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Editor’s Introduction
by Dr. Melissa S. Dale, Executive Director, Center for Asia Pacific Studies

We are pleased to announce the publication of the Fall 2017 issue of Asia Pacific Perspectives. This issue highlights the work of scholars who are researching masculinity in China, Japan, South Korea, and India in new and inventive ways.

The Fall 2017 issue features several papers from the University of San Francisco Center for Asia Pacific Studies’ fall 2016 conference, “Constructing Masculinities in Asia” for which participants were invited to consider how masculinity is defined and/or constructed in Asia and how these masculinities and/or expressions of manhood changed over time. The articles in this issue reveal that despite the plurality of definitions of masculinity across the Asia Pacific, one finds commonalities such as the importance of nation building, the corporate world, economic status and power, and the tension between native and Western traditions in shaping men’s identity.

This issue begins with Kam Louie’s think piece, “Asian Masculinity Studies in the West: from Minority Status to Soft Power.” Louie notes the rise of the study of Asian masculinities since the 1990s and traces the major transformations that ideas of Asian masculinity have undergone in academic discourse, social media and the film industry. As Louie notes, this is an exciting time in the study of Asian masculinity studies with scholars from a variety of fields addressing a diversity of topics.

In the first research article, Derek Hird explores how globalization and marketization has influenced constructions of masculinity in contemporary China and the Chinese diaspora and led some Chinese men to look to Confucianism and the ideal of the junzi for inspiration.

Romit Dasgupta’s study touches on the discourse of masculinity in Japan as embodied in the urban, middle-class white collar “salaryman” during the Showa (1925-1989) and Hesei (1989-present) periods. Dasgupta’s study argues for the continued relevance of the salaryman to understandings of masculinity in contemporary Japan.

Joanna Elfving-Hwang’s work continues to examine the importance of the salaryman in South Korea, but in the context of contemporary society where television dramas have become a medium for propagating ideas of masculinity. Elfving-Hwang’s study of “failed salarymen” in these dramas reveals how definitions of success, especially in the corporate world, can become intertwined with definitions of masculinity.

Madhura Lokohare’s paper provides insight on how masculinity is constructed in contemporary India. Studying how young subaltern men use billboards to “imagine and perform” their masculinity
ideals, Lokohare reveals a dynamic landscape where politics, class, and consumption intersect and find public expression.

In this issue’s book review, Susan Brownell reads Stefan Heubner’s Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913-1947 (University of Singapore Press, 2016) and analyzes the book’s contribution to our understanding of the history of Asia through major sports events.

The papers featured in this issue are intended to encourage our readers to broaden their horizons beyond their usual region of interest or speciality. As we have found, reading about constructions of masculinity in other Asian societies yields important insights that contribute to discussions on topics such as the continued relevance of Confucianism in East Asian societies. We hope these articles will stimulate further discussion and research on the topic of Asian masculinity in its diversity of forms.

Thanks to Dr. Leslie Woodhouse for her dedication to the journal and all of her hard work on helping usher this issue to publication. We are also excited to welcome a new editorial board to our team (please see title page for a complete list) and we look forward to collaborating with them on future issues of Asia Pacific Perspectives.

~ Melissa S. Dale, Editor
Asian Masculinity Studies in the West: From Minority Status to Soft Power
By Kam Louie, Hong Kong University

It is well-known that “man” as a gendered being had for a long time escaped scrutiny because the generic man as representing humanity was so normalized that history was assumed to be “his-story.” This only changed in the 1980s when, inspired by the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 70s and the productive research and popularity of women’s (gender) studies, “man” was at last put under the spotlight as a distinct category for consideration. Pioneers of masculinity studies like Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner argued almost from the inception of the concept that “the meaning of masculinity is neither transhistorical nor culturally universal, but varies from culture to culture and within any culture over time.”¹ Yet, despite the recognition that masculinity is to a large extent culture-bound, analyses of men – whether in scholarly works, popular magazines or social media – were almost exclusively focused on men in Western societies, particularly those of North America.

By the turn of the new millennium, a number of authoritative scholars in men studies were already well aware that a large proportion of the world’s men – those away from the Euro-American orbits – received only scant attention in gender studies, and that this neglect was a serious problem in the field. In the first article in the inaugural issue of Men and Masculinities, for example, R.W. Connell called for a more comprehensive understanding of the world’s gender order.² Increasingly, more studies of non-white men have been produced. Studies of men from non-Western regions such as Asia or Africa were usually researched in the context of “men of color” or “minorities” in predominantly white cultures. This is not surprising given that most of the researchers are based in Europe or America.

Nonetheless, a large number of the researchers who are interested in Asian men are themselves Asian. They are more familiar with and understandably do research on what personally interests them and what they know best: that is, the Asian diaspora. So, for research into Asian men, from early on there was more intense research into how Asian men fared outside Asia, mostly in America. Excellent books and journal articles have been appearing since the 1990s. Some researchers explore how Asian American males have had to manage what amounted to “racial castration” in white America, often using psychoanalytic theory and literary sources.³ And many others use fictional but iconic images of Asian men in the West such as Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan as archetypal Chinese men “in order to provide a discursive foundation from which the construction of Chinese American masculinities can be critiqued.”⁴ Such studies indicate that along with the growing interest in being an Asian man in a Western country, many Asian men have become increasingly unhappy with their minority status. This discontent is not purely academic, and it is even more pronounced in the popular realm. Blogs such as the Reddit forum r/AsianMasculinity⁵ or “Angry Asian Man,”⁶ and YouTube videos such as those by Wang Fu Productions show the frustrations and irritation often felt by Asian men living in America. Most are produced by younger men, so themes such as dating, sex and cultural adjustments feature predominantly.

Academic discourse and social media are not the only avenues where notions of Asian masculinity have experienced major transformations. The film industry is a major source of how people perceive others, so how it presents an Asian man is vital to interpretations of Asian masculinity. And here, diasporic movements in the second half of the twentieth century have changed the way the general population perceive and interpret the Asian male figure. In the American film industry of the early twentieth century, for example, white actors were usually called upon to play non-white characters.
This changed towards the last few decades of the century. Asian actors, both male and female, increasingly took on major roles in films. The Asian diaspora has produced a host of actors such as Bruce Lee, who was born in San Francisco, and Dev Patel, who was born in London. As they have become internationally famous, these actors have provided new models of Asian masculinity. The flow of positive Asian male images into the movie industry increasingly has had a high impact on cinema in the West, and insightful studies have begun to be published in this area. Though not as obvious as the internet blogs mentioned above, the new images have been partly a result of the rapid growth of the Asian diaspora in the West.

The Asian diaspora has produced actors performing heroic roles as well as large audiences that appreciate them. For example, the 2016 Oscar-nominated film Lion (for which Dev Patel won the BAFTA Award for Best Supporting Actor) is set partly in Hobart, Tasmania and Melbourne, Australia. It is about a young Indian boy who is separated from his family in Calcutta, eventually adopted by a white family in Tasmania, who later finds his family back in India. It projects an image of an Indian boy who grows up to be a successful young man in Australia. The movie was popular and received six Oscar nominations. Moreover, while the Indian diaspora does appear on the screen, the Indian movie industry is so popular in India and abroad that the word “Bollywood” is used to designate it. According to Rohit Dasgupta, the co-editor of Popular Masculine Cultures in India: Critical Essays, “Masculinity in Bollywood has seen a sea change from the sensitivity of Dev Anand; we are now confronted with the hypermasculinity of John Abraham, Salman Khan and others.” We can therefore expect to see more South Asian film productions that emphasize the “masculine,” and we can expect to see the macho notions of manhood as well as the usual “good and/or goofy” boy to catch on in diasporic South Asian communities.

The tendency to define being masculine as being strong and tough is widespread among film critics and viewers. This is ironic because, as indicated above, there is a strong feeling within the Asian diasporic community that Asian men are not happy to be merely a minority, and to be seen as nerdy and effeminate. In a blog that asks “What Is Asian Masculinity,” for example, Natalie Ng argues that in traditional China, the “real” men were warrior gods like Guan Yu, and that traditional Chinese masculinity “had its roots deep within Asian culture for centuries, long upheld by our ancient East Asian warriors and ancestors. If anything, [the practices] that defined true traditional Asian masculinity centuries ago few, if any, would dare to carry out today. Consequently, for the greater good of our community, Asian men have every right to reclaim their original masculinity without fear of conforming to so-called ‘western’ standards, because it is not ‘western’ standards.” In the social media popular among younger diasporic Asians in the Western world, then, there has been a yearning to find true Asian masculinity in Asia itself, perhaps back in the distant past, when macho men that could counterbalance those commonly seen in the Western mass media were common.

However, “Asian” is not an easy term to define as it encompasses a huge variety of different races and cultures, and it can be confusing and frustrating when its meaning is not made clear. This problem is often alluded to in social media platforms. In the tremendously popular Wang Fu Productions video “Yellow Fever,” two Asian friends talk about dating. The Chinese character Philip Wang bemoans the fact that Asian women date white guys but white women do not date Asian men, to which his Indian friend Richard Sarvate responds by saying that “at least you [Asians] have a chance to get girls... but how often do you see an Indian guy with a white girl?” In addition to its intra-Asian comparisons, this exchange is telling because Sarvate does not see Indians as Asian. Several contributors in the comments column of this blog remark upon this. It highlights one of the conundrums of studying Asian masculinity. From the exchange related above, and the essays in this volume, it is clear that there are a great variety of masculinities in Asia and among Asians who live abroad. This is in keeping with the many diverse Asian races, cultures and terrains. In many ways, it
is absurd to lump all these masculinities together as if they form a homogenous whole. While both popular and academic discourse often talk of “the East” and “Asia,” these terms and others such as “the West” often make little sense if used to refer to people or ideas.

The reaction against being labelled simply as Asian is understandable when we know that the referent for this term is too broad and could include traits one Asian detests in another. The trend to take a more Asia-centric approach and to be more specific about the Asian culture referred to has also intensified in academic research on Asian masculinities. A conscious effort to reconfigure masculinity studies away from examining masculinities exclusively in the Anglo-American sphere was in evidence by the end of the first decade of the 21st century. For example, the 2014 book Reimagining Masculinities: Beyond Masculinist Epistemology is a collection of ten chapters by scholars most of whom are from outside America and Europe, and “each chapter sheds new light on the differences and complexities that constitute the making of masculinities in particular locales.” Of more lasting significance, the regional scope of masculinity studies has been broadened via the founding of journals such as NORMA: Nordic Journal of Masculinity Studies, Masculinities and Social Change and Masculinities: A Journal of Identity and Culture.

European in their inspiration and interest in “other” masculinities while moving away from the metropolitan centers of Europe and America, scholars continue to be fascinated by the effects that such centers have exerted in the non-Western world. For example, Raewyn Connell, who earlier sounded the call for global thinking about men and masculinities, since the early 21st century has begun to link the study of gender with her interest in the “Global South,” and rallied for more work on “gender and masculinities in Southern perspective.” This is a timely and salutary proposal, and Connell is so keen on this issue that she published an article specifically advocating for Southern perspectives to be taken on board in masculinity studies.

Yet, Southern theory is still intimately bound to the colonized world and ideas of postcoloniality. Also, while combining Southern theory with gender is productive for the purposes of, for instance, analyzing past European colonies like India and Malaysia during their colonial periods and their impacts on these regions, the problem with focusing on Asian countries premised on their status as ex-colonies is that masculinity studies becomes almost an offshoot of postcolonial studies. That is to say, the European empires still provide the backdrop to contemporary times, and research on the indigenous people becomes a way to reflect back onto the “mother country,” mainly those in Europe. The study of Asian masculinities in Asian regions per se is therefore still limited by such colonial points of reference, especially since the significant “men” in the colonies were mostly white men, and heterosexual relations generally led to an “overemphasis of heterosexuality and relations between Western men, typically, and Asian women [that] occlude other forms of eroticism and sexuality.”

In the 1970s Edward Said pointed out how knowledge about the relationship between the West and the Orient was constructed as a result of the European colonial expansion in the 19th century. In gender terms, the West was metaphorically seen as masculine and the East sexualized into a passive feminine. This characterization inspired many studies of gender in colonial times. For example, Mrinalini Sinha makes this binary explicit in her characterisation of the gender relations in the title of her book itself: Colonial Masculinity: The ‘manly Englishman’ and the ‘effeminate Bengali’ in the late nineteenth century. She specifically argues “that the late nineteenth-century notions of English/British masculinity or Bengali/Indian effeminacy cannot be understood simply from the framework of discrete “national cultures; instead, they must be understood in relation to one another, and as constitutive of each other.” While the study of colonial periods is necessarily about understanding these frameworks in relationship, colonial masculinities has the problem of focusing more on colonialist men than indigenous masculinity as such. Indigenous men again escape the spotlight.
The impact of British colonialism on South Asia is so powerful and pervasive that in resisting that impact, Indian men developed a trope Sikata Banergee calls “masculine Hinduism,” an amalgam of the Hindu soldier and the warrior monk. Banergee argues that masculine Hinduism is a reaction against the way the British had categorized Indian men as the “effeminate other” and that this concept of masculinity has had an immense influence on Hindu nationalism. As in other nationalisms, Hindu nationalism adheres to a rigid notion of “us versus them.” Its make-up therefore needs to be revealed and critiqued for an understanding of gender relations not just in India but other societies. Even when historical figures were examined as representing a more assertive and positive masculinity, it could not avoid being seen as a reaction against the colonialists as well as indigenous local men. For example, Gandhi’s argument to make men “closer to women” was intended not to improve women, but rather “...served to present the masculinities of British imperialist patriarchy as crude, rapaciously materialist, violent, hypocritical, and profoundly lacking in self-control and discipline, in contrast to the spiritually stronger, scrupulously nonviolent, disciplined Indian patriarchy that Gandhi sought to forge.”

In recent years, there has been much media coverage of sexual violence against women committed by men in South Asia. But in both public media and official policies, much of the attention is directed at women in terms of their modesty and victimhood. While the actions of the men are roundly and rightfully condemned, the men themselves have remained largely under-investigated, and the role masculinity plays in their actions again escapes attention. This is so striking that researchers of masculinity have felt the need to make “men and masculinities visible.” Indeed, it is unfortunate that in gender studies of South Asia, much of the attention has been focused on women in this part of the world. This fact is not surprising given this is also true of rest of the world, but it is especially conspicuous in South and Southeast Asia.

Indeed, in a review essay on masculinities in Asia, Chie Ikeya observes that “only a small number of works produced in South and Southeast Asian studies address the historical construction and evolution of masculinities in the regions and even fewer offer in-depth inquiries into the extent to which historical forms of masculinity governed social relations.” Thus, the paucity of material on masculinities is not just found in South Asia, but also evident in Southeast Asia. It seems researchers tended not to look at the common man, but extraordinary figures, such as the idealized classical spiritual man or the violent wrongdoer (particularly those of a sexual nature). Up until the 21st century, little was written about ordinary men performing mundane everyday masculinity. Michael Peletz observed in 2012 that there was a “conspicuous absence in the anthropological and other literature on gender and sexuality in Southeast Asia — indeed, the deafening silence with respect to empirical and theoretical perspectives on normative masculinities (which should not be confused with masculine or masculinist perspectives) especially those that prevail among ordinary folks outside arenas of colonial warfare, militarization, and ethno-nationalistic, religious, or racial strife.”

As if in response to this concern, a collection of essays edited by Ford and Lyons appeared the same year examining the lives of men who can be said to have “normative” masculinities, such as seafarers and low-wage workers in Southeast Asia. This collection is interesting in that while the ethnographies it presents are about ordinary men, and the emphasis is no longer one of gender relationships as in colonial or postcolonial times; most of the essays describe masculinity in a state of flux: about men who travel to other lands for work or leisure, men who interact with men of other races and so on. As Southeast Asia is so ethnically, culturally and politically heterogeneous, and so many waves of migrants have moved across the region, it is inevitable that there would be many and close encounters with the “other” in terms of masculinity. The key difference now is that the “other” is no longer the white colonialist or the local colonial. In contemporary times, hegemonic relationships occurred not only in the opposition between European and Asian. Many inequities and
exploitative behaviors are exhibited within Asia, between Asians. By the dawn of the 21st century, some excellent studies of Chinese men in Asian regions began to appear, such as Ulf Mellström’s (2003) study of the impact of technology on Chinese diasporic men in Penang. 24

While research on South and Southeast Asian masculinities are making significant headway, it is Chinese masculinity studies that have experienced phenomenal growth, with research books and papers mushrooming in the first two decades of the 21st century. Of these, my Theorising Chinese Masculinity (2002) has become influential. 25 My work utilizes the ancient Chinese paradigm wen-wu (literary-martial; mental-physical; mind-body etc.) to show how Chinese masculinity ideals have unique features specific to Chinese society. For example, wen-wu was traditionally a male-only quality that completely excluded women. This is because to gain social recognition as someone having these attributes, people had to pass the official wen or wu examinations and women were prohibited from sitting these examinations. Moreover, even the expression wen-wu shows how the Chinese prioritizes the mind more than most Western cultures, and certainly more than the Euro-American one as discussed by Christopher Forth, who uses “arms and letters” to frame the discussion of the body-mind dichotomy in European masculinity. 26 Of course, since the abolition of the imperial civil service examinations in 1905, the meaning of the wen-wu dyad has undergone many transformations. For example, whereas previously women could not pass examinations simply because they were barred from them, they now not only participate but excel.

Clearly, the relationship between Chinese men and women has changed a great deal in the modern era, and the rise of the white-collar workforce since the reform period of the 1980s has also generated an interest in the masculinity of the urban men. Scholars like Derek Hird and Geng Song have looked at the everyday lives of these men, from their fashion sense to their leisure activities, 27 while others such as John Osburg and Avron Boretz chart the lives of businessmen and lower-class men to demonstrate how their masculinity is anchored sometimes in traditional concepts of brotherhood and other times in imitation of gangster behavior from Hong Kong movies. 28 Many scholars have also researched Chinese men focusing specifically on masculinity and its role in different historical contexts. For example, Bret Hinsch writes on masculinities in the whole span of Chinese history, 29 Geng Song on the fragile masculinity of traditional China, 30 Matthew Sommer on aspects of law and gender in Qing China, 31 Martin W. Huang on the masculinity of the elite in late imperial China 32 and Nicolas Schillinger on masculinity and the military in late 19th and early 20th centuries. 33

The new millennium has therefore seen an abundant and growing research on men in China. This rapidly growing field is fueled partly by the number of diasporic Chinese researchers who have turned their attention to looking at masculinity in China. It is also a result of the general attention being paid to China as well, especially since China is now catching up to America as the top economy in the world. Economically, Japan had occupied the number two spot until recently, and it too has seen increased interest from gender studies researchers. Japan was the first Asian country to modernize, and there has been intense speculation on how and why this happened – and what sort of population, particularly the male portion, made it possible. Among the men who made the post-war recovery possible, the figure of the salaryman came under some scrutiny. The word “salaryman” has since taken on special connotations. It is often taken to denote a Japanese man (and not woman) who joins a business immediately after he graduates from college and works there until his retirement, and who spends long hours in the office often doing mindless clerical work, while socializing outside working hours exclusively with his co-workers.

This idea of the salaryman has been widely used outside Japan as well. In terms of masculinity, salarymen have been described as “corporate warriors,” 34 and the various manifestations of their make-up appear in popular media as well as detailed academic discussions. 35 He is often described as living in a stressful state and, as a creature of the industrialized and bureaucratized society, his
fulfillment is forever elusive. In any case, as a symbol of masculinity, he cannot be said to be an ideal that most people aspire to, though it seems most Japanese men in the modern era aspire to join the ranks of the salaryman. While white-collar workers in Chinese business enterprises or government offices have been studied by researchers such as Osburg and Hird, the ways that modernization and bureaucratization works in these two Asian countries provide much material for comparative research.

In this way, while “Asian masculinity” may be too general to contain more than limited tangible meaning, there are good reasons for looking at the East Asian region, especially China, Japan and Korea, as suitably similar in cultural make-up for analysis. These nations have a Confucian heritage, and they have had strong bonds with each other for centuries, sometimes as tributary states or colonies. In the 21st century, with the ease of travel and the rise of the internet, they have become even more enmeshed. The cultural interactions between countries in Asia became so significant and warrant so much scholarly attention that in 2000 the journal Inter-Asia Cultural Studies was launched. Similarly, masculinity studies in Asia was deemed important enough that Hong Kong University Press launched a book series entitled “Transnational Asian Masculinities” in 2016. This is because since the final decades of the 20th century, the rise of Asia – especially China, Japan and the “Four Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan),” – has not only given these countries economic and political clout, but also a desire to promote their cultures as part of a “soft power” strategy.

Interestingly, the “soft power” idea has parallels in the gender sphere. As early as 2009, Sun Jung pointed to the rise of a “pan East-Asian soft masculinity” and its flows across the Asian region.36 In China, the “soft masculinity” concept has even been interpreted to mean more subtle and gentler ways of treating other people. Thus, in conflict situations between bosses and workers, the “soft power” method of dealing with one’s subordinates has been interpreted as a “kindly” tactic used by the Communist Party in everyday practice to soothe masculine egos in order to avoid unpleasant or even violent confrontations at work.37 Politically, the “soft” approach is also a way for the government to promote family and social harmony. Derek Hird’s description of Xi Jinping as a leader who, while reaffirming gender equality also reasserts the central role of the husband/father in the family, is interesting.38 Hird interprets Xi’s message of family values and intimacy between parent and child as reflecting on his performing a new style of masculinity: a strong but fatherly figure who can be both strict and nurturing. This image of the traditional disciplinary father who is also softened into a modern nurturing one is found in current empirical research by anthropologists as well.39

A perception of Asian men as becoming more family-oriented and more caring as fathers has also gained traction. For example, Ayami Nakatani specifically points to the emergence of “nurturing fathers” in Japan.40 However, urbanization and industrialization in East Asia also means the middle classes spend a lot more time in the office. Romit Dasgupta in his essay for this volume points to the “absent father syndrome,” whereby a father’s being away from home for extended periods effects their loss of authority within the household. This is a much more serious situation in China, where in recent decades literally hundreds of millions of men (and women) have left their parents and children behind in rural areas to become migrant workers in cities. This entails men leaving behind many traditional customs, such as the gendered division of labor within the family, and abandoning some patriarchal privileges they might otherwise have expected. While they may not like it, such “masculine compromise” was necessary because of their lives as migrant workers, which require them to spend years away from home.41 Some sociologists thus have interpreted social changes in Asia as having taken some traditional patriarchal power away from men, however reluctantly.

Certainly, with the interactions between Asian countries intensifying and their concerted attempts at projecting a more positive profile internationally, the image of the Asian man has undergone a makeover in the West. This is nowhere better seen than in the discussions of aspects
of youth culture from Asia, such as those associated with J-pop and K-pop. While to Western eyes musicians and boy bands from East Asia can be very effeminate, they have become immensely influential and popular, even in the Western world. The most conspicuous example is Psy’s “Gangnam Style,” which quickly became the most watched video on YouTube following its release in 2012, with over 2.8 billion views. Psy’s phenomenal success shows most clearly the worldwide consumption of an Asian pop icon through the internet. This demonstrates two aspects of the Japanese and Korean pop “waves”: they are spread through technology such as mobile phones, laptops and tablets – gadgets that are popular with the young. Young women in particular have a big voice in determining trends in what is considered ideal masculinity, and many prefer the cute and cuddly. Moreover, the speed and spread of the internet means crossing cultural and national boundaries is becoming easier and faster. K-pop’s ascendancy spells the rise of a “soft masculinity” that is hybrid as well as Asian, for which “binaries [are used] to describe the members as either cute and pretty, or beastly and aggressive.” However, Psy’s persona has also been criticized as he is said to conform to the stereotypical and racialized construction of Asian men as being emasculated. Whether Asian masculinity is trendy or effeminate, at least it has been mainstreamed, and it has become extremely popular globally.

Furthermore, Psy’s is a Korean masculinity that is both hybrid and global, as Sun Jung indicated in her 2009 article, and she discusses this phenomenon in greater depth in Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption. Others in the field have taken on the phenomenon of transcultural and border-crossing masculinities. For example, following Theorising Chinese Masculinity I published another book on the globalization of the wen-wu construct, which examines wealthy diasporic Chinese men on the China mainland as well as what might be termed “metrosexuals” in the West. Similar to the metrosexual, this new breed of young man is pampered and self-indulgent, and happy to invest money and time in his appearance, so much so that there is a new word now widely used in China: “flower-like men” (huayang nanzi). It is a term that originated from the title of an extremely popular Japanese manga series Hana-yori Dango, often translated into English as “Boys Over Flowers” by the young woman writer/artist Yoko Kamio, which was serialized from 1992 to 2004. The depiction of young male characters as being girlishly beautiful as well as having homosocial/sexual tendencies is a common feature of a lot of the late 20th century Japanese literature/manga for young women readers. Which is all very interesting, but what are the implications for masculinity research? One of the most interesting offshoots of the “soft” masculinity that has emerged in popular literature and particularly manga is a genre known as BL (Boys Love) in Japanese, and danmei (Indulging in the Beautiful) in Chinese. While Japanese BL production and research into it are relatively established and substantial, research into danmei genre is relatively recent and not as well researched as its Japanese counterpart. But the idea of a beautiful man, or pretty boy, existed in both China and Japan in traditional times – for example, Beijing Opera and Kabuki theatre both have young effeminate males singing and acting female parts. Such young men are often objects of homoerotic desire by “connoisseurs” of the moneyed classes. And as indicated above, the beautiful man – or looking at flowers as code for desiring beautiful young men – was very common in Ming-Qing China and has been studied and documented by scholars such as Wu Cuncun and Mark Stevenson. Indeed, some of the earliest and most interesting work on Asian men was about gay men. And as interest in homosexuality increased and became normalized, other forms of sexuality such as bisexual and transgender also came under academic exploration. Queer Studies gained respectability. For example, Russell Leong, David Eng and Alice Hom edited books on gay, lesbian and queer experiences of Asian Americans in the late 1990s. And scholars like Mark McLelland, Travis S. K. Kong, Elisabeth Engebretsen and William Schroeder have produced books that deal with country-specific concerns relating to gender. Academic interest in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender
populations in Asia has become so widespread that in 2008, Hong Kong University Press launched the Queer Asia book series, which has produced many vibrant and innovative studies on non-normative sexual practices across the Asian region. The different sexual and gender orientations discussed in the series in cities such as Shanghai, Bangkok and Singapore testify to not only the large diversity of sexual identities in Asia, but also the research that growing out of the queer scene. And among these, the book *Boys Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols* shows the appreciation of beautiful boys has gone way beyond elite male culture as was traditionally the case. Much creativity is evidenced in young and mass culture, and social media popularizes this tendency. For example, a Facebook group called “Queer East Asian Studies” has been set up, where it features numerous announcements of workshops, conferences and new research on gay or lesbian sexualities and related themes across East Asia.

