

Cultivating "Masculinity": Where Does China's Anxiety about Masculinity Come From?

Qinxuan Zhu^{1,a,*}

¹*Northwest Catholic High School, West Hartford, CT, 06117, USA*

a. communication@nwcath.org

**corresponding author*

Abstract: China's Education Minister recently called for educating teenagers to be "masculine" by highlighting the "crisis of masculinity." This paper intends to examine the causes and impact of this initiative by exploring the cultural and societal factors. Drawing on academic literature, media reports, and government policy documents, the paper identifies the main causes of anxiety in China about masculinity from two perspectives: 1) The increasing participation of Chinese women in the workplace and 2) The trend of feminization and its relationship to collectivism. Finally, the paper discusses the negative consequences of overemphasizing the "crisis of masculinity" in China, particularly on mental health issues, domestic violence, and gender stereotypes. This paper offers insights into promoting a more diverse and inclusive gender-equal society.

Keywords: China, masculinity, crisis

1. Introduction

Masculinity has been discussed among scholars, social scientists and the public over centuries. Connell points out that masculinity are not congenital but, instead, is produced in an acquired social culture with four types of masculinity: "hegemonic (or dominant)", "subordinate", "complicit", and "marginal" [1]. Analyzing the sources and characteristics of dominant masculinity used by contemporary humans based on Cornell's classification, Bederman found that Western mainstream masculinity has evolved significantly [2]. In the 1880s, many middle-class men began to find rugged working-class masculinity extremely attractive, and with the power struggle between different social classes, the "rough working-class masculinity" eventually took the stage and later became the hegemonic masculinity of the West [2].

The development of Chinese masculinity follows the same path. In traditional Chinese culture, masculinity is given high value and importance, and also is called *yang*, which is associated with masculine traits such as bravery, perseverance, decisiveness, strong decision-making power [3]. With the development of Chinese society, the image of masculinity has gradually undergone significant changes. By comparing the image of masculinity in the pre-2000 and post-2000 periods, researchers found that "users of crude language" and "rough" were always considered part of masculinity, while "smart", "confident", and "subtlety" no longer belong to men only, but are becoming common traits for both sexes [4]. However, only some see this change as a good symbol. Without traditional masculinity and with new symbols of male power, contemporary masculinity is seen as "emasculated" by some older generations, pointing to a crisis of masculinity [5]. The Chinese government is

overwhelmed to deal with this new change. In the latest education proposal, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China emphasized the need to focus on cultivating students' masculinity to countenance the “crisis” of masculinity [6].

The “crisis” of masculinity refers to a period of difficulty, insecurity, and uncertainty, mainly in the political or business sphere, but also in other areas of social life for men [5]. This sense of crisis creates anxiety that affects not only the personal lives and psychological health of Chinese men, but also has a profound impact on society as a whole [7]. Therefore, this paper aims to explore in depth the roots of the masculinity crisis in China and to explore the links between social change, indicators of crisis, and the broader meaning of masculinity.

2. Masculinity “Crisis”

2.1. The Increasing Participation of Women in the Chinese Economy

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, women have been given unprecedented development opportunities. Mao Zedong, the first president, mentioned in his gender-neutral policy:

Women in the People’s Republic of China enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of life, political, economic, cultural and social, including family life. The state protects the rights and interests of women, applies the principle of equal pay for equal work for men and women alike and trains and selects cadres from among women.

Men reacted differently to the gender-neutral policy. Some accepted the changes and began to help with traditionally female tasks such as shopping, cooking, and laundry [8]. Others felt a sense of crisis that traditional masculinity was being challenged as never before as the status of women increased.

In terms of wealth, men are often considered as the owners of most of the wealth, and the amount of wealth they occupy directly affects their self-confidence and their family and social status [9]. According to the norms of masculinity, a man's ability to fulfill the role of bread-winner is an essential criterion for judging his masculinity and his position of authority in the family [10]. However, some scholars claim that women deprive men of work and that the nation pays the price of inefficient labor as women enter the labor market [10]. This, in turn, leaves many men feeling powerless because they are unable to maintain the role of bread-winner [11]. Once men are unable to take on the responsibility of being the bread-winner, their masculinity encounters stress.

Yang discusses the “crisis” of masculinity among a group of men laid off after the restructuring of state-owned enterprises. Informed individuals included male workers who had "lost both their livelihoods and the masculinity associated with lifelong employment" [12]. In a society that promotes men as bread-winners, male unemployment is subject to more pressure than female unemployment, often from disappointment and opposition from family and friends [13]; at the same time, male unemployment is seen as more of a problem than female unemployment by both spouses [13]. It is believed that the state deprives men of their masculinity and their privileges are replaced by women [14]. For men, the influx of women increases market competition and indirectly causes males’ mass unemployment. As a result, men complain about losing masculinity associated with lifelong employment. This loss of livelihood and masculinity leads to social instability that is reflected in unemployed men [12].

