but in the context of globalization and transnational relations. Through the contrasting of the characters of Tian Tian and Mark and the nationalities they seem to represent, *Shanghai Baby* seems to revolve around masculine binary oppositions such as Western-Chinese, modern-traditional and potent-impotent. In this chapter, I will examine these binary oppositions and question whether they are as absolute as they seem, or if they are complicated by the feminist stance that the novel takes. In order to do so, I will first focus on the role that globalization and cosmopolitanism play in the novel and their effect on gender and the formation of masculinity of the male characters. I will

then zoom in on the motives of potency and national identity that are connected to the male characters of Tian Tian and Mark and the opposition that is suggested between them. For this, I will first examine the fragile image of Tian Tian and what this implies, and then move on the transnational relationship of Mark and Coco.

4.1 Cosmopolitan Shanghai and Emancipation

As I mentioned earlier, from the 1980s on, China opened up to outside influences and entered the capitalist world economy. From the beginning of the novel, modernity and capitalism are connected to sexuality and masculinity, as we see in the description of Shanghai with its dazzling lights and the newly built Oriental Pearl TV Tower, "Asia's tallest" with "its long, long steel column [that] pierces the sky, proof of the city's phallic worship" (Wei 14). The cosmopolitan city of Shanghai reflects the material *and* phallic worship that are at the centre of this period. In this section, I will examine what the economic developments and globalizing society mean for the construction of gendered identity of the characters, and the emancipation of male characters in particular. First I will examine what globalization and cosmopolitanism does for Coco's sense of (gender) identity and what the effect is on her relationships with men.

The Cosmopolitan and Female Identity

Coco is rather obsessed with Western culture, which serves as an important part of her urban identity. She wears Calvin Klein underwear, listens to Vivaldi, and refers to the Titanic movie and Modigliani. Each of the thirty-eight chapters is preceded by an epigraph, citing lyrics, poems and statements of famous authors, thinkers and celebrities from the West. Examples are Marilyn Monroe, Sigmund Freud, Virginia Woolf, Milan Kundera and Henry Miller, who Coco sees as her spiritual father.

According to Hongwei Lu, Coco is "possessed by the desire to physically embody what transnational consumerist culture promises: worship of wealth; sophisticated understanding of luxurious cosmopolitan commodity and style; sexual freedom; physical allure; and so on" (H. Lu 42). Coco establishes her identity through these cultural references to show that she is a woman of the world; she is independent, can buy whatever she wants and sleep with whomever she wants. Discussing desire and agency in the works of beauty writers, Sheldon Lu explains that the female character "uses her wit, body, looks, and sexuality to seduce men, sleep with them, move into their

apartments, live off their money, and control them. Men, Chinese or foreign, become their vehicles in the pursuit of capitalist consumption and entertainment" (S. Lu 177). By breaking the silence of female desire, Coco reclaims her female agency. Other women in her surrounding do so too: her friend Madonna capitalizes on her sexuality by marrying a rich old man who – as is typical – soon dies, and leaves her a young rich widow that picks up young lovers. Coco's cousin Zhu Sha is a beautiful and successful career woman who divorces her frigid husband and starts dating a much younger sex-crazed boyfriend (H. Lu 42-43). By showing themselves to be modern, Westernized women, they establish their agency and independence.

I wonder whether this new modernity that is linked to the entering of Western culture in China is actually accompanied by female emancipation, or rather is a mere demonstration of post-feminism that hides traditional ideas of gender under the cover of female sexual freedom. Coco enjoys being sexualized, but at the same time, it evokes a feeling of discomfort in her:

> Usually the expressions of strangers looking at me half-naked gave me an instinctive sense of satisfaction, but as soon as I thought of myself as a dessert exposing myself in broad daylight I became uncontrollably angry. Feminism reared its head. What was it that made me seem so like an empty-headed Barbie doll? Those men probably couldn't guess I was a novelist who'd just shut herself in a room for seven days and seven nights, and they probably couldn't care less either. (Wei 202)

It is ambiguous: when Coco decides herself to dress up sexily, she feels empowered, but when she has no choice – in the quote above she takes a dip in a swimming pool – she feels uncomfortable, even enraged. She wants to be valued for her intellectual qualities as well. This example suggests that she not only enjoys the perks of her sexual freedom, but wants society to change as well. Globalization and Coco's cosmopolitan lifestyle thus appear to be a productive counter-normative strategy for female subjugation.

