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Xueping Zhong. Masculinity besieged? : issues of modernity and male subjectivity in Chinese literature of the late twentieth century

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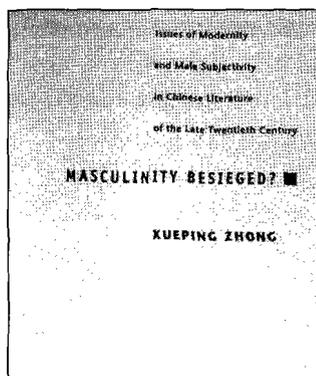
Masculinity Besieged?: Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late Twentieth Century. By Xueping Zhong. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000. 208 pp. ISBN 0822324067(Cloth); ISBN 0822324423 (Paperback).

Shortly into *Masculinity Besieged?: Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late Twentieth Century*, one realizes that the question mark in the book's title is largely meant to be rhetorical. There is little doubt in the author's mind that Chinese masculinity indeed was under siege—and not just in the 1980s, but throughout the twentieth century. What the penultimate decade of the twentieth century witnessed was but another attack of male anxiety over masculinity, which the author argues—quite convincingly—is symptomatic of a larger and deep-seated uneasiness over potency both sexual and cultural, or the lack thereof. As the author sees it, long before Zhang Xianliang, Liu Heng, Han Shaogong, Yu Hua, and Wang Shuo obsessed over enervated masculinity (*vis-à-vis* women), marginalization (*vis-à-vis* the state) and the search for the (male) self in the 1980s, their May Fourth predecessors, Lu Xun and Yu Dafu, were already exploring issues of “modern (male) subjectivity” six decades earlier. Furthermore, building on others' work, the author links the emergence of the “problematic writing self” in May Fourth literature to “China's century-long struggle to come to terms with modernity” (21).

郁達夫

錢鍾書 圍城

Less clear is how Qian Zhongshu's *Weicheng* fits into the author's thesis, apart from the “convenient . . . coincidental use of the word ‘besieged’ in the English translation of the title”—to use the author's own words (21). For Zhong, what is under siege in *Weicheng* is not so much the protagonist's marriage as “himself” (23) (or his self?). In Zhong's interpretation the end of the novel acquires special significance because the image of the slow clock reveals a sense of belatedness indicative of the general plight of China and Chinese intellectuals:



Symbolically, this belatedness becomes a sign of male uncertainty (hence weakness); it echoes the dilemma of the Chinese modern condition as it is perceived by Chinese intellectuals: time has never been on the side of China's quest for modernity. Temporally, China always seems to lag "behind" (hence, is "backward") or suffers from bad timing. (24)

If this reading sounds somewhat schematic—if not altogether allegorical, which the author very cogently argues against—it is because it is not immediately obvious how the protagonist of *Weicheng* belongs to the same company as Ah Q, the "I" in Yu Dafu's "Chenlan," or their innumerable male progeny in the 1980s. It would seem that, of all the male characters in modern Chinese literature, Fang Hongjian is perhaps the most comfortable with both tradition and modernity, China and the West, being able to keep an ironic distance from both. One suspects that Fang Hongjian's quandary is of a different sort from that which incapacitates Ah Q and Yu Dafu's first person narrator or their descendants. On the contrary, Fang Hongjian seems remarkably free of any complexes of sexual and cultural insecurity that beset his male counterparts before or after him. Zhong's shift in emphasis, from the psycho-spatial dimension of the metaphor of a fortress under siege to the psycho-temporal dimension of the metaphor of a slow clock, remains to be justified.

方鴻漸

However, such quibbling aside, the central question in *Masculinity Besieged* is without a doubt a valid and important one. The author asks,

In what ways is Chinese modernity, especially Chinese male intellectuals' quest for it, closely related to the changing male positions in modern China, and how have such changes affected the formation of Chinese modernity and the trajectory of China's quest for it and, by extension, the subject positions of male intellectuals? (3)

Insofar as the book highlights "the gendered identity" of Chinese male intellectuals, it joins an expanding body of critical works examining the intersections between gender and a host of other cultural and political issues in the Chinese context. Much of the

interest and value of *Masculinity Besieged* derives from the author's focus on the triangular relationship among modernity, men, and masculinity. By using this gendered approach, others before Zhong have succeeded, for instance, in exposing the paternalistic—if not downright patriarchal—nature of Chinese male intellectuals' attitude towards women, even as it appears to be a sympathetic one. Similarly, by eschewing a narrowly allegorical analysis, *Masculinity Besieged* yields valuable insights into the dynamics between what the author calls “sexual and textual politics” (9).