Cultural Studies, an emergent discipline at the end of the 20th century which has since moved to being a mainstream and popular one in the new millennium, takes pop culture items as its research targets. Not only does Cultural Studies take a serious academic interest in phenomena such as comics, movies and beauty contests, but it also opens up new avenues to research the mundane that were previously deemed frivolous. As a result, material focusing on Asian men and sexualities which had in the past resisted analysis, has sparked original and innovative modes of analysis that have become commonplace. In this exciting period, Asian masculinity studies have attracted some adventurous minds and new territories are being explored every day. While carving out an interdisciplinary field for itself, Asian masculinity studies can look forward to attracting interest from researchers in almost all fields of inquiry. Although there may still be concerns about whether Asian masculinity studies can be meaningfully investigated given the diversity of the people and cultures, I suggest that it is also precisely this diversity that makes it a stimulating and burgeoning field.

ENDNOTES

5. See the Asian masculinity link in https://www.reddit.com/r/AsianMasculinity/
6. See the blog [http://blog.angryasianman.com](http://blog.angryasianman.com)
13. Launched in 2012, this open-access journal focuses on masculinity studies in Spain and Latin America, and accepts submissions in English, Spanish, Catalan, Euskera and Galician.

14. Established in 2014, this is another online journal that accepts multilingual submissions, in this case English and Turkish.


27. Song Geng and Derek Hird, Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China (Leiden: Brill, 2014).


30. Song, Geng, The fragile scholar: Power and masculinity in Chinese culture (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004).


32. Martin W. Huang, Negotiating masculinities in Late Imperial China (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006).


44. See for example the essays in Mark McLelland, Kazumi Nagaike, Katsuhiko Suganuma and James Welker (eds.), *Boys Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).


Introduction

On a cold November day in Beijing in 1914, in a fragile Republic of China not yet two years old, the prominent reformist scholar and journalist Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873-1929) delivered a speech at Tsinghua School 清华学堂 (later to become Tsinghua University 清华大学) urging the Chinese people to strengthen the nation through the ancient model of the junzi 君子 (Confucian gentleman).1 In his talk, Liang drew attention to the central role that the gentlemanly ideal played in the education systems of powerful and prosperous Britain and America. By setting the junzi as its standard, he argued that China could similarly raise up the “personality of the Chinese people” (guomin zhi ren’ge 国民之人格). 2 Quoting the Book of Changes (Yijing 易经), Liang said: “As heaven maintains vigor through movements, a junzi should constantly strive for self-perfection; as earth’s condition is receptive devotion, a junzi should hold the outer world with broad mind.”

Liang’s talk made such an impact that Tsinghua School abbreviated these phrases and adopted them as the school motto, translated succinctly into English as “Self-Discipline and Social Commitment.” In 1917 the abbreviated phrases were engraved in large characters on a school crest set into the stage in the main assembly hall as an encouragement to students.3

Notwithstanding the endorsements of Liang Qichao and Tsinghua School, many reformist scholars and writers in following generations attacked the junzi ideal because they believed that Confucian dogma had “nurtured a ‘national character’ (guominxing 国民性) detrimental to China’s modernization.”4 National salvation was held to depend in no small measure on the rejection of Confucian “scholar-official” (shidafu 士大夫) masculinity and the adoption of Western business and lifestyle practices: “the scholar of old was considered unsuited to the modern world.”5 The new middle class that emerged in Shanghai in the 1920s and ‘30s similarly turned towards Western commercial masculinities and away from embedded Chinese models of manhood.6

After the Communist victory in 1949, some scholars advocated the relevance of certain Confucian principles to socialism, including the junzi model, but anti-Confucian, class-based, socialist perspectives came to dominate discourse on Confucianism during the Cultural Revolution towards the end of the Mao era.7 The reintroduction of capitalism to China in the 1980s and ‘90s spurred the emergence of the “new junzi”: professionals and businessmen who legitimized their quest for material wealth by reinterpreting Confucianism as an ethical system compatible with doing business.8 More recently, junzi masculinity has been further boosted by the proliferation of Confucian ideas in television programs, self-help books, popular philosophy guides, online articles, “national studies” (guoxue 国学) university degrees, and ethics classes in private schools.

Drawing on the concept of cultural nationalism, I argue in this paper that the promotion of
the junzi ideal is a form of political, social and cultural identity-making that seeks to “validate and moralize” a particular view of national culture. In particular, I argue that the masculine figure of the junzi has become a significant touchstone in the educated elite’s cultural nationalist reimagineings of China’s society and polity. Intellectuals and professionals are keen to associate themselves with reinvigorated junzi masculinity in order to enhance their status inside and beyond China in the context of increasing globalization and marketization. This paper contributes to existing literature by showing how highly educated Chinese men are reworking the figure of the junzi in their quest to shape cultural nationalist discourses in their gender and class interests.

The new junzi masculinity does not simply act to legitimize educated men’s participation in the business world, it also offers a reassuringly well-anchored Chinese identity in fast-changing transnational environments, as well as privileged class status in China’s ongoing large-scale socioeconomic transformations. Middle-class men wish to distinguish themselves not only from migrant workers, farmers, and the urban working classes, but also from the coarse bao fahu 暴发户 (nouveau riche) and the wealthy but corrupt heiling 黑领 (black collars). Claiming the moral high ground through Confucian values and suzhi gao 素质高 (high quality) behavior positions highly educated men as heirs to the long Chinese tradition of elite masculinity, which distinguishes them from other groups of men within and beyond China. Fitting a global pattern in the emerging middle classes, it also enables them to reconcile the material and the moral by portraying themselves, their lifestyles and their methods of earning money as morally respectable.

With a focus on junzi masculinity in texts and subjectivity formation, this paper examines recently published major works on the junzi by prominent public intellectuals associated with the promulgation of “traditional cultural values” in post-Tiananmen China, as well as the ways in which middle-class professional Chinese men negotiate the junzi ideal as part of their cultural identity. The paper explores the significance of the junzi revival for contemporary class, gender and transcultural relations, and contributes to understandings of elite cultural nationalism in China.

The post-Mao Confucian resurgence and cultural nationalism

The post-Mao new junzi view that “moral management” justifies the pursuit of wealth has its antecedents in earlier arguments by Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) “Confucian merchants” (rushang 儒商), who positioned “righteousness” (yi 义) and “profit” (li 利) as equals in harmony with one another. When the latter years of the Ming Dynasty saw substantial population and economic growth but no commensurate expansion in the number of officials, increasing numbers of scholars turned to commerce as a means to support themselves. The Confucian merchants reinterpreted the relationship of righteousness and profit from one of opposition to one of duality, although their revision did not at that time displace mainstream Confucian ideological disapproval of the pursuit of profit through business. In the post-Mao era, many intellectuals and scholars have joined others in “entering the sea (of business)” (xiahai 下海) to make money for themselves. The infusion of morally elevated elements into the contemporary business sphere legitimizes profitmaking in the eyes of a Chinese cultural elite traditionally hostile to commerce, and has become a salient feature of pro-business discourse in the post-Mao era.

The revitalization of the junzi ideal and Confucianism in recent years has become evident across multiple spheres of life in China, not just in business discourses. During the 1990s, the Confucian revival grew in intensity as intellectuals engaged in a post-Tiananmen “national studies fever” (guoxue re 国学热). Prominent examples include the popular TV programs and best-selling books of Beijing academic Yu Dan 于丹 (1965–), in which she promotes Confucian concepts as psychological aids for attaining peace of mind in today’s stressful world; the proliferation of national studies curricula across all stages of state education; and the establishment of thousands of private
schools throughout China teaching Confucian classics, ethics and associated activities such as calligraphy to all ages of students. Marc Moskowitz provides an instance of the uptake of junzi ideas in everyday life in his ethnography of weiqi 围棋 (Go) players in Beijing. He shows that middle-class, university-educated weiqi players, whom he found to be overwhelmingly male, are explicitly drawing on historical, idealized notions of the junzi in their performance of a gentlemanly weiqi masculinity, which even extends to how they hold themselves as they walk.

Historically, the junzi was gendered male in normative discourse; and the kinds of activities associated with the junzi, such as weiqi, were beyond the realm of women’s possible pursuits. Some contemporary voices maintain that the junzi should remain a male preserve, and that the equivalent term for women is shunü 淑女 (virtuous woman). However, high-profile commentators such as Yu Dan tend to present the junzi ideal in gender-neutral terms, as a potential aspiration for anybody. Nonetheless, regardless of the emergence of gender-equitable rhetoric in junzi discourse, Moskowitz’s ethnographic findings suggest that in contemporary everyday life in China it is men who are overwhelmingly likely to identify with junzi characteristics. The junzi ideal therefore appears destined to continue its historical trajectory as a predominantly masculine model of cultivation.

The concept of cultural nationalism offers a productive way of understanding current reworkings of the junzi ideal, as well as Confucianism more broadly and other aspects of “traditional culture.” Kosaku Yoshino defines cultural nationalism as the belief that a distinctive “cultural community” with its own unique history and characteristics is the “essence of a nation,” and argues that cultural nationalists seek to “regenerate” a nation’s cultural identity when it is perceived to be weak or under threat. Yingjie Guo identifies “historical narratives, commemorative ceremonies, arts and literature, and collective memory” as important sites of cultural nationalist identity-making, drawing from Richard Madsen’s suggestions on the fora through which scholars can examine how community actors as well as the state produce ideas and contest concepts. Cultural nationalism can be implicitly or explicitly linked to ethnic nationalism, in that particular cultural values may be associated with a certain “people,” which can therefore be used to police who belongs and who does not to a particular ethnic identity. This kind of ethno-cultural nationalism is manifestly predicated on “othering” and exclusion. The activities and concepts promoted in ethno-culturalist discourses are manifold, and can include practices that may be treated as mundane in most cultures, such as bathing customs, which as Lesley Wynn shows, have come to be considered a definitive component of national identity in Japan.

In early twentieth-century China, Liang Qichao was a seminal proponent of ideas of race and nation, which he understood in terms of the Darwinian sociology of Herbert Spencer (1820–1903). If Chinese people did not rally around the idea of the national unity of China, then the country was doomed to be destroyed by peoples with a stronger sense of themselves as a nation. In his influential series of essays written between 1902 and 1906 titled “On a New People,” Liang advocated a new kind of moral relationship between individual and country. To provide a conceptual vocabulary for
this, he introduced the Japanese term minzu 民族 into Chinese as the term for “nation,” inspired by its use from the start of Japan’s modernizing program in the 1860s. Liang promoted the expression Zhonghua minzu 中华民族 (“Chinese nation”), which was enthusiastically taken up by Kuomintang 国民党 nationalists Sun Yatsen 孙中山 (1866–1925) and then Chiang Kai-shek 蒋介石 (1887–1975) before falling from favor in Mao-era political discourse. In recent years, however, the Chinese authorities have reinvoked the concept of Zhonghua minzu as a singular national peoplehood to serve as a unitary cultural nationalist identity in contrast to the framework of fifty-six diverse nationalities within one socialist China created during the Mao era. The term Zhonghua minzu subsumes Tibetan, Uighur, Mongolian, Miao and the other ethnicities as defined by Mao-era scholars within one overarching, Han-dominated, Chinese cultural nation, and is projected back thousands of years into the past.

Cultural nationalism in China since the 1990s has been characterized as both anti-Western (especially anti-US) and anti-Marxist. It has taken shape in a context of rising self-confidence in China’s cultural traditions among intellectuals as a result of China’s rapid economic development, and of suspicion towards perceived cultural overreach of the US in processes of globalization processes. Since 1991, the Chinese government’s program of Patriotic Education has created ideal breeding grounds for exclusory ethnic and cultural nationalism. The willingness of China’s intellectual class in recent decades to engage with Western political and cultural theories might be seen as an ameliorating factor, yet this does not necessarily produce pro-Western viewpoints or liberalization teleologies, since theories developed in the West, such as postcolonialism and orientalism, can be used against the West.

Western theories are not necessarily deployed to undermine cultural nationalist reimaginings of the junzi: as my analysis of Chinese public intellectuals’ works below shows, they are by contrast used to render reworked junzi models more convincing.

Methodology

My focus in this paper is the way in which the model of the junzi has been reformulated in contemporary cultural nationalist texts by public intellectuals. As such, it takes a broadly Foucauldian approach to discourse, with the understanding that discourses act to produce/construct particular identities. Taking up Yingjie Guo’s approach that looks beyond statist formulations of cultural nationalism, it principally examines two recent works that stand out in the increasing volume of writing on the junzi, and the responses of a professional Chinese man in London to the concept of the junzi that relate to cultural nationalist tenents. Three characteristics underpin the selection of the texts: Firstly, the foregrounding of the concept of the junzi in book-length projects; secondly, the wide market reach of the books; and thirdly, the prominence of the authors, who are both well-known public intellectuals. A third work by a less well-known author is also subsequently discussed due to its very explicit positioning of the junzi within a racialized cultural nationalist framework. I critically analyze the texts with a view to building a picture of their multi-faceted constructions of cultural nationalist junzi masculinity. At the same time, the analysis also confirms the cultural nationalist characteristics of the texts, in line with the above discussion on cultural nationalism.

The professional Chinese man whose responses I examine below was interviewed as part of a larger research project conducted in 2014-15 on the masculine subjectivities of Chinese professional men in London. The project involved narrative interviews with ten highly-educated professional Chinese men who had come to the UK to study or work. Two of the participants aspired to emulate the junzi model of masculinity, and four others expressed strong attachment to conventional Confucian virtues such as filial piety, familial responsibility and self-control. Participants were recruited through bilingual advertisements in Chinese and English circulated by community organizations, friends and associates. I carried out recorded individual interviews with all the participants for between one and two hours, and had more informal follow-up discussions with five of the participants. Data collection and analysis were conducted according to narrative
research methods. In common with much qualitative research writing, my approach recognizes that individual subjectivities are created through everyday processes of negotiation and contestation of discursive identities. And further, that accounts of personal experiences and understandings elicited in interviews are not pre-formed, but are co-created in the “social encounter” between the interviewer and research participant.

Junzi as Jungian archetype

Yu Qiuyu 余秋雨 (1946–) is a Chinese scholar, writer and commentator whose views on Chinese culture have been influential since the early 1990s when he published Wenhua ku lü 文化苦旅 (A bitter journey through culture, 1992), which includes essays lamenting the historical neglect of China’s cultural heritage that have become set texts in Chinese secondary schools. In his recent book, Junzi zhi dao 君子之道 (Way of the gentleman, 2014), Yu argues that the junzi is the key to Chinese culture. Echoing Liang Qichao, he makes the concept of personality central to his argument. He anoints the junzi as the “collective personality of Chinese culture” (Zhonghua wenhua de jiti renge 中华文化的集体人格) in order to bring clarity, as he sees it, to debates about the fundamental nature of the Chinese people. The logic underpinning Yu’s argument runs thus: if “personality” (ren’ge 人格) is the “ultimate achievement of culture” (wenhua de zhongji chengguo 文化的终极成果), then the ultimate achievement of Chinese culture is “Chinese people’s collective personality” (Zhongguoren de jiti ren’ge 中国人的集体人格), and it therefore follows that the “rejuvenation of Chinese culture” (fuxing Zhonghua wenhua 复兴中华文化) requires the search for and “optimization” (youhua 优化) of Chinese people’s collective personality.

Yu espouses and promotes a cultural form of nationalism, yet is at the same time a cosmopolitan writer: he refers widely to Western authors and their concepts in order to support his arguments about the junzi, and particularly draws from the notions of the collective unconscious and collective personality that Jung derived from Freud’s work on the unconscious/subconscious. In his book on junzi, rather than deploying postmodernism and other theories against the West, Yu’s strategy is to mine the Western academy for conceptual frameworks that can bolster his positioning of the junzi at the forefront of a Chinese cultural nationalist paradigm.

And yet Yu is quick to denounce the use of Western theories when he feels they are being used to critique the traditional Chinese canon. As Yu relates in his book, in the mid-1930s Jung met Hu Shi 胡适 (1891–1962), the reformist philosopher and prominent figure in the May Fourth and New Culture movements of the 1910s and ‘20s. During the ensuing conversation, Jung asked Hu about his feelings towards the Book of Changes, the very text from which Liang Qichao plucked the junzi quotations that became the Tsinghua motto. In his response to Jung, Hu disparaged the Book of Changes as a form of magic and amulet. Yu is infuriated by this, claiming that Hu’s comments were “sloppy” (caoshuai 草率) and an inappropriate application of “Western modern scientific thinking” (xifang jindai kexue siwei 西方近代科学思维). Yu contrasts Hu’s attitude to the Book of Changes with Jung’s, who, in his introduction to Richard Wilhem’s 1923 German translation, sets out reasons for taking it seriously. Yu approves of Jung’s starting point, which is that the personalities of Western and Chinese people are different. For Yu, the personality of the saint (shengtu ren’ge 圣徒人格) and the personality of the gentleman (shenshi ren’ge 绅士人格) are the salient examples of collective personality in the West, but, as mentioned above, the collective Chinese personality is the junzi. This idea aligns neatly with Liang Qichao’s argument in his Tsinghua speech one hundred years previously that the junzi model is most suited to the task of “raising up the personality” of the Chinese people.

Yu sees the junzi as the most profound “personality mode” (ren’ge moshi 人格模式) to have emerged from early Chinese culture. Drawing on Jung, he claims China as the “homeland” (guxiang 故乡) of the junzi, and, argues that over time the concept of the junzi has become a deeply buried “archetype” (yuanxing 原型) in the collective unconscious of the Chinese people.
Confucians turned it into a “personality ideal” (ren’ge lixiang 人格理想), into which, he believes, all of Chinese culture’s “high points” (liangdian 亮点) have been absorbed.\(^4\) Indeed, Confucian, can be concisely summarized as the way of the junzi, according to Yu, and as such, the junzi is the sine qua non of Chinese culture: if there are junzi, Yu states, then all can be had; but without junzi, everything is futile.\(^4\) Yu firmly links the junzi personality with being Chinese, suggesting it is the cultural aspiration of all Chinese: “to be a junzi is to be the most qualified, most ideal Chinese person.”\(^5\)

He even goes as far as to claim that it is solely the existence of junzi that prevents the dying off of Chinese culture, because the junzi provides such a strong model personality.

This suggests Yu understands “culture” as a kind of high form of ideals and practices that are generated, transmitted, and protected by a highly educated elite. This differs from the approach of populist Confucianists like Yu Dan, who try to integrate Confucianism into everyday mass culture, turning it into a kind of self-help Confucianism-lite for daily use. This latter approach presupposes a more postmodern, consumerist take on cultural practices, and lacks the sustained, lifelong self-cultivation that Yu Qiuyu advocates. It appears that Yu Qiuyu is writing for an audience that wishes to reflect more deeply on the significance of the junzi model for Chinese culture: those, one might assume, that Yu believes have the potential to become junzi.

Confucians have often approached the attributes of the junzi through defining the junzi’s opposite: the xiaoren 小人 (small person).\(^6\) Without the xiaoren as the junzi’s Other, it could be argued that the junzi cannot exist. In Yu’s words, “the divide between the junzi and the xiaoren makes the junzi, this ideal personality, more solid.”\(^7\) Yu relates that in ancient times, xiaoren was not necessarily a derogatory term: it referred to those with low social status. Eventually, however, he argues that the difference between the two concepts came to be defined as one of personality or “moral character” (renpin 人品).\(^8\) By framing the difference as a matter of morality, Yu avoids the common characterization of the junzi as attached to righteousness and the xiaoren as attached to profit. Yu’s shift of emphasis away from associating money making with a xiaoren mentality is in line with post-Mao (and antecedent) efforts to reconcile Confucianism, and the junzi, with commercial activities.

Within one group of people, even within one person, Yu argues, there can be a contest between junzi and xiaoren components.\(^9\) To support this point, Yu cites Tang dynasty historian Wu Jing’s 吳兢 (670–749) concise formulation: “the junzi does good deeds; the xiaoren does evil deeds” (xing shanshi ze wei junzi, xing eshi ze wei xiaoren 行善事則為君子，行惡事則為小人).\(^10\) Thus, for Yu, the difference between the junzi and the xiaoren is not a difference between two stable social groups, but that exhibited by “a momentary slip in our innermost being” (neixin de yi nian zhi cha 内心的一念之差); in other words, between the good or bad behavior of individuals.\(^11\) Yu thus deftly psychologizes the junzi/xiaoren dichotomy in a way that could be used to deflect critiques of the junzi as socially divisive or reminiscent of feudal hierarchies. Yu argues that the only thing anyone has any real control over is himself or herself. Cultivating one’s moral character is thus the kernel of Confucian teaching, as it is not possible to be fully successful in managing family affairs, ruling the country and bringing peace to all under heaven, as the traditional Confucian formula sets out. Through a focus on cherishing virtue for his own benefit, in Yu’s view, the junzi can go forth to benefit others, and, indeed, to benefit the whole world.\(^12\) Yu’s approach speaks to multiple modern notions of personhood, to middle-class concerns about their own moral standards, and to contemporary feelings among professional and intellectual men of a loss of control and influence in the family and beyond.

A final salient point to note about Yu’s reformulation of the junzi as collective personality ideal of the Chinese nation is his integration into the junzi model of elements of Buddhism. For Yu, Buddhism is a core component of China’s cultural heritage. Buddhist tenets complement the way of the junzi, and the junzi should keep close to Buddhism. Yu is concerned that during the practice of self-cultivation there is a danger that the practitioner will become too self-centered; Buddhist texts and
concepts, such as the notion of “emptiness” (空) set out in the Heart Sutra, can help overcome this potential weakness in the practice of junzi self-cultivation. The potential for Buddhism to act to some extent in tandem with Confucianism in endorsing the worth of self-cultivation and filial piety is clearly demonstrated in the characteristics of the remarkable Buddhist renaissance in Taiwan in recent decades. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Yu has taken special efforts to promote his book on the junzi to Taiwanese Buddhist audiences.

To some, Yu Qiuyu’s views may appeal as a timely reworking of the neglected historical concept of the junzi as a counterweight to the encroachment of Western models of personality in China. Yet viewed from another angle, Yu’s enthusiastic promotion of the junzi as the collective personality ideal for the Chinese nation demonstrates a desire among Chinese intellectuals and China’s highly-educated professionals to renegotiate more favorably their fragile status in an increasingly commercialized Chinese society, and to better place themselves as the guardians and paragons of a national Chinese culture in what could be described as an intensely competitive global “soft power” marketplace. In short, by drawing on China’s deeply significant Confucian historical tradition to promote the junzi role as the essence of Chinese culture, highly-educated Chinese men like Yu are attempting to solidify and enhance their social status and political power in today’s fast-changing world.

Calling for a “junzi nation”

Yao Zhongqiu 姚中秋 (1966–) is a Confucian scholar, economist, public intellectual, and President of the Unirule Institute of Economics (北京天则经济研究所). The Unirule Institute is a Beijing social sciences think tank committed to promoting market economics, founded in 1993 by Mao Yushi 茅于轼 (1929–), a champion of economic liberalization and deregulation who is reviled by the Chinese left. Yao’s 2012 book Meide; junzi; fengsu 美德君子风俗 (“Virtue; junzi; social customs”) proposes the junzi ideal as the foundation on which he believes Chinese society should build its future. In his book, Yao critiques three paradigms of governance: what he calls “system determinism” (制度决定论), which enforces conformity with a dominant system (it is likely that Yao has socialism in his sights here); “cultural determinism” (文化决定论), especially in the form that holds that Western cultural values need to be adopted in China to change society for the better, because as a Confucian he does not agree that culture is wholly responsible for all change; and “civil society construction doctrine” (公民社会建设论), which holds that through marketization, urbanization and the expansion of the middle class, people are trained into being better citizens. Yao criticizes this last doctrine because in his view it neglects the training of “private citizens” (私民), without which he argues there cannot be “public citizens” (公民).

In this book, Yao puts forward a Confucian theory for building society, which he describes as using Confucian doctrines of human nature as its cornerstone, putting the junzi at the center, and taking social customs as its means. With an unashamedly elitist tenor, Yao defines the junzi as “people with outstanding moral conduct” (德行出众者), the opposite of whom he calls “ordinary people” (凡人), although he also refers at times to xiaoren. For Yao, junzi are particularly strongly disposed towards being supportive of others, are skilled in such endeavors, and are therefore the people who set up, organize and lead groups, and who produce and allocate public goods. In Yao’s vision of a junzi-led society, ordinary people also learn the necessary basic morality and conduct for the maintenance of social order, and through participating in public affairs develop from “private citizens” into “public citizens.” In this way, a social fabric is gradually developed that has the junzi at the center, surrounded in ever-increasing circles by family, community, workplace, region, country, and ultimately the whole world, and which maintains a social order that is “diverse yet harmonious” (和而不同).
Yao is aware that his emphasis on the *junzi* may incite the accusation that he is endorsing social inequality. But he strongly believes, in a very similar way to Yu Qiuyu, that the presuppositions of contemporary (Western) mainstream social science are inappropriate and inaccurate when it comes to understanding China’s history and reality. Consequently, Yao argues provocatively that the fields of Chinese humanities and social sciences have been and continue to be warped by what he sees as their word-for-word copying of the outside world, whether Soviet, German, Japanese, British or American, a world of which he argues Chinese intellectuals only have a superficial understanding. For Yao, Confucian thinking, by contrast, can lead people to “more aptly and accurately understand theoretical paradigms for human nature, society, and order in contemporary China.”

As with Yu Qiuyu, Yao Zhongqiu harbors no doubts about the benefits of the *junzi* for Chinese culture and society and the importance of the *junzi* for the fate of the nation. Yet Yao also goes further than Yu by including an urgent requirement to build a “*junzi* community” (*junzi qunti*), arguing that for China to rebuild a “superior social order” (*youliang zhixu*) and to undertake its “mission in world history” (*shijie lishi zhi shiming*), the cultivation of a *junzi* community is a pressing task.” His desire to build such a community fits Yoshino’s paradigm, described above, in which cultural nationalists define a particular “cultural community” as the core of the nation. Yao goes as far as to assert that China’s future civilization and strength depend ultimately on the cultivation of a certain scale of *junzi* community. Making the bold claim that without *junzi* there can be no governance, Yao argues that the words and actions of the *junzi* are the fundamental mechanisms for shaping the moral, rational and good behavior of the future Chinese citizenry. As was the case in premodern China, Yao argues for scholar politicians, summing up his notion of the *junzi*’s role in one simple term: “scholar official” (*shidafu*): the very figure that the early twentieth century New Culture Movement intellectuals were keen to eradicate.