At the same time, we must keep in mind that these cultural references are not accessible to everyone in China, for Coco and her friends are part of a certain urban class, who have access to education and products. Knight argues that the Western cultural references also "mark and perhaps seek to legitimate her class privilege [and] Coco's

access to and fluency in both high culture and popular culture of the West depend on material conditions connected to the modern market economy" (Knight 646). Similar to Handong in *Beijing Comrades*, sexual power is attached to economical power. Although the Western cultural references seem to support Coco's construction of her counter-normative feminist identity, Knight argues that "they do so within a dominant political economy that often associates things Western with modernity, advancement and power" (Knight 646). Furthermore, Coco's own sexuality seems to have more freedom, contrary to Handong and Lan Yu in *Beijing Comrades*. On the streets of Shanghai, she kisses Shamir, a female German director. This broadcasts modernizing Chinese ideas on gender and sexuality, but as Coco's experience here is with a European woman, this also suggests that it is the West that brings modernity and open-mindedness to China.

To summarize, Coco's obsession with Western culture helps her in establishing a (perhaps post-feminist) independent female identity, but a hint of transnational hierarchy is present. Before I further examine this hierarchy, I will look into the effects of the globalizing Shanghainese society on notions of masculinity.

Male Liberation

For the male characters in the novel, China's globalizing society also seems to be a liberating force. In Coco's surroundings, there are men of all sexualities: heterosexual, bisexual, gay, and transgender. Coco's colleague Spider from the café where she works to earn money to support her writing chats online with 'Enchantress', who "is a girl on the net, but in real life she's a guy […] He's been thinking of having a sex-change operation for a long time" (Wei 104). Although one can wonder if this is merely a result of Western culture entering China, similar to Coco's kiss with Shamir, we have not seen this kind of male gender diversity and *acceptance* up until now.

Another example is the character of the famous stylist Flying Apple, who has both male and female lovers, has a beard and wears leather skirts and make-up: "His eye sockets were lightly shadowed, but his eyes were bright, commanding yet delicate, casting a harmonious image in which *yin* and *yang* were turned topsy-turvy (Wei 172-73). The novel initially seems to link the opposition of West/Chinese to binary/non-binary gender, but the use of the image of *yin* and *yang* further complicates this idea. Although Flying Apple demonstrates a new kind of masculinity that we haven't seen up to now, instead of explaining this in terms of Western values and openness entering Chinese society, Coco

views him in terms of traditional Chinese culture; that of *yin* and *yang*. She appreciates Flying Apple for presenting a perfect harmony of the two traditional Chinese opposites. Nevertheless, by establishing and praising the fact that Flying Apple blurs the lines of the *yin* and *yang* dichotomy, she also criticizes this traditional Confucian idea of *yang* (male) being the natural superior to *yin* (female). Tian Tian, however, "had a strange fear of bisexuals and gays, only being able to accept heterosexuals and lesbians" (Wei 257). He serves as the embodiment of traditional thought that still has to come to terms with changing values and notions of gender in particular.

Returning to changing notions of gender, Coco also sets requirements for the men she dates, in order to accompany her own cosmopolitan identity. When discussing one of her previous relationships, with a boyfriend who ended up stalking her, she describes the start of their relationship:

> My admiration for tall men is partly due to vanity, but mostly because of loathing for a pint-sized ex-boyfriend of mine. […] I don't quite remember why I fell for him. Perhaps it was his erudition or his ability to recite famous Shakespearean works in Oxford English. […] And so I turned a blind eye to his disappointing shortness and threw myself into the arms of his learned, eloquent soul (maybe all the men I ever become infatuated with will, first and foremost, be widely learned, highly talented, and passionately eloquent, with crenelated brains. I can't imagine myself falling for a man who can't cite ten proverbs, five philosophical allusion, and the names of three composers). (Wei 37)