2.2. The Trend of Feminization and Its Relationship to Collectivism

With the development of the Internet era in recent years, the popularity of a group of influential celebrities who take the "(feminine) beauty" route has unknowingly entered the critical view of mainstream public opinion [15]. Among them, the Japanese and Korean trend has gradually monopolized the idol market of Chinese teenagers for a long time [15]. Most of these people have undeniable "femininity" traits: heavy makeup, skinny, etc. The effeminacy of masculinity has become

an uncontrollable trend. According to the Research Report on Consumption Trends of Male Groups, the growth rate of men's lipstick consumption among cosmetics reached 278% [16]. Furthermore, some critics have listed the specific manifestations of feminization in school boys, including atrophy, dependence, quietness, fear of movement, timidity, lack of adventure, and low self-confidence [17].

In China, discussions of gender roles cannot be separated from the idea of collectivism, which implies that discussions surrounding individuals, including their gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, have been closely linked with the construction of the modern nation-state [18]. As a result, individual behavior can easily be seen as a reflection of the nation and the state. With this ideology, the education and training of men and women become an important part of the governance of the state [19]. For example, in the period of external and internal turmoil during the late Qing dynasty, the government created a number of paradigms for the young to inspire nationalism: the young men represented hope, and therefore, the transformation of the young men became a preparation for the transformation of the nation and the state [20]. This idea has spread to these days, and most people in China still identify men (especially young men) as tough men who carry the burden of the nation [21]. To mainstream critics, "being a real man" means rejecting everything that has to do with femininity [22]. As they always have been, parents are taught that men should not cry and represent a powerful image of the nation [23].

China treats the tendency of feminization of masculinity negatively. In Szeff's proposal, he said he observed that Chinese teenagers have weakness, low self-esteem and timidity, which he called the "feminization" of boys, lamenting that boys no longer want to be war heroes and warned that this trend could endanger the Chinese nation [17]. Following years, China's broadcasting regulator issued a "restriction on femininity" order: the media began to mosaic earrings worn by male celebrities, in addition to censoring elements related to LGBT symbols in the show [6].

3. The Negative Effects of Masculinity "Crisis"

The previous analysis shows that the main sources of anxiety about masculinity in China stem from the challenge of women to the men's hegemonic economic position and the trend of feminization. The suggestions of educating boys masculinity may alleviate the current anxiety, but its actual adversely affects far outweigh the benefits it can bring.

When masculinity is in crisis and challenged, in addition to passive acceptance, residual masculine instincts cause loss, resentment, and anxiety, which in turn trigger reaction force to preserve their masculine identity [24]. This transformation implies "an overcompensation of aggressive tendencies and an endless quest for victory and status" [25]. Stubborn adherence to specific socialized norms of masculinity awareness can affect men's health. Sedleir suggests that a male environment that places a heavy emphasis on masculinity can be detrimental to the mental health of men [26]. Similarly, men who suppress their emotions to conform to societal expectations of masculinity will increase risky behaviors such as alcohol abuse and domestic violence [27]. According to the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), domestic violence occurred in 30% of the 270 million Chinese households in 2005 [28]. Of these, 90% of the perpetrators were men, and the main form of domestic violence is husband to wife, and of all domestic violence between husbands and wives, 85% of the victims are women. For these men, the family is the only territory where they retain their masculinity [29]. Therefore, they beat their wives and children to show that they are responsible, at least in the family.

Many men are not only being confined by traditional masculinity, but also risk putting themselves in dangerous situations. The worship of violent power is also influenced by collective masculinity that involves the honor system, in which men check each other's "masculinity" [30]. Therefore, traditional masculinity tends to isolate those unconventional elements challenging its core image. Kimmel, a masculinity researcher who explored the many ways in which mainstream masculinity in the United States, noted that the rejection and suppression of "femininity" lead men to grow up as

isolated individuals: not knowing how to express their true feelings, not being able to reveal their weaknesses, not knowing how to the relationship with others eventually leads to various problems in psychology and life [31]. Therefore, over-emphasis on masculinity is actually detrimental to the integration of this diversity of masculinity and can create a certain stereotype. `

4. Conclusion

The anxiety about masculinity in China comes from the fact that traditional mainstream masculinity is being challenged as society changes. However, the term "crisis" is clearly misused. First, traditional masculinity is dangerous [32]. It stigmatizes and rejects traits and behaviors that are different from this type and associates them with the "bad", "abnormal", and "unhealthy" categories [33]. Second, traditional masculinity harms not only boys and men, but also girls and women, transgender people, and society at large [32]. This paper insists that China's approach to dealing with such anxiety creates problems. Instead, embracing a diverse image of masculinity is the only way to prove that society is healthy. How China should promote diverse masculinities through education, economics, and politics requires further research and experimentation in the future.

