

The London School of Economics and Political Science

**Performing Masculinity in Peri-Urban China:
Duty, Family, Society**

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DECLARATION

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the MPhil/ PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how a hegemonic ideal that I refer to as the 'able-responsible man' dominates the discourse and performance of masculinity in the city of Nanchong in Southwest China. This ideal, which is at the core of the modern folk theory of masculinity in Nanchong, centres on notions of men's ability (*nengli*) and responsibility (*zeren*). It differs from, while not always being in contradiction with, the ideal of the 'wealthy and worldly man' that many scholars of contemporary China have written about. For my research informants, an exemplary man is expected to excel financially but also to shoulder his responsibilities, first and foremost within the kin group, and then to society and the country. I explore the formation and nuances of this ideal in an economic and social milieu that has been radically transformed by forces such as modernization, labour migration, the one-child policy, and changing ideologies and practices of leisure, individualism, filial piety, gendered power and nationalism. Through ethnographic accounts from teenage boys, men of marriageable age, and married men alike, I show that the hegemonic model is coercive, yet negotiable. These accounts reveal the vulnerabilities of male youth and adults in different circumstances, and the multiple and varying strategies they take as they enact their masculinities. The hierarchical nature of relationships amongst men and between the two genders is complicated by an intersection with other social divisions and individual life trajectories. At the apex of the hegemonic model are the country's leaders who exemplify for their political subjects what it means to be an exemplary Chinese man in the modern era. The thesis looks into not only what men think of being men and their performance as men, but also at what women think and how they construct and, in some regards, sustain the male mode.

NOTE ON TRANSLATION, NAMES AND FIGURES

Pinyin is used as the primary romanization system for Chinese characters throughout this thesis.

I alter all personal and some locational names to protect the anonymity of my informants. As far as possible, I use pseudonyms which follow the way I have addressed those persons during fieldwork, or which can give the reader a feel for each individual personality. For example, adults usually address one another by using their surnames only (e.g. Chen, Yang), with an additional qualifier to denote the hierarchical relationship such as ‘Elder sister Yang’ (*Yang Jie*), ‘Little Yang’ (*Xiao Yang*), or ‘Auntie Yang’ (*Yang ah Yi*). Several informants have an English name such as Vivian, which I reflect accordingly in the writing.

All Chinese names, translated to English in the text, appear in the way that they are called by Chinese custom: surname first, given name last. This applies to both the Chinese scholars whose work I have cited and my interlocutors. For example, I use ‘Yan Yunxiang’ instead of ‘Yunxiang Yan’ in the thesis.

All translations and transcriptions are by the author unless otherwise noted.

At the time of fieldwork, RMB10 is roughly USD1.56.

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MAP OF THE FIELD SITE - NANCHONG



(Maps downloaded from the website www.szscmap.com with the consent of Sichuan Qixing Co.)

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It was more than a year after I started fieldwork in Nanchong when I met Vivian, the daughter of a neighbour, and her boyfriend, Zeng. Vivian had been living in Germany after graduating from university, and her boyfriend was about to finish a master's programme. During Christmas that year, they paid a visit first to Zeng's family in Wenzhou, and then travelled to Nanchong. I met with Vivian a few times at her home and around the neighbourhood. The couple dropped by to say hello one evening. Zeng became interested in my research when I told him of the topic in the broadest terms – an anthropological study of Chinese men in today's China. He asked me what I had found out so far – a question only a handful of my interlocutors had bothered to ask. I counter-proposed that he could answer some questions for me first, to which Zeng happily agreed. I asked something like what it meant to be a man for him, what kind of man would he consider as 'a real man' (*zhengzheng de nanren* 真正的男人). Zeng hesitated and declared that this kind of question seldom crossed his mind or came up within his circle of friends, 'maybe because we study IT'.¹ I was aware of the oddity of asking such a question, but by that time I had already developed some hypotheses on the subject matter, so I asked direct questions occasionally only to validate or disprove my thoughts. Seeing that her boyfriend was stuck, Vivian offered help. In order not to let her pre-empt Zeng, I suggested that it would be more interesting to hear what 'a real woman' was for her. Here is what Vivian said:

A real woman is one who can manage her private life and social life well, even after marrying. She is talented, she not only has a good family, but also a good job, and she pursues her own interests.... My point is, a woman has to be an independent being (*duli de geti* 独立的个体).

Following Vivian's long answer, Zeng offered his in a concise manner:

To put it in simple words, a man has to be responsible (*fuzeren* 负责任). He must be a good husband to his wife, a good father to the child, and a good son to his parents.

Before I could say anything, Zeng turned to Vivian and asked her to clarify what she meant by 'independence'. The young man looked disturbed. For him, a married couple could not be 'two independent beings' (*liangge duli de geti* 两个独立的个体), they would be fused together and

¹ A similar scenario is reported by Edley and Wetherell (1995: 2), who note that 'most men probably have not spent much time thinking about their status as men.... identity tends to come into focus most clearly when it is seen as problematic in some way.'

become ‘one co-dependent unit’ (*yige xianghu de geti* 一个相互的个体). Vivian replied that nowadays, a woman should be financially independent. If she wanted to buy something, she should not have to ask her husband for it; she ought to have the same kind of decision-making power in the family, and so on. The young couple entered into a debate. Vivian used her mother as an example of a ‘non-independent woman’: she gave the appearance of being a happy *taitai* (rich wifely woman), but she had in fact succumbed to a dissatisfying marriage without the means and courage to improve her situation. Zeng still seemed unconvinced of Vivian’s views. Vivian gave another example of what she meant by independence: ‘Suppose I did not want to have a child after we married. You can’t force it on me. You don’t have that mentality of having to continue the family’s posterity (*chuanzong jiedai* 传宗接代) anymore, do you?’ Apart from the physical pain of carrying a baby, Vivian feared that a child would be too burdensome; she argued there was nothing wrong with a childless couple, nor staying as a single woman (at this, she looked at me). Hearing all this, Zeng ended the debate by saying in a notably compassionate tone that it was easy for Vivian, as a young woman in the modern age, to pronounce these feminist (*nüquan* 女权) ideas. He would not say that the ideas were wrong, but he was certain that after they married, she would think differently. As a woman, she would (naturally) want to have a baby with her husband; he added with assurance that Vivian would be a great mother. In the middle of the conversation, I told them that Zeng’s definition of ‘a real man’ – as one who was responsible – was similar to what I had heard from other men in Nanchong. Zeng looked intrigued but not surprised. He tried to help me analyse my ‘finding’ by reasoning that they might have been influenced by that famous Confucian teaching which outlines male responsibilities in ascending order – ‘self-cultivation, family harmony, state governing and world peace’².