Following Adorno's thinking via Martin Jay, the author acknowledges the interplay between history and subjectivity, but does not see the former as determinative of the latter. The individual is as much “the source of one's own destiny and . . . as [sic] passive object of domination, the plaything of an other to whose will one is ‘subjected’” (quoted from Jay; 8). This is why the author finds historical/allegorical interpretations of the reemergence of (male) sexuality in post-Mao literature inadequate. It is not enough to see such texts as Zhang Xianliang's *Nanren de yiban shi nüren* and Liu Heng's *Dong zhi men* as reactions against the desexualizing and dehumanizing discourses of the PRC. To do so is to ignore the conjunction between the desire to recover masculinity and the desire to reinvigorate the Chinese nation, or how the male subject position affects the quest for modernity. Nevertheless, Zhong deftly negotiates between history and subjectivity, between history and human participation. In Chapter 1 of the book she turns to history for “a better understanding of the trajectory that led to the contemporary concern over masculinity and the sense of besiegedness” (15). To be more precise, it is “the psychosocial, or the psychoanalytically specific, aspects of the historical of Chinese modernity” (16) that the author concentrates on in order to show that modern Chinese intellectuals are not only agents of Chinese Enlightenment but also products of their desire, which is in turn conditioned by China's traumatic encounter with the West and China's struggle with modernity.

Chapters 2 through 4 of *Masculinity Besieged* explore the connection between the obsession with a perceived enfeebled masculinity and its variegated manifestations—anxiety over

張賢亮
男人的一半是
女人
劉恆 冬之門

male potency, the search for a strong masculine identity, and the quest for cultural roots in post-Mao Chinese literature. It is here that the author is at her most trenchant. Her analysis of the texts lends credence to her thesis as delineated in the introduction. Her reading of Zhang Xianliang and Liu Heng, for instance, shows that their creations have more to do with the male desire (mixed with a misogynistic tendency) to regain potency than with sexual relationships *per se*. Moreover, for all the protest against the power center, the fixation on potency masks a yearning to occupy the center (86). Likewise, the marginal male characters in Yu Hua, Han Shaogong, and Wang Shuo all harbor a wish to move away from the margins. The antiheroes are none too happy with their diminished manliness but aspire “to the *da ye* status” (117). The author links that aspiration to a longing for a strong masculine identity. Self-loathing bound up with a rejection of the emasculated present is accompanied by a desire to identify with strong masculine role models of the mythical past. In Mo Yan’s novel *Hong gaoliang*, that contrast is suggested by a curiously absurd biological metaphor of pure red sorghum and hybrid sorghum, with the latter symbolizing a debased, depleted form of masculinity.

Chapter 5 maps the link between the search for the (male) self (*xunzhao ziwo*) and the larger intellectual environment of the 1980s, particularly the inward, backward-looking cultural movement known as *wenhua xungen* or the search for cultural roots. What ties the two together is a symbolic identification with a glorified past. A quest to reconnect with China’s cultural roots becomes in the end a celebration of masculine power. The author rightly points out the patriarchal and patrilineal connotations of the notion of *gen* itself. Indeed one could elaborate further on the phallic dimension of the word *gen*. The grandfather in *Hong gaoliang* tries desperately to save his son’s sexual organ or *gen* in order to ensure the continuity of the family line or *chuan zong jie dai*. *Gen* and its corollary, *zhong*, are indeed “the veil set up to signify both the original and missing male organ. The past is glorified to symbolize the grit—hence the potency—of Chinese men that they desire to recover” (168).

Zhong concludes her book with these words:

大爺

莫言 紅高粱

尋找自我

文化尋根

傳宗接代 種

What underscores the paradox of men lamenting and despising being weak is a male anxiety whose manifestations go further and deeper than mere protests against political persecution and oppression. In resisting the dominant ideology, post-Mao male writers challenge its utopian myths and versions of the history by creating seemingly decentered male subject positions and by giving voice to them through manifestations of their desires. The decentered male subject positions, however, do not necessarily equate positions without center. Rather, the center is shifted or relocated. The relocated center lies in the conflation of such notions as Chinese cultural roots, the return of the (Chinese) race, and the search for real and masculine men. The *Chineseness* symbolized by roots and guts, in this sense, becomes the new center. (168-69)

Misogyny and nationalism go hand in hand in this dual enterprise of recovering masculinity and cultural patrimony.

As should be obvious by now, buttressing the author's analysis is a psychoanalytical, feminist theoretical armature. It serves the author well, although on occasion one wishes for a clearer exposition of some of the terms—subjecthood and bodily integrity, for instance. It is not entirely clear how the author distinguishes the former from “subjectivity.” Chapter 4 could perhaps be tightened a bit. Nevertheless, the book is of interest to all students of modern Chinese literary and cultural history. Interestingly, all the endorsements on the back cover of the paperback edition of the book come from writers of the same gender as the author—ideological soulmates, presumably. The superlatives are no doubt employed by the publisher as a marketing tool to promote the book, but they have the unfortunate effect of giving *Masculinity Besieged* a narrow partisan slant that it does not deserve.

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