First of all, I think it is interesting to note that Coco's discussion of her requirements are comparable to those of Chen Handong in the previous chapter on *Beijing Comrades*: she first and foremost discusses the appearance of the men she dates, their height in particular, for they will complement her well on social occasions. This does not necessarily mean that Coco is a performer of masculinity like Handong, but now that she as a woman holds a position in power, she also objectifies the opposite sex, and thereby changes the power structure, but not necessarily for the better. Then, interestingly, she feels attracted to men because of their intelligence, something Handong did not mention at all. The ex-boyfriend seems to fit into the idea of traditional *wen* men, that Kam Louie introduced, the cultured man who fulfils his sexual obligations. This boyfriend is both

intellectual and sexually potent (a 'sex maniac' actually). The difference, however, is that his intelligence is measured by his knowledge of *foreign* culture. Coco feels attracted to him because he can cite Shakespeare (in perfect Oxford English) and not, for example, Confucius. In order to fit into and strengthen her cosmopolitan identity, he has to perform the signs of a worldly man; he has to perform a globalized and cosmopolitan masculinity.

Globalization and cosmopolitan lifestyle play a crucial role in the construction of gender within the novel and are used as productive forms of liberation of gender stereotypes, both female and male. Coco and her friends perform Western identities in order to create looser norms of gender and sexuality. Women acquire (sexual) agency through a cosmopolitan identity, although sometimes by putting Western culture on a pedestal. At the same time, they create new masculine standards that men must adhere to, and establish a masculine masquerade that the male characters have perform, almost as a literal act: that of the sexually potent, intellectual *wen* man that has knowledge of high *Western* culture. I will analyze the characters of Tian Tian and Mark, their relationship with Coco and the oppositions that are suggested between them.

4.2 The East-West Dichotomy

Through Coco's relationships with Tian Tian and Mark, a clear contrast is apparent between the two men. Important for the analysis of the implied dichotomy is to note that Tian Tian and Mark can be viewed as representation for respectively Chinese and Western men. Lackner and Xu state in their discussion of the 'erotic foreigner': "Sometimes it seems as if the foreigner takes on the role of a metaphor for 'foreign' […] and the Chinese protagonists become radicalized representatives of 'Chinese culture' and its claims to self-assertion against the loved and, at the same time, hated Westernization" (Lackner 64-65). With this in mind, I consider Mark and Tian Tian the embodiments of Western (German) and Chinese masculinities. As I mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, Tian Tian is impotent, and Mark "brings [Coco] to 'real' heights" (Lackner 85). Nevertheless, Coco loves Tian Tian deeply, and it is he who taught her "that a kiss has a soul and colours all of its own" (Wei 6). Mark represents a Western potent and sexual man, while Coco's relationship with Tian Tian is based on love and a deep connection. At a retro theme party in remembrance of old Shanghai, Coco meets Mark, and "his eyes were shining in the darkness, like those of an animal lurking in the shrubbery […] Those eyes of his seemed like the epicentre of his body, and all his energy emanated from there. A white man's eyes"

(Wei 33). At the end of the night, they find Tian Tian passed out next to a urinal. Ironically, Coco meets this new 'modern' man while at the end of the night, they find Tian Tian passed out next to a urinal. At this party that focuses on old Shanghai, the 'new' conquers. The tension between the strong and sexy Mark and the sensitive, fragile Tian Tian "runs like a thread through the entire novel" (Lackner 85), and suggests a similar opposition between China and the West. In the next section, I will further examine Tian Tian's (fragile) masculinity.

Tian Tian and the Chinese Male: Effeminate or Emancipated?