The way Vivian differentiated herself from her mother – in short, she saw herself as a modern independent woman but saw her mother as a traditional virtuous wife – should not be new to readers, given what we know about changes to women’s status in modern China.³ Neither should Vivian’s sense of empowerment in a growing egalitarian environment cause any great surprise.⁴ One may even find Zeng’s description of what is a real man commonplace. What was interesting to me was how this young man reconciled his girlfriend’s assertion of autonomy with his relatively ‘old-fashioned’ mentality. Zeng showed his readiness to perform

² In Chinese: ‘*xiushen, qijia, zhiguo, pingtianxia* 修身齐家治国平天下’. The whole passage (from *Daxue*, Book of Rites 大学, 礼记) teaches how great people can rule the world: they have to first cultivate their moral selves, then they can make a harmonious family, and then govern the country, finally make peace in the world.

³ Very similar themes have been reported by anthropologists and scholars in gender studies. See especially Rofel 1999, 2007; Evans 2008a; Mann 2011.

⁴ See Yan 2003, 2009b: 133-154; Fong 2002.

the traditional duties of a husband, a father and a son, which clearly pleased Vivian. He did not deny the legitimacy of feminist principles such as egalitarianism and women's rights to pursue their own interests; nevertheless, he did not seem to have a doubt that those principles would have to be negotiated and realigned in practice.

Zeng and Vivian are not very representative of the young people I met in Nanchong in the sense that both received education in a foreign country and both came from relatively affluent families. However, much of what they said *is* representative. They indeed articulated explicitly what was more implicit in the actions of the representative locals. More such material based on my participant-observation in my field site will be presented in the chapters that follow. In this study, I am not only concerned with exploring the ideological expressions of what it means to be a man in China, but I also seek to understand how the dominant ideology affects the actual lives of men and, in particular, their actual relationships, be these with their girlfriends, wives, male friends, or others. The dominant expectation of men in a given society can be referred to as a form of 'hegemonic masculinity', a concept developed by R. W. Connell (1987) and used widely in the study of masculinities. Drawing on Gramsci's analyses of hegemony and class relations, Connell defines hegemony as a form of 'social ascendancy' acquired through cultural consent and ruled by complicity (1987:184-185). Hegemonic ideologies work like cultural ideals which are presented and perceived as being in everyone's best interests, even though they are in the best interests of the dominant group. In the case of hegemonic masculinity, it helps reproduce inequality and hierarchical relationships between men and women and also among men.

I call the Chinese model of hegemonic masculinity that I observed during fieldwork in Nanchong the *able-responsible man*. In the next section, in order to start from the ground up, I will discuss more fully what I mean by this term and explain how I have developed the notion of the able-responsible man from my field observations. After that, I will review Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and other relevant literature. I note that many scholars who studied men and masculinities in China's post-reform period described a male ideal that was largely underscored by wealth. The notion of the able-responsible man, as I describe it, is also closely tied to material wealth. But the notion has evolved so that (a) 'wealth' has come to be vernacularized as 'ability'; (b) it is moreover inflected by the moral ethos of 'responsibility', which has traditionalistic overtones, as I will explain.

THE ABLE-RESPONSIBLE MAN

Soon after I started fieldwork in Nanchong, I noticed that many people were talking about ‘responsibility’ in very strong terms. Social problems such as unattended elderly, prostitution and gambling, individualistic and selfish behaviours, and civic unaccountability are quite conveniently summarized as phenomena linked to ‘irresponsibility’. The demand for *responsible* behaviour is applied to all individuals irrespective of gender. However, I heard many more accusations – and, for that matter, compliments – aimed at men rather than women when it came to the subject of responsibility. As I have already mentioned at the end of the last section, financial ability (i.e. the ability to create wealth and thus support others) is seen as a fundamental expectation of men. But whereas a man who is responsible is always credited as being able (including financially able to some extent), a financially able man is not always deemed responsible. Responsibilities to society and the country as well as to oneself were sometimes mentioned, but never with the same intensity and frequency as a man’s responsibilities to his family. But let me explain this further by analysing the elements of the able-responsible man.

Ability (*Nengli* 能力)

The word *nengli* is composed of two characters: *neng* roughly means ‘can do’, *li* means strength or power. Used together, it means ability, competence, or capability. Somebody can be described as having ‘strong ability’ (*nengli henqiang* 能力很强), ‘average ability’ (*nengli yiban* 能力一般), ‘low ability’ (*nengli hendi* 能力很低), or simply ‘no ability’ (*meiyou nengli* 没有能力). In other words, ability is often used in a hierarchical order. The first informant I heard talking about a man’s ability, *nengli*, was a nanny named Miao who worked in Vivian’s home (the young woman I mentioned at the beginning). Miao and her husband are both migrant workers. One day, Miao and I talked about the instability of marriage caused by *xiaosan* 小三 (literally, ‘minor number three’), a popular term which refers to a female intruder into a couple’s marriage. I asked Miao in passing if she worried about her husband having a *xiaosan*. Miao looked at me, burst into laughter, and said, ‘Who would be interested in my husband?! He only works the land (*wadi de* 挖地的!)’ I could not quite figure out what she meant. Amused by my ignorance, Miao laughed even more heartily and replied, ‘He is a farmer! He has no ability and no money. How can he attract any other woman?!’