Yet, for Yao, as with Yu, the *junzi* of today is not a simple replica of the *junzi* of old. At the heart of Yao’s conceptualization of the contemporary *junzi* lies a class distinction predicated on moral quality. Even if contemporary society aims for gender, education and wage equality, Yao argues, there are still differences in people’s natural capacities, which can be physical, mental and moral. Yao embraces a purer notion of *junzi* than Yu, seeing the capacities of individuals in more clear-cut terms than Yu. For Yao argues that people can be categorized as possessing either high or low “moral conduct” (*dexing*), hence the division between the *junzi* and *xiaoren*. However, as with Yu Qiuyu, Yao stresses this division in terms of moral character and self-cultivation, rather than the historical dichotomy of righteousness-profit. Yao argues that as with the aristocracies of Western countries an emphasis on equality does not render the *junzi* superfluous, but merely transforms the justification of his role as guardian of the social order from birthright to his elevated personal “quality” (*pinzhi*).

A morally elevated *junzi* stratum must therefore govern the *xiaoren*, Yao argues, as the latter, being less cultivated, are captives of their material desires. There is public appetite for the society-wide promulgation of *junzi* attributes, Yao claims, citing a 2012 opinion poll in the *China Youth Daily* in which 71% of respondents believed that *junzi* moral integrity could help rebuild Chinese citizens’ morality and values, and 87% hoped that *junzi* education would be strengthened. Yao’s cultural nationalism manifests very clearly in his use of the term “*junzi* nation” (*junzi zhi bang*), expressing his hope for a Chinese future in which “*junzi*-style” (*junzi shi*), businessmen, lawyers, politicians and scholars will utilize the “way of the *junzi*” to enable China to harmonize its relations with all nations and to “display a world-leading role appropriate to China’s size.”

Despite his dismissal of Western academia’s inappropriateness for understanding Chinese society, Yao, like Yu, is quick to use Western theories when he feels that they strengthen his arguments. For example, Yao is strongly influenced by the Austrian classical liberal economist...
Friedrich Hayek (1899–1992). Yao relates that after the 1940s Hayek took Scottish moral philosophy as his basis for thinking through self-cognition, society, the market, law, politics and so on, and argues that while Scottish moral philosophy is the ethics of the (British) gentleman, Confucian philosophy is the ethics of the junzi. Developing this idea, Yao states that the basis of society should be woven around the junzi and the gentleman. The moral conduct of the junzi or gentleman naturally forms a junzi or gentleman-centered social order, which is the foundation of the government. Politics, then, is the bridge between the junzi or gentleman-centered social order and the government. Yao draws from eighteenth century Ulster-Scots philosopher Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746) to bolster his claim that government should be composed of people with junzi virtues, approvingly citing Hutcheson’s notion that ordinary people naturally put their trust in highly able, courageous, moral, wise, benevolent and social ethics-oriented people, believing them to be responsible public officials and having confidence in their ability to manage social affairs.

Yao’s predilection for the free-market oriented Austrian School of economics leads him to align the junzi or gentleman with what he calls the Austrian School’s “rule-making entrepreneur” (lifa qiyejia 立法企业家), which he derives from studies of the formation of institutions by Carl Menger (1840–1921), the founder of the Austrian School. Yao suggests these junzi entrepreneurs could compete with each other to come up with programs for the authorities. Further influenced by Hayek’s notion of spontaneous order, Yao argues that although the setting up of a constitution which has a junzi-centered social order is a man-made artifice, it also belongs to Hayek’s spontaneous social order, as everyone is allowed—in theory—to put forward their opinions. It is likely that Yao is trying here to distinguish his vision from top-down systems like socialism. Yao holds that the mix of constitutional politics and conventions in his junzi-centered spontaneous order, which he likens to the “gentry constitutionalism” of the UK and the USA (the two countries whose gentlemanly education Liang Qichao praised), creates stability and robustness in a country. In this way, Yao believes that Hayek’s Scottish moral philosophy-founded insights provide a preferable alternative to the Hobbesian view of politics as calculated self-interest, which Yao laments is currently dominant in China.

Using shenshi 绅士, a term for gentleman associated with the historical gentry class in China, Yao postulates that there are already some gentlemen amid contemporary Chinese entrepreneurs, but very few. He argues they are the contemporary re-generation of the gentry merchants tradition. Their idea of public ethics is not fully formed, Yao states, nor are there broad enough channels for the expression of public ethics. These gentry merchant gentlemen are thus not strong enough to pull against the corruption of the entire mass of entrepreneurs. In Yao’s view, entrepreneurs are the most important managers and leaders of a “normal” country’s system of social governance, and he condemns entrepreneurs in China for conspiring with officials to exploit the weakest people in society. Again with similarities to Yu’s position, Yao argues that only traditional religion or quasi-traditional religion can shake them out of that corrupt state. Thus he lauds the increasing number of entrepreneurs who have turned to Buddhism and Confucianism in the last ten years.

Putting this increasing interest in religion in the context of a global revival in religion since the 1980s, Yao writes that with regard to Christianity in China, experts have identified two new groups of Christian followers: “boss Christians” (laoye jidutu 老爸基督徒), composed of owners and directors of private enterprises; and “big city white-collar employees” (da chengshi de bailing 大城市的白领), which includes teachers, university students, doctors, lawyers, artists etc. Boss Christians establish churches and use their wealth for charitable purposes, and many businessmen believe in Buddhism and Daoism and enthusiastically support the revival of Confucianism, because religion enables them to leave materialism and their inner binds behind. Yao refers to research that shows that religious businessmen are less likely to engage in immoral and illegal behavior, and that their values encourage people to buy their products. With a view to religion’s emphasis away from the self, as
with Yu, Yao writes that some entrepreneurs have already broken free from the trap of egoism, and have started to be concerned about their staff’s difficulties, their customers’ feedback, the hardships of vulnerable groups, and the good and the bad in the social order. This leads them to use their resources to promote “cultural reconstruction” (wenhua chongjian), and it is in this way that they can become Confucian junzi. Yao concludes that the more entrepreneurs become such junzi or even gentry businessmen, the more they can effectively assume public responsibilities. In Yao’s view, this is good for them as individuals and for Chinese society as a whole.

Besides entrepreneurs, Yao is also keen for middle-class professionals to aspire to become junzi. Professionals in general play an important role in today’s society because of the knowledge they possess, Yao states, which gives them a certain power and autonomy that he believes can be used as to balance the power of governments, the economy, and popular opinion. According to Yao, the development of the knowledge and autonomy of professionals in the Chinese context relies on them raising themselves up to be junzi, and only those who become junzi can organize other professionals into coherent groups and gradually shape professional ethical standards, through appropriate and prudent relations with the government and the people. Yao maintains that it is only through professional communities that professionals can raise their self-awareness, come to understand the power they hold, and fulfill their social duty. Of all today’s professionals, legal professionals are most engaged with junzi-like behavior, in Yao’s view, and by self-cultivating as junzi legal professionals can truly delimit “justice” (yi) (the same word that is used for “righteousness”) by identifying appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

Doctors and teachers are also prime candidates for junzi self-cultivation. Yao argues that the commercialization and bureaucratization of healthcare provision can only be overcome if doctors use their autonomy to achieve an ethical re-awakening, and that teachers must become junzi, because it takes a junzi to foster a junzi. Ultimately, Yao acknowledges that, generally speaking, the junzi are each and every field’s “elite” (jingying). As elite exemplars, he argues that the junzi in each field possess the following attributes: high moral conduct, an authoritative presence, and the desire and skill to participate in public affairs. But when politicians, businessmen and scholars go astray, they become corrupt, show off their riches, overindulge in drink and sex, and lose concern for the people and public affairs. A key step in reconstructing Chinese culture, therefore, is to “tame the elite” (xunhua jingying). This entails every CCP school, every civil service college, legal college, commercial college, etc., teaching the Confucian classics so that students can develop their individual moral qualities, such as sincerity, and go on to run the country with wisdom. Interestingly, Yao’s sense that the elite’s excesses need to be “tamed” is also projected in the hugely popular online novel Huiguoxunhuoji, written in installments by a rich Chinese returnee businessman from the US since 2003, which regales its readers with tales of a successful Chinese businessman and investor who returns to China from America to live a life of “consumerism and hedonism without bounds.” Although the novel has not been completed, Louie argues that a moral ending to the story is suggested, given the already provided downbeat title of the final unwritten chapter, and its intimations of the historical conventions of Chinese literary fiction, in which the protagonist realizes that he can only truly achieve happiness by abstaining from debauchery and hedonism. As such, Yao’s objective to tame the out-of-control elite through moral cultivation runs true to a deeply embedded paradigm in historical Chinese thinking.

In sum, Yao’s vision for a junzi nation mixes Confucian social and political ethics with Hayekian economic (neo)liberalism. Yao dreams of a dynamic, liberal market economy, powered by ethically outstanding junzi entrepreneurs and junzi professionals. In doing so, he provides a more developed model than Yu for the reconfiguration of the pursuit of material wealth within a Confucian moral framework. His attention to middle-class professionals highlights their importance as a
moral cornerstone in the project of Yao and other intellectuals to re-Confucianize China. While undoubtedly innovative, Yao’s reliance on the junzi as the only figure who can make China great again is culturally nationalist, elitist, and possibly sexist if read as a male-only model. As such his program stands as an attempt, like Yu’s, to enhance the influence of China’s intellectual class, who find their status diminished in comparison to their forerunners, due to the post-Mao reach of financial capital and global markets.

“Life is about self-cultivation”: a Chinese professional’s responses to junzi discourses

Kosaku Yoshino, a theorist of cultural nationalism, writes:

Two groups are normally prominent in the development of cultural nationalism: intellectuals (or thinking elites), who formulate ideas and ideals of the nation’s cultural identity, and intelligentsia (or social groups with higher and further education), who respond to such ideas and ideals and relate them to their own social, economic, political and other activities.93

In this section, in order to explore how highly educated Chinese men are responding to the ideas and ideals of intellectuals of the junzi, I discuss the case of Bradley, a young Chinese professional man whom, as mentioned above, I interviewed as part of larger project on the masculine subjectivities of men from China working in London. Bradley was one of the two project participants who explicitly cited the junzi ideal among the six who stated adherence to typical Confucian values. Of these two, I have chosen to focus on Bradley because he specifically referenced Yu Qiuyu as a major influence on his thinking, neatly illustrating the link between intellectual discourse and the practices of the highly educated outlined by Yoshino.94

The son of officials, in his mid-twenties and a design professional, Bradley had moved to the UK from east China for his high school education. When we met for the interview, he told me his relocation to the UK had forced him to reconsider his notions of China and Chinese culture. In the first place, through reading Mencius (372-289 BCE), he had come to the realization that “life is about self-cultivation.” He pinpointed two important dimensions to this: the cultivation of Confucian morals, and the Buddhist cultivation of personal happiness, both of which he felt were important. His mix ofConfucian and Buddhist methods of self-cultivation resonated with Yu Qiuyu’s approach, and indeed he told me that he had read Yu’s work on the junzi: “Yu Qiuyu says the junzi is the cultural ideal of Chinese culture, like the samurai is for the Japanese. China needs more self-cultivation to be taught.” Bradley was particularly concerned that consumerism without a moral framing results in poor development of moral subjecthood. With regard to what he saw as the problematic consequence of this, he said: “the attention paid to creams, designer clothes, hairstyles, doesn’t make for interesting character. What’s missing is that self-cultivation is not being taught.” In this regard, his desire to insert a moral dimension into materialist lifestyles accords very strongly with the programs of both Yu Qiuyu and Yao Zhongqiu.

For Bradley, the issue of self-cultivation raised interesting questions about the nature and exercise of the power wielded by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). He expressed his disappointment with the CCP’s Patriotic Education program, which he felt lacked a moral dimension. Bradley expressed in his comments a tension between a narrow, insufficient CCP patriotism and his desire for a more fulfilling engagement with Chinese cultural identity. Moreover, for Bradley, the promotion of a masculinity founded on Confucian self-cultivation was not simply desirable, but was vital for China’s political system, which he emphasized does not have the checks and balances of Western political systems: “I guess the Chinese way is harsher, more strict. Because Confucian self-cultivation cultivates one towards power, like a man who can hold so much power without being
corrupt—that’s a much higher standard.” He argued that Western institutional structures prevented leaders amassing the same amount of power as the Chinese leader could, which necessitated the Chinese leader cultivating exemplary moral rectitude: “you will never give a man that much power, therefore there is no need for one single character to have such high moral standards as Xi Jinping (1953–) or Wen Jiabao (1942–).” Nevertheless, despite Bradley’s disagreement with the narrowness of CCP historical narratives, he did not reject the Party itself, the survival of which he argued depended precisely on the moral self-cultivation of its officials. Exhilarated by Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption drive, he talked of the Party staying in power for two or three hundred years, like a dynasty of old, if its leaders successfully fostered a *junzi* mentality. His vision, therefore, exhibited clear parallels with Yao Zhongqiu’s call for *junzi* political leadership and *junzi* public officials.

When I asked Bradley to give an example of someone who embodied *junzi* qualities, Bradley named the nineteenth-century general Zeng Guofan (1811–1872), who in Bradley’s view incorporated both Confucian and Daoist principles into his performance of cultivated masculinity. Bradley’s choice was no doubt influenced by the vociferous lauding of Zeng by cultural nationalists that has taken place since the 1980s in books, TV series and republications of his writings. Zeng has been hailed as a seminal modernizer of industry and education, and yet at the same time “an exemplary Confucian man of literary and professional achievements and moral excellence.” Zeng was a hero of Liang Qichao, Chiang Kai-Shek and other Confucian nationalists in the first half of the twentieth century due to the major role he played in bringing a degree of stability to China through the suppression of the Taiping Rebellion (1851–64). Liang Qichao even believed that Zeng could have rescued China from its weak condition at the end of the nineteenth century had he been alive then. However, Zeng became a taboo figure during the Mao years, when for the very same actions he was portrayed as a reactionary killer of progressive peasants and criticized for his Confucian values. Bradley most appreciated what he considered to be Zeng’s strength of moral character, reflecting the predominant way he has been presented in the post-Mao era as encapsulating “the four principal ideals of the Confucian man (achieving self-perfection, managing the family, governing the empire, and bringing order to all under heaven).”

Bradley also approvingly mentioned the Qing Dynasty *Jinshang* 晋商, morally minded Confucian merchants from Shanxi, whose extensive trading required the development of more sophisticated financial institutions. The *Jinshang* are one of the groups of merchants associated with premodern attempts to reposition Confucianism vis-à-vis the pursuit of wealth. Bradley’s mentioning the *Jinshang* reflects the prominence of several films, TV dramas and documentaries about them since the 1990s, which have helped cement the idea of a late-imperial, morally sound “Confucian business culture” (儒家文化) that created wealth and generated taxes in responsible ways and helped the less well-off. Influenced by this recently popularized understanding of Confucian-infused historical business practices in China, Bradley legitimized his own sense of himself as a moral man of business.

**A darker side of cultural nationalist use of the *junzi***

Werner Meissner suggests that it is possible that “anti-Western ideology in China will become an amalgam consisting of Confucian elements, combined with set pieces of Party ideology, anti-Western, non-liberal philosophy, and based on an ethnic, or even, racist identity.” He argues that the CCP could use this kind of ideology to encompass non-Han ethnic groups and Sinophone populations beyond China within one Chinese national identity, with the Chinese leadership as the core of the “Chinese nation.” In the light of Meissner’s comments, one can see how Yu’s “collective *junzi* personality,” Yao’s “*junzi* nation”, and Bradley’s enthusiasm for Yu Qiuju’s *junzi* cultural archetype and his own expression of the “Chinese way” of self-cultivation all easily fit the category of cultural nationalism and even potentially racialized nationalism, as their imputation of particular
attributes to Chineseness and the Chinese nation excludes non-Chinese from possessing them. If everyone or every society or culture in the world had the potential to possess these attributes, they would cease to be defining features of Chineseness.

A clear example of racialized nationalist use of the junzi concept can be found in the work of author Gao Xitian 高喜田 (1956–), who has written a book entitled Way of the junzi: Chinese people’s philosophy for conducting themselves in society (Junzi zhi dao: Zhongguoren de chushi zhexue 君子之道：中国人的处世哲学). A quotation from Gao initiates an account of an interview with him in a 2012 article in the China Youth Daily:

*Even if peasants lived deep in the mountains for ages and ages without books or education, they would still understand the basis for being a junzi and not a xiaoren, and would guide their offspring to follow benevolence and righteousness and not offend Heaven and Earth. This precisely permeates the Chinese cultural genes in our nation’s blood (minzu xueyehong de Zhonghua wenhua jiyin 民族血液中的中华文化基因).*

Gao directly acknowledges Liang Qichao’s speech promoting the personality of the junzi personality at Tsinghua University in 1914 as his inspiration. Yet he describes how thinking of Liang’s speech fills him with both excitement and sorrow. Although Gao strongly admires Liang’s diligent and tireless pursuit of junzi-hood, he feels despondent that in the market economy of today’s China the guiding light of the junzi ideal is becoming fainter and fainter.

Culturalist/racialized sentiments similar to Gao’s are found in the preface of his book, which was written by Ji Baocheng 纪宝成 (1944–), a previous Principal of Beijing’s renowned Renmin University, where China’s first “National Studies College” (guoxue yuan 国学院) was founded in 2005. Ji states in the preface: “There is no nation in the world like the Chinese nation (Zhonghua minzu 中华民族): our cultural traditions grow without end, are continuous and uninterrupted, and the moral concepts and values formed thousands of years ago are still actively playing a role today.” Gao anticipates the ideas of Yu Qiuyu when he proposes the personality of the junzi as “the ideal personality of the Chinese nation” (Zhonghua minzu de lixiang ren’ge 中华民族的理想人格) and “the ideal model of a perfect personality” (wanmei ren’ge de lixiang moxing 完美人格的理想模型). Ji also echoed these sentiments in his preface. It is through the concept of the “Chinese nation” that racializing nationalists subsume China’s ethnic and cultural differences under a Han-dominated national identity. This kind of cultural and racialized nationalism inevitably benefits the Han as the existing hegemonic group in China.

**Conclusion**

Bradley’s ethical self-makings via the appropriation of the junzi ideal are creative and transformative responses to the circumstances he has encountered as a transnational, well-educated Chinese man. As an educated Chinese men living and working in a world in which Western power is hegemonic, he has striven to embrace a cultural nationalist reworking of junzi masculinity against a historical background in which Chinese masculinity has been undermined, challenged and erased. His refashioning of his identity seeks to link his masculinity with Chinese nationhood and culture in ways that thwart the ever-present potential undoing of his manhood. He enfolds ideas of junzi-hood into his own subjectivity, invoking the junzi in inventive ways to imagine a more moral, less consumerist China, to promulgate a patriotism rooted in historical culture rather than CCP interests, and to reconcile Chinese intellectuals with marketplace economics. The increasing manifestation of the junzi model in internet blogs, current affairs magazines, TV programs and recently published books show that many other educated professional men are also invoking this model of masculinity in their own particular trajectories of identity-making. Indeed, despite an increasingly gender-neutral framing, including by Bradley and in the texts I have analyzed, the culturally nationalist junzi model...
remains in everyday life mostly a preoccupation of men, and thus a masculine ideal. In terms of social status and privilege, the classed and gendered implications of junzi-type cultural nationalism particularly privilege highly-educated middle-class men, who, unsurprisingly, form the vast majority of those promulgating the Confucian/junzi revival. Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that the junzi is just one among many masculinities jostling for attention in today’s relatively pluralistic China; and that while interest in junzi cultivation is clearly growing, a large-scale study is needed to get a clearer picture of its prevalence.

The resurgence of “traditional” Chinese cultural pursuits and identities in everyday activities, with the state’s acquiescence and even support in many instances, fits a global trend, towards the expression of identity in cultural and religious terms, due in part to increasing doubts across the world as to whether secular liberal or socialist approaches are necessarily the only possibilities for building well-grounded and stable modern societies. This trend has particularly intensified since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991 dealt the death knell to a viable socialist alternative to capitalism. As emerging economies have grown in wealth and confidence since the 1990s, in some cases leaving colonial era shadows further behind them, they have also felt free to discard notions that modernization is synonymous with Westernization. Intellectuals such as Yao Zhongqiu and Yu Qiuyu are pushing Confucianism and the junzi ideal to shape a cultural nationalist revisioning of China’s future that they believe will raise their status. Using Confucianism as their foundational philosophy provides them with a usefully indirect way of critiquing the Communist authorities. Yu has proven particularly successful at criticizing current norms without ever falling into taboo territory. The same is true for Yao’s promotion of Confucianism.

Of particular note is the way that Yao and others address today’s Chinese professionals in their promotion of junzi masculinity. For Yao, today’s professionals, with their specialized knowledge and focus on mental work, must take on the mantle of cultivating themselves to become contemporary junzi. Such efforts are not without effect, as the example of Bradley shows. This negotiation of social status in a commercializing and globalizing China is complemented by a simultaneous negotiation of status globally. Chinese intellectual voices are urging the promotion of Confucian values across the world. Guan Shijie, Director of the International and Intercultural Communication Program at Beijing University, has stated that “the time has come for the West to learn from the East... The Confucian concept of universal harmony will be dominant during the next century.” However, the potential danger of such approaches is the homogenization of China’s plurality of cultures to service a racialized Chinese nationhood.

Although not explicitly racial, Yu Qiuyu’s use of notions like “collective personality” (jiti ren’ge 集体人格) and “junzi personality” (junzi ren’ge 君子人格) furnish a “Grand View of Culture,” according to Haomin Gong, which Yu uses to deflect criticism of his scholarship. When Yu has been challenged in the past over the accuracy of details of his writings, he has brushed them aside, and has brought the focus back to these big ideas. Yu, and Yao, promulgate new grand narratives of the nation and national culture. But the only means that they have of influencing many people with their ideas is paradoxically through the very mass commercial culture that they condemn as immoral and deleterious. It may be that the current hegemonic confluence of socialism and market economics in China will prove impossible to tame, and will continue to appropriate, and regulate, junzi visions, including those of Yu and Yao, for its own aims. Yet if more professional men like Bradley are won over, the realisation of Liang Qichao’s gentlemanly ideal will be a step closer. Yu, Yao and their fellow travellers know their only chance is to embed the junzi in nationalist sentiment. Yet, if they succeed, they may find, as Meissner warns, that they have helped create a rather more unpleasant regime than the one that they envisaged.
ENDNOTES

1. The junzi ideal was one element in Liang’s overall vision for strong Chinese manhood. Inspired by his experiences in early twentieth century Japan, he also vigorously advocated the need for a cultural nationalism founded on the mythical “way of the warrior” (wushidao 武士道) in order to foster the Chinese people’s “martial spirit” (shangwu 尚武). See Oleg Benesch, “The Samurai Next Door: Chinese Examinations of the Japanese Martial Spirit,” Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident 38 (2014): 138–42. I am grateful to Professor Kam Louie for highlighting this point in comments on my presentation of an earlier version of this paper at the University of San Francisco, November 2016.


6. Bret Hinsch, Masculinities in Chinese History (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 9. Valentina Boretti has shown how the connections between modernization, nation building, Western commerce, and masculinities can be seen in how toys were marketed to Chinese “new” children, who were often coded as masculine despite comprising both genders. By the 1920s, “modern,” “patriotic” toys were seen as crucial tools for the appropriate education of the minds and bodies of “new” children. See Valentina Boretti, “Small Things of Great Importance: Toy Advertising in China, 1910s-1930s,” Asia Pacific Perspectives 13, no. 2 (2015–16): 7, and passim.


9. See Prasenjit Duara, “Provincial narratives of the nation: centralism and federalism in Republican China,” in Cultural Nationalism in East Asia: Representation and Identity, ed. Harumi Befu (Institute of East Asian Studies Research Papers and Policy Studies 39) (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), 9; see also Yingjie Guo, Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary China: The Search for National Identity under Reform (London: Routledge, 2004), 2–4. including notes) formation, this papers of elite cultural nationalism in China, an inserterns, including:


11. Song and Hird, Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China, 64, 124–5.


13. Since 1989, an increasingly vocal neo-Confucian movement in China has argued for the promotion of traditional Confucian values as an alternative to or even replacement for the CCP’s Marxist ideology, and for a ruling class of virtuous Confucians who embody junzi characteristics. This culturalist movement, which is dominated by men, has energized historical masculine ideals such as the junzi. See Heike Holbig and Bruce Gilley, “In Search of Legitimacy in Post-revolutionary China: Bringing Ideology and Governance Back In,” Legitimacy and Efficiency of Political Systems Research Program Working Paper no. 127, German Institute of Global and Area Studies (March 2010): 22.

14. Tak Sing Cheung and Ambrose Yeo-chi King, “Righteousness and Profitableness: The Moral Choices of


26. Ibid.


36. Yu adds the English word “personality” in brackets, adumbrating an Anglophone/Western dimension to his argument.
38. Ibid., 5–6.
41. Ibid., 9.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., 10.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., 11.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 15.
55. Miao Kai, “Yu Qiuyu Taiwan kaijiang.”
56. See Gong, *Popularization of Traditional Culture*, for a similar argument in relation to Yu's “cultural prose.”
58. Ibid., 2.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid., 3. Yao's use of he er bu tong comes from a saying of Confucius in the *Lunyu* (Analects of Confucius): *junzi he er bu tong, xiaoren tong er bu he* 君子和而不同, 小人同而不和, which can be glossed as: “the junzi maintains harmonious and friendly relations with others, but does not blindly agree with them; the xiaoren panders to and parrots the opinions of others, but does not harbor a harmonious and friendly attitude towards them in his heart.” See Baidu baike, “Junzi he er bu tong,” accessed April 7, 2017, http://baike.baidu.com/view/2925692.htm.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid., 77.
65. Ibid., 93.
66. Ibid., 85.
67. Ibid., 84.
68. Ibid., 86.
69. Ibid., 86-9.
70. Ibid., 93.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid., 94.
73. Ibid., 100.
74. Ibid., 102.
76. Yao, Meide; junzi; fengsu, 103.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid., 185.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid., 186.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid., 186-7.
85. Ibid., 204.
86. Ibid.
87. Ibid., 190.
88. Ibid., 211-13.
89. Ibid., 223.
90. Ibid., 236.
92. Ibid., 66.
96. Ibid., 55.
97. Ibid., 51; Pang, “The Rise of Cultural Nationalism,” 3362.
Junzi Masculinity – Hird

103. Ibid., 16.


105. Ibid.

106. Ibid.

107. Ibid.


109. Cheng (2011) argues that the discourse of patriotic nationalism in China is characterised by a hegemonic Han racial chauvinism that excludes non-Han ethnicities from the scope of the term Zhonghua minzu. Rae and Wang’s survey of over 1000 respondents from eighteen universities in China found that on the question of national identity “Han identity was often fused with the larger Chinese identity . . . leading to Han chauvinism that remains problematic for non-Han people today.” (2016, 487)


114. Ibid., 358.

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Articulations of Salaryman Masculinity in Shôwa and Post-Shôwa Japan
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Introduction

Nations (and national identities) are constituted as much through ideologies of gender, both in relation to women and femininity, and men and masculinity, as other ideologies such as those of class or race or ethnicity. This applies to Japan, and the country’s processes of industrialization, modernization and nation-building from the late-nineteenth century during the Meiji Period (1868-1912), right through the Taishô (1912-1925), Shôwa (1925-1989) and post-Shôwa, Heisei (1989- ) periods of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

At one level “men” have historically been pivotal to discourses and ideologies on nations and nation-states. However, it was really not until the 1980s and 1990s that “masculinity” (and “men”) began being interrogated as a construct. A growing body of academic and non-academic literature started to draw attention to the reality that rather than being a fixed, biologically-determined essence, “masculinity” is constructed, shaped, “crafted” in response to socio-cultural, economic, political, and other considerations. Furthermore, rather than a singular form of masculinity, just one way of “being a man,” there are a myriad of masculinities, at any one time. Within these there are hierarchies of power defining the relationships between these various masculinities; the discourse of masculinity that has the greatest ideological power and hold may be thought of the hegemonic form of masculinity. The hegemonic form can be considered as a cultural “ideal” or “blueprint” which, by-and-large, cannot be perfectly attained by most men. Thus, it need not be the most common form, but it is normative in that what it does have in its favor is power and ascendency achieved “through culture, institutions, and persuasion.” However, importantly, this is an ongoing, shifting process, as the discourse of hegemonic masculinity is constantly “crafted” and “re-crafted” in response to changing socio-economic, cultural, and political conditions.