Tian Tian's desirability is based on his mind rather than on his body. Tian Tian is a painter, with whom Coco discusses Tchaikovsky and Modigliani. She is attached to her Chinese lover through his intellect, spirituality and tender emotions: "My tears always fall for him, my heart always aches for him, and it's for him that my soul soars. I don't know if what we have between us is love, but it is hopelessly tragic; the purest poetic expression of doomed passion [...] (Wei 208). Above, I explained Tian Tian as the embodiment of traditional Chinese values, for he felt uncomfortable in the presence of homosexuals. At the same time, however, he fits into the traditional cultural ideal of the *wen* man, being artistic and gentle, but unable to fulfil his girlfriend's sexual desires, for he is impotent:

> When I discovered he was impotent, I was devastated, so much so that I didn't know if I could stay with him. Ever since college I had seen sex as a basic necessity (although I've since changed my mind about this).
>
> Unable to enter me, he stared at me, speechless, his whole body in a cold sweat. It was his first time with a girl in his twenty-something years.
>
> In the male world being able to perform sex normally is as important as life itself, any shortcoming is an unbearable pain. He cried, and so did I. For the rest of the night we kissed, touched and murmured to one another. I soon came to adore his sweet kiss and gentle touch. (Wei 5-6)

Later, it turns out, Tian Tian's impotency was not of a physical nature, but resulted from mental problems and depression following trauma that occurred in his family: a few months after his parents moved to Spain, his father passed away, according to Tian Tian's grandmother killed by his wife. Hongwei Lu asserts that "his impotence in the forms of

social impracticality, parasitic economic dependence, and physical handicap (drug addiction) is also reminiscent of social ineffectiveness, economic underdevelopment, and historical humiliation" (H. Lu 45). Tian Tian's impotency can once again be seen as a stereotypical depiction of weak Chinese masculinity.

In the feminist context of *Shanghai Baby* however, one could also read this as a counter-normative depiction of men that shows that they can also suffer from psychological problems, and stay at home while his girlfriend is the breadwinner. When Coco works on her novel, Tian Tian takes care of her: "Tian Tian trod softly in the apartment, poured Suntory soda for me, prepared fruit salad with Mother's Choice salad dressing for me, gave me Dove chocolate bars for inspiration, chose discs which were stimulating but not distracting, and adjusted the level of the air conditioning" (Wei 27). Tian Tian's looking after Coco may seem to contribute to this effeminate image, as presented by Lu, and combined with his impotency this is a reasonable assumption.

There are other signs that hint at Tian Tian's weak masculinity, for instance his dependence on Coco:

> Tian Tian is from a different species to my earlier men. He was a foetus soaking in formaldehyde who owed his life to unadulterated love, and his death was inextricably linked to that love. [...] Perhaps my love grew from how much he needed, that was how much I provided. Tian Tian needed my existence like he needed oxygen and water, and our love was a bizarre crystal formed by the oppressive atmosphere which surrounded us. (Wei 79)

This bizarre image shows that Coco feels pressure for staying with Tian Tian; he cannot go without her. And indeed, when Coco does not come home for a few nights because she spends time with Mark before he returns to Germany, he relapses, which eventually leads to him overdosing and dying. Tian Tian does not serve as an object of desire for Coco (like Mark) and she does not use him to move up the social or professional ladder. She merely views him as something that is in need of her care. Moreover, this might be read as a metaphor: when all the attention is focussed on the West, the Chinese legacy will slowly pine away. This image of Tian Tian as a dependent foetus is extended when Coco describes his relation with his mother, and connects his mental problems to her:

> But I'd always understood that Tian Tian's rootless existence, filled with lost souls and dark shadows, was fatally linked to her. Their relationship was a rotting umbilical cord linking the infant to its mother's womb forever […] Mother, son, smoke, death, terror, indifference, grief – everything hung together, there was cause and effect, like the Buddhists' eternally revolving Wheel of Transmigration. (Wei 223-24)

Here, Sun Longji's theory on wombnization comes to mind, that I discussed in Chapter One. According to Coco, Tian Tian's dark and depressed emotions are the result of his connection with his mother. For Sun, Chinese men are incapable of being independent and maintaining social (heterosexual) relations because they are too closely connected to their mother. They have to de-wombnize; cut the figurative umbilical cord in order to move on. As Zhong explains, for Sun, modernization means Westernization (Zhong 2000: 31). Because Tian Tian is presented as the embodiment of tradition, first of all by being Chinese, and also non-capitalist and homophobic, he is presented by Coco as being behind on modernization and subsequently Westernization. It is almost as if Coco herself also has to detach herself from Tian Tian in order to move on. On the other hand, the wombnization of Tian Tian suggest that his mother is the source of his impotency: she is the castrating female, also keeping in mind that she is appointed as the one who killed her husband. The trope of female threat in terms of a woman that paralyses male libido with active sexual desire is not applied to Coco, as one might think, but to Tian Tian's mother.