Miao’s husband is not a farmer anymore. He now manages a school canteen operated by Vivian’s family. Miao used the description ‘*meiyou nengli*’ for her husband in a self-deprecating and humorous manner. Thereafter, I heard a number of wives of working-class men commenting on the lack of competence of their husbands: *nengli bugou* 能力不够 (not enough ability), or *benshi buda* 本事不大 (not much ability). These conversations usually happened in daily gossip among neighbours in a communal park where I lived. Most of those comments

were, in my hearing, cast in an understanding and forgiving tone. Often times, the conversations were intersected with ‘complicit irony’ (Steinmüller 2013), and ended with laughter all around. One could say all women want their husbands to make good money, but in reality they do not mind having a husband who is not such a big shot. Other qualities may matter more to them. For instance, a middle-aged domestic worker would point to an older wealthier woman and say: ‘She comes to Nanchong to enjoy life (*xiangfu* 享福)⁵, her son and husband have money. I come to Nanchong to work, mine has no money!’ However, the same woman would proudly tell us how fortunate she was to have a faithful and ‘obedient’ husband.

It is still the case, however, that a man’s *nengli* is often felt to be displayed and recognized in terms of material success. Examples are ownership of properties, cars, or generous spending with friends at entertainment venues. Nevertheless, sheer display of wealth does not equate to *nengli*. *Nengli* is punctuated by ethics such as the ability to endure hardship and responsibility to one’s family. Those who are suspected of getting rich through corrupt practices and inheritance (the so-called ‘*fuerdai* 富二代’ and ‘*guanerdai* 官二代’ cohort) are discredited. Instead, self-made men who become wealthy through their own ability are honoured.

I have noted that it is mainly male adults, not women or children, who are judged by their *nengli*. The comment about lack of ability is projected as a worry for the future; it is not an immediate concern for children or young teens. For boys, academic success is critically important, as it paves the path towards a good career and the ability to make money. Daughters, on the other hand, are not so worrisome if their *nengli* is not strong. Many mothers and fathers say that after all, women can depend on men. Women’s capability is measured by other criteria. The traditional perception of the ‘all-giving, self-sacrificing, ever-loving, always-patient, never-angry mother’ (Evans 2008a:22) has not waned totally. However, there is now more to an ideal woman, such as what we have heard from Vivian.

Responsibility (*Zeren* 责任)

The second term used in relation to ideal manhood is *fuzeren*, which means ‘responsible’. *Fu* is a verb which stands for an act of carrying or shouldering; *zeren* is the equivalent to the English word responsibility or duty. Lu and Koehn (2015) researched the meaning of *zeren* from ancient China texts. I quote them in length because it foregrounds why responsibility is of such importance for masculinity:

⁵ For Chinese people, *fu* encompasses the ideal of having money, long life and sons. Whether one has *fu* or not is related to fate, but one also has to work hard to guarantee *fu* in their lives (Wang 1997: 240-262). Wang points out that there is an unfathomable relationship between one’s fate (*ming* 命) and capability (*benshi*), these two together ultimately determine whether or not someone will be happy.

... the word ‘ze 责’ meant ‘to take responsibility, call somebody to account, blame, punish, claim’. It is worth noting that the word for ‘debt’ (*zhai* 债) was the etymon of ‘ze’.... According to this usage, the debtor had the obligation to pay back the debt to the lender and deserved punishment if he or she could not repay what was owed.... In ancient Chinese books, ‘ren 任’ had the meanings of ‘appointment’, ‘position’, ‘office’, ‘duty’, ‘undertaking’, and ‘trust’.... From ‘ren’, in turn, comes the word ‘ze’ meaning ‘trust’ and the ‘willingness to bear the burden of hard work’.... ‘Ren’, then, is related to the responsibility of a position or power and to the professionalism, dedication, and trustworthiness of a position holder. (Lu & Koehn 2015:608)

Traditionally, the word *zeren* was applied exclusively to men because incurring and repaying debt were strictly men’s affairs – at least formally speaking. Besides, in imperial China, women were denied of the right to sit in official civil service examinations and to become the ‘officeholders’ who were expected to pay *zeren*.

Responsibility struck me as a critical element in notions of Chinese masculinity during fieldwork. When a man does something dishonourable in public eyes, he is often criticized for being irresponsible (*bu fu zeren* 不负责任). For example, a man who does not try his best to make money is irresponsible, as is a man who gambles and fails to play his paternal role; a man who doesn’t share the housework with his working wife is irresponsible, as is a man who doesn’t produce a grandchild for his parents; a man who fails to protect his girlfriend when she is teased in public is also irresponsible. Above all, no man can claim to be responsible if he is not filial to his parents. Male responsibilities refer to obligations as a husband/boyfriend, a father, and a son. Importantly, the examples above are accusations levelled by men and women alike. On the other hand, when men are credited for being responsible, that same sense of responsibility can restrain them from what is considered irresponsible wrongdoing. To give two examples, Vivian’s mother told me subtly that she had hoped her husband could be better, but in the end, ‘he is a responsible husband because he gives me all that he earns’. A married man frequently recounted to me an affair he had with a woman. He asked for a divorce, but his wife vowed that if a divorce was to be filed, she would kill her two children and then commit suicide. The man finally terminated his affair but would regret it for the rest of his life. He said he was a man killed by being ‘too soft (*tai ruanruo* 太软弱) and too responsible (*zerengan taizhong* 责任感太重)’.

Since I routinely heard references to responsibilities when people discussed men, I started to realize that this could be a key element of masculinity in the society. I decided to test people by asking them to define what masculinity was for them, in a totally open-ended way. I

used these terms interchangeably when I posed the question: ‘real man’ (*zhenzheng de nanren*), ‘good man’ (*hao nanren* 好男人), ‘a manly man’ (*nanzi han* 男子汉), ‘ideal man’ (*lixiang de nanren* 理想的男人); ‘simply a man’ (*jiu shi ge nanren* 就是个男人). I spoke to about ten adult men on this subject. Since I only wanted quick and intuitive answers, most of the people I asked were passing acquaintances for me – taxi drivers, neighbours, salesmen I met in shops. To my surprise, the majority of them mentioned responsibility either explicitly or implicitly. They used phrases such as ‘can shoulder responsibility’, ‘filial to parents’, ‘keep his promises’ (*shuodao zuodao* 说到做到). When I asked women how they would define a ‘real woman’, I got a greater variety of answers which reflected a stronger theme of individualism and self-entitlement. Apart from having to perform their family duties, they emphasized the importance for women to pursue their own career, hobbies, friendship, financial independence, and take care of their health and ‘beauty’. Altogether, these gave me the strong impression that responsibilities are usually contained in the script of what defines masculinity. Femininity, on the other hand, has more diverse meanings that have gone beyond the traditional expectations.