With this in mind, this paper looks at Japan over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, particularly over the Shôwa (1925—1989) and post-Shôwa, Heisei (1989— ) periods, through the framework of masculinity – specifically, through a discourse of hegemonic masculinity that, in many regards, came to signify Japanese national identity. The figure of the middle-class, white-collar salaryman (sarariiman) has occupied a prominent place in socio-cultural and economic narratives of postwar Japan. As a sort of “Everyman” of corporate Japan over the high economic growth decades of the 1960s through until the early 1990s, the salaryman came to signify both Japanese masculinity in general, and more specifically Japanese corporate culture. In this regard the discourse of masculinity signified by the salaryman could have been regarded as the culturally privileged hegemonic masculinity in postwar Japan. This was despite the reality that, even at the height of Japan’s economic ascendancy in the 1970s, only a minority of Japanese men would have fallen within the strictest definitional parameters of the category of “salaryman” – fulltime white-collar permanent employees of organizations offering benefits such as lifetime employment guarantee, salaries and promotions tied to length of service, and an ideology of corporate paternalism characterizing relations between the employee and the organization. However it was more a case that the discourse surrounding the middle-class salaryman, indeed the ideology associated with and embedded in the discourse, was far more extensive and pervasive in its reach. Consequently, over the crucial postwar decades from the 1960s through the 1980s, the salaryman could well have been considered to be what Vera Mackie has referred to as the “archetypal” citizen, someone who was...
“a male, heterosexual, able-bodied, fertile, white-collar worker.”\textsuperscript{10} Together with his \textit{sengyô shufu} (“fulltime housewife”) counterpart the salaryman constituted the “archetypal” middle-class nuclear family that “was idealized as the bedrock of national prosperity in the postwar years.”\textsuperscript{11} Importantly this discourse of the salaryman/\textit{sengyô shufu}-centered family was embedded within both postwar corporate ideology, and the socio-political and economic ideology of the postwar Japanese state, specifically the “Japan Inc.” partnership between the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, private industry, and the bureaucracy.

However, the bursting of the Bubble Economy in the early-1990s, and the prolonged post-Bubble recession has had major implications for this discourse of masculinity. The major corporate restructurings and shifts within the employment sector since the mid-1990s has called into question many of the assumptions upon which the salaryman/fulltime housewife-centered ideology, and by extension the gendered ideology of the postwar Japanese nation-state was based. In particular the abandonment of institutions such as guaranteed lifetime employment (both ideologically and in reality) and the move to a more “Western,” individualistic, economic-rationalist model of corporate culture, has had significant implications for the discourse of masculinity embodied in the salaryman. In the process, older expectations have given way to a new set of ideals and attributes, that appear to draw on a different set of more globalized neoliberal assumptions.

Yet, ironically, the reality in the second decade of the twenty-first century is that the salaryman continues to be pivotal to the ways in which Japanese corporate culture, Japanese masculinity, and indeed Japanese national identity continue to be imagined and framed. Evidence of this is the salaryman’s continuing visibility in popular culture spaces as varied as advertising, television dramas, and \textit{manga}. Even within the context of corporate culture, despite the media hype about the salaryman being an anachronism from the past, research evidence seems to point to, if anything, important continuities with the past in terms of core expectations of the ideology underpinning the discourse.\textsuperscript{12} Quite clearly then, there seem to be contradictory pressures and pulls at work in relation to discourses about the salaryman in contemporary Japan. On the one hand, what it means to be a salaryman in twenty first century Japan is seemingly quite different to what being a salaryman might have meant twenty, thirty or fifty years ago. At the same time, it would appear that certain underpinnings and assumptions continue to inform and underpin the discourse surrounding the salaryman.\textsuperscript{13}

Thus, with the above in mind, this paper traces the emergence of the discourse of the salaryman in the first decades of the twentieth century, during the late-Taishô/early-Shôwa period, its entrenchment in the post-World War Two (postwar) decades as the culturally idealized (but at the same time problematized and parodied) hegemonic blueprint for Japanese masculinity, and its apparent subsequent fragmentation since the collapse of the 1980s “Bubble” economy, and the ensuing two decades of economic slowdown foregrounded against considerable socio-cultural shifts. At the heart of my discussion, is the contention that salaryman masculinity, even in its apparent heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, was in a constant process of “crafting” and engagement, and was often characterized by ambivalence, contradiction and even anxiety – something that was best captured and given expression in spaces of popular and visual culture. Second, I suggest that Japan’s socio-economic and cultural trajectory from the early years of industrialization through to the post-industrial conditions of the late-twentieth/early-twenty first centuries, may be “read” through the salaryman, and specifically through the salaryman in visual culture.

Accordingly, after tracing the contours of the salaryman discourse over the Shôwa and post-Shôwa years, the paper focuses on this presence in visual culture over this span of over eight decades. Specifically, my discussion will spot-light two particular film texts book-ending the time period, one from the 1930s, the other from the 2000s – the world renowned film-maker Ozu Yasujirô’s 1932 silent classic \textit{I Was Born, But... (Umarete wa Mita Keredo)} and Kurosawa Kiyoshi’s
2008 film *Tokyo Sonata*. Both films, as we will see, despite being separated by almost eighty years, give expression to some of the anxieties and fault lines in the everyday engagements and negotiations between salaryman subjectivities and the conditions of modernity and late-modernity, and in that regard, provide a useful lens through which to reflect on twentieth and twenty-first century Japan.

The Gendered Modernizing Nation-State and the Emergence of the Salaryman

As alluded to above, the discourse of the salaryman was situated within a specifically *gendered* ideology of family, nation, and citizenship, which had underpinned Japan’s path to capitalist modernity from as early as the establishment of the modernizing Meiji state in the late-nineteenth century. Within the framework of this ideology femininity was equated with, and defined through, the private household sphere, as exemplified in the Meiji period discourse of *ryōsai kenbo* (Good Wife, Wise Mother). Conversely masculinity, while linked to authority as a father within the family, was nevertheless firmly located within the public sphere – the prewar Japanese Empire needed pliant, productive workers and soldiers for its industrial-capitalist and military-nationalist project.

In this regard the emergent shapings of a discourse around salaryman was inseparable from discourses about the nation and modernity in these years. The origins, as suggested above, may actually be traced back to the initial decades of Japan’s industrialization enterprise in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. The term “salaryman” (*sarariiman*) itself appears to have been coined and popularized in the years following World War One. However, its antecedents can be traced back to the *gekkyû-tori* (monthly salary recipient) of the early Meiji decades, and even the *koshi-ben*, a somewhat demeaning term for low-ranking *samurai* bureaucrats in the late Tokugawa years, who had been reduced to dangling a lunch-box (*bentô*) instead of a sword from their waists (*koshi*).

These earlier articulations, in a sense, led to the early shapings of a distinct discourse around the salaryman from the 1920s (specifically during the late-Taishō and early-Shōwa years). It was also during these years that the salaryman really started taking shape as a distinct form of masculinity, linked with the conditions of urban, capitalist modernity, and importantly, with anxieties about this emerging modernity. To his supporters, the salaryman was the embodiment of a new, modern, industrialized, urban Japan, and to his detractors all that was wrong with this new urban middle-class, modern culture. This period of Japanese history witnessed the surfacing of the varied tensions and contradictions of modernity, as divergent discourses of ‘Japanese-ness’ (and the intertwining with gender) competed in a socio-economic climate characterized by growing inequality, tension, and flux. For many of these circulating discourses – both celebratory and anxious – the reference point was modernity, and the implications were for Japan’s future.

The emergence and circulation, both in the scholarly and popular-press, of various discourses related to the figure of the salaryman, albeit couched more in terms of social class or lifestyle, rather than with reference to the salaryman’s *masculinity*, was set against this backdrop of articulations on conditions of modernity. The academic literature – reflecting the growing influence of Marxist theory – often tried to fit the salaryman within the framework of social class or in terms of lifestyle analysis (for instance social commentator Ôya Sôichi’s analysis of the salaryman and his lifestyle), or literary critic Aono Suekichi’s 1930 *Sarariiman no Kyōfu Jidai* (The Salaryman’s Panic Times) which, in the words of Harootunian sought to “analyze formally the social structure of the salaryman class (Japan’s *petit bourgeoisie*) within the larger context of capitalist social relations in order to explain how and why they were fated to a life of continual unhappiness and psychological depression caused by the growing disparity between their consumerist aspirations and their incapacity to satisfy them.”

The salaryman also started being represented in spaces of popular culture, such as Maeda Hajime’s popular 1928 novel (and subsequent sequel) *Sarariiman Monogatari* (Story of the
Salaryman), and cartoonist Kitazawa Rakuten’s popular manga depicting “sarariiman no tengoku” (Salaryman’s Heaven) and “sarariiman no jigoku” (Salaryman’s Hell). “Salaryman’s Hell” consisted of such things as commuting on “jam-packed” trams at peak hour, being gossiped about by colleagues, and having to work late at the end of the financial month; “Salaryman’s Heaven” included business trips, a walk with the attractive typist, and long weekends. Similarly, magazines targeting an urban, white-collar readership like Kingu (King) or the monthly Sarariiman revolved around the daily concerns of a salaryman’s life. Sarariiman, for instance contained features on a range of concerns from the economy and issues to do with the workplace, right through to pieces on aspects of “modern” life, everything from cafés through tips about fashion to advice about relationships.

Even the newly emerging medium of film engaged with the salaryman and his lifestyle – some of the early works of Ozu Yasujirō such as Umarete wa Mita keredo… (I Was Born, But…) and Tokyo no Kōrasu (Tokyo Chorus) had the salaryman at the center of their narratives – a topic I will return to further on in this paper. Significantly, this visibility in public culture underscores the positioning of the discourse of the salaryman within the expanding conditions of capitalist modernity in 1920s/early-1930s Japan.

However, it was really in the postwar decades that the salaryman and the salaryman-centered nuclear family became the hegemonic blueprint, both for discourses of Japanese masculinity, and of the family. Japan’s defeat in the war, and the accelerated industrialization and urbanization meant that alternative/competing discourses of masculinity from the prewar decades, such as the soldier or the farmer, became less socio-culturally relevant. Rather as the white-collar sector of the economy burgeoned, with close to 40 percent of new school graduates entering into white-collar work by 1970, the salaryman and the associated discourse of masculinity became the overarching signifier of Japanese masculinity. At the same time, rapid urbanization, working in tandem with changes in employment structure and improvements in living standards, meant that the middle-class urban/suburban nuclear family increasingly became the norm – by 1970, 64 percent of households were in nuclear-family situations. Furthermore, the distancing of homes from workplaces as a consequence of urbanization and rising land prices, worked to reinforce the gender role divide within the household between the daikokubashira (quite literally, the central supporting pillar/mainstay of the house/household) husband, who was absent from home for most of the day, and the stay-at-home wife (the sengyō shufu), whose role was increasingly constructed around being a wife, and especially, mother.

Behind the standardization of the salaryman/sengyō shufu in the national psyche in the postwar period were demographic forces coalescing around the postwar “Baby Boom” generation (the dankai sedai), those born in the immediate postwar years. As this generation came of age and entered the workforce, Japan was at the high-point of its “Economic Miracle” years. Companies were expanding, and the expectation was that the economy would keep growing. Consequently features of the employment system that in the prewar period had been limited to large-scale organizations, diffused out across a wider spectrum of firms, and came to signify Japanese corporate/organizational culture. These included such “pillars” of the employment system as lifetime employment guarantee, a salary and promotions system skewed towards seniority rather than performance, an emphasis on generalist, rather than specific, skills, and an overall framework of corporate paternalism.

As the men of the baby boom generation entered into the workforce, there was an overall expectation that by the time they reached middle-age, there would be sufficient middle-management posts to absorb them. It was this generation of baby boomers, who together with the preceding generation, the Shōwa hitoketa (those born in the first decade of Shōwa, 1926-1934), who became the foot soldiers of the “Japan Inc.” partnership between the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), big business, and bureaucracy which powered the “Economic Miracle” over the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Furthermore, the interweaving between the gender ideology foregrounding the salaryman/sengyō shufu discourse, the success of the Japanese economy over these years, and the ideology of the
state needs to be highlighted. In the prewar period, Japan’s project of modernity had hinged as much on an expansionist foreign policy dependent on a strong military, as on domestic industrialization and nation-building. However, following Japan’s defeat in 1945, under the new political system put into place during the Allied occupation, the military as a hegemonic ideal of masculinity was effectively neutralized. Rather, in many respects, it was the “corporate soldiers” (the kigyo senshi) of Japan Inc. who increasingly started to take on this role – even the terminology associated with the salaryman during these decades, such terms as messhi hōkō (selfless advance), senpei (advance guard), and shijō senryaku (market strategy), underscored this association. Moreover, the clearly demarcated separation between the paid labor of the daikokubashira husband in the public-sphere and the unpaid labor of the sengyō shufu wife within the household, allowed these “corporate warriors” to channel their time and energy (and to a large extent, their identity) into the public work sphere, thus contributing to the state’s objective of economic strength.

Additionally, the striving for, and achievement of, economic success as a state ideological priority was further facilitated both by the restriction on military expenditure in the postwar Allied-imposed “Peace Constitution” and by Japan’s position in the Cold War global order. With the defense of the Japanese state (and by extension, its foreign policy) now the responsibility of the United States, resources which otherwise may have been channeled into defense, could be utilized for economic recovery and growth. Thus, it is important to recognize the nexus between Japan’s position within the US defense and foreign policy umbrella and the success of the Japan Inc. framework, as being the crucible for the emergence of the salaryman/sengyō shufu as the hegemonic blueprint of family over the crucial decades of the 1950s until the 1980s.

The Fragmentation of the Salaryman Discourse and the Shifting Contours of Hegemonic Masculinity

It was within the context of the social, economic, and historical framework outlined in the previous sections, that the salaryman became the “ideal citizen” in the first two decades of the postwar period. He emerged as both the corporate “ideal” and the masculine “ideal,” shaped by, and embodying the hegemonic discourse of masculinity. Typically, he would be middle-class and often university-educated, entering the organization upon graduation from university in his early twenties. Once within the organization, he would be expected to display qualities of loyalty, diligence, dedication, and self-sacrifice. Everything about the salaryman embodied these values: his behavior, deportment (white shirt, dark business suit, lack of ‘flashy’ clothing and accessories, neat hairstyle), consumer habits (for example, reading certain types of magazines), even his verbal and body language. Moreover, his success (or lack of it) would be premised not only on workplace conduct, but also on his ability to conform to the requirements of the hegemonic discourse – to marry at an age deemed suitable, and once married to perform the appropriate gender role befitting the role of husband/provider/father. This type of “Everyman” kaisha ningen and/or kigyo senshi hero figure figured prominently in spaces of popular culture. This included contemporary film such as the Tôhô Film company’s Shachô (President) series of the 1960s, some of Ozu’s postwar works like the 1956 Sôshun (Early Spring), or the 1960 suspense drama Kuroi Gashû: Aru Sarariiman no Shôgen (The Black Album: The Testimony of a Salaryman) based on one of the works of crime fiction writer Matsumoto Seichi. As with the prewar period, these representations also extended to the innumerable business novels (kigyo shôsetsu), magazines and salaryman manga of the period.

However, even at the height of the “glory days” of the Economic Miracle, the figure of the daikokubashira salaryman, and the discourse of masculinity built up around him, was not as monolithic and unified as might appear at initial glance. First, as indicated earlier, even at the high-point of the Japan Inc. system in the 1970s, only a minority of the male workforce would have fallen
within the strictest definitional parameters of the salaryman. This meant that the hegemonic hold of the salaryman discourse notwithstanding, there were large swaths of the male population who were outside its orbit. Thus side-by-side with the salaryman discourse, were other masculinities, co-existing and intersecting with it. Examples included the discourse of masculinity and gender embodied in the student activists of the 1960s, or the “anti-hero” cinema masculinity of actors like Takakura Ken and Ishihara Yujiro or even the bumbling, ineffectual but endearing character of Torasan (played by actor Atsumi Kiyoshi) in the enormously popular Otoko wa tsurai yo (It’s Tough Being a Man) series of films.

Second, the discourse of the salaryman itself, even in its heyday, was not free from contestation and interrogation. While at one level the salaryman may have been projected as the “archetypal” citizen, at another level, there was a degree of ambivalence and critique about the costs of salaryman masculinity to himself, his family, and society in general. These ranged from humorous, but nevertheless critical portrayals of the salaryman and his lifestyle in popular culture spaces, such as in the 1970s manga Dame Oyaji (Useless Dad), to growing public discourse about the loss of authority of the father within the household, the so-called “absent father syndrome.” Such negative readings of the salaryman and his lifestyle further intensified during the “bubble” economy boom years of the 1980s, when the media focused on phenomena like karoshi (sudden death caused by work-related conditions), kitaku-kyohi (fear of going home, due to lack of communication between the salaryman and his family), and tanshin funin (employees forced to live away from their families for extended periods of time due to job transfers).

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the above critiques, it was really only after the collapse of the Bubble Economy boom in the early-1990s and the subsequent economic stagnation through the “Lost Decade” of the 1990s and the 2000s that the salaryman/sengyo shufu based family discourse started being challenged in an innate sense. Prior to the 1990s, the perception seemed to be that despite modifications to the external contours of the discourse, the salaryman and all that he signified would remain a fixture on the psycho-cultural landscape of Japan. The post-Bubble recession and the ongoing socio-economic upheavals and shifts had a significant impact on this perception (and reality). In contrast to the corporate prosperity and close to full-employment conditions of the 1980s, the 1990s saw a dramatic turnaround in the economic climate. The decade was characterized by a succession of corporate bankruptcies, as well as rising unemployment, as organizations sought to cut costs and restructure. As a consequence the official unemployment rate that had been 2.1 percent in 1992, rose to 4.7 by the end of the decade, and up to 5 percent by 2001.

Two demographics were particularly hard-hit: youth (especially young female graduates), and middle-aged men. As companies drastically reduced their intake of new recruits in what came to be dubbed the “Employment Ice Age,” increasing numbers of younger Japanese sought work in the casual/temporary freeter (furitâ) sector of the economy, with the number of part-time/temporary workers under 35 years of age reaching over 2 million by 2004. While for some, this may have been a deliberate choice, due to the relative flexibility of the freeter sector, for growing numbers this became the only available long-term source of paid work.

The other group particularly hard hit were middle-aged male corporate employees. As mentioned above, this cohort had entered the workforce at a time when companies were expanding, with the general expectation being that this would continue as they moved up the ranks into middle-management. However, in the context of the abrupt downturn of the 1990s, corporations found themselves with a costly layer of fat around the middle. The very men who had previously embodied the archetypal citizen – middle-class, middle-aged, middle-management husbands and fathers – were now equated with a lack of efficiency, and increasingly seen as a burden. In the increasingly globalized economic rationalist environment of the post-Bubble era, the priority shifted
from the earlier emphasis on managers with non-specific generalist skills nurtured over the long-term, to individuals possessing very specific skills who would be of immediate measurable benefit to the organization. The new corporate ideal was no longer the kigyô senshi type salaryman of the pre-1990s. Rather in the new domestic and global economic reality it was a new generation of more individualistic, entrepreneurial corporate executives who started being projected as the new hegemonic ideal. In the context of the harsher, globalized, neoliberal realities of (both private and public sector) organizational culture, idealized (and expected) attributes and behavior no longer focused around “hard work (kinben), perseverance (nintai) and group harmony (kyôchôsei)” but rather around “entrepreneurial spirit (kigyôka seishin), competitive society (kyôsô shakai), and self-responsibility (jikosekinin).”

As even large elite organizations started abandoning institutions like lifetime employment, unemployment among middle-aged males became an issue – the jobless rate for men in the 45-54 age group, which had been a low 1.1 percent in 1991, climbed to 4.3 percent by 2002; for men in the 55-64 cohort the rate in 2002 was 7.1 percent. For many middle-aged salarymen who had entered the workforce expecting to be with the same employer until retirement, the implications of being retrenched were particularly acute. Not only did these men have to contend with the financial strain of being laid-off, but also given the centrality of the daikokub ashira husband/father identity in their lives, their very masculinity, within society, and more specifically, within the family, was compromised. Hence, for many, there was a sense of betrayal by the very corporations to whom they had devoted their whole careers, and a deepening sense of anxiety about their place in society. In many respects this was an anxiety about the emasculation of previously under-problematized power and authority – one possible fallout being, for instance, a marked increase in the male suicide rate particularly among middle-aged men.

More than two decades on from the bursting of the Bubble Economy boom, this (apparent) unraveling of many of the givens of salaryman masculinity appears to have continued. At one level, given all the upheavals, particularly within the labor market and corporate sector, of the past two decades, it would make sense to dismiss the salaryman, and the discourse of masculinity he embodied, as an anachronistic vestige of a past era. Public imaginings of Japanese masculinity in the 2000s started to be increasingly dominated by tropes such as the otaku/techno-gEEK, the freeter, the male escorts (hosuto) of “Host Clubs,” or the seemingly asexual/feminized sôshokukei danshi (Herbivorous Men) of the mid-2000s, or even the outwardly relatively conventional, but nevertheless interrogating (of expectations of traditional gender roles) ikumen, men who define their identity through active childcare, rather than work. All of these discourses (indeed, practices) of masculinity come across as complete antitheses of the salaryman, and may well appear to be displacing him in a struggle for a new hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, these shifts may be indicative of what Sabine Frühstück and Anne Walthall, writing at the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century, refer to “numerous microcosms of (hegemonic) masculinities” (my italics).

However, we need to be careful about reading too much into practices/styles (rather than discourses/ideologies) of sub-cultural masculinities like the otaku or sôshokukei danshi, whose socio-cultural impact often gets disproportionately magnified as a result of media commodification. Rather, what we need to consider when reflecting on articulations of masculinities in the context of post-Bubble Japan, is the extent to which core assumptions about socio-culturally hegemonic expectations of masculinity are, or are not, being dislodged. In particular, we need to contemplate whether the ostensibly consumption-mediated, seemingly “anti-salaryman” masculinities like the otaku or sôshokukei danshi, or even the ikumen are really dismantling the work/production/masculinity nexus.

In fact, despite all the socio-economic and corporate culture upheavals and shifts over the post-Bubble era, the discourse of the salaryman has continued to be remarkably tenacious. This comes
through in the persistent presence of the salaryman in the popular cultural landscape of twenty-first century Japan – for instance, the ongoing popularity of salaryman manga icons like Sarariiman Kintarô and Shima Kôsaku, or the fact that in the mid/late-2000s one of the most popular shows on NHK was the comedy/parody series (and subsequent movie) Sarariiman Neo, or the success of the J-Pop/hip-hop group Ketsumeishi’s 2010 single Tatkae! Sarariiman (Fight On! Salaryman), or even the continuing profile of the business novel as a popular literary genre. Moreover, paradoxically, the ongoing economic slowdown and harsh labor market conditions of the past two decades have actually worked to enhance the socio-cultural appeal of salaryman masculinity. At first glance, this may come across as counter-intuitive. However, in reality the post-Bubble years have seen a widening divide, in terms of financial security and socio-cultural status, between those male graduates able (or lucky enough) to enter into the parameters of salaryman masculinity, and those (in increasing numbers) who find themselves relegated to low-paying, insecure jobs in the non-permanent sector.

This has ramifications for such considerations as the ability to attract potential marriage partners, start a family, get a bank loan to purchase a house, pay childcare costs, etc. – essentially access to all the discursive and ideological markers of “middle-class” respectability. Despite the not insignificant shifts in attitudes towards gender, sexuality, and family over the past two decades, the notion of the husband being the primary household provider (essentially, the daikokubashira) remains stubbornly entrenched, as reflected in the much higher rates of singlehood among men in non-permanent work. While young women today are much less likely than their mothers’ generation to be sengyô shufu (fulltime housewives), there is still a continuing desire to marry a man with job and income stability. Thus, the discourse of the salaryman, may well, in some respects, be returning to the socio-culturally idealized elite status it occupied in the late-1950s and 1960s, when access into “salaryman-ness” (through university education, for instance) translated through to an economic and financial security (and consequently socio-cultural status) not available to men who may have only had a junior-high or high school education. In the post-Bubble era, this finds echoes in the divide between the growing population of men restricted to unstable, irregular contract or freeter work (the precariat), and those able, or lucky enough to enter into the domain of fulltime, permanent work, with all the social, financial, and economic dividends that go with the status. However, at the same time, there is absolutely no denying that the on-the-ground reality of being a salaryman in neoliberal, economically downbeat 2010s Japan, is quite different from what being a salaryman entailed in the economically buoyant 1960s, ’70s, ’80s, and even into the ’90s.

As noted in the introduction to this paper, since the 1990s there has been a shift to the privileging of a newer form of idealized corporate masculinity, referencing a more Euro-American-influenced neoliberal and global hypermasculinity. This is a “style” of masculinity that, in contrast to the company-centered articulations of past salaryman attributes, is marked by “increasing egocentrism, very conditional loyalties (even to the corporation), and a declining sense of responsibility for others.” Significantly, this is a style of corporate masculinity/corporate ideology that is seen, in some quarters, as providing the key to resuscitating Japan’s sluggish economy, and reinvigorating its creative potential. In some respects, this newer form of salaryman/ corporate masculinity may well come across as more “liberating,” in the sense of opening spaces for expression of individuality and flexibility. For instance, in relation to gender in the context of corporate culture, the newer shapings of corporate masculinity may come across as less patriarchal and gender exclusivist.