To conclude, in *Shanghai Baby,* Mark and Tian Tian act as opposing embodiments of Western and Chinese masculinity. The rather stereotypical depiction shows Mark as a strong and (sexually) potent man and Tian Tian as a weak and impotent Chinese man. One may wonder however if this image of Tian Tian as a fragile but intellectual man fits into the traditional Chinese notion of the *wen* man. Although he is praised for his sensitive character, overall Tian Tian is depicted as weak and he does not have the power that a *wen* man would have despite – or even thanks to – his softer character. When viewed in the feminist context of the novel, Tian Tian's dependency and caring personality can be read as the shattering of gender stereotypes and the emancipation of both men and women. The depiction of Tian Tian's masculinity is thus rather complex and open to multiple interpretations. The novel itself and the choices Coco makes are therefore complicated, for on the one hand, she wants a man like Tian Tian, but on the other hand

she desires a strong Western male like Mark. In the following part, I will dive into Coco's transnational relationship with Mark and analyze what meanings can be derived from it.

4.3 Transnational Fetishization

As I discussed in the previous chapter, in the late 1980s and 1990s men no longer felt castrated by the socialist system. However, a new phenomenon undermined their masculine identity and feeling of power: the relationships of Chinese women with Western men. Brownell discusses that "the gendered nature of international relations became increasingly obvious" (Brownell 227), for it was merely the Chinese women who were on the international marriage and sex market. In *Shanghai Baby*, Coco discusses this phenomenon, which she describes when partying at YY's Bar in Shanghai:

> There were plenty of fair-haired foreigners, and lots of Chinese women, their tiny waistlines and silky black hair their selling points. […] Of course, some were prostitutes who specialised in the international market. They often wear their hair incredibly long (the better for the foreign devil to admire his Asian woman's magical hair when she's pressed close beneath him and he's in sexual ecstasy). (Wei 82)

Coco is aware of the commercialization of sex that has developed with the opening up of Chinese society to foreign trade and is critical of the orientalist view on Chinese women. Again, similar to *Beijing Comrades*, in the reformed society, sexuality and sex are seen as commodities, but this time on the international market.

Mutual Exoticism

In Coco's own relationship with Mark something similar can be noticed. Apart from all the Western references, the only Chinese cultural reference that is found in the novel is *pingtan*: a traditional musical/oral performance from the city of Suzhou. When Mark and Coco sleep together for the first time, Mark states that "it's the best music to make love to" (Wei 70). The *pingtan* is thus only played on the initiative of the foreign man, Mark. When having sexual intercourse with Chinese women, Mark listens to traditional Chinese music, which suggests a connection between her and the 'exotic' Chinese culture and adds an orientalist aspect to their relationship. This, however, is not criticized by Coco, contrarily

to the sexualized cliché image of other Chinese women. On top of that, Coco's own attraction to Mark is itself interestingly enough based upon a fantasy and fetishization of the West and the European male, with his 'golden hair' and 'Nordic eyes': "I leaned my head against Mark's shoulder, and smelled both a flowery fragrance and a hint of body odour from the vast lands of Northern Europe. The exotic scents of his body were perhaps the most moving thing about him" (Wei 113). Coco finds his scent 'exotic', and similar to the shiny black hair of the women in YY's Bar, she admires Mark's 'golden hair': she now applies the fetishization of the Other that she herself earlier problematized and criticized to Mark. The only difference might be that there is another power structure at play, for she looks up to the West and its modernity.