All the above alludes to the idea that in present-day China, the masculine ideal is defined by a composite of *nengli* and *zeren*. These two components are obviously interrelated: a man has to have *nengli* to be able to perform his responsibilities. I do not claim that the able-responsible man is the only and universal winning model of becoming a man in China. There is sufficient evidence from my research, however, that it represents a dominant model of exemplary men in Nanchong during my research period. This represents an evolution from a previous model which many scholars have directly or indirectly implied in their studies. Before I provide more details on these previous accounts of ideal Chinese manhood and its transition during the contemporary era, I want to step back and examine the scholarship on the study of men and masculinities in more general terms, and in particular, Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity.

STUDIES OF MEN AND MASCULINITIES

It need hardly be pointed out that the field of gender studies has previously been dominated by the study of women and femininity. Since the late 1980s, scholarly study of men and masculinities has gained traction, first with respect to the Western Hemisphere and gradually in other world regions (Connell 1987, 2014; Edley and Wetherell 1995; Gutmann 1996; Louie 2002; Osella and Osella 2006; Inhorn and Wentzell 2011; Ford and Lyons 2012; Ghannam 2013). I begin the literature review by attending to the work of Connell.

Hegemonic masculinity

The concept of hegemonic masculinity was first introduced by Carrigan, Connell and Lee in a co-authored article (1985). Connell subsequently expounded the concept in her⁶ two major publications: *Gender and Power* (1987) and *Masculinities* (1995). Drawing on Gramsci's work, Connell articulates hegemonic ideologies as cultural ideals which legitimize and naturalize the interests of powerful men, and which create hierarchical relationships among men and between the two genders. Connell insists that the ideal masculinity does not have to correspond to the actual personalities of the majority of men; it instead creates aspirational goals and 'fantasy figures' which are honoured and desired by the rest in the hierarchy (1987: 185). The majority of men are 'complicit' to the ideal even though they themselves do not enact a strong version of masculine dominance; they spread those hegemonic ideals and behaviours in everyday life. Those who embody values that are opposite to the cultural ideal are 'subordinated'. The gender hierarchy intersects with other social divisions such as race, class and ethnicity to produce 'marginalized' masculinities. Connell hypothesized in her earlier writings, which she later admitted may have been overly-simplistic (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), that men adhered to the hegemonic ideal because the majority of them could benefit from the 'patriarchal dividend'. Connell and Messerschmidt urge for further research to ascertain the interplay of femininity and masculinity, which forms an important strand in my study. They also call attention to the fluidity of masculinity: what is socially admired can be redefined and reconstructed according to historical and other circumstances (ibid: 846).

Connell's theory is extremely useful for understanding masculinities in that it exhibits gender relations that are 'multiple and hierarchical, as well as unstable yet persistent' in nature (Howson 2006:59). Many scholars consider Connell's concept ground-breaking because it presents a single theoretical principle which encapsulates a gender ordering including multiple masculinities (Demetriou 2001; Schippers 2007; Lusher & Robins 2009; Johansson and Ottemo 2015). The theory of hegemonic masculinity has become a key reference point for discussions on masculinity studies across disciplines. Referencing Connell's work, anthropologist Matthew Gutmann (2003: 3) notes that 'what it means to be a man in Latin America can often best be appreciated in relationship to hegemonic masculinities in the region'. Marcia Inhorn (2012: 41) puts it like this: 'In my view, any ethnographic study of masculinity must begin with Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity'.

Useful as it is, there are also many debates and criticisms around Connell's theory, such as its conceptual slipperiness: lack of specificity, and an abundance of overlaps and ambiguities.

⁶ Connell was previously Robert W. Connell, but is now legally Raewyn Connell after undergoing sexual reassignment surgery. According to an interview with N. Wedgwood (2009), Connell prefers to be referred to, even in the past tense, as a woman.

For example, it is unclear how the legitimization of gendered power occurs and is sustained; why women and ‘other’ men give their consent to the hegemonic men; how one can assess which masculinity is the hegemonic one; how it affects men’s and women’s psyches; how hegemony is negotiated and performed in mundane life (Donaldson 1993; Wetherell and Edley 1999; Demetrious 2001; Whitehead 2002; Moller 2007; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; Hearn 2012). Johansson and Ottemo (2015:196) offer a fair remark that ‘Most of the critical voices accept the main premises and definitions of the concept, but are calling for elaboration of different aspects’, the debates have the intention of making the concept more usable in specific and local studies on particular forms of masculinity. For Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994: 20-44), various hegemonic models can coexist in any cultural setting, and different hegemonic masculinities produce different subordinate variants; they stress the importance to explore the negotiated variations of the hegemonic ideology rather than to assume that it can completely define men’s actual experiences. This speaks of my analytical approach in the thesis.

I conceptualize the ‘able-responsible man’ as *one* version of hegemonic masculinities in Nanchong. In other words, the able-responsible man does not point to the existence of a singular way of being a real man; it is very likely that other forms of hegemonic masculinity exist but I do not have sufficient empirical data to identify and expand upon alternatives, a point I will return in the concluding chapter. I contend that the notion of the able-responsible man has emerged towards the end of the twentieth century and has come into full shape in the past decade. The notion and the hierarchical relations that are engendered are persistent though not necessarily enduring; they can be reworked and reinvented over time. Throughout the dissertation, I will show that boys and men actively adapt to, negotiate or resist the masculine expectations, whereas women play a critical role in supporting or disparaging those efforts. This results in multiple expressions of masculinities under an overarching set of ideals. My overall interest is to give an emic account of how people conceptualize masculinity in China, and how it affects men’s lives and their relationships. This follows Gutmann (1997a: 398)’s view that ‘An important contribution of anthropological studies of masculinity has been to explore the subjective perceptions of men about being men, including the relation of being men to claiming, seeking, and exercising various forms of power over other men and over women’. I contribute to the existing body of literature by feeding in up-to-date empirical data to a field that is of burgeoning scholarly interest. To this, I will provide a brief overview of some of the most relevant literatures in the anthropological field.