The reality, though, is more complex. Indeed, in the harsher, more efficiency-driven post-Bubble organizational culture, if anything, the qualities and attributes defining “success” in the workplace, rather than being “gender neutral” have become even more starkly masculine in many respects. While the form of salaryman masculinity may have altered in response the pressures and contestations,
Snapshots of... Salaryman Articulations – Dasgupta

the core ideological assumptions at the heart of the discourse, such as the work/masculinity nexus and the expectations of the man as heterosexual reproductor, have not altered significantly. In this respect, despite the fact that the Japan of early-Shôwa 1920s/1930s Japan, and the Japan of contemporary post-Shôwa 2000s and 2010s, are vastly different in so many regards, when it comes to some of the core assumptions about masculinity perhaps not that much has changed.

Visual Culture Articulations of the Salaryman Over the Shôwa and Post-Shôwa Years

As suggested in the previous section, when it comes to the salaryman, and his discursive framings, there is continuity over the entire Shôwa period, and into the post-Shôwa years. This comes across, for instance, in visual culture references to the salaryman over this span of eight or nine decades. Thus, many of the concerns and even tongue-in-cheek parodies of the salaryman in Kitazawa Rakuten’s Sarariiman no tengoku and jigoku referred to earlier in this paper, find echoes decades later in texts like the 1970s manga Dame Oyaji, or the more recent parodies like Sarariiman Neo or, more recently the single-frame manga, created by comedian Tanaka Hikaru, Sarariiman Yamasaki Shigeru, which has been popular on social media platforms including Twitter and Instagram. Similarly, film texts spanning the Shôwa and post-Shôwa years also convey a sense of some of the continuities in relation to the calibrations and expressions of salaryman masculinity. For instance, some of the issues and anxieties of salaryman life in the early 1930s silent-film works of Ozu including Tokyo Chorus (Tokyo no Kôrasu) and I Was Born, But... (Umarete wa Mita Keredo), recur in early postwar films like Ozu’s Early Spring (Sôshun 1956) and Kurosawa Akira’s 1952 To Live (Iku); in later postwar works like Morita Yoshimitsu’s Family Game (Kazoku Gêmu, 1983), Suo Masaaki’s 1996 Shall We Dance (subsequently adapted into a Hollywood version with the same name); through to post-Bubble era works like Kurosawa Kiyoshi’s Tokyo Sonata (2008) and the 2010 film, Railways: The Story of a 49-year Old Man Who Became a Train Driver (Reiuruuezu: 49-sai de Densha no Untenshu ni Natta Otoko no Monogatari). At the same time, these films provide us with periodic visual snapshots of differing moments in the narrative of Japan’s modernity and late-modernity over the Shôwa and post-Shôwa years.

Bookending Shôwa and Post-Shôwa Through Salaryman Anxieties

Following on from the above, by way of bookending the time period at the heart of the discussion in this paper, the Shôwa and post-Shôwa years, I will spotlight two specific films from either end of the time-frame – Ozu Yasujirô’s I Was Born, But... from 1932, and Kurosawa Kiyoshi’s 2008 Tokyo Sonata. Both are set against quite different socio-historical and economic conditions. I Was Born, But... was situated in the era following 1923’s Great Kanto Earthquake, in the context of an expanding urban modernity and the emergent visibility of a new white-collar-based, middle-class masculinity. At the same time, the film took place against the backdrop of growing inequalities and contradictions – of class, of rural/urban, traditional/modern, of nostalgia for the past/yearning for the future. Significantly, these inequalities, which Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano refers to as the “split nature of Japanese modernity” were linked to the shift from the “Taishô Democracy” years of the 1910s and 1920s to the growing domination of the military in politics, and the slide towards authoritarianism through the 1930s. Tokyo Sonata, on the other hand, is set against the backdrop of the mid-2000s, when the dismantling and unraveling of many of the social, economic, and even cultural institutions and fallback networks of the postwar “Japan Inc.” decades, were becoming an entrenched reality.

On the surface, the two films appear to draw on quite different cinematic genre, and are directed by two (apparently) very different filmmakers. Ozu, is most strongly associated with his body of aesthetically delicate, understated and introspective postwar social realist classics like Late Spring (Banshun 1949), Tokyo Story (Tôkyô Monogatari, 1953), Floating Weeds (Ukigusa 1959), and An Autumn
Afternoon (Sanma no Aji, 1962). *I Was Born, But...* is an example of Ozu’s early silent-film era works, situated within the body of film from the early-1930s known as shôshomin eiga (middle-class cinema) characterized by the weaving together of light-hearted comedy, humanism, and engagement with the everyday concerns of the emerging urban middle-classes.\(^{51}\)

Kurosawa Kiyoshi, the director of the 2008 *Tokyo Sonata*, on the other hand, is better known as a maker of innovative horror/suspense cult films, such as *Cure* (1997), *Pulse* (2001) and more recently the award-winning *Seventh Code* (2013).\(^{52}\) *Tokyo Sonata*, however, while incorporating some influence from his earlier horror/thriller works, is more reminiscent, in terms of narrative and style, both of works like Morita Yoshimitsu’s *The Family Game* (Kazuko gêmu, 1983) with its playful/fantastical aspects,\(^{53}\) as well as some of Ozu’s social realist salaryman/family-centered films (as indeed, flagged in the title of the film *Tokyo Sonata*, which is reminiscent of Ozu’s 1953 *Tokyo Story*).

However, as already hinted at, the two films despite their apparent temporal and contextual distance, do in fact have crossovers that make them useful texts through which to reflect on both the underpinnings and the fragilities of salaryman masculinity over the decades in question. *I Was Born, But...* is situated at a historical moment when the discourse of the salaryman was starting to take shape and subsequently emerge, in the postwar years, as the culturally privileged hegemonic blueprint for Japanese masculinity. *Tokyo Sonata*, on the other hand, references a historical moment when the discourse of salaryman masculinity (or at least, its entrenched socio-cultural presence) appeared to be fragmenting and weakening. Yet, both texts engage with and give expression to very similar anxieties about one of the core underpinnings of salaryman masculinity – the link between successfully (or not) living up to the cultural ideal of the husband/father *daikokubashira* provider.

I have discussed *Tokyo Sonata* in greater depth elsewhere.\(^{54}\) Hence, for the purposes of this paper, after providing brief overview of the narratives of *Tokyo Sonata* and *I Was Born, But...*, I focus on two specific scenes in both texts that capture the sense of masculine instability at the core of hegemonic masculinity. The narrative of *Tokyo Sonata* revolves around the impact of corporate restructuring on a seemingly conventional middle-class family (*goku futsû kazoku*), with a salaryman father, a *sengyô shufu* mother, and two sons, living in the anywhere/everywhere landscape of suburban Japan. The father, Sasaki Ryûhei, initially comes across as something of a “poster boy” for Japan Inc. era salaryman masculinity - a forty-six year old middle-management *kachô* (section manager) in a large organization. Ryûhei’s seemingly predictable middle-class salaryman life is abruptly shattered when, as a result of organizational out-sourcing to China, he is suddenly laid off, a victim of the coldly efficient economic rationalist realities of post-Bubble Japan. The film is a very powerful study of the impact of the change in circumstances on Ryûhei and on the rest of his family.

*I Was Born, But...* similarly revolves around a middle-class salaryman, Yoshii Ken’nosuke, and his family, and, as with *Tokyo Sonata*, the salaryman father’s efforts to successfully live up to the expectations of being a *daikokubashira* husband and father. Just as *Tokyo Sonata* was situated against a socio-cultural landscape of corporate downsizings and unemployed salarymen, the socio-economic backdrop to *I Was Born, But...* was also a time of similar anxiety and uncertainty for the salaryman; for instance, in the year the film was released (1932), one in five of all unemployed workers was a middle-class white-collar male.\(^{55}\) As with the Sasaki family at the start of *Tokyo Sonata*, the Yoshii family also seem, at least initially, to be successfully performing the expectations of urban middle-class respectability. For instance, in order to be closer to where his department director lives, Ken’nosuke moves his family to a new, aspirational middle-class suburban residential area. The film, accordingly, follows two inter-weaving narratives, that of the two Yoshii boys’ attempts to integrate into their new school and neighborhood, and that of Ken’nosuke’s relationship with his workplace and his attempts to ingratiate himself with his boss, as well as his performance of the *daikokubashira* patriarch at home.
The scenes in the two films I wish to focus on are moments in the narrative where this striving effort and performance of the middle-class breadwinner role crumbles in humiliating ways. In Tokyo Sonata, Ryûhei, unable to reveal his newly “unemployed” status at home, spends his days alternating between killing time at a city-center park populated by homeless down-and-outs and unemployed salarymen like himself, and visiting the official employment exchange, in search of a job commensurate with his white-collar managerial expertise. At first his efforts are in vain, but finally he does get short-listed for a white-collar management position. The scene where Ryûhei interviews for the job brings into sharp relief the contrast between the discourse of salaryman masculinity privileged when Ryûhei was being “crafted” into it (so during the Bubble years of the 1980s), and the dominant articulations of its twenty-first century counterpart. In contrast to Ryûhei’s almost frumpily old-fashioned presentation, his interviewer comes across as a fashionably groomed, slick young thirty-something embodiment of the new post-Bubble generation of salarymen discussed earlier in the paper. In language normally reserved for subordinates, the interviewer asks (the age-wise, senior) Ryûhei what specific skills or talents he can bring to the organization. Ryûhei fumbles trying to come up with anything convincing, other than the ability to sing karaoke and his long experience of maintaining smooth interpersonal relations in the workplace – well-recognized attributes of the earlier generation of generalist managers, but clearly out of sync with the requirements of the new specific-skills based workplace ideology. Ryûhei’s humiliation is sealed when his sneering younger interviewer orders him to demonstrate his karaoke skills there and then, using a pen as a proxy microphone.

In another scene, Ryûhei’s continued efforts to perform the expectations of the cultural ideal of the daikokubashira husband and father looking after his family, are similarly challenged and dismantled. The elder son, Takashi, decides to enlist in the first contingent of Japanese mercenaries being recruited to support the United States military’s effort in Iraq. Takashi’s decision to enlist seems to be his way of escaping the boredom of unstable freeter work and bleak prospects facing his generation. Ryûhei is unequivocally opposed and tries unsuccessfully to bully, then to plead with Takashi to change his mind. The scene brings to the surface, and juxtaposes, powerful societal undercurrents of anxiety about the loss of authority, and indeed, masculinity, both within the micro-space of the family, and within the macro-space of the nation-state. Takashi’s reasoning for his choice is his desire to “protect” (mamoru) his parents and his younger brother, much in the same way that the US “protects” Japan. His father’s assertion that he is responsible for looking after his family, results in his son challenging his authority to be the “protector,” and pointedly asking what it is that he does everyday. Ryûhei’s inability to respond satisfactorily reflects the cracks emerging in his efforts to maintain the façade of daikokubashira father and husband. In the end, despite not getting his parents’ explicit consent, Takashi enlists and goes to Iraq.

In I Was Born, But... the fragility of Yoshii Ken’nosuke’s authority as the daikokubashira father is similarly challenged and revealed to his two young sons. The contradiction between his behavior at home and his weak, subservient behavior in public is revealed during a screening of an amateur home movie by his buchô (department head) Iwasaki, in which Ken’nosuke (not unlike Ryûhei in the above scene from Tokyo Sonata) is forced to deliberately play a ridiculous, fawning office clown. The public exposure (indeed, emasculation) of their father results in Ken’nosuke’s two boys going on a short-lived hunger-strike after angrily confronting their father about his weak, subservient behavior in public, which they see as being at odds with his insistence that the boys work hard and distinguish themselves. Significantly, almost eighty years down the track, very similar dynamics are played out in the confrontation between Ryûhei and his older son in the Tokyo Sonata scene discussed above.

In both films, despite these moments of rupture and displacement of authority, both families eventually go back to a “new” normal, with the father’s position and respect seemingly restored. The
final scene in *I Was Born, But...* has the two Yoshii boys sitting beside the father eating the breakfast they had earlier angrily rejected. The scene suggests both a reconciliation with the reality of their father’s need to be subservient to his boss, and a realization that in their father, the boys may well be seeing their own futures, settling into a compromise of “unresolved continuation.” This sense of “unresolved continuation” also plays out in the final scenes of *Tokyo Sonata*. Over the course of a twenty-four hour period, all three remaining members of the family – the father, Ryûhei, Megumi, the mother, and the younger son Kenji – experience a series of (indirectly) interconnected out-of-the-ordinary, almost surreal experiences, which seem to suggest the final fragmentation of the carefully calibrated salaryman-father-centered family performance. Yet, in a scene reminiscent of the closing moments of *I Was Born, But...*, the morning after their various traumatizing experiences all three are shown seated around the kitchen table, sharing a meal with no apparent reference to the collective traumas undergone. The “everyday-ness” of this scene is accentuated variously through the shared family meal, the sound of a passing train in the background, and a television news report (about the Iraq War) droning on in the background. This “unresolved continuation” is further underscored by a letter sent by Takashi, the older son, both gesturing towards a healing and reconciliation with the family, but also stating his intention to continue staying on in Iraq to help the local population, despite the disbanding of his Japanese mercenary unit.

**Conclusion**

As stressed in the introduction to this paper, gender, and specifically masculinity, has been an essential component of the project of nation-state building, everywhere. This applies to Japan too, and as I have suggested in this paper, Japan’s processes of modernization and nation-building from the mid-19th century right up to the present, can be considered through the crafting of the discourse of the white-collar salaryman, at the heart of which lay the equation of masculinity with the public/work sphere (and conversely “femininity” with the private/household sphere). As I outlined in the first half of the paper, the emergence of this discourse of masculinity was closely linked to Japan’s project of nation-building and industrialization. Over the postwar decades, particularly over the 1950s to the 1990s, salaryman masculinity could have been regarded as the culturally privileged hegemonic discourse of masculinity in Japan. Even in the context of the considerable socio-economic and cultural shifts since the 1990s, the salaryman, and the ideological assumptions at the heart of the discourse of masculinity he signifies, has continued to occupy an important place in the collective national imaginary. However, what I have also tried to map through this paper, particularly with reference to articulations of the discourse in visual and popular culture, is the fact that rather than being a monolithic, un-changing constant, the contours of the discourse of the salaryman (and masculinity, both hegemonic and non-hegemonic) are in a constant state of flux as it is shaped (indeed “crafted”) through dynamics of negotiation and engagement, with other (equally shifting) discourses of gender, class, and nation. This was as much the case in the early years of the discourse taking shape during the 1920s and 1930s, as in the more recent post-Showa years of the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. This in turn serves to remind us that, at the end of the day, hegemonic discourses – of gender, of the family, of the nation – are constantly in a process of being crafted and re-crafted.

**SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY**


BIBLIOGRAPHY


Messerschmidt, James W. “Engendering Gendered Knowledge: Assessing the Academic Appropriation of


ENDNOTES

1. In this paper, Japanese names generally appear in Japanese order – surname followed by personal name. However, in a couple of instances names of authors with Japanese names writing in English follow the English language naming order – personal name, followed by surname. Macrons are used to indicate extended vowels, except in the case of place names commonly known in English (for example, Tokyo, rather than Tôkyô), and Japanese names of authors writing in English, who do not themselves indicate extended vowels in their names with a macron.


7. Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity,” 832


9. In this paper, I use both ideology and discourse as theoretical underpinnings framing my discussion. While the two concepts may be (and often are) treated independently, they are, nevertheless intertwined, particularly in my application of the concepts. While ideology has a myriad of meanings and applications, my deployment of the term references it as “a set of ideas through which people fashion themselves and others within specific socio-historical contexts, and through which the prosperity of certain groups is concerned,” Dani Cavallaro, Critical and Cultural Theory: Thematic Variations (London, The Athlone Press, 2001), 76. In this regard, ideology may be thought of as one of the “tools” through which hegemony operates, a “particular set of effects within discourses,” Terry Eagleton, Ideology: An Introduction (London, Verso 1991), 194. I use discourse in the sense of a body of knowledge built around specific culturally and historically produced meanings – thus the discourse of the salaryman would refer to all the meanings, articulations, actions, associations, and practices built up around the term. Moreover, discourses are processes that have ideologies – of class, of gender, of nation, for instance – embedded within them. In this sense, discourse is not only a process in and of itself, but also an ideological process.


30. As with the discourse of salaryman, the notion of the sengyô shufu did not reflect the reality that women were an integral part of the (primarily non-permanent) labor force, contributing to the economy without receiving the recognition and benefits extended to their fulltime male colleagues. See Mary C. Brinton, Women and the Economic Miracle: Gender and Work in Postwar Japan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); also Priscilla A. Lambert, “The Political Economy of Postwar Family Policy in Japan: Economic Imperatives and Electoral Incentives,” The Journal of Japanese Studies 33.1 (2007): 1–28.


36. Romit Dasgupta, Re-reading the Salaryman, 39.


39. Precisely delineating the definitional parameters of “freeter,” a combination of the English term “freelance” and the German-derived Japanese term for casual work, arubaito, is, as Emma Cook points out, not as clear-cut as may be expected. For instance, the official definition has changed and narrowed at various points. Initially, freeter were defined as temporary, part-time or dispatched workers between the ages of 15 and 34. Subsequently the definition was tightened to exclude certain categories (like dispatched workers). Regardless of these definitional shifts, there is no denying that the proportion of (particularly) male freeter in the working population increased significantly over the 2000s, from 9.3 percent in the early-2000s to 18 percent in 2013. See Emma E. Cook, Reconstructing Adult Masculinities: Part-time Work in Contemporary Japan (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2015), 13–15, 17–18. Accessed 7 October, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central. Also, Emma E. Cook, “(Dis)Connections and Silence: Experiences of Family and Part-time Work in Japan,” Japanese Studies 36.2 (2016): 156. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10371397.2016.1215228


41. Dasgupta, Re-reading the Salaryman, 39.

51. Ibid., 49–51. Also, Woojeong Joo, “I Was Born Middle Class, but... : Ozu Yasujiro’s Shôshimin eiga in the Early 1930s,” Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema 4. 2 (2012): 104. https://doi.org/10.1386/jjkc.4.2.103_1
52. For a detailed discussion of Kurosawa’s earlier works prior to Tokyo Sonata, see Jerry White, The Films of Kiyoshi Kurosawa: Master of Fear (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2007).
56. Joo, “I Was Born Middle Class, but...,” 116.

Aestheticizing Authenticity: Corporate Masculinities in Contemporary South Korean Television Dramas

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Introduction

In 2014, a television drama titled Misaeng (Incomplete Life, tvN) became a surprise hit with audiences in South Korea (henceforth, Korea). Misaeng was first published as an online graphic novel (“webtoon”) in 2012, and has since garnered over one billion hits on its website. The print version of Volume 1 has sold over a million copies since 2013, and the television adaptation became the second most-watched cable channel television program of all time in Korea.1 When first aired it became little short of a cultural phenomenon for its unapologetic yet humorous take on the desperation that young corporate interns face when trying to secure permanent employment, as well as the travails of permanent employees who struggle to hold onto their jobs in the increasingly precarious employment market. Online fan-communities and media praised the series for its “realistic” depiction of the struggles and daily humiliations of salarymen who have to negotiate the increasingly exploitive corporate workplace without any real prospects for permanent employment.2 Moreover, while romantic narratives with attractive male actors tend to dominate television drama ratings in Korea, Misaeng broke the mold as the series was narrated from the perspective of an ordinary-looking salaryman (chigwŏn)3 and no significant romantic plot. Moreover, the leading male characters did not conform to the aesthetic expectations of contemporary Korean beauty cultures reflected in popular media, or other hegemonic definitions of manhood where the leading man was typically presented as “a man in power, a man with power, and a man of power.”4 To the contrary, Misaeng is concerned with the salaryman’s lack of power, and yet the success of the series indicates that it clearly represents a cultural narrative that struck a nerve with viewers.5 So what resonated so much with audiences that even the restaurant where many of the scenes were shot became a place of pilgrimage for some viewers?6

It would be tempting to read this popular narrative as mirroring the real lives of the chigwŏn, and there is certainly a didactic element in the way in which the show provides strategies for survival in the changing corporate world. In this respect, the series follows many soap opera narrative conventions in that it focuses on the failures of the main characters, who are forced to “stoically [face] life’s problems rather than to make grandiose gestures or to seek magical solutions to...
them.” However, when one examines the aesthetic representations of corporate masculinity in this series and others like it, their narratives emerge as more than simple sites for learning about the lives of the chigwŏn in the ruthless, neoliberal corporate world. The salaryman, whose self-sacrificial devotion to a company in the developmental context of the 1980s and 1990s may once have signified nationalistic masculinity, is now represented as anxious, frustrated and powerless to withstand the exploitative corporate forces that require loyalty of their workers, but offer none in return. Within this context, the image of the oppressed salaryman emerges as a marker signifying masculine powerlessness, expressing – as Kimmel observes in the context of the American man – “the feelings of men who were raised to believe themselves entitled to feel that power, but do not feel it” (emphasis added), thus rendering visible the relations of power that engender such sense of powerlessness. While patriarchy is intact and men in Korea continue to benefit from what Connell has termed as “patriarchal dividend,” access to such dividend is not equally distributed among all men. As Connell explains:

*For instance, working-class youth, economically dispossessed by structural unemployment, may gain no economic advantage at all over the women in their communities. Other groups of men pay part of the price, alongside women, for the maintenance of an unequal gender order.*

In this article I will explore how *Misaeng* emerges as an example of a popular televsual cultural text that reflects Koreans’ growing unease with the competitive value systems in the workplace which require individuals to submit to the logic of relentless investment in self (whether through education, appearance or connections) without offering any sense of empowerment in return. While the patriarchal gaze in Korean popular media has been explored in existing literature, less attention has been paid to how men experience the increasingly precarious workplace in contemporary Korea. Popular culture texts such as *Misaeng* have become effective ways of raising consciousness of structural inequalities in the workplace, and also perform a cathartic function for the audiences. As representations of underdog salaryman masculinity provide male viewers with achievable and positive “discursive positions that help [men] ward off anxiety and avoid feelings of powerlessness,” although this cathartic function is not the focus of this present article. While the actions of the characters are important for the audiences to identify with their narrative development in the series, I will focus here on how appearance and the presentation of self are utilized to signify cultural resistance to aspects of corporate masculinities perceived as undermining “authentic” working class masculinity. Before discussing the link between appearances and traditional masculinities in popular culture narratives, this essay will first outline the development of masculine leads in Korean television dramas in order to contextualize the cultural significance of the salaryman or chigwŏn as a cultural sign of changing social conditions in the 1990s and 2000s.

**Salaryman as a Cultural Sign: Contested Corporate Masculinities in South Korean Television**

In Korean public discourse, masculinity and presenting oneself as a “manly man” (namjadaun namja) have typically been linked to notions of militarized masculinity. Seungsook Moon notes that in this context the “warrior man” has been represented as the mythopoetic and “authentic” measure of manhood, and military service represented as a rite of passage through which this authentic masculinity is discovered. Chungmoo Choi argues that militarized masculinity is an ideal which was constructed in the decades after the Korean War (1950-53) in cultural and state-enforced discourses to subvert the image of an emasculated and weak male, who in cultural representations had come to symbolize a sense of historical failure. In contrast to these images of “masculinity in crisis” and the emasculated male as symbolic of individual struggles to come to terms with the
socio-economic changes in postwar Korea, Park Chung-hee’s (1961-1979) administration promoted a cultural meta-narrative intended to bring the nation together by quelling social unrest, and creating a an ideal (male) citizen as part of a discourse of shared cultural identity (“Koreanness”) for the post-colonial and divided nation. The “authentic” or “real” masculinity (and even citizenship) was constructed in relation to nation and duty, and to valorizing strength, courage, loyalty and leadership in men, and the ability to negotiate successfully the constraints of patriarchal capitalism. Within these discourses men were represented as warriors bringing glory to the nation, whether in the actual military or within the economic sphere, battling with the market forces to bring in maximum profits to benefit the nation and their families.

Representations of men in Korean corporate settings in the 1990s were also not completely dissimilar to the way in which the Japanese sarariiman (salaryman) was portrayed as a “corporate warrior” in the Japanese popular cultural imaginary. However, unlike in Japan the salaryman did not occupy quite as iconic position in the Korean cultural imaginary because of the emphasis on the military as a place where young man transitioned to full adulthood as an act of ritual citizenship – possibly also because Korea had less time to develop an idealized large-scale social organization centered around the white collar worker. This said, in the 1990s permanent employee status (chōngjig‘wŏn) at a large-scale organization (tae’giyŏp) came to signify both masculine empowerment and success. However, cracks in the prevailing discourses of hegemonic masculinity linked to white collar employment first began appearing in the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis, which brought the Korean economy nearly to collapse and led to mass redundancies. As the Korean patriarch’s position of power had been built on his ability to provide for the family in cultural and state-led discourses, loss of employment meant not only the loss of income but of symbolic status as well. Public discourses about work became increasingly gendered, and female office workers often became the first casualties of the mass layoffs as various campaigns were initiated to protect the hardworking (presumably male) heads of families. Phrases such as “Abba him naeseoyo!” (“Daddy, be strong!”) were plastered on large billboards in prominent locations around the cityscape of Seoul in an effort to lift the spirits of the struggling patriarchs, and to encourage their families to support them. Whether or not there was a conscious effort on the part on the government to promote patriarchal familial structure is debatable, but there certainly was a concerted drive to allay feelings of powerlessness among men. In public discourses of the social impact of the crisis, men were presented as primary “victims” of the crisis, emasculated through redundancy or demotion. This image of the patriarch in crisis was used to legitimate the perceived necessity of supporting the existing gendered structures, which in turn repositioned women into the domestic support roles or into “flexible workforce” thought to benefit the nation and society at large by safeguarding the normative family.