Similar to Chen Handong in *Beijing Comrades*, Mark – whose name casually overlaps with that of the historical German currency, as Lu sharply notes – demonstrates how sex and money are intertwined. This is comically demonstrated when Mark tells Coco about "the time when he had just begun learning Chinese and kept confusing the word for 'wallet' with 'foreskin'" (Wei 110). Not only economic power and sexual power are connected; transnational hierarchy also plays a major role, as we have seen above in her description of foreign men ogling Chinese women who are in their turn looking for a Western man to upgrade their economic situation. Moreover, Coco repeatedly compares Shanghai in the new era to a neo-colonial and imperial situation.

For Coco, Mark's foreignness plays a key part in her attraction to him. His successful career as the chief representative of the Shanghai branch of a German-owned investment consulting firm confirms his economic potency, and, this is easily linked to his sexual potency: Coco repeatedly mentions his 'huge organ'. Hongwei Lu argues that the Western lover is not merely a body, but has become a strategic site of power relations "because the body specific to the modern period is linked to the growth and establishment of bourgeois hegemony" (H. Lu 44). Hence, Coco and Mark's transnational relationship creates an unequal power relation that at the same serves as the basis of their mutual attraction.

Social Emancipation versus Sexual Domination

When Coco describes her sexual encounters with Mark, the link to imperialism is evident:

> I imagined what he would look like in high boots and a leather coat, and what kind of cruelty would show in those Nordic blue eyes. These thoughts increased my excitement. 'Every woman adores a Fascist/The boot in the face, the brute/Brute heart of a brute like you…' wrote Sylvia Plath. I closed my eyes and listened to him moan a sentence or two in indistinct German, sounds from my dreams that struck the most sensitive part of my womb. (Wei 71)

First of all, the choice for 'womb' seems strange, as the relation with her Chinese lover is also associated with the womb, a body part that is linked to bearing children and thus family, while her relation with Mark is rather sexual. Here, Coco willingly subjugates herself to German power, even finds it attractive. The quote from Sylvia Plath's poem *Daddy*, in which Plath makes short work of her father, by creating an image of him using several metaphors, describing her struggles with him, and eventually killing him, serves as an ambiguous reference. Interestingly, when first reading about a fascist brute and immediately continuing to describe Mark's German moans, a connection to Nazi Germany is quickly made. The ambiguity, to me, lies in the fact that for Coco, this 'increases her excitement'. The authoritarianism that I associate with fascism, and the domination of Western forces that Coco seems to enjoy make me unsure whether she applauds the Western – or German in particular – interference in China or not. At the same time, when read in a bitterly sarcastic way, she might be commenting on women allowing themselves to be dominated by these men. Then, both women – including Coco herself – and the brutes they love are criticized.

To summarize, Coco's desire for Mark and his sexual potency, in association with transnational capitalism, is driven by the attraction of Marks "symbolic power as an icon of the global capitalist elite" (H. Lu 44), and the affair is reminiscent of China's colonial legacy (S. Lu 173). In my opinion, as she embodies an ambiguous attitude towards him, Coco's relation to Mark "functions both as historical xenophobia and contemporary fetish" (H. Lu 46). Coco's desire for social emancipation is undermined by her (subconscious) sexual desires. Sexually, she cannot detach herself from the desire for a strong and potent Western man. With this in mind, we can see an ambiguity that appears to be intrinsic to this novel; her sexual desire can be recognized as an expression of her liberation and modernization, but at the same time Coco seems attached to her subjugated position.

4.4 Conclusion

The globalizing and cosmopolitan society of Shanghai plays an important role in the construction of notions of gender and masculinity in particular. Coco and her female friends use Western culture and their sexuality to form their new worldly identity, subjectivity and agency. For the male characters, norms for the performance of masculinity have loosened, but new standards are introduced as well. The fragile intellectual Tian Tian and the sensual, potent golden haired Mark suggest an opposition between China and the West and demonstrate a "deep-seated popular assumption and a stereotypical characterization that has origins historically rooted in the semi-colonial past of China" (H. Lu 46) of the emasculated Chinese male and hypersexualized Western man.