Anthropological investigation of men and masculinities

Anthropologists often challenge what has been taken for granted and bring thoroughly new insights to long-standing issues. For example, Gutmann (1996, 1997b) set out to deconstruct the

popular concept of *machismo* by looking into a diverse range of male experiences such as sexuality, fathering practices, and domestic violence amongst working-class men in Mexico, thereby showing how expressions of Mexican maleness in daily life differed from the macho stereotype. In a similar vein, Inhorn (2012) rejected a vilifying ‘hegemonic masculinity, Middle Eastern-style’ which had been propagated both inside and outside of the Middle East. With years of research in the region, specifically on men’s experiences of infertility and assisted reproductive technologies, Inhorn unearthed a totally different set of ‘emergent masculinities’ embodied by Middle Eastern men. Importantly, Inhorn foregrounded that those hegemonic norms were so strong that many indigenous people took ‘self-stereotypy’ for granted, while some tried to rethink their changing views of masculinity and resist the caricature (ibid: 49). This taken-for-granted attitude brings to mind the concept of ‘common sense’ which Antonio Gramsci explicated as he developed his theory of hegemony. Gramsci defined common sense as ‘spontaneous feelings of the masses’, ‘instinct’, ‘folklore’, or ideology which became everyday thought and which made situations of inequality and oppression appear to be natural.⁷ In the last few decades, men from different cultural settings are seen negotiating naturalized social norms and changing gender dynamics which are created by new socioeconomic and political circumstances (Lupton and Barclay 1997; Hodgson 1999; Aboim 2009; Inhorn and Wentzell 2011; Ghannam 2013; Boratav et al 2014).

Lila Abu-Lughod’s (1986) seminal study amongst the Bedouin in Egypt’s western desert seems to be centred on women, as suggested by its title, *Veiled Sentiments*. However, it also gives a valuable understanding of Bedouin men. Abu-Lughod endeavours to uncover the terms in which women and men see themselves and the social system within which they live. Through her ethnographic work in the Bedouin community, she observes that real men are tested against a moral code of honour, while women abide by a code of modesty. A dominant value, autonomy, sits above all, representing the ability and capacity of people to act independently. The gender hierarchy which underlies the social system makes sense as a consequence.

Michael Herzfeld (1985), who conducted his research in a small community in Greece nicknamed ‘Glendi’, brought up the important concept of performative excellence in manhood: ‘In Glendiot idiom, there is less focus on “being a good man” than on “being *good at* being a man”’ (1985: 16, original emphasis). The meanings young men attach to stealing sheep, for instance, reflect the performative aspect of a man’s significance and social standing, and they

⁷ From Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* (1971) and other writings, see Hoare and Nowell-Smith eds. 2001: 198-199, Forgacs ed. 2000: 421.

are opposed to the officially defined masculinity. The theme of performativity⁸ will repeatedly appear in my thesis as it is integral to the notion of the able-responsible man.

Many studies suggest that masculine performance is inspired by a motive to gain honour or to restore honour that is lost. Honour seems to be a meta-concept which can have a hegemonic effect in different societies. Its cross-cultural pervasiveness does not, however, mean that it is a unitary category. Abu-Lughod links the honour (of men) and modesty (of women) with the notion of autonomy. Ghannam speaks of men's honour (the words 'reputation', 'distinction' and 'standing' are used) in a similar way as Abu-Lughod as both studies were carried out in the same region, where Islam has a strong influence. In Ghannam's study in Egypt, a man of honour is expected to selectively use or avoid violence to uphold cherished social norms as well as to reinforce the social and gender hierarchies (2013: 109-118). John Campbell (1974) indicates that, in his field site in a Greek village, a man earns honour from his enemies; Campbell unravels the interdependent nature of honour, family, and patronage. Also describing the Mediterranean area, Gilmore (1990: 31) exemplifies honour as an attribute which brings security to a man's family and lineage, and establishes collective reputation and respect. The honourable 'Big-Man' in the Pacific Islands is one who gives more than he receives, and who controls competitive exchanges and redistribution of resources (Sahlins 1963; Godelier 1986). The meaning of honour for the Japanese salarymen can be described as a collective responsibility for corporate success (Hidaka 2010). For the Malaysian Chinese, honour is represented by entrepreneurial success followed by contributions to the family and the local community (Mellström 2003). In this regard, the definition of honour for the 'able-responsible man' in Nanchong is not too dissimilar to that of the Malaysian Chinese. The source of honour and the performative aspects of it, however, do not stay the same even in a single place. What constitutes honour for a man has changed over time in China, a point I will revisit later.

The above selection of works pertains to the study of masculinity in the field of anthropology only. Contributions from many other disciplines can be found, of course, and I will cover some of them in different chapters of this dissertation. In the next section, however, I will turn my attention to the literature which helps us trace the thread of masculinity in China.

⁸ I take Henrietta Moore's general definition of performativity in gender studies, which says that gender identity is constructed in discourse through various tasks or activities, whose successful performance is thought to be connected to the essential nature of particular sorts of gendered persons (1994: 47). Judith Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity is set out to challenge the distinction between normative and deviant categories of sex and gender, which is less pertinent to my thesis because I concentrate on mainstream, heterosexual men and women in the study.

Studies of men and masculinities in China

A considerable body of literature on the subject of men and masculinities has emerged in China in the last two decades. However, ‘most of these studies focus on premodern Chinese literature and culture, with textual reading as the major method of inquiry’ (Song and Hird 2014: 4). I am aware of only two book-length anthropological monographs that are fully dedicated to the study of masculinities: Avron Boretz’s *Gods, Ghosts, and Gangsters* (2011) and John Osburg’s *Anxious Wealth* (2013), the former with heavier coverage on Taiwan than mainland China. Both authors concentrate on a specific group of men: Boretz deals with the socially marginalized working-class and gangsters of the underworld, while Osburg looks into the new-rich entrepreneurs who have made their fortunes in a new market economy. Both point out the importance of homosocial comradeship and the popularity of a carousing culture which involves drinking, karaoke singing and women in the production of masculinities. The other male practices that they cover are starkly different. Boretz explores martial rituals and violence, which he links to the perpetual conflicts between fathers and sons in the patrilineal family and the struggles for male domination (cf. Sangren 1984, 2000). Osburg examines elite networking through conspicuous consumption, which he suggests is rooted in a notion of ‘recognition’ rather than ‘distinction’ (cf. Bourdieu 2010 [1979]). While Boretz and Osburg show how men perform and consume their masculine prowess boldly in public, Yang Jie (2010) and Jaesok Kim (2015) reveal the struggles made by factory workers, who are losers in the new economic system, to pursue their manliness. Everett Zhang’s ‘entrepreneurial masculinity’ (2001) is about a new class of entrepreneurs who rose to power in the post-Mao period; they feel ‘castrated’ and try to find opportunities to become real ‘macho’ men and gain social recognition. The theme is similar to that developed by Zhong Xueping (2000), who explores a ‘male marginality complex’ represented in fictions written in the 1980s by male authors. Both Zhang and Zhong associate the male anxieties with China’s sudden exposure to the modern world, and men’s search for a more manly image of the self as their old Confucian and Maoist ideals collapsed. These studies were carried out in about the same period after the economic and social reforms had started in the early 1980s. Taken together, they show that there are multiple styles and ways of being men in contemporary China. It is also apparent from the studies that men seek to live up to certain masculine standards which are accepted as more legitimate and powerful.