On large and small screen this remasculinization was achieved in two ways. In post-1997 cinematic representations, male characters were often remasculinized as action or military heroes. Moreover, at the same time Korean television series began to find international markets with
narratives that offered light entertainment in the form of heterosexual romances in which men took the leading role in initiating and sustaining relationships, and in which the image of the hardworking salaryman was not the only measure of masculine achievement. These new masculinities reflected an increased fluidity in the ways in which hegemonic masculinities were understood and consumed in the post-financial crisis era. The early 2000s saw a rise in popularity of a new kind of “soft” masculinity, and the domestic and international popularity of the so-called *kkonminam* ("flower boy") actors such as Kwon Sang-woo (*We Are Dating Now*, 2002; *Stairway to Heaven*, 2003; *Sad Love Story*, 2005; *Bad Love*, 2007) and Bae Yong-joon of *Winter Sonata* (2002) fame. Actor Bae Yong-joon’s huge popularity in Asia following the release of the television series in Japan and Taiwan in particular, helped to create an overseas perception of Korean men as soft, romantic and sensitive. This image was further popularized and developed in romantic dramas such as *My Girl* (2005), *The 1st Coffee Shop Prince* (2007) and *Boys Over Flowers* (2009) which featured floppy-haired and androgynous male leads, whose images proved especially popular with young and middle-aged female audiences. At this point, there was some anxiety in the media over whether “authentic” Korean masculinity was under threat from being “effeminized” as the new “sensitive” masculinity was embodied through a “soft” appearance, manner of speech and behavior which stood in stark contrast to the hyper-masculine and violent male lead characters of the 1990s. However, it should be noted that much of this anxiety was either generated by Western media, or by domestic media’s self-searching of whether encouraging “soft” masculinities (that in fact drew much on the Japanese *bishōnen* imaginary) was something that would fundamentally threaten “authentic” Korean masculinity. Perhaps to assuage any suspicion, the male leads began increasingly to show exposed torsos, and frequent fight scenes would also be built into the narratives without the need to tamper with the characters’ soft, flowy hairstyles or cutting-edge fashion. In this sense, whether one presents masculinity in ways that may be coded as “effeminate” in some Western cultural contexts (such as the *kkonminam*’s soft aesthetics and attention to maintaining carefully groomed appearances), a person’s sexual orientation is not necessarily immediately in doubt in the same way that it might be in the West. For this reason, popular culture representations of masculinity in Korea have often afforded male characters a significant degree of fluidity and flexibility in terms of the aesthetics without linking fashion or use of makeup to a specific sexual orientation.

Toward the end of the first decade of the 2000s, there was a resurgence of televiusal narratives dealing with the ruthlessness of the corporate world, and the increasing precariousness of the contemporary workplace where no traditional other-oriented social values seemed to matter. As companies came to be seen as increasingly hostile environments for individuals who sought to make success of their lives as employees, a number of television dramas tapped into this sense of powerlessness and rage, creating characters that sought to make the most of the opportunities presented to them. Examples of such include *Hot Blood* (2009), *Incarnation of Money* (2013), *Empire of Gold* (2013), *Flames of Ambition* (2010), *The Innocent Man* (2012), *Bad Guy* (2010) and *Shark* (2013), which all used the revenge plot to present male leads who are ruthless and intelligent enough to utilize corporate structures to their own (often destructive) ends. These characters differed from the ideal salaryman masculinities of 1990s television dramas which featured men who were loyal to their companies. Those characters succeeded in the corporate world by perfecting their ability to negotiate within corporate cultures informed by Confucian structures of corporate paternalism, and by sacrificing their individual needs for the sake of the company’s success. This aspect of Korean corporate culture has been referred to as “dynamic collectivism,” which draws on Confucian cultural notions of in-group/out-group distinctions where an individual’s focus is always on ensuring the success of one’s own social group over individual gain (such as one’s work team). Cho and Yoon argue that in the past, such a group orientation was perceived as a highly positive aspect of Korean management culture because it tended to “reinforce the boundary between in-group and out-
group and to intensify competition between the two groups, which in turn [made] Korean society more dynamic and competitive.”25 In addition to considerations of competitiveness, the dynamic collectivist organization of the corporate labor force has been observed to foster a strong “we”-spirit. While the individual may be required to conform to the group’s or company’s values to attain shared goals, the individual is rewarded by a strong, often homosocial sense of belonging to a “brotherhood” and loyalty (우리) to the group.

In the post-financial-crisis era, however, the widespread mass redundancies, increasing job insecurity and the precariousness of fixed-term employment have meant that corporate working environments have become more transactional than relational, meaning that workers became more likely to allow individuality, self-interest and rationality to guide their actions and choices in the workplace.26 As the government encouraged large corporations to restructure to better respond to challenging global financial circumstances, workers were often forced to move on to precarious contractual arrangements that created “flexible” (that is, undemanding) and self-governing workers who were transformed into what Jesook Song calls “commodifiable labor power.”27 New recruits (신입원) in particular were envisioned as citizens who competed as for a chance to prove themselves as exceptional and deserving to hold onto a job in the labor market that already had a surplus of graduate employees, each one of whom were seen as potentially disposable unless proven useful. The alternative was to enter the world of venture companies in which “their employment depended on their own capacity for maneuvering, inventiveness, and adaptation.”28 While in one sense, the responsibility of one’s success was thus shifted on the individual, Song goes on to point out that “these autonomous individuals became micro-engineers of “productive” labor as a whole and involved themselves in the appropriation and exploitation of surplus labor power.”29 There was a dramatic rise in the number of irregular workers and a decrease in expectations for companies to consider their workers’ rights or concerns (such as the right to form a labor union or fair pay), and each worker was increasingly seen as having to “earn” their right to stay in the company or face being laid off and replaced by others waiting to seize their opportunity to prove themselves.30 Consequently, many workers now feel very little to no emotional connection with or loyalty to their companies. In this context, You-me Park notes in her nuanced analysis that corporate masculinities now intersect with profit-driven neoliberal ideologies in ways that have created “toxic cultural practices” requiring individuals to measure up to a “quasi-utilitarian criteria of productivity and consumption” that effectively reduces the workers themselves to the status of a function more so than an individual. What is more, Park notes that the measures by which success is defined are by and large unobtainable and require constant effort which is unlikely to be rewarded with long-term work prospects.31 Moreover, the uneven ways in which individuals have fewer resources to constantly invest in themselves leave a growing number of citizens vulnerable to precarious economic realities. Park argues that both

![Figure 3. Team Leader Oh Sang-sik in the original webtoon (Yun T’aeho, Misaeng 2012). Available at: http://webtoon.daum.net/webtoon/viewer/15299miseng](http://webtoon.daum.net/webtoon/viewer/15299miseng)
militarism and neoliberalism “both justify their absolute power to adjudicate whom to let live and whom to let die by resorting to idealized forms of masculinity and heroism” from the past, but in ways that rarely guarantee an individual success in the present.\textsuperscript{32}

However, while “heroism” and militarism are still expected, the transactional way in which the individual salaryman is positioned within the system simultaneously requires them to develop a degree of detachment from others in order to pursue individual goals. In this sense, contemporary corporate salarymen may feel disempowered not only by the unequal level of resources to compete with other, but also by the culture of corruption and cronyism that often marks contemporary Korean work cultures and large scale corporations in particular.\textsuperscript{33} Unsurprisingly, television representations of corporate masculinities are marked by ambiguity and ambivalence about previously essentialized and relatively stable notions of presumably “authentic” masculinities. The South Korean corporate workplace is increasingly shown to be a place of alienation rather than of belonging, and a place of powerlessness rather than empowerment.

\textbf{Negotiating Masculine Power in the Precarious Workplace}

It is in this context that the televisual representations of the Korean salaryman have recently witnessed a reincarnation of the anxious, but immensely likeable anti-hero. Anxious and insecure male characters have featured in Korean popular culture since the Korean War, but what sets these anti-heroes apart is that despite being full of self-doubt and fear of failure, they emerge in many ways as positive role models to the modern man. While vulnerable to abuses of power, the characters are determined to find workable solutions to their predicament. The root of their struggles is not that they are lazy or incapable, but that they lack the right connections (yŏnjul) to achieve permanent employment (chŏnggyujik) – or refuse to use them to gain shortcuts. As noted previously, this predicament is rooted to real work-life conditions, as the first two decades of the 2000s have also witnessed a significant rise in youth unemployment and the one of the highest rates of youth inactivity as university graduates struggle to secure permanent employment.\textsuperscript{34}

The rapid casualization of the Korean work force has meant that over 30\% of the waged and non-self-employed work force is now on non-permanent contracts (pijŏnggyujik).\textsuperscript{35} The lack of secure employment opportunities occurs in tandem with more global management styles and reorganization of the work force, which has meant a shift away from the harmony-oriented management practices described above. The in-group harmony-focused corporate management practices of the pre-1997 financial crisis era were replaced in the post-Crisis era by practices that emphasized individual attainment over the previous group-oriented performance appraisal. A shift toward constant self-monitoring and improvement through “ability- and performance-based appraisal, appraisal feedback, merit pay and 360-degree appraisal” has increased the possibility of being singled out for redundancy\textsuperscript{36} and one’s level of anxiety about job security. More significantly, the focus has shifted increasingly to the individual’s own responsibility to ensure their employment. Nelson has termed this as “elaborated ethos”\textsuperscript{37} under which an individual’s failure to succeed in the corporate workplace is never blamed on the company’s structural weaknesses which prevent them from thriving and developing, but on the individual’s inability to adapt to the demands of the workplace. As a result of precarious contractual arrangements and a decreasing emphasis on values such as dynamic collectivism, a feature of the new corporate culture has been constant self-surveillance and competition, as well as the willingness to “endure (kyŏndita or ch’amta) present privations or troubles for future rewards.”\textsuperscript{38} Furthermore, such vulnerability to redundancy has also meant that bullying (kabjil), which refers to a superior being abusive to their workers just because they can, has become a feature of contemporary corporate cultures. Such practices include humiliating subordinates verbally or requiring bodily display of absolute self-effacement. This aspect of Korean corporate culture is perhaps the most unfortunate mix of traditional and global in as much
as Confucian hierarchies are kept in place, but are stripped of traditional ethics of reciprocity and affection (chóng) that would have previously regulated (at least in part) some of the more extreme aspects of bullying.

Given the toxic mix of hierarchical social structures which concentrates power in the hands of a few, and performance-based appraisal systems which focus on the individual actual realities of corporate cultures in Korea, it is perhaps no surprise that parody and humor in particular have increasingly become the vehicle through which the nationalistic ideology of the white-collar patriarch as the imagined ideal of hegemonic Korean masculinity is both critiqued and problematized in contemporary popular cultural texts. Successful television dramas that focus on the lives of the underdog have included series such as *Queen of the Office* (2013), which pokes fun at the precarious lives of contract workers who are willing to go to almost any length to secure permanent employment; *History of the Salaryman* (2012), which parodies office politics and performance-driven corporate cultures focused on short term gains;* Ms Temper and Nam Junki* (2016), which features a male lead who is the ultimate, yet utterly likeable, yes-man; and *Neighborhood Lawyer Jo Deul-Ho* (2016), which followed the struggles and victories of a self-made man and lawyer. What all of these narratives share in common is that rather than simply lamenting the sorry state of the contemporary salaried man, their protagonists actively reject both the capitalist symbolic economy which values material possession over other things and a neoliberal logic according to which an individual is required to constantly engage in self-cultivation (chagi kyebal) to survive in the competitive and changing corporate environment. Instead, the main characters draw on older moral code to guide their social interactions, which are defined in terms of absolute loyalty to the in-group, shared gains and harmony – even in a workplace which does not ultimately care for their wellbeing.

**An (In)appropriate Presentation of Self as a Critique of Hegemonic Corporate Masculinity in *Misaeng* (Incomplete Life)**

It is in the context of (non)belonging, homosocial in-groups and their relation to renegotiating contemporary corporate masculinities that I now turn to discussing the presentation of masculine selves in *Misaeng* (tvN, 2014) as a counter-corporatist critique of self-oriented neoliberal masculinity. In this section of this essay, I will analyze representations of corporate masculinities through the aesthetic gaze that the viewers are invited to fix on the main male characters as a reflection of their return to traditional “other-oriented” values and social practices. I argue that in these cultural narratives of masculinity in *Misaeng*, appearances are coded as aesthetic points of resistance to the “inauthentic” performance of greed-driven, individualistic and global masculinity. However, rather than signifying a crisis of masculinity in Korea, resistance to conform to sleek corporate appearance in popular television narratives such as *Misaeng* emerge as visual reminders of (or nostalgia for) lost authenticity and to reorient hegemonic corporate masculinities toward traditional other-oriented social values.

*Misaeng* centers on the experiences of Chang Kūrae, a 26-year-old temporary worker (kyeyagjig’wŏn), who narrates his desperate effort to succeed in gaining an elusive permanent contract in a large trading company. Yun T’ae-ho, the author of the original webtoon *Misaeng*, aimed to capture this sense of struggle both in the storyline and the visual narrative of the manhwa. Chang Kūrae’s point of view as a “newbie” is utilized as an effective narrative device that allows the audience to learn about the world of office politics from a perspective of an only partially-informed narrator as the audiences are rarely given information about the decision-making processes of the executive board. Instead, the viewer experiences the workplace through Chang’s point of view where minor tasks (such as writing a report) are seen in isolation from wider corporate aims, but at the same time fill his whole purpose within the company. Moreover, Chang Kūrae is physically
slight and unimposing, with androgynous facial features and awkward social skills. As such, he is scripted as the ultimate disempowered “yes-man” whose very name, “Kŭrae,” translates as “yes I agree.” Despite having enjoyed some significant success as a baduk (a popular but difficult Korean board game) player, his lack of connections and formal education are shown to have barred him from securing permanent employment in the past and taught him determination to take every insult and order unquestioningly to succeed. As such, he is presented as the ultimate disciplined individual, trained to benefit the company and not himself through – as Foucault notes – its “specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise.”

After passing a grueling series of company entrance tests, he is overjoyed with relief to join “One International” with four other new entrants (sinipjawŏn) on a two-year contract, and is assigned to Sales Team 3. Sales Team 3 is headed by a hardworking and capable team leader by the name of Oh Sang-sik, whose tendency to make decisions on moral grounds and refusal to sacrifice team members have cost him a number of promotions which he otherwise would have been expected to have been due. The third member of the team is a good-natured character Kim Dong-sik, who has been equally unlucky in his career thanks to his loyalty to Team Leader Oh. Ultimately, none of the characters succeed in the greed-driven and individualistic workplace because of their decision to resist its disciplinary practices. However, it is precisely this process by which the characters are shown to actively resist neoliberal logic that prioritizes individual attainment and success over that of the team, that is presented to the audiences as the proof of their moral character, and a comforting cultural sign of “authentic” Korean masculinity that also makes the series resonate with the audiences.

Central to Misaeng is the way in which corporate ideologies are critiqued and parodied both through overplaying selected disciplinary signifiers of corporate masculinity (such as obedience and subservient body language when dealing with superiors or clients) whilst on other occasions, certain idealized external markers of success (such as expensive suits and watches) are passed over by the main characters as unnecessary. Moreover, none of the characters in Sales Team 3 are shown to focus on maintaining a disciplined and well-groomed appearance. The refusal to maintain the suave corporate appearance expected of a chigwŏn is significant here because it allows the director to visually juxtapose characters with shabby appearance as signifiers of dynamic collectivism (willingness to sacrifice for one’s team for common good) with characters who are well groomed but also willing to forgo the needs of the group to pursue their own gain. It is important to note here that an appropriate presentation of self – both in terms of behavior and attire – has traditionally been considered very important in Korea, and it is difficult to underestimate how much symbolic value is put on the maintaining of age and class-appropriate appearance in professional contexts. In contemporary Korea, the idea of appropriate appearance is typically linked to one’s real or aspirational class status, and in professional contexts follows very closely Erving Goffman’s observation of how “a given social front tends to become institutionalized in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise.” However, the importance of appearances also goes beyond simply mimicking an appearance deemed suitable to a given profession, and draws on much older Confucian ideas of how the body and self are
perceived as indivisible – quite unlike the Cartesian duality of immaterial mind and material body. Lee Seung-hwan notes in his analysis of Confucian conceptions of body-mind, thinking about the relations between appearance and inner self, “the self is the body in which the corporeal and the spiritual are inseparable” (emphasis added).45 This idea draws on the belief that the self cannot be “hidden” on the inside of an individual subject, because the inner self is always and necessarily available to others to “read” as signifiers of the inner qualities each individual on the surface of the body. Because of the perceived unity between the mind and the body, the surface of the body (individual gestures, behavior, and facial expressions) becomes the agent through which propriety (or li) is expressed in social contexts through a properly maintained and presented body. During the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) a truly righteous gentleman (sŏnbi) was expected to project his inner virtue via an orderly outward appearance. The appearance appropriate to one’s status was then validated and acknowledged “by the intersubjective gaze of the community,”46 which in turn made the individual socially “visible” as an outstanding and successful member of a particular social group. There is a high degree of continuity between this principle and the way in which the self is presented in the contemporary workplace (and other contexts). Displaying appropriate external signifiers of white-collar corporate masculinity through appearance, fashion, behavior and grooming are important ways of signifying not only an appropriate appearance for a salaryman, but an individual’s economic value to their organization. Even cosmetic surgery and various facial treatments such as fillers and frequent treatments of microdermabrasion are utilized to ensure a well-kempt and fresh appearance that belies the physical effects of stressful work environments, and to signify not only youth and strength but also a disciplined body that is valuable to the organization.47 Fashion is used to signify class status (aspirational or real), and hair and skin care play an important role in creating an important impression of age-appropriate or class-appropriate status. Consumption of beauty practices and a presentation of a class- or profession-appropriate appearance are therefore closely tied to the accumulation of social capital through reinforcing existing social hierarchies, and a strategy to make visible one’s willingness to appear as a disciplined body that is of value to the organization. Moreover, self-presentation is also considered a statement about one’s inner self: a disheveled appearance signaling unease on the inside, and inappropriate clothing signifying lack of moral judgment and respect to others.48 Because a tidy appearance is encoded as a signifier of an “orderly” inner self, a disheveled appearance is considered discourteous toward others because an unruly presentation of self raises questions about the mental state (or physical health) of the person and can cause anxiety in others. A neat, orderly appearance with a dress code appropriate to one’s social status and role is therefore considered a basic form of social etiquette (yewi).49

It is in this context that the characters’ “scruffy” appearances and overplayed markers of humility to superiors are utilized strategically in Misaeng as “flawed” performances of hegemonic corporate masculinities. The donning of unfitting suits and presenting an unkempt (ch’orahada) appearance can be read as signifiers of the main characters’ unease with and inability to mimic the
hegemonic ideals, as well as resistance to the disciplinary power of self-cultivation (chagi kyebal), and markers of their inner distress about the inauthenticity and cruel nature of the contemporary workplace. The visual aesthetics of the television drama adaptations of online cartoons such as Misaeng typically borrow heavily from the original webtoons, albeit occasionally there is some element of “fine tuning” to ensure that the main character appears more palatable to broader audiences. Example of such can be seen in the case of the television show Neighborhood Lawyer Jo Deul-ho (KBS, 2016) in which both the titular character and his female assistant lawyer were presented as significantly more kempt and attractive than the same characters in the original webtoon. In the original version Jo Deul-ho sports stubble, carelessly tied necktie and an ill-fitting old suit, whereas his assistant is presented as a bookish wallflower without the typical manga aesthetics of an attractive woman. In the small screen adaptation the appearances of both characters have been altered to better correspond to audiences’ aesthetic expectations of normative beauty, which in turn has the effect of lessening the visual effect of their potentially transgressive appearances unsuited to the high-flying world of the law courts.

The visual representation of the main characters in the television adaptation of Misaeng, on the contrary, is truer to the original webtoon in terms of how the presentation of the self is used to signify unease with the values (or perceived lack of values) of current hegemonic corporate masculinities. These visual signifiers that mirrored closely the original webtoon were a conscious choice on the part of the director (Figures 1 and 2). From the start of the series, main character Chang Kŭrae’s unease with his ill-fitting suit, his initial inability to fix a tie, and even his androgynous facial features mark him as an outsider. It is his appearance that causes other characters to initially deem that he, if anyone, is a dead-end candidate destined never to secure permanent employment. His soft-spoken and anxious manner is picked on from the start by those around him, and he is advised to learn assertiveness if he is to achieve his goal of permanent employment. However, he turns out to be a perfect fit for the Sales Team 3 as Oh Sang-sik and Kim Dong-sik are shown equally reluctant to conform to either the attire or hairstyle expected of a worker in a global trading company. In the original webtoon version, Oh Sang-sik’s disheveled appearance – with perpetually blood-shot eyes and a stubble – and Chang Kŭrae’s ill-fitting suit are even more accentuated than in the television series version, clearly signifying their “outsider” status (Figures 3 and 4).

Their abject status in the corporate machinery is heightened by the way in which everyday existence is presented as a constant struggle for survival. As many of the themes in Misaeng deal with the unrealistic demands put on the sales team as they work to ensure the best profits for their company under nearly impossible trading environment, their workdays require them to choose between moral integrity and survival in the work place. For this reason, the office and the business world are often described as a battlefield or a war zone. However, rather than being “warriors for the nation” or even the corporation they work for, the men are shown to fight for the survival of their immediate team. On the contrary, the company is presented as nothing more than a stage on which the individuals perform their daily struggle. After years of service and personal sacrifice, Oh Sang-sik realizes that in the corporate space the individual has been reduced to nothing more than
their perceived economic value, and that neither effort nor ability can guarantee one’s success. The company is no longer a “safe place” that offers a lifetime of protection and security. In fact, in Chang Kūrae’s frequent voiceover narration the corporate world is described either in the language of competitive baduk, or as a war zone, in which survival can never be guaranteed and annihilation can only be postponed through careful strategic thinking and planning. This war zone mentality is reinforced through the settings in which most of the work takes place: in the confines of the impersonal office environment in which the individual is constantly open to attacks from other teams in the company. The only place of relative safety is on the roof space of the office building, where Oh Sang-sik’s team frequently retreats to plan their next move, away from the prying eyes and ears of other teams that are plotting their demise (Figure 5). The “war zone” mentality thus critiques the flawed logic of self-governance and internal competition as clearly damaging to the company.

Outside the office, and when attempting to win new business for their team, even entertaining potential customers is described and planned in the language of war. The mise-en-scène for the shots are framed in dark, claustrophobic night clubs into which the team “descends” – as if to the netherworld – in order to seal deals at the expense of their dignity and health after long hours of drinking games and excessive alcohol consumption. These scenes relate to Korean business culture practices where suppliers are typically expected to provide potential buyers with entertainment, which sometimes can be very costly. For Sales Team 3, the “entertainment” – aside from pouring drinks for their customer – is shown to consist mostly of the ritual humiliation of Oh Sang-sik and his team (Figure 6). Chang Kūrae’s voiceover accompanies his concerned gaze as he observes their vanishing chance to clinch a deal: “We panicked even before we could load our guns” (Episode 8). Chang Kūrae’s point of view is again utilized here to draw the viewer’s attention to the pathetic ways in which true emotional connections as a means of building lasting business relationships have been transmuted into practice of gabjil (bullying) and bribery. The audience is invited to witness the pathetic heroism of the common salaryman as their feigned enjoyment appears tragic and humiliating. Chang Kūrae’s gaze thus both bears witness to the heroism of Oh Sang-sik (with whom Chang has formed a son-like attachment and genuine sense of loyalty) in Oh’s marionette-like performance and condemns those who humiliate Oh for their own twisted entertainment (Figure 7).

Throughout the series, the embodied performance of the expected external signifiers of corporate masculinity are thus revealed as inherently false and not a basis for a meaningful identity. The pathetic and exaggerated demonstrations of humility and subservience to superiors and business partners belie any real meaning attached to them in ways in which the salaryman masculinity may have once signified devotion and loyalty to the extended in-group of the company. The series openly critiques the excessive entertainment practices of both superiors and customers, which are purely shown as transactional (and thus immoral and ultimately meaningless) rather than relational (the ideal). In some scenes where signs of humility might be expected, markers of respect which in the past would have been read as genuine communicative tools representing power relations of domination-subordination are taken to the extreme in the form of over-exaggerated bows and self-effacement. The self-humiliation of the salaryman thus marks him both as the abject of the corporate system and the signifier of the system’s corrupt and empty nature for the individuals within it. Moreover, scenes of elaborate corporate entertainment are juxtaposed with scenes depicting the moment after the “battle” for business, featuring images of pathetic drunken men, spent and desperately ill after overconsumption of alcohol. The workers barely conscious and vomiting from binge drinking, their expelled bodily fluids are symbolic of their own position in the corporate machinery.

While on the one hand the behavior of the characters (Oh Sang-sik in particular) can be read as a spectacle of powerless salaryman masculinity for the audience to witness, as the series progresses
Oh’s disheveled appearance comes to signify the character’s authenticity. Observing the desperate “battles” fought in nightclubs to win a deal, and practices of gabjil in the office, Chang Kūrae’s persistent gaze makes Oh Sang-sik’s inner human virtues visible to those around him. Rather than signifying a self in crisis, Oh’s unkempt appearance is thus used to suggest his refusal to pretend that the system works: a marker of his inner authenticity juxtaposed against well-presented but “inauthentic” corporate masculinity. Through the process of making contemporary hegemonic masculinities visible, their precarious discursive foundations are thus revealed as inauthentic and contradictory and their value as a measure of success is contested. In this context, Oh’s character emerges as the ultimate superior man (sŏnbi) both because of his moral fiber, and because he becomes everyman's hero in his ingenuity to survive in the corporate world. The title of the series, Misaeng, is taken from the piece of advice that Oh Sang-sik gives to his new intern: “Since you have entered the company, do your best to hang in there (pŏt’ida). In this place, sticking with it (pŏt’ida) is winning, and enduring (pŏt’ida) can perhaps be seen as moving toward complete life (wansaeng). We are still living incomplete lives (misaeng).” (Misaeng, Episode 8.) In this sense, Oh becomes perhaps paradoxically a true sŏnbi in a Confucian sense in that he earns his subordinate’s respect through displaying “internal virtue [...] manifested in his face, people see it, are admonished by it, and voluntarily submit to it.”

His virtue, however, is not derived from a pursuit or display of wealth, but on traditional values of loyalty (ŭiri) and genuine affection (chŏng) for his team.

By positioning the character of Oh Sang-sik as an archetype of authentic Korean masculinity which is defined by one’s moral character, Misaeng thus presents a cultural counter-discourse that aims to reclaim hegemonic masculinities from neoliberal materialism. The ending implies, however, that integrity can only be found and upheld outside the system. Despite their best plans, global corporate values are presented as alien to the other-oriented traditional values of the characters because the system is set up to bring the maximum benefits to the company and the overseas investor rather than the Korean individual. Ultimately, then, the narrative undermines faith in the neoliberal corporate structures, while providing an ode to chŏng as the true connection of affection that was traditionally thought to bind workers together in meaningful harmonious relationships. Misaeng’s narrative also focuses on homosocial bonding as a precondition for respectful relationships and survival: the workplace is claustrophobic, but it is so because of individual workers’ willingness to buy into the logic of transnational business masculinities as a norm that builds on “the competitive individualism of contemporary business ideology.”

So while on the one hand the narrative illustrates how corporate workers buy into the logic of entrepreneurship of the self (or self as an object of entrepreneurship) – as reflected in their conformity of maintaining corporate code of dress and appearance – the main characters appeal to the majority of working men who know that they will never be able to reach the executive ladder of the corporate sector. Therefore, through presenting a critical perspective embodied in the refusal of the main characters to buy
into the aesthetic conformity of the corporate world, the male characters in this drama present a powerful cultural counter-discourse to transnational business masculinities. Transnational corporate masculinities are presented as an anathema to “authentic” Korean masculinity defined by shared cultural values, rather than entrepreneurship of the self.