References

- [1] Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). *Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept*. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829–859.
- [2] Bederman, G. (2008). *Manliness and civilization: A cultural history of gender and race in the United States, 1880-1917*. University of Chicago Press.
- [3] Louie, K. (2014). *Chinese masculinities in a globalizing world*. Routledge.
- [4] Jankowiak, W., & Li, X. (2014). *The decline of the chauvinistic model of Chinese masculinity: A research report*. *Chinese Sociological Review*, 46(4), 3–18.
- [5] Morgan, D. (2006). *The crisis in masculinity*. *Handbook of Gender and Women's Studies*, 109–124.
- [6] *China to teach masculinity to boys because of changing gender roles*. (2021, March 5). NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-proposes-teaching-masculinity-boys-state-alarmed-changing-gender-roles-n1258939>
- [7] Zheng, T. (2015). *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), 347–365.
- [8] Da, W.-W. (2004). *A regional tradition of gender equity: Shanghai men in Sydney, Australia*. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 12(2), 133–149.
- [9] Connell, R. (2020). *The social organization of masculinity*. In *Feminist Theory Reader* (pp. 192–200). Routledge.
- [10] Sun, L. 1994. *Congjian xingbie jue se guanxi [Reconstructing Gender Roles and Relation]* *Shehuixue Yanjiu [Studies in Sociology]* 9(6): 65–68.
- [11] Li, X. 1995. 'Nannü pingdeng': *zai zhongguo shehui shijian zhong de shi yu de [Gender Equality: Losses and Gains in Social Practices in China]*. *Shehuixue Yanjiu [Studies in Sociology]* 10(1): 92–97.
- [12] Yang, J. (2010). *The crisis of masculinity: Class, gender, and kindly power in post-Mao China*. *American Ethnologist*, 37(3), 550–562.
- [13] Gonalons-Pons, P., & Gangl, M. (2021). *Marriage and masculinity: male-breadwinner culture, unemployment, and separation risk in 29 countries*. *American Sociological Review*, 86(3), 465-502.
- [14] Zhong, X. (2000). *Masculinity besieged?: Issues of modernity and male subjectivity in Chinese literature of the late twentieth century*. Duke University Press.
- [15] Maliangkay, R., & Song, G. (2014). *A sound wave of effeminacy: K-pop and the male beauty ideal in China*. In *K-pop—The international rise of the Korean music industry* (pp. 164–177). Routledge.
- [16] *Suning Finance*. (2019). *Research report on consumption trends of male groups [in Chinese]*.
- [17] *China National Defense Newspaper*. (2018). *Chinese teenagers shouldn't get rid of their masculinity [in Chinese]*.
- [18] Marshall, T. C. (2008). *Cultural differences in intimacy: The influence of gender-role ideology and individualism—collectivism*. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 25(1), 143–168.
- [19] Zhang, J., Mandl, H., & Wang, E. (2011). *The effect of vertical–horizontal individualism–collectivism on acculturation and the moderating role of gender*. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(1), 124–134.
- [20] Ng, W. C. (1999). *The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945-80: The pursuit of identity and power*. UBC Press.

- [21] Louie, K. (2012). *Popular culture and masculinity ideals in East Asia, with special reference to China*. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 71(4), 929–943.
- [22] Zhu, G., Zhang, A., Cheng, L., Shi, K., & Wang, Y. (2022). “Saving Our Boys!”: Do Chinese Boys Have a Masculinity Crisis? *ECNU Review of Education*, 20965311221113590.
- [23] Lin, X., & Mac an Ghaill, M. (2019). Shifting discourses from boy preference to boy crisis: Educating boys and nation building in neoliberal China. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 40(3), 281–293.
- [24] Breitenberg, M. (1996). *Anxious masculinity in early modern England (Vol. 10)*. Cambridge University Press.
- [25] Zhang, J., Mandl, H., & Wang, E. (2011). The effect of vertical–horizontal individualism–collectivism on acculturation and the moderating role of gender. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(1), 124–134.
- [26] Seidler, Z. E., Dawes, A. J., Rice, S. M., Oliffe, J. L., & Dhillon, H. M. (2016). The role of masculinity in men’s help-seeking for depression: A systematic review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 49, 106–118.
- [27] Seidler, Z. E., Rice, S. M., Ogrodniczuk, J. S., Oliffe, J. L., Shaw, J. M., & Dhillon, H. M. (2019). Men, masculinities, depression: Implications for mental health services from a Delphi expert consensus study. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 50(1), 51.
- [28] Yan, L. and W. Han. 2008. “The Issue of Preventing Domestic Violence from the Perspective of the Social Work Profession: A Case of Domestic Violence against Women.” *Legal System and Society* 10(b): 220–221.
- [29] Campbell, C. (1992). Learning to kill? Masculinity, the family and violence in Natal. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18(3), 614–628.
- [30] Spaaij, R. (2008). Men like us, boys like them: Violence, masculinity, and collective identity in football hooliganism. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 32(4), 369–392.
- [31] Kimmel, M. S. (2018). The contemporary “crisis” of masculinity in historical perspective. In *The making of masculinities* (pp. 121–153). Routledge.
- [32] O’neil, J. M. (2015). *Men’s gender role conflict: Psychological costs, consequences, and an agenda for change*. American Psychological Association.
- [33] Rubin, G. S. (2002). *Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality*. In *Culture, Society and Sexuality A Reader* (pp. 143–178). Routledge.