William Jankowiak’s work on intimacy (1993, 2002) and his gender stereotype surveys (Jankowiak and Li 2014) also contribute to our understanding of Chinese masculinities. Marc Moskowitz’s thesis on Chinese masculinities and the chess game of *Go* (2013) is certainly refreshing; however, we learn more about the practice of educating ‘quality’ youth in China (cf. Kipnis 2011a/b) than about masculinity in his work.

Stepping away from anthropology, we find a wider pool of resources on the subject. The accounts of men and masculinities in specific historic periods are particularly enlightening. Bret Hinsch's book, *Masculinities in Chinese Histories* (2013), is highly commendable. He traces the historical changes in masculinities from the Confucian period to the contemporary era. Hinsch considers four key factors which point the way to understanding the practices of Chinese manhood: filial piety, the engagement between manhood and the state, economic change, and foreign influence (ibid: 6-9). The significance of these four factors will be brought to light throughout this dissertation. A Chinese book which uses the same approach as Hinsch, written by Zhang Hongjie (2013), was published in the same year.⁹ These two books confirm Kam Louie (2002, 2015)'s renowned theory which uses *wen-wu* (文武) as an analytical dyad to examine the construction of masculinity ideals in China. Briefly, *wen* is the mental or civil, and *wu*, the physical and martial (2002: 10). What becomes clear from the two historians' accounts is how the relative weight of *wen* and *wu* is moulded by political and social circumstances, and actually manipulated by emperors and leaders for political purposes. Zhang (2013) dispels the popular notion that *wen* qualities are always superior to *wu*, or that Chinese men are essentially a *wen*, genteel type of people. He shows that until the Song Dynasty, martial qualities were valued and glorified in China. The founding Emperor of Song suppressed *wu* (soldiers) by shifting the emphasis totally to *wen* (scholars). Hinsch shares the same view that, in the Song Dynasty, 'for the first time cultural accomplishments became recognized as the supreme social distinction' (2013: 91). From then onward, men of late imperial China faced two prestigious forms of manhood: one which was marked by status and wealth and cultural refinement; another by the demonstration of valour and toughness which Hinsch describes as a kind of 'low-status hegemonic masculinity', or the *haohan* 好汉 (heroic) archetype that was considered exemplary by many men in the lower rungs of society (ibid: 111). This alternative form of hegemonic masculinity indeed continues to exist in Chinese societies, and this is exactly what Boretz (2011) covers in his masterpiece.

The meanings of heroism (*yingxiong* 英雄 and *haohan*) and effeminacy are explored by several scholars through their interpretation of works of fiction and novels written in late imperial China (Song 2004; Huang 2006; Vitiello 2011). The volume of work edited by Brownell and Wasserstrom (2002) investigates a plurality of images of femininity and masculinity from different angles, especially ethnicity and class, from the Qing Dynasty to the reform era. Registering the expression of masculinities (and femininities) in the open-door period, Baranovitch (2003)'s study is informed by changes in the genre of popular music. He devotes one full chapter to discuss how the state uses popular music to disseminate its ideology

⁹ Zhang's book is titled *Historical changes in Chinese national character (Zhongguo guominxing yanbian licheng)*, but focuses almost exclusively on the character of men.

and consolidate its control, and how hegemony and resistance in the music culture interact in a dialectical fashion (ibid: 191). State influence on masculinity is a crucial topic which I will develop in the thesis. This whole body of literature I summarize above shows that what it means to be a man has continued to evolve in China.

For an updated view of masculinities in contemporary China, Song and Hird's publication (2014) is most valuable. The strength of their work is the diversity of discourse and performance of manhood which they represent by using a multi-disciplinary approach. By covering men at work, at leisure and in the family, men in daily life, in popular culture and in cyberspace, Song and Hird illuminate the hybridity and variability of masculinities in current China. They provide a well-rounded picture of men and masculinities in contemporary China and raise a number of thought-provoking topics. The strength of diversity perhaps also poses a deficiency because the two authors can only be very brief on certain subjects, 'nationalism' being one. Finally, Lin Xiaodong (2013) and Choi and Peng (2016) contribute to the literature by focusing on migrant men and the negotiations which they make in sustaining their masculine authority. Due to the limitation of space, I cannot mention the large number of writings on femininities and gender which shed useful insights on masculinities. However, many of those writings will be used and cited in the thesis. The question I aim to address in the next section is: what does the existing literature tell us about hegemonic masculinity?