Conclusion

This article has discussed how transgressive appearances and overly compliant parodying of social signs of respect and humility present embodied sites of critique and resistance to contemporary neoliberal hegemonic masculinities. In Misaeng, the underdogs are depicted as truly manly men (namjadaun namja) not because of their accidental successes in mimicking the corporate ideal of the disciplined individual, but because of their desire to maintain traditional Korean values. While it should be pointed out that these “traditional” values are of course as much a product of social discourses that go back no further than the “New Village Movement” (Saemaül undong) of the 1970s, the success of the program and the way in which these flawed characters have resonated with the viewing audiences suggests a broader desire to resist individual-centered work aspirations as the new norm. In many ways then, these narratives work to reclaim Korean or national masculinity back from what is seen as inauthentic (and perhaps foreign) pursuit of individual gain. The return of the unprivileged but hardworking “common man” who has no connections to speak of (or refuses to utilize them as a matter of principle) and whose unsophisticated adherence to traditional values sits uneasily within the competitive corporate landscape, emerges as an uplifting cultural narrative that rejects domination and neoliberal logic as desirable markers of hegemonic masculinity. Symptomatic of the growing unease with the increasingly alienating landscape of the Korean corporate cultures, the common corporate worker is once more presented as the place of return, a site of cultural counter politics of resistance to the more negative aspects of the contemporary corporate cultures which normalize abuses of power through engendering neoliberal technologies of the self.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


ENDNOTES

1. Webtoons (web-based comics/graphic novels) have become extremely influential in the contemporary Korean cultural context, and their wide popularity indicates the role they play in shaping popular attitudes toward social issues, cultural values and even politics. The most popular webtoons deal with issues of social importance to average citizens, and often address issues that are highly topical as the serialized online publishing format allows for a quick process of getting creative content out at minimum risk. Unlike television miniseries which usually tend to rely on recycling ‘safe’ subject topics because of their high production cost and need for high viewer ratings to recoup their costs, webtoons have arguably become one of the most accessible outlets for the dissemination of new creative content and imaginative story lines. Similarly to the way in which many popular literary works of 1970s and 1980s Korea were turned into film adaptations, television producers have turned to webtoons to source popular content for television miniseries (Byung-yul Baek, “Webtoons emerge as source for dramas, films,” *Korea Times* January 27, 206, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/culture/2016/01/201_196512.html). As story lines which garner a significant number of hits online are taken as indicators of wider popular interest in the topic addressed by a given webtoon, television producers are increasingly developing a more or less symbiotic relationship with webtoon artists. Conversely, the webtoon authors also benefit from TV drama success which can lead to increased sales of print copies of their work. This was the case with Misaeng, which has since the broadcasting of the TV series sold over two million copies, and became the best-selling print book in 2014. (Mi-hwan Oh, ‘Misaeng’ webtoon and drama... the manhwa sells 2 million copies, *Hanguk Ilbo* 26 November 2014: http://hankookilbo.com/v/8461169c914644f29bf394ead162913c)


3. While the term “salaryman” (*saellerimaen*) was in use in Korea until the 1990s, the terms “hoesawŏn” (company worker) and “chigwŏn” (employee) are more commonly used today because of their gender-neutral connotation.


11. After the final episode of Misaeng aired, the government introduced a proposal for a new law to improve the working conditions of workers on temporary contracts. While no claim is made here that the proposal was in any way linked to the television drama discussed here, the fact that the plan was dubbed ‘Chang Kŭrae Protection Law’ after the main protagonist of Misaeng, speaks of the iconic status that the main character had taken in the public imaginary (see Steven Denney, “South Korea's New Labor Plan Looks to TV Drama,’ The Diplomat, December 31, 2014, http://thediplomat.com/2014/12/television-drama-and-south-koreas-new-labor-plan/)


22. Films dealing with the troubled North-South Korea relations such as Swiri (1999), JSA Joint Security Area (2000) and Last Witness (2002) can be seen as examples of such. The number of Korean War films which focused on brotherhood and heroism under extreme stress, such as Taegugki: The Brotherhood of War (2004) and Welcome to Dongmakgol (2005) also focused on characters who suffered trauma but found comfort in building strong homosocial ties over fighting for a just or common cause.


24. This said, willingness to resort to acts of violence has continued to feature as a marker of hypermasculinity in popular culture whether or not the male lead character is carefully groomed or not. Moreover, where a character is represented as queer or gay, this is often achieved through excessive, camp “gay gesturing” (kki) rather than through clothing and use of makeup.


27. Song, South Koreans in the Debt Crisis, 96.


29. Ibid., 99.


39. History of the Salaryman (SBS) reached a staggering 21.7% of the total audience share when the final episode was broadcast in March 2013 (AGB Nielsen, 2013).


42. Oh Sang-sik’s name is again a play with words, and can be translated as ‘Oh common sense,’ which ironically is shown not to take him very far in the fictional company of One International Trading.


49. “Making of Misaeng,” Misaeng TV Series Deluxe Set (Director’s Cut), DVD Disk Set (Seoul, South Korea: CJ Entertainment, 2015). The way in which the link between the original webtoon artwork and the television series was also emphasised in the innovative marketing material for the program in which each of the actors in character were shown as ‘half-drawn’ cartoon characters (see for example: http://program.tving.com/tvn/misaeng/13/Contents/Html).
50. See http://webtoon.daum.net/webtoon/viewer/15299 for examples of these aesthetics.
54. Connell and Wood observe similar conformity in dress code and even political opinion in their study of Australian corporate masculinities in “Globalization and Business Masculinities,” 353.

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Iconographies of Urban Masculinity: Reading “Flex Boards” in an Indian City
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Introduction

On an unusually warm evening in early May of 2012 I rode my scooter along the congested lanes of Moti Peth¹ on my way to “Shelar galli,”² a working-class neighborhood in the western Indian city of Pune, where I had been conducting my doctoral field research for the preceding fifteen months. As I parked my scooter at one end of the small stretch of road that formed the axis of the neighborhood, it was impossible to miss a thirty-foot-tall billboard looming above the narrow lane at its other end. I was, by now, familiar with the presence of “flex” boards, as they were popularly known, as these boards crowded the city’s visual and material landscape. However, the flex board in Shelar galli that evening was striking, given its sheer size and the way in which it seemed to dwarf the neighborhood with its height (see Figure 1.1).

The image of Mohanlal Shitole, a resident of Shelar galli, dressed in a bright red turban and a starched white shirt, with a thick gold bracelet resting on his wrist, stood along the entire length of the flex making it seem like he was towering above the narrow lane itself. The rest of the space was dotted with faces of a host of local politicians (all men, barring one woman councilor) and (male) residents of the neighborhood, on whose behalf collective birthday greetings for Mohanlal were printed on top of the flex. Having been witness to Mohanlal’s strong ambition to make a foray into local politics by this time, I was hardly surprised by the fact that this flex was sponsored by and erected by Mohanlal himself, on the eve of a grand celebration of his birthday in the neighborhood. Mohanlal cut his birthday cake (after proudly brandishing a sword) to ear-deafening music, in full presence of the residents of the neighborhood. Following this, young and older male residents of the neighborhood lined up to greet Mohanlal and hand him bouquets of flowers, while making sure that they took a picture with him. As the rush of guests continued to swell, Mohanlal’s huge flex swayed in the breeze, overseeing as if with studied approval the success of his birthday celebration (see Figure 1.2).

As I consolidated my doctoral research around the ways in which urban space and gendered identities were articulated – specifically in the context of young, working-class, Dalit³ men in Pune – the flex boards seemed to be located precisely on this point of articulation: as a distinctly urban and a gendered popular practice. While my ethnography remained firmly focused on the young men’s lives in Shelar galli, I continued in subsequent years to document flex boards as a crucial, publicly-displayed index of how this constituency of young men in the city imagined “being a man.”

This paper is based upon my extensive documentation of flex boards between the years 2014 - 2016 in the city of Pune. I turn an analytical lens on the practice of erecting flex boards in the city.
to illustrate how these boards serve as a site for young, subaltern men to imagine and perform a gendered self. This practice has crucial implications for the increasing class- and caste-based disparity situated in contemporary Indian cities. In this paper I demonstrate that the practice of erecting flex boards also signifies an attempt by the city’s subaltern (men) to (re)write themselves into the city’s public spaces and the city’s public life, thus challenging their gradual marginalization from the former. The landscape of flex boards, I argue, makes available to us a peculiar iconography of contemporary urban masculinity, constituted by an alignment of class-specific motifs of manliness, consumption and politics in urban India.

Frames of Reference: Meanings and experience of masculinity in South Asia

A critical focus in the social sciences on studying men as “men” is relatively recent in India (and in the larger context of South Asia), gathering momentum only in the last two decades. Early research was based in history, in the discipline’s investigation of the discursive deployment of notions of masculinity (and femininity) which inscribed colonial and post-colonial India with unmistakably gendered meanings. Sinha’s landmark study has shown how the figures of the “manly Englishman” and the “effeminate Bengali babu” that emerged in nineteenth-century colonial India encoded within them the constant power dynamics between the colonizers and the colonized, rooted in political, economic and administrative imperatives of the imperial rule. In its twentieth-century response to this Orientalist internalization of themselves as effete, the Indian elite sought to wrest back their power by advocating cultural nationalism. They reinvigorated a Hindu masculinity that blended qualities like discipline, loyalty, and courage along with an emphasis on character-building, education and selfless service to the nation to consolidate the masculine ideal of a “real Hindu man.” Srivastava presents a fascinating analysis of the post-Independence project of producing the modern Indian citizen as a gendered project, to be achieved via “Five Year Plan Hero;” this figure was epitomized in Hindi cinema’s male protagonists of the 1950s and 1960s as engineers, doctors and scientists, who embodied the rational, scientific masculinity of modern India and mastered its incipiently urban spaces.

The above research while elaborating upon the discursive content of masculinity in modern India, proves to be inadequate to illustrate the everyday experiences and notions of being a man in present day India. The 2000s however, have seen a burgeoning of work which investigates a range of sites where masculinity is produced and performed, including work, modernity and consumption; queerness and practices of sexuality; migration, communal violence, local politics; and all-male sites like wrestling, movie-going and neighborhood clubs. This research elaborates upon the processes of making and unmaking of masculine identities which are embedded
in constellations of gendered, class, caste or ethnic relations. Going beyond simplistic renderings of masculinity in terms of patriarchal dominance or hegemonic masculinity, the above body of literature underlines the vulnerabilities which disrupt the links between maleness and power and the consequent recuperative strategies of the actors. It is within this larger frame that I situate this paper, as I analyze how contemporary representations of manliness in urban India are informed by the vulnerabilities that cities continue to produce for their working-class male citizens and simultaneously the avenues that representations provide for these men to reclaim a sense of masculine control.

**Cities in India and their men**

In the more than two decades since India liberalized its economy in 1991, Indian cities (big and small) have undergone fundamental spatial and social reconfiguration which is pegged onto class, gender and caste differences. A major highlight of this transformation has been the recasting of the notion of “public” in the exclusive image of the urban, middle-class consumer-citizen in globalizing India. This revised image is manifested in the realm of the public in its spatial and social manifestation. Thus contests over existing urban spaces have sharpened acutely as public space has become increasingly privatized via the mushrooming of exclusive consumer spaces, malls, multiplexes and gated communities. A new brand of middle-class civic activism is asserting its presence in the governance and management of urban public life, edging out the imagination of an inclusive city via its subscription to neoliberal notions of efficiency, “world-class”-ness and most recently “smart cities,” which views the presence of urban poor as nuisances or as hostile bodies.

The furious debate on women’s safety which was triggered by the brutal rape and murder of a young paramedical student in Delhi in December of 2012, has to be located in the larger context of neoliberal urban India elaborated above. The outrage expressed in large-scale public demonstrations in the capital city and in national print and social media following the incident made way for larger discussions surrounding linkages of power, violence and masculinity and the institutionally entrenched misogyny in Indian public life. However, with the media giving disproportionate coverage to instances of lower-class men’s attacks on middle/upper-class women, the discussion around women’s safety was subtly framed as middle-class women’s increasing vulnerability to the violence of lower-class masculinity. It is important to note here that lower-caste referent is often implied in allusions to lower-class/working-class in debates/discussions in the popular sphere. The prevalent intersection of class marginalization with caste-based disempowerment in the Indian context means that constructed fears of violent lower-class masculinity also thinly disguise similar reservations about lower-caste masculinity. Thus although the increased discussion of notions of manhood in the public sphere was welcome, the terms of the discussion were questionable.

Phadke traces the progressive consolidation of the image of working-class men as violent “lost causes” and as obstacles to progress in the development discourses of 1970s to their contemporary portrayal as dangerous, “unfriendly bodies” in discussions of urban women’s safety. In the distinctly neoliberal ethos of contemporary urban India, Phadke argues that, “Women’s safety, or to be more specific, middle and upper-class women’s safety, is...premised on the removal of...
of lower-class and minority men from public spaces.” The above developments point towards the contradictory ways in which masculinity has come to occupy space in public discussions on urban India: while the sensitivity towards the gendered nature of urban spaces and the need to look at dominant meanings of masculinity is no doubt welcome, these discussions seem to highlight a disturbing alignment of class, masculinity and violence as a singular concern within the larger realm of masculine identity, pitting the former against middle-class women’s respectability. These shifts have molded the popular discourse on masculinity in urban life in contemporary India in a profoundly uneven manner: the figure of the working-class/ lower caste/ migrant man has been rendered as dangerous and undesirable as opposed to the unprecedented celebration of the suave, upper-caste, professional and English-speaking image into which the “urban man” is increasingly being cast.

The celebration of the middle-class male figure in popular discourse is made obvious in a spate of advertisements in recent years which address upper-caste, middle-class men explicitly, emphasizing their duty to respect and “protect” women and prevent gendered violence. In contrast to these celebratory representations, working-class men appear as potential villains, their masculinity laced with unmistakable connotations of danger. While these representations are not necessarily radically new in their class and caste bias, they are significant markers of the ascendant ideal man as middle-class/upper-caste, while simultaneously erasing the working-class/migrant/rural/lower-caste male body from popular public discourse. Performance of an ideal masculinity by fighting for women’s safety and protecting them has been a crucial trope of manly behavior in Hindi cinema through the post-independence period, as the brawny, muscular male protagonist protects women’s honor through exercise of strength, an obvious act of patriarchal patronage. However, this act now is cast in a modified avatar: it is the urbane, professional, “civilized” middle-class man who commits himself to protecting women’s rights to safety in public spaces, not necessarily through a show of muscular strength. In a context where spaces of consumption and leisure like malls, multiplexes and food courts are increasingly conflated with notions of “public space” in urban India, this discourse of masculinity becomes hyper-visible, imprinting itself forcefully on to these spaces in Indian cities, including in Pune (see Figures 1.3, 1.4, 1.5).

Consumption (of commodities, lifestyles, ideologies, culture) has become a fundamental axis along which gender/class/ caste and regional/national identities are imagined and constructed in India today. Thus the consolidation of the middle-class/upper-caste prototype of Indian male as the representative of Indian masculinity at the cost of the invisibilization of the regional/vernacular/working-class masculinity itself is also reflected overwhelmingly in this realm. It is against this erasure that Pune’s flex boards emerge as an important site for the expression of working-class masculinity.

It is relevant to note that flex boards are not typically erected in public space that is marked specifically for advertising, neither are the boards put up in paid spaces. While the city’s civic body does make specific public spaces available for purpose of advertising and for putting up of large hoardings, these (paid) spaces are usually occupied by advertisements of upmarket clothing, electronic or store brands, constituting a “formal” visual-scape of the city. The abundance of flex boards in the city’s public spaces, on street corners and in alleyways is in fact, on account of the fact...
that these spaces are not paid for. Collectives or individuals simply erect a flex board on the side of the road and pull it down after a few days. In technical terms, flex boards are considered to be “encroachments” on the city’s public space. The larger context of indeterminacy of property regimes in urban India and the porous boundaries between legal, illegal and extra-legal uses of urban space spawns forth a wide range of practices of appropriation and claiming of urban land by refugees, squatters, migrant labour or ethnic groups for residential, religious, economic or political purposes. Recent perspectives in anthropology and urban planning however, emphasize upon these practices of appropriating urban space as sites of subaltern resistance to hegemonic imaginations and structuring of cities, a crucial reclamation of the city space by its subaltern publics. Thus the discursive and material significance of flex boards in the city scape itself is already strongly marked by connotations of subaltern subversion. It is not mere coincidence then, that flex boards constitute a site where subaltern, low caste men re-inscribe themselves into the city’s space and its imagination, against the background of their increasing marginalization from the same.

**Locating Pune**

My research is set in the western Indian city of Pune, the next biggest city after Mumbai in the state of Maharashtra. With a population of 3.7 million, the city considers itself to be the educational and cultural center of the state. Pune’s rise as an urban center can be traced back to the rule of the Peshwa dynasty between 1720 and 1818; the Peshwas, who were the *de facto* upper caste Brahmin rulers of the vast Maratha-ruled territories in eighteenth century India, made Pune their capital city in 1720, and over the following century, transformed it into a major bureaucratic-military center, imprinted with a distinct Brahminical cultural and social ethos. Peshwa rule represented the near-complete hegemony of Brahmin state authority, manifested in unconditional privileges and protection granted to the Brahmin community by its rulers. This pattern persisted until the present day in the spatial organization of the city, which pivots around the axis of caste: predominantly upper-caste Brahmins inhabit the prosperous parts of the city, while the eastern blocks of the city continue to be populated by lower-caste and Dalit communities and Muslim communities. In the last two decades, the city’s economic landscape has shifted to post-industrial “knowledge” and service-oriented activities like multinational-owned information technology (IT) hubs, pharmaceutical companies, business process outsourcing companies (BPOs) and biotechnology firms. These developments have been facilitated by the skilled labor pool supplied by the city’s numerous prestigious research and educational institutions. These shifts have accompanied several changes in the cityscape, akin to the transformations in several metropolitan and smaller cities in India in the last decade. Pune has now acquired a new aspirational landscape consisting of high-end places of leisure and consumption and an increasingly class-segregated spatial regime (via gated communities), mapped onto its earlier geography of exclusion. A quick look at the history of housing in Pune shows that high proportion of Dalit castes remain concentrated in the city’s slums. Of the 43% of Pune’s population which resides in slums, the majority are Dalits and members of
Scheduled Tribal groups.

Claiming the Cityscape

It is against the above background of a distinctly caste-based geography of exclusion that the ethnographic and the visual data in this paper must be considered. In this section I present visual data which documents the peculiar practice that has come to increasingly characterize local politics across urban and rural India: putting up large and small flex boards in the city’s public spaces to mark a special occasion including national holidays, birthdays or death anniversaries of popular leaders or politicians, and religious celebrations. Flex boards are usually sponsored by an individual, a youth collective or a neighborhood association, whose name and photograph also appear prominently on the flex boards along with a message directed to the citizenry or to a local political leader being greeted/supported (whose image will also appear prominently). The ability to cheaply print flex boards that has arisen in the last decade has changed the nature of local political practice in important ways. The affordability of large size flexes allows them to be put up easily by even those who do not enjoy local political clout. Flex boards are now a constant presence in the visual regime of the cityscape, looming at traffic intersections, in prominent squares, lining neighborhood streets or at major junctions in the city (See Figures 2.3, 2.4).

Of course, flex boards are but one element of the visual material that populates the cityscape. Pune’s landscape, like most urban Indian landscapes, is a rich repository of popular visual imagery that ranges from religious and nationalist iconography to advertising local and upmarket brands to film posters, statues of leaders of national and local importance and quirky Marathi signage which testifies to the popular, caste-specific image of a particular (Brahmin) Puneri resident as one who is unfriendly and entitled, armed with sharp barbs and taunts (see Figures 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 2.1 and 2.2). Most of the above mentioned categories of visual material can be closely read in order to see how they derive from a historical, material context of the city-space/region, and how they produce and sustain a distinctly gendered and caste-specific visual regime which imbues the city with its ethos, through their inclusions and erasures. It is beyond the purview of this paper, however, to illustrate how these competing visual regimes intersect to produce normative gendered ideals for its citizens. Neither do I want to suggest simplistically that flex boards respond directly or indirectly to the masculine imagery prevalent in the abovementioned overlapping visual cues in the city. However, this attempt to analyze the flex boards as spaces of gendered self-making can provide us with further clues in order to explore the semiotic import of a city’s visual scape in the making of its citizens’ gendered, caste-d and class-ed selves.

Pune’s history as a Brahminical city and its location in western Maharashtra implies that this context is also populated with a range of masculine archetypes, undergirded by the region’s caste contours. The presence of the figure of the 17th-century warrior king Shivaji, depicted as a wily, courageous fighter and ideal statesman, looms large over the masculine horizon of Maharashtra, and can be easily identified as a model of hegemonic masculinity who defines the ideals of manhood associated with the region as a whole. This warrior king, who belonged to the warrior Maratha caste, was instrumental in successfully defeating the Mughal rulers in the 17th century, thus forming an
independent Marathi kingdom located in what is today roughly the territory of Maharashtra. Over the last five decades the figure of Shivaji has ascended to be Maharashtra’s most prominent icon: his name was claimed by a political party formed in the 1970s, Shiv Sena (translated roughly as “the army of Shivaji”) which has consistently relied on hyper-masculine, xenophobic, anti-Muslim rhetoric in its rise to power in the state. Shivaji’s appropriation into the complex caste politics of the state has also meant that his figure is claimed and evoked by all caste groups and political parties. Shivaji pervades the popular cultural referents of urban and rural Maharashtra in the form of a figure who is an unequivocally hyper-masculine, martial statesman and a cultural symbol of Marathi identity itself.

At the same time, other caste-specific versions of gendered ideals can be easily located in the figures of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the icon of Dalit emancipatory movement in mid-20th century and the author of India’s constitution and in the figures of Annabha Sathe and Lahuji Salwe, leaders increasingly appropriated by youth from another Dalit caste, the Matangs, as their idols. The contours of these figures and their gendered attributes are shaped to a large extent by the ways in which their respective caste groups are increasingly asserting their caste identities in a distinctly masculinized idiom. Pune’s Brahminical past and its location as a stronghold of the right wing cultural organization, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) throws up its own set of ideals of manliness, embodied in the figure of the Sangh volunteer, typically dressed in khaki shorts and a white shirt, wielding a lathi (wooden stick) and engaged in a military-style drill, in their daily morning meets in neighborhoods of the city.

The point behind these descriptions is not to provide an inventory of “models of masculinity” that shape the cultural, political and gendered contexts of Pune and the larger region. Neither is there a single hegemonic masculine ideal, which seems to be the dominant ideal, in relation to other “subordinate masculinities” in the region. To read these contesting ideals of manhood within fixed boundaries of “hegemonic” and “subordinate” does not allow us to see how gendered performances of manliness across caste groups might be far more fluid, allying with hegemonic masculine ideals and challenging them simultaneously or subscribing to multiple ideals in multiple contexts. This description rather attempts to outline the existent repertoire of gendered ideals of manliness which mark the social and historical context of Pune and the region as a whole. How the specific markers of masculinity are represented in the flex boards articulated to these specific ideals is a topic for a much larger research project.

Through their presence in the material spaces of the city flex boards constitute distinct “spaces for representation” which fulfill the dual role of declaring one’s political allegiance as well as making oneself visible (literally and figuratively) on the horizons of local politics, in ways that are highly gendered and class-specific. The following images show how these flex boards are a rich repository of popular motifs of masculinity as they circulate in and dominate public spaces in contemporary urban Maharashtra.

Figure 2.5 is a tribute to the man pictured, pehelwan (wrestler) Rajesh Barguje, and sponsored
by a male collective called Gokul Group. The tag line above Barguje’s image is a play on two Hindi words, “naam” (name/fame) and “kaam” (work/task). It suggests that “Your work should earn you fame, and you should earn so much fame that just your name ensures the success of any work you undertake.” The presence of the Maratha icon Shivaji is a highly suggestive one, central to attributing masculine power to the person who features in the flex. The juxtaposition of images of Shivaji, a roaring lion and the smiling wrestler, affectionately referred to as “Master,” (meaning Guru/mentor) in this image is remarkable. In doing so, the image casts the achievement of success and fame in an unmistakably masculinized idiom.

Even more suggestive is the tagline, which exhorts the readers to earn fame which will open doors to success magically just by the power that their name will carry. This trope of understanding power is a highly class-specific one in the context of contemporary urban India. It refers to a realm where the weight carried by a name makes a difference and can be an adequate condition for the fulfillment of any necessary task. Recent research on urban South Asia focuses on the informal modalities as a methodological imperative for understanding social processes and urban experience in South Asia. Roy argues that informality in the realms of housing, land and in acquiring the resources needed for urban survival highlights the entrepreneurial resourcefulness and collective political agency of the urban poor to expertly exploit the porous divisions between the legal and illegal realms to survive in the city. Simone’s work on cities in Africa is also extremely relevant to understanding the lives of Indian cities: Simone demonstrates how informality is a way of life itself in urban Africa, as city dwellers continually plug into (and out of) fragmented, ephemeral networks of people, resources, objects and connections in order to survive in hostile and resource-deprived urban contexts.

The notion of informality thus equips us to understand the process of how the urban poor in the global South “make things work” in the face of their own marginalized positions in the city’s economic, political and cultural life; this process is essentially contingent, unstable and works in the interstices of formal authority and informal ways of bypassing it. In my ethnographic research in the Dalit, working-class neighborhood of the Shellar galli, it was clear that several important resources – such as licenses for food vending carts, permission for extra water supply lines, and contracts for managing parking lots and several such “kaam” (tasks) – could only be achieved through informal contacts with the local municipal councillors or through maneuvering lower level council bureaucracy. Against this background, we can appreciate how central a name’s
weight can be to get any kaam done; naam, (name) condenses within it not just clout, but the power of networks and the ability to maneuver these expertly for one’s own benefit. Moreover, it is the masculine forms of sociality and mobility that make possible the ability to construct, sustain and nurture these informal ties and networks in the Indian context, thus making informality a highly masculinized terrain. The ability to “get things done” through just the mention of one’s name thus becomes an index of one’s degree of manliness, specific to the urban poor and working-class sections, as reflected in the flex dedicated to the wrestler in Figure 2.5.

Many of the young men featured in the flex boards pay special attention to their bodily presentation, in terms of their pose, the clothes they wear, their accessories and the messages that accompany their images (see Figure 2.6, 2.7, 2.8).