However, the standard interpretation of the novel is more complex than it seems, and the characters, Coco and Tian Tian in particular, lend themselves for a more subtle interpretation. The idea that Western means liberation and sexual freedom is subverted, for although Coco's character seems to suggest that women are now emancipated because of their freedom to use their sexuality, when you dig deeper, it will actually show that she is not liberated from thinking in binary oppositions that puts the West in a superior position. Sexually, she cannot detach herself from exoticizing views and desire for a strong and potent man. My analysis thus shows that the novel suggests that sexuality and sexual desire are not always autonomic expressions, and that it problematizes the notion that beauty writers merely approach sexuality from a commercialized perspective.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The three novels I have discussed demonstrate how gender performance, sexuality and ideology are complexly intertwined. In my first analysis, *Half of Man is Woman* shows that the masculinity of the protagonist Yonglin as the embodiment of intellectual Chinese men is shaped through political and sexual repression and confinement that evoked a feeling of emasculation and (sexual) impotency. Central to the construction of his masculinity is the attempt to re-establish this weakened masculine identity, by overcoming hierarchical inter-male relations with his superiors and returning to traditional, patriarchal notions of gender that use the female other as the site of men's struggle.

The period following Mao's death was characterized by radical changes in society, in particular in terms of economic power. My analysis of *Beijing Comrades* shows that masculinity during these years took on a new form: the ideal of entrepreneurial masculinity arose, that is based on economic and accompanying sexual power, and the commodification and consumption of bodies and sex. This entrepreneurial ideal defines how masculinity is constructed in relation to women, who are objectified and inferiorized, but I have shown that this ideal also structures same-sex relations, for they are pestered by heteronormative and conservative ideas on masculinity. Although homosexuality does not fit into the entrepreneurial- and more traditional Chinese ideals of masculinity, within his relationship, Handong wants himself and Lan Yu to perform according to entrepreneurial masculinity. They have a traditional division of gender roles, where Handong is the dominant male, and Lan Yu the female. Handong can only break with these ideas when he breaks with the structuring force of the ideal of entrepreneurial masculinity.

Shanghai Baby shows that in the late 1990s, commercializing of bodies and sexuality continues, but this time in order to create female agency. Globalization, cosmopolitanism and entering Western culture loosened norms of gender and thus masculinity, but at the same time set new gendered ideals. Although the novel seems to structure masculinities based on a series of binary oppositions such as East-West, traditional-modern and impotent-potent, by opposing Coco's lovers Tian Tian and Mark, when viewed from a feminist or traditional Chinese perspective, these oppositions prove to be rather complex. Despite Coco's feminist quest for emancipation and her awareness of orientalism and negative aspects of globalization that remind her of imperial Shanghai, her relationship with Mark, is based on mutual fetishization and (subconscious) desire

for a strong and potent man. In addition, the depiction of Tian Tian as a – now all too familiar – weak and impotent Chinese man shows that the novel (and Coco) cannot completely detach itself from thinking in stereotypical binary oppositions.

How Chinese masculinities are constructed is intrinsically connected to the specific historical, political and economic context. But overall similarities can be recognized: men struggling with a masculine performance that has to meet society's expectations, and thinking of gender and masculinities solely in terms of binary oppositions, for example. Key to the sense of crisis and the deep-seated concern for weak and effeminate masculinities is the underlying and crucial link between the nation and masculinity, for the condition and power position of the nation and its national identity hinges on the strength of masculinities. What has become evident is that in the search for potent masculinity, the novels and their characters all return to patriarchal hegemonic masculinity, thereby restoring the objectified and subjugated position of women. In this way, masculine norms are questioned but never really changed.

Bibliography

Alphen, Ernst van. "Masculinity." *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*. London: Reaktion, 1992. 164-192.

Bao, Hongwei. "Haunted Chinese Gay Identity: Sexuality, Masculinity, and Class in Beijing Story." *The Cosmopolitan Dream: Transnational Chinese Masculinities in a Global Age*. Ed. Derek Hird and Song Geng. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018. 73-86.

Baranovitch, Nimrod. *China's New Voices: Popular Music, Ethnicity, Gender, and Politics, 1978-1997*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books, 1973.

Bei, Tong. *Beijing Comrades*. Vert. Scott E. Myers. New York: First Feminist Press, 2016 (1998).