The representation of hegemonic masculinity in the literature on Chinese masculinities

Even though none of the authors I mention above addresses the question directly, many of them reveal a dominant, desired form of manhood which suggests hegemony. Consistently, they show an overwhelming masculine ideal that is coupled with *wealth*. Song and Hird (2014:12) find that 'masculinity is increasingly being defined in terms of money, bearing remarkable similarities with the discourse of "hegemonic masculinity" in the West'. Zhang Li (2010), in her study of commercial property ownership in Yunnan, concludes that 'Masculinity in post-socialist China is increasingly being defined by one's entrepreneurial ability and the power to provide and consume'; men's self-worth is linked to 'one's ability to make money, possess desirable material goods, or gain political power' (2010: 185, 166). Osburg's study uncovers an elite masculinity which is becoming institutionalized, 'and in the process it is becoming the normative masculinity around which all urban men's practices are oriented and measured' (2013:10). Those who fail to enter the ranks of the new rich experience a form of exclusion and emasculation. Farrer's study of young people's romantic lives in Shanghai indicates that masculinity is identified with 'earnings and career success' (2002: 16). Zheng Tiantian (2009)'s anthropological account of sex workers attests to the fact that in post-socialist China, men are judged not by birth status or education, but by their competitive abilities and entrepreneurial

activity. Women and prostitution become a testing ground for men. A similar theme is developed by Uretsky (2008). Hinsch observes that in contemporary China, ‘money represents the essence of masculinity; a higher income represents superior manliness’; businessmen assume the new standard for heroic Chinese masculinity (2013:163). More significantly, Louie conjectures in his latest work that the traditional notions of *wen-wu* manhood have been overwhelmed in the modern era by an emphasis on monetary and material concerns; wealthy, worldly and worthy ‘globe-trotting Chinese entrepreneurs’ are ‘winning in the ideal masculinity stakes’ (2015:89-104). All these certify that in China an ideal man has to be rich, and a man’s honour is strongly associated with his financial ability.

It cannot be pure coincidence that all of the above eminent studies on Chinese men, many of which based on deep ethnographies, single out the preponderance of material wealth. We have to accept the possibility that money is the dominant value by which men are judged in contemporary China. This sounds awkward and ironic, for China is still officially a socialist state. It was not long ago that the whole country went through the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1967-76), and selfless and modest figures from the military or working class were made cogent cultural icons. Can money now dictate the worthiness of men? If not, why have so many scholars observed the significance of financial ability? I provide some possible answers to this phenomenon below and elucidate the transition from the ‘wealthy, worldly and worthy’ to the ‘able-responsible man’.

It is notable that all the studies which I cited as portraying a hegemonic model of masculinity based on wealth and entrepreneurship were published within the fifteen years since the turn of the millennium. The radical economic growth which started in the early 1980s accelerated over the next two decades and led to China becoming the global superpower that it is today. The process of economic transformation was accompanied by numerous policies of liberalization such as the household responsibility system in the countryside, the loosening of restrictions on mobility, and the gradual privatization of state-owned enterprises. These have led to an ‘individualization’ of Chinese society (Yan 2009b, 2010). Marketization and consumerism have further fuelled the rise of the ‘desiring self’ (Rofel 2007), and the necessity to engage in conspicuous consumption to maintain the types of *guanxi* network through which power and status can be expressed (Zhang 2001; Osburg 2013: 123). The polarization of wealth has intensified over the post-reform years, causing greater rifts in the socio-economic hierarchy. The emphasis on personal wealth as a benchmark of powerful and desirable men, which many scholars have scrutinized in their writings in the last decades, has advanced in this context.

I argue that financial ability constitutes only a part of the contemporary hegemonic masculinity in Nanchong; what is required is fulfilment of a man’s responsibilities. This is a

moral dimension without which the exemplary male model is incomplete. Chinese civilization puts ample emphasis on cultivation of the moral self (as the Confucian teaching mentioned by the young man Zeng testifies).¹⁰ It goes without saying that this is of ideological importance but not necessarily practiced. Confucian moral principles are not always stressed in relation to the desired form of selfhood. Deng Xiaoping's reform strategy starting in the 1980s was guided by an aim to allow a group of people to 'get rich first' rather than worry about ethics such as responsibility; people were motivated to become an enterprising self rather than a moral self.¹¹ While China successfully developed into the second-largest economy in the world, a host of new problems have emerged. These include a growing rift between rich and poor, corruption, discontent over social injustice and civic irresponsibility of individuals and merchants, a hypercompetitive economy, hedonism, conspicuous consumption and materialism, a steep rise in extra-marital affairs and divorce, left-behind children and disregarded elderly in rural villages, the critical dismantling of the traditional value system, a 'spiritual vacuum' or 'moral vacuum', and many others. Anthropologists, amongst scholars from other disciplines, have discussed these problems extensively.¹² Against this backdrop, we can expect anxieties and resistance from the masses, and calls from the state and the public to address those problems. As Maoism and Marxism lost their allure, the state has had to promote a new set of ideologies to rescue a collapsing moral order and to reactivate a new sense of national positivism. The development of the internet and social media has certainly expedited the circulation of public discourse. It is within this problematic context that the rhetoric of responsibility is born.

It is clear that by the turn of the new millennium, in the twenty-first century, there was a growing discourse on the cultivation of responsibility and self-discipline in society. Kipnis (2011b, 2012b) and Tomba (2009) describe it as a form of governmentality, a political project of subjectification, and even a process of nation-building (Kipnis 2012b); whereas Kleinman et al. (2011: 3-31) deliberate a psychological and moral transformation that arises with a self-reflective consciousness. Particularly with regards to the development of masculinities in China, by the time I finished writing this dissertation in 2016, a notable number of scholars had observed the change towards a more ethics-driven masculinity. Responsibility is emphasized by Zavoretti (2016) in her recent article about intimacy. Uretsky (2016: 54-85) highlights the

¹⁰ See Feuchtwang (2012)'s summary of sage rule and self-cultivation in Chinese civilization. Also see Qian Mu (2002: 83-92).

¹¹ Deng asked people to 'grab the opportunity, push for reform, develop yourself.' He told a group of visiting guests in 1987 that the aim of socialism was to liberate the productive power of people and develop the power of production. <http://www.zgdsw.org.cn/n/2014/0716/c244522-25289265.html>

¹² See, for example, Ku (2003), Rosen (2004), Zhang (2011b), Kleinman et al. (2011) and volumes of work edited by Kipnis (2012a), Stafford (2013), Link et al. (2013). Oxfeld (2010)'s perspective is distinctive because she dwells on sustaining moral discourse and practices in post-reform China.