Figure 2.6 is a close-up of one young man who featured in a flex put up in one of the bigger and busier crossings in the city. The prominent inclusion of his nickname, “Yoyo,” signals his resemblance to the extremely popular Punjabi singer Yo Yo Honey Singh. His dark leather jacket, the thick chain displayed prominently around his neck, the stone stud earring in his right ear and his sideburns are all deployed to further emphasize the similarity between this young man and the popular singer. These accessories also signal a certain flamboyance of style and a familiarity with the latest trends in the world of fashion.

Figures 2.7 and 2.8 also illustrate a characteristic style of bodily presentation and style in the flex boards: the wearing of a heavy gold chain against a dark shirt. The vermillion mark on the forehead is also a prominent marker of a traditional masculine comportment in the context of Maharashtra. Both the young men in above images also have accessories like a tattoo or an earring, as well as slickly gelled hair.

The nomenclature adopted by some of the youth collectives – and displayed boldly on their flex boards – suggests the nature of the aspirations they harbor (see Figure 2.9). Some of the names of such youth collectives include “Rock Star Group,” “Enjoy Group,” “Jolly Group,” “Naughty Boys Group,” “No Fear Group,” “Meet Your Maker Group” and so on. The names adopted by some of these youth collectives or neighborhood associations testify to a profound desire to sound/look Anglicized. At the same time, these names are also heavily gendered in their framing, referring to masculine qualities of courage on the one hand and of a carefree, youthful “boys will be boys” idiom on the other.

Lukose’s research on the engagement of Malayali youth with consumption in neoliberal Kerala also resonates with this emphasis on being carefree and pleasure-seeking, an
imperative which she argues is a deeply gendered one. Elaborating upon the slang word, “chethu” she demonstrates how this term condensed a distinct practice of commodified masculinity among lower caste, working-class Malayali young men. Chethu, which referred figuratively to “hip,” “sharp” or “cool,” was a term used by young men to refer to a certain style quotient manifested by wearing jeans, cotton shirts and sneakers or in a fancy bike or a flashy car. Chethu, however, also encompassed considerations of status evidenced in easy cash, an Anglicized comportment, a flaneur-esque consumption of public spaces like the beach or the beer parlor, and an aspirational orientation towards life marked by youthfulness, enjoyment, and a staunch rootedness in the present moment. However, girls wearing westernized clothes would never qualify as chethu; they would be referred to as having “gema,” as being arrogant or a show-off, a clear indication of the starkly masculine contours of chethu.

Consumption (of clothes, styles of dressing, bikes, accessories, social media) as a site of fashioning masculine identity has been the theme of a sizeable chunk of research in recent times. Chopra, Osella and Osella and De Neve highlight practices of consumption through which men construct themselves in the image of masculine ideals of “householder”/“patron,” etc. in Kerala and Tamil Nadu respectively. Rogers and Anandhi, Jeyaranjan and Krishnan explore consumption as an axis along which caste hierarchies are challenged or reinforced in Tamil Nadu. In rural Uttar Pradesh, educated Jat men seek to establish distance from rural agricultural laborers by riding motorcycles, wearing designer watches or chino-style trousers. It is crucial to note that the imaginary of modernity is an important constituent of the masculine identity these subjects seek to construct through practices of consumption. The flexes above are also an important site of self-making for the young men, in terms of portraying themselves as consumers of a certain modern style, clothing and accessories or in the Anglicized nomenclature of their “groups.” However, it is crucial to emphasize here that this style and idiom of consumption is starkly different from the idiom that is flashed across urban India today, via its glitzy malls, upmarket restaurants, foreign branded stores and high-end accessories and set apart from the kind of consumption that manifested in the advertisements specified in the preceding section.

In their analysis of the 1996 hit Tamil film Kaadalan (Lover boy), Dareshwar and Niranjana trace the material and ideological components of this idiom of consumption to the moment of liberalization of Indian economy, beginning 1991. They point out that the film produced a fashion-conscious, MTV sensibility for lower-caste men, marked by a combination of baggy pants, blue jeans, rap music and Michael Jackson-like dance moves, portraying a distinct youthful energy through its use of colors and fashion.

Figure 2.7 Image from a flex board erected in honor of Ambedkar’s birthday. (Photo by author)

Figure 2.8 Another image from the same flex as 2.7. (Photo by author)
While until that time, it was the upper-caste, middle-class men’s and women’s bodies that constituted the space for the production of the consumerist aesthetic and ethos of globalizing India, this film signaled an important shift “... where globalization and its signifiers attach themselves to the body of the male lower-caste ‘youth’.”53 The modes of self-making evident in the flexes in Pune can be said to partially belong to this shift, where the young men, through their careful display of accessories of consumption like cell phones, clothes, hair style, tattoos and group nomenclature inscribe their caste and class selves into the narrative of consumption, hitherto so heavily dominated by bodies marked distinctly as upper-caste and upper-class. This inscription of lower caste/class bodies into the narrative of consumption in turn serves to reconfigure the idiom of consumption itself, which is increasingly cast in a class-specific and caste-specific imaginary. It is these highly localized imaginaries of consumption which continue to consolidate on the flex boards in Indian cities today.

Remarkably, it is in the figures of local male politicians that these localized imaginaries of consumption seem to materialize in their most spectacular avatar. In the following section I will illustrate how flex boards are an embodiment of class-specific markers of masculinity, deftly aligning consumption with the practice of local politics to construct an ideal man. Research in recent times has confirmed the value that “doing politics” has acquired in lower-class, lower-caste masculine context of contemporary India. Jeffrey54 and Jeffrey et al.55 demonstrate how local, low caste (male) youth in rural north India respond to unemployment by establishing themselves as netas (political leaders), engaging in local political brokering and networking, which provides the young men with a model of masculinity which incorporates the value of education, earning them respect. Also, Hansen demonstrates how the militant right wing party, Shiv Sena, in order to establish their stronghold on the city, effectively harnessed the aspirations and hopes of boys from poorer backgrounds, for whom being a part of the political party was instrumental in gaining money, power and status.56 Flex boards are thus a part of a larger process in urban India, wherein the acutely masculine terrain of the domain of politics, coupled with vulnerabilities of subaltern men, has given rise to a remarkable constellation of politics, class and masculine identity across contexts within the country. Presented below are instances of local political leaders in Pune who enjoy almost a cult following, a large part of it being their distinct style and their excessive consumption (Figures 2.11- 2.13). While reading the valence of these representations of male political figures, I find it helpful to re-visit some interactions during my doctoral field research in 2011 and 2012, given that these conversations make available to us an added layer of comprehension of these figures, in terms of young, low-caste men’s own affective engagement with these representations of the political leaders.57 In the light of the fact that these
political figures have continued to dominate the terrain of local politics in Pune for the past decade, these conversations hold significant relevance for the purpose of this paper. Wanjale (Figure 2.11), a local politician, who allegedly wore two kilograms worth gold on his person, had earned the title, “The Gold Man” of Pune. He was described to me as a vagh (tiger) by several young men. In its tribute to the politician, a prominent Marathi newspaper noted Wanjale’s favorite quote, “Main dikhta hoon villain jaisa, lekin kaam karta hoon hero ka” (I look like a villain, but my deeds are those of a hero). I find it remarkable that Wanjale was acutely conscious of the embodied and visual regime of attributing morality that prevails in the Indian context: the consistent association of lack of hygiene/morality with lower-caste/class bodies and bodies which appear as low-caste as opposed to the automatic attribution of an unquestioned moral subject-hood to bodies that looked like upper-caste bodies (fair complexioned/certain bodily comportment, etc.). The advertisements referred to in the preceding section which established the “goodness” of certain kinds of men in sharp contrast to the lack of it in certain others, are the most explicit manifestation of this visual regime of crediting bodies with unequal moral value. In an extremely suggestive instance, a report in a local newspaper laments the proliferation of flex boards across the city’s spaces as “unsightly banners, which detract from the aesthetic appeal of large trees, heritage structures and thoughtful architecture.” The article further goes on to say that, “...most of the faces on the banners and [billboards] invariably look like crooks in comic books. This is the ugly part.” While Wanjale displays awareness of this profoundly unequal casteist and classist graded system, he does not question it fundamentally, as he asserts his “hero”-like deeds despite his villainous appearance. Wanjale also inspired another politician to follow suit in terms of this display of gold. Samrat Moze, an aspiring politician, does not shy away from his penchant for wearing heavy gold ornaments. Claiming to wear eight kilograms of gold, Samrat Moze joined the Nationalist Congress Party in August 2012 (see Figure 2.12).

In December 2012, Datta Phuge, a chit fund manager from a suburb of Pune and a cadre of the Nationalist Congress Party, created a huge splash with his custom-made shirt of gold worth US$235,000 (see Figure 2.13). Phuge’s extravagance and obsession with gold received wide national and international media attention. It is crucial to note that none of the male politicians above correspond to the image of urbane, suave, English-speaking consuming male figure, with which we are now familiar. All these men in fact, belonged to the Maratha caste, which, though a dominant caste in Maharashtra (in terms of political power and financial prowess), does not enjoy the cultural capital claimed by the urban, professional Brahmin community. Flex boards as spaces for representation, however, can hardly be understood as constructing idealized manliness solely via the idiom of consumption. In the following part of this section, I focus on the instance of one politician in Pune and attempt to illustrate how
his carefully managed public persona through flex boards and the urban legends generated by their actions consolidate an extremely seductive narrative of working-class and lower-caste masculine power for the young men, one which upholds a distinctly class-based moral ethic and values of loyalty and defiance.

Dheeraj Ghate (original name retained) is a prominent leader from the currently ruling right wing Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), active in a central western administrative ward of the city of Pune. I was introduced to Dheeraj Ghate via his constant presence on flex boards in one particular crossing of the city, close to his headquarters (see Figure 2.14). Almost every week a new flex would be erected in this crossing, announcing a local welfare scheme that Ghate had advocated, or greeting the citizens for a religious occasion on behalf of Ghate. Close-ups of his face would be often displayed in these flexes, with creative tag lines, which sometimes were purported to be Ghate’s quotes.

During my research in Shelar galli, Ghate’s name surfaced in informal conversations with several young men, as they excitedly discussed the city-wide procession which marks the end of the ten-day long Ganesh festival. This procession is an important landmark in the city’s cultural landscape. Winding its way through the city’s arterial roads and lasting for 30 hours, several hundred neighborhood associations participate in this procession carrying tableaus dedicated to Lord Ganesh, accompanied by deafening music and feverish dancing. Inviting huge (and largely working-class male) crowds, these frenzied celebrations are now turning into a site of civic disciplinary action, as the former are increasingly represented in the city’s discourse as a nuisance, as noise pollution and as corruption of the religious essence of this festival. Against this background, it was interesting to note how the young men described how Ghate’s influence in the procession had gone unchallenged; he had easily flaunted the restriction on the decibel level of the music, ignoring warnings of police action. Some of the older men then recounted how in the year 2011, Ghate was the only one who had dared to publicly screen the World Cup cricket match between India and Pakistan, when the police had specifically banned all public screenings due to the possibility of communal tensions erupting. When I asked about why they all looked up to him so much, one young man named Rama said “To sagla baghto tyancha. Kapde, boot, khanya paasun” (He looks after “his boys” completely, right from their clothes and shoes to their meals).

Rama went on to describe Ghate’s headquarters to me: it was stocked with minor weapons like clubs and sticks; he explained how Ghate just needed to signal to one of “his boys” and he would be surrounded with a protective ring of his boys within a flash. These narratives helped consolidate Ghate’s status not just as a man who dared to defy the civic authority, but importantly as a man who dared to defy the authority in defense of the interests of young men like those in Shelar galli, as a man who cared about
what these young men liked, enough to defy the authority’s orders. Ghate representation as a nurturing patron was underlined even more markedly in Rama’s description: in referring to the younger cadre of Ghate’s party as the Ghate’s boys, Rama clearly indicated an entrenched relationship of patronage between Ghate and his young cadre, with the former providing for all the latter’s basic needs. There was an unmistakable sense of romance with which Rama had described how Ghate’s boys surrounded him with a protective ring just at his signal. The ability to command unflinching loyalty from other men is the other crucial trope that established Ghate as an ideal man in the eyes of the young men in Shelar galli. These narratives, circulating amongst the young subaltern men across the network of neighborhood associations in the city, thus have the power to signify the figure of the politician with explicitly masculinized virtues of benevolent patronage and protection. In a similar vein, in another conversation the young men in Shelar galli admitted that Ramesh Wanjale’s gold was earned through “don numbercha paisa,” (through illicit means); but they hastened to clarify that “Pan garibancha chorlela nhavta” (It was not stolen from the poor). This Robin Hood-esque representation rendered Wanjale as sympathetic to the cause of the subaltern, while simultaneously beating the dominant at their own game (of gaining and flaunting wealth).

The construction of Dheeraj Ghate as a fearless mentor who earned young men’s loyalty finds striking resonances in Hansen’s research on Shiv Sena in Mumbai. Hansen describes the almost mythical aura constructed around a local Shiv Sena leader, Dighe saheb, to whom “superhuman” qualities are attributed. Hansen contends that Dighe saheb’s carefully cultivated image was more than just a political gimmick; it also represented the aspirations of scores of young boys who adored Dighe and who sought to replicate the narrative of his journey from humble origins to a place where he commanded enormous power, status and blind loyalty of local boys. The boys’ dreams of a bright future entailed a transformation “…from a ‘nobody’ to a local ‘somebody.’”

In representing Ghate simultaneously as the “king,” “son,” “brother” and an “efficient administrator,” (Figures 2.15 and 2.16) these flexes tie together the disparate realms of familial duty and civic duty, evoking a subject-king relationship and citizenAdministrator relationship together in a heavily masculinized single ideal embodied by the politician. The flex boards,
Iconographies of Urban Masculinity – Lohokare

However, do not merely serve to construct the figure of the benevolent protector enmeshed with a modern administrator; the images above also are significant indicators of the ways in which the young men sponsoring the flexes represent themselves as being aligned with the powerful masculine figure, thus seeking to establish proximity with the power and values that the latter represents (Figures 2.16 and 2.17). Flexes, then, serve not just to construct an idealized masculinity through the figure of the politician, but are also the site of an explicit, public performance of alignment with an idealized masculinity.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to explore the visual regime of flex boards in urban India as a crucial site for gendered self-making for working-class/lower-caste men in neoliberal urban India. I argue that the proliferation of the flex boards across the city’s landscape signifies an attempt to gain visibility in a new urban order in India which celebrates only certain kinds of bodies (upper-caste/middle-class, English-speaking) and certain kinds of idioms of consumption (mall-centric, brand-centric) as those who legitimately “belong” to the city or as those who can represent the face of the new city (and consequently the new nation). The flexes and the images of the young men that they carry, disrupt continually these hegemonic narratives of neoliberal citizenship. They do so by physically inserting themselves in the city’s public spaces: bodies which do not conform to the upper-caste, middle-class aesthetic and the latter’s modes of consumption. In doing so, the flex boards in the public spaces of the city also become subversive spaces where a class and caste specific gendered masculine self is imagined and performed.

While the flex boards allow subaltern men in the city to perform masculinity via consumption specific to their caste and class locations, the fast incorporation of flex boards into the repertoire of urban local politics also means that flex boards enable the articulation of idioms of masculinity within the imagination of political participation in the city today. For the young men who hire and feature in the flex boards, their aspiration towards becoming/aligning with a political leader becomes imperceptibly enmeshed with their imaginations of an ideal masculinity, shaped by values of loyalty, fearlessness, benevolence, flamboyance, and ostentatious display of wealth.

However, any argument about the flex boards as a space of disruption of the hegemonic narratives of citizenship in neoliberal Pune has to be equally mindful of the fact that flex boards are as much a site of a hyper-masculine, patriarchal constructions of the gendered self, premised on the exclusion of women from the arena of politics and participation in these intricate networks of local political dynamics. Any analysis has to be cautious of romanticizing this aspect, while at the same time focusing upon its subversive potential. Thus while claiming the city’s material (and social) spaces for representing themselves, men behind (and on) the flexes also end up masculinizing the city’s spaces acutely in discursive terms, rendering the latter unequally available to women, especially lower-caste/working-class women of the city. Flex boards as an iconography of urban masculinity then, condense within their visuals the stark articulations between class- and caste-specific ideals of manliness and neoliberal urban processes; the exclusionary aspect of these rich sites of gendered self-making, however, continues to highlight the contradictory nature of urban transformations themselves, of which the flex boards are but an artifact.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


ENDNOTES

1. All the names identifying specific neighborhoods and people in this paper have been changed (unless otherwise specified), in order to protect the identity of the interlocutors. The name of the city of Pune, however, remains unchanged.

2. Galli in Marathi, the native language of the state of Maharashtra, refers to a narrow alleyway. The older part of the city, divided into wards known as Peths are typically marked by thousands of narrow crisscrossing gallis. Most residents in Moti Peth where I conducted my fieldwork referred to their neighborhood simply as galli or Sheral galli, referring to the Sheral family who owned a large plot of land in this alleyway.

3. Dalit ("crushed" or "broken" in Marathi) refers collectively to castes formerly considered to be untouchable in India. This term of reference has a complex political genealogy, which seeks to recover a specific kind of a political subjectivity, wherein the denial of dignity and humiliation attached to being untouchable is secularized and re-signified into a positive political value and a politicized demand for justice and inclusion (Rao 2009: 1-3).

4. Bengali babu refers to the middle-class, English-educated Bengali man, who typically held clerical positions in the imperial administrative system.


7. The term “Five Year Plan” refers to India’s long-standing legacy of rational planning inherited from Soviet Union in the realm of economic development. India’s economic planning has been conducted through Five Year Plans since 1947.


25. On the night of December 16, 2012, Jyoti Singh, a young paramedical student in Delhi boarded a privately operated bus after watching a movie with a male friend. The privately run bus was empty except for four young men who proceeded to rape Jyoti Singh and injure her brutally. After Singh succumbed to her injuries two weeks later, this incident triggered unprecedented mass protests across cities in India, especially in the capital city of Delhi, bringing into focus with a sudden urgency questions of gendered violence in Indian cities, state accountability and misogyny in Indian public culture. See https://kafila.online/tag/delhi-gang-rape/ for some insightful commentaries on this event and its implications.


28. Ibid., 52.

29. Ibid., 55.

30. Note here the Officer’s Choice Blue Label ad campaigns, etc.


37. Ministry of Home Affairs, GOI, Census of India, Population Details.

38. Neighborhood associations/youth collectives are a crucial presence in the public life of cities in western India, including in Pune. These associations are typically run exclusively by young male members within working-class and low-caste neighborhoods with the explicit purpose of organizing collective religious/cultural celebrations within the neighborhood. Apart from this, neighborhood organizations also constitute a fundamental node of the network of support that working-class and poor neighborhoods in urban India rely on in times of financial, medical or even domestic crises. Neighborhood associations are profoundly gendered and caste/religion specific spaces in the city and have been the primary drivers of making popular the practice of putting up flex boards in the city’s spaces, to make visible their presence and activities.

39. The usage “subordinate masculinity” has been a contribution of R. Connell (1995), who set the agenda for a critical view of masculinity, arguing for plurality of masculinities and power differentials within groups of men, thus taking the field beyond a simplistic, monolithic view of all men as being equally powerful, or as ascribing to a singular model of masculinity. The categories of “hegemonic masculinity,” “subordinate masculinity” and “marginalized masculinity” have been helpful in operationalizing these power differentials while analyzing men’s interrelationships and bringing in the vectors of race, class or ethnicity in the analysis of masculinity (71-85).

40. Don Mitchell, “The End of Public Space? People’s Park, Definitions of Public and Democracy,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 85 (1995): 123-4. Mitchell elaborates upon the concept of spaces for representation in the specific context of claiming of citizenship rights in cities. For him, visibility and representation are crucial aspects of claiming of citizenship rights, where groups or individuals can represent and make visible their needs and demand their rights from the state. From this view, public space becomes an ideal arena for claiming citizenship, with the former’s materiality ensuring visibility for the groups occupying the space and providing them with spaces for representation. However, spaces for representation, I argue, can be crucial for not just claiming of formal citizenship rights but also for claiming the substantive right to belong and to occupy space in the imagination of the city.

41. The name of the collective, partially obscured, appears in blue type on the left bottom side of the image.


44. Also see Ananya Roy, *City Requiem, Calcutta: Gender and the Politics of Poverty* (New Delhi: Pearson Education. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), for an elaboration of a masculinization of ties of political patronage in urban India.


47. Chopra, Osella and Osella, *South Asian Masculinities*.


My doctoral research was an ethnographic investigation of the process through which urban space structured the gendered identities of young men in a working class, Dalit neighbourhood in the city of Pune, in western India. As part of this research, I explored the young men’s participation in local political brokering as recuperative, in the light of their caste and class based marginalisation. This part of the research alerted me to the gendered referents of power and morality that male political figures signified for young Dalit men in the city.

It is important to note here that Wanjale met an unexpected death in 2011, while Datta Phuge was brutally murdered in 2016. Samrat Moze, the NCP politician, has not been active in local politics in the past two years. Similarly, as already mentioned, my reading of these figures relies partly on field data collected in 2012. Nevertheless, I find it valuable to include these politicians and the ways in which they are made into idealized figures, in this narrative, because collectively they continue to represent an important archetype of masculine self-making, reflected on the flex boards in the city in present times. Together, Wanjale, Phuge and Moze give us initial clues in understanding the caste and class underpinnings of this peculiar figure of the “male politician” that dominates the visual landscape in India’s several large and small cities. While I attempt to begin this through this paper, excavating this figure clearly calls for a much more elaborate engagement with the gendered realm of politics in urban India.

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Sports in general, and Asian sports in particular, have been an under-studied topic in any language until recently. China’s hosting of the 2008 summer Olympic Games to mark its emergence as a superpower, together with the upcoming three Olympic Games in East Asia (PyeongChang 2018; Tokyo 2020, Beijing-Zhangjiakou 2022) have attracted increasing attention from scholars and media who have realized that sports play an important role in Asian regional and international relations. This book shows that they have done so since the turn of the last century. *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913-1974* joins an emerging critical mass of scholarship. It pursues the novel but somewhat limited approach of focusing on the major regional games that have taken place in Asia. Thus, it covers the temporal span from the first Far Eastern Championship Games (FECG) (1913-1934) to the first through Seventh Asian Games (1951-1974), with a detour through the first and only Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFO), held in Indonesia in 1963. Along with these better-studied events, it is perhaps the first work to integrate discussions of two one-off events, the West Asiatic Games in India in 1934, and Asian GANEFO in Cambodia in 1966, into analysis of more well-known events. The book covers the vast geographical span covered by the FECG – which primarily included the Philippines, Japan, China, and Hong Kong – to the Asian Games, held in India (1951), the Philippines (1954), Japan (1958), Indonesia (1962), Thailand (1966 and 1970) and Iran (1974). The 1974 Asian Games were the first major sports event for the People’s Republic of China, which after its founding in 1949 refused (and still refuses) to join any international organizations that recognize the “Republic of China” (Taiwan), a source of continual tension in the Asian Games Federation.

The focus of the book is on the hosting of these mega-events as an expression of pan-Asianism. As the book proceeds, it becomes clear that, whatever the semantic differences, the various attempts at constructing pan-Asianism shared the pragmatic goals of establishing regional solidarity, identity, and peace. In addition to the expected macro-level political and economic background, to pin down the various brands of pan-Asianism, Huebner employs clever micro-level analysis of the lives and thinking of key individuals, the rhetoric in speeches and mission statements, and – his most original method – the symbolism in medals and trophies, opening and closing ceremonies, monumental architecture, and other symbolic expressions.

A fascinating overall picture emerges from this unique romp through half a century of Asian history. The paradox of hosting sports events against the background of colonialism and war makes it seem almost miraculous that the events discussed in the book were held at all over such
a long span of time, so that Asia not only possesses the world’s oldest regional games, but also the world’s biggest regional games. It seems amazing that, time and again under extremely difficult circumstances, a desire for peace and connection was strong enough to overcome antagonistic ideologies and even the horrendous grievances of war and occupation. While the FECGs served the universalistic aspirations of the YMCA and IOC alongside nationalist interests, the book depicts pan-Asianism after World War II as an anti-Western, anti-colonial reaction: the horrors of that war had discredited the West’s “civilizing mission,” and the Korean War and the Cold War made Asian leaders fearful that the West was going to pull everyone into another world war. Thus, pan-Asian solidarity was not internally-driven, but resulted from a perceived shared threat coming from the West. Japan recurs as the “most advanced nation” that other nations wanted to match, sometimes winning more medals than all the other nations combined. Japan itself seemed to always have one eye on its standing in the Western-dominated global order. The prevalence of the Grecian symbols in the 1958 Asian Games in Japan at a time when Japan was bidding to host the 1964 Olympic Games and wanted to win over the Western-dominated IOC is particularly telling.

The book also shows how nationalism linked with pan-Asianism motivated self-interested government leaders to host the games as a platform for bigger regional strategies. A series of nations emerge one after the other with aspirations of leading their own brand of pan-Asianism, only to disappear again due to domestic regime changes and/or an inability to mobilize other nations behind their visions. Despite organizing the first Asian Games, India had a negative image in the region due to the corruption and lack of organizational skills seen in its attempts to organize sports events. In the early 1960s, Indonesia’s Sukarno attempted to utilize sports in leading the Non-Aligned Movement, but in short order he was replaced in a coup d’etat. Then the Philippines and Thailand, with their pro-American stance, were unable to attract the support of anti-Western and Muslim nations. Iran succeeded where they had failed, but the Shah’s Indian Ocean Project to create a zone of peace and a common market ended with the revolution there. Huebner does an excellent job of drilling down below the macro-level politics to point out the myriad of practical obstacles in constructing pan-Asianism. The lack of a common language and culture led to the paradoxical use of English and neo-classical Greek symbolism even though they represented the very same Western culture that Asian leaders rejected. But Western colonialism and imperialism were the one history that they all had shared: in the end, Auld Lang Syne became the song sung by the spectators and athletes at the end of the closing ceremonies.

The author frequently returns to an argument that the “egalitarian internationalism” of sports was a sufficiently ecumenical concept that all Asian nations could accept, in contrast it with the Western “civilizing mission” and its Christian underpinning. Because of the range of events covered, for any one of the events, only a smattering of speeches and other evidence can be provided. The thorough search of relevant archives is praiseworthy, but it relies heavily on English-language sources, and on sources about sports. Engaging more fully with primary sources in the languages of the respective countries, literature on the general historical context, and critical postcolonial studies would no doubt have required several more years of research, help with translation, and a still longer book. However, this reader is left feeling that the book has only scratched the surface, and that a number of arguments are worthy of fuller treatment. The book’s main question is “Why and how did the early Asian Games and their predecessors turn into sites of contestation of the nation and of visions of a modern Asia?” (p. 10). However, without comparison with other channels that might have served the same purposes, it is difficult to evaluate the importance of sports in the bigger picture of nationalism and pan-Asianism. The major accomplishment of the book is to reveal a very interesting history of Asia through the lens of major sports events.