Berry, Michael. *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*. New York: Columbia UP, 2008.

Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Brownell, Susan. "Gender and Nationalism in China at the Turn of the Millenium." *China Briefing 2000: The Continuing Transformation*. Ed. Tyrene White. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2000. 195-232.

Bryson, Norman. "Géricault and "Masculinity"." *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*. Ed. Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England for Wesleyan University Press, 1994. 228-259.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

—. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

—. "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex." *Yale French Studies* Simone de Beauvoir: Witness to a Century.No. 72 (1986): 35-49.

Fang, Jincai. *The Crisis of Emasculation and the Restoration of Patriarchy in the Fiction of Chinese Contemporary Male Writers Zhang Xianliang, Mo Yan and Jia Pingwa*. The University of British Columbia (Canada): ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2004.

Foucault, Michel. *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. Penguin Books, 1991.

Gardiner, Judith Kegan. "Introduction." *Masculinity Studies & Feminist Theory: New Directions*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. 1-29.

Keijser, Anne Sytske. "Review." *China Information* 3.3 (1986).

Kimmel, Michael. *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopedia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Knight, Deirdre Sabina. "Shanghai Cosmopolitan: Class, Gender and Cultural Citizenship in Weihui's Shanghai Babe." *Journal of Contemporary China* (2003): 639-653.

Lackner, Michael and Yan Xu. "The Erotic Foreigner: Five Narratives from Contemporary Chinese Literature." *Aiatische Studien: Zeitschrift Der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft* 60.1 (2006): 63-99.

Lei, Jun. *Bodies, Emotions and Feminine Space: The Changing Femininities and Masculinities in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Culture*. UC San Diego, 2015.

Louie, Kam. *Theorising Chinese Masculinities: Society and Gender in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Lu, Hongwei. "Body-Writing: Shanghai Baby's Love Affair with Transnational Capitalism." *Chinese Literature Today* 1.1 (2010): 41-46.

Lu, Sheldon H. *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2007.

McRobbie, Angela. „Post-feminism and Popular Culture." *Feminist Media Studies* 4.3 (2004): 255-264.

Plain, Gill. *John Mills and British Cinema: Masculinity, Identity and Nation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. Penguin Books, 1979.

Scott, Joan. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *The American Historical Review* 91.5 (1986): 1053-1075.

Sedgwick, Eve K. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

Su, Lezhou. *Narrative of Modern Chinese Masculinity in Ha Jin's Fiction*. University of Louisville: ProQuest Dissertation Publishing, 2012.

Tam, Kwok-kan and Terry Siu-han Yip. *Gender, Discourse and the Self in Literature: Issues in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2010.

Tam, Kwok-kan. "Sexuality and Power in Zhang Xianliang's Novel "Half of Man is Woman." *Modern Chinese Literature* 5.1 (Spring 1989): 55-72.

Vitiello, Giovanni. "China: Ancient to Modern." McCallum, E.L and Mikko Tuhkanen. *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014. 125-142.

Wei, Hui. *Shanghai Baby*. Vert. Bruce Humes. London: Robinson, 2002 (1999).

Zhang, Xianliang. *Half of Man is Woman*. Vert. Martha Avery. London: Viking, 1988 (1985).

Zheng, Tiantian. „Entrepreneurial Masculinity, Health, and the State in Post-Socialist China." *International Journal of Men's Health* 11.1 (2012): 3-21.

—. "Masculinity in Crisis: Effeminate Men, Loss of Manhood, and the Nation-state in Postsocialist China." *Etnográfica Revista do Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia* 19 (2) (2015): 347-365.

Zhong, Xueping. "Male Suffering and Male Desire: The Politics of Reading 'Half of Man is Woman' by Zhang Xianliang." *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State*. Ed. Christina K. Gilmartin, et al. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994.

—. *Masculinity Besieged? Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of Late Twentieth Century*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

—. "Who Is a Feminist? Understanding the Ambivalence towards Shanghai Baby, 'Body Writing' and Feminism in Post-Women's Liberation China." *Gender & History* 18.3 (2006): 635-660.