‘manly men (*nanzihan*)’ who are expected to fulfil a prescribed set of personal roles and relationships that encompass the idea of responsibility. The argument offered by Choi and Peng (2016) is that rural migrants construct the concept of ‘respectable manhood’, which prioritizes morality –mainly one’s responsibility as a father and son – over material wealth and ‘quality’. A similar point is expanded upon by Lin Xiaodong (2013). Hird (2016) shows how white-collar men construct themselves as new moral subjects by drawing on traditional Confucian masculine identities and practices (*junzi*) on one hand, and cosmopolitan and transnational elements on another, resulting in a hybridized masculinity which appears to be egalitarian and progressive. Wong and Yau (2016) write explicitly that the ‘good’ son-in-law in Taiwan is a competent and responsible man. According to Osburg (2016: 51), ‘In what many Chinese view as a post-moral society, claims that one is acting out of morality, compassion, or belief carry a great deal of force and legitimacy’. Without going into the details of these arguments, suffice it to say that in the last couple of decades especially after Hu Jintao took over in 2002, moral doctrines have been popularized as applicable to everyone in society. Hu’s ‘harmonious society’ and ‘eight shames and eight honours (*barong bachi* 八荣八耻)’ (Lin 2012: 176) are representational. To give another example, the post-Mao amendments of the Marriage Law (1981, 2001, 2011) have recast marriage in terms of responsibility, and renewed individual obligation to elderly care (Wang 2004; Zavoretti 2016: 1201). Martin Whyte, writing about filial piety in China, mused that ‘one of the most notable rehabilitations during the reform era has been that of Confucius himself’ (2003: 13). Tomba describes it well by saying that the political goal has been to ‘responsibilize’ autonomous social players (2009: 600). To sum up, it is those specific circumstances which have shaped the development of the dominant code of the able-responsible man. Most men do not meet the ideal male standard but they try to ‘fit in’ around the culturally imposed ideal. The collective ideal matters because it relates to a man’s honour. A man’s reputation is continuously critiqued by people who know him, directly or indirectly. Honour is a major tenet of masculinity in different parts of the world. In this case, honour joins ability and responsibility, a point which requires further elaboration.

One of the most commonly used Chinese words for honour is *rongyu* 荣誉, which means ‘reputation (*mingyu* 名誉) and respectable glory (*zunrong* 尊荣) that spread widely because of achievements and status, it implies recognition (*chengren* 承认)’ (chazidan.com 09/06/2015). Hinsch (2013:71) observes that ‘Chinese masculinity evolved within the context of an honour culture, making the safeguarding of reputation a key goal of men’s relations with the opposite sex’. The emphasis of public recognition harkens back to the Confucian culture of shame: ‘An individual in Chinese society always belongs to some groups which absorb and reflect that individual’s glory or shame’ (Bond and Hwang 1986:247). Delia Lin (2012) describes a

‘narcissistic shame’ which is embedded in Confucian governance, and which lingers on.¹³ As many scholars have observed, the subjectivity of Chinese people is located in a web of relationships rather than the self, hence the importance of such notions as ‘face’ and *guanxi* 关系.¹⁴ This web of relationships is hierarchical, based on old Confucian principles. The strong social and hierarchical orientation may explain why a Chinese man’s honour can be so naturally embedded in his ability and responsibility to other people. A man’s performance affects the honour of the whole family more than the individual. His ability and responsibility are consensual and public.

It may seem that the able-responsible man is the same as the big-man in Melanesia and Papua New Guinea with respect to the importance of honour, but it is not. The big-man gains honour by achieving something great in public; recognition comes from his generosity and power in influencing the collective and redistributing resources. The emphasis is on his achievements *for the public*. ‘The making of the faction, however, is the true making of the Melanesian big-man.’ (Sahlins 1963: 291). The honour of the able-responsible man I identified in Nanchong is more family-centric, though his achievement has to be recognized *in public* (cf. Osburg’s idea that ‘recognition’ matters more than ‘distinction’ for men in China). Ideally, the exemplary man is capable enough to fulfil his duties for society and the country; but he is expected to start with familial responsibilities. The contemporary version of hegemonic masculinity does not insist on making self-sacrifices for the public good, like the communist role models. It is rather more like Yao Ming or Ma Yun, who have been able to amass a big fortune for themselves and their families; then, through their global reputation and their subsequent work, become recognized for their contribution to the community and the country. Interestingly, this point was implied by Fei Xiaotong when he discussed his famous ‘differential mode of association’. Fei compared the ego-centric (*ziwo zhuyi* 自我主义) orientation of Chinese people with the Western model of individualism (*geren zhuyi* 个人主义). The latter is dictated by law which stresses equality of people and the belief in a supreme God, which are absent in Chinese culture. The relational ethics in Chinese culture are more fluid and flexible. A sense of duty and responsibility always starts from the ego and spreads to the family, and then the wider networks. Therefore, in traditional Chinese society, a person may sacrifice a family for himself/herself, sacrifice the party for the family, sacrifice the country for the party, and sacrifice the world (*tianxia* 天下) for the country (Fei 1947 [2011:31]).

¹³ See Pye (1968) and Solomon (1971) for their elaborate theses on how the Chinese culture of shame affects people as political subjects.

¹⁴ Psychologist Hwang Kwang-Kuo (1987) provides a detailed analysis of the concepts of face, *renqing* 人情, *mianzi* 面子, *guanxi* and *bao* 报. Several renowned anthropologists have picked up on the theme of *guanxi* and expanded its meanings (Yang 1994; Yan 1996; Kipnis 1997; Osburg 2013). See Kleinman and Kleinman (1985) for analysis of the socio-centric orientation of Chinese people.

A few times, I saw the rhetorical narration of the able-responsible man circulated on social media. The following was posted by a famous movie star who always plays tough-guy roles:

For men (*nanren*), the most important thing is *zeren*. My understanding of *zeren* is not to owe others anything (*buqian* 不欠). To the country – the fatherland (*zuguo* 祖国) has developed me, so I have to try my best to follow the rules and laws, when the country needs me, I will fulfil my obligations and responsibilities; to the family – my parents have nurtured me, I have to be filial, to make the elderly feel good about this son; to my wife – I try my best to maintain the wellbeing of this family; to my son – may you feel proud because of your father; to friends – you are happy having this friend; to people – they can benefit because of the existence of this man.
(Chen Daoming, 13/04/2015, *weixin*)

The actor is a national star in China, not specifically in Nanchong. There is a possibility that the concept of the able-responsible man serves as a nationwide male model. However, further research is required to assess the relevance of the concept on a broader scale. This leads to the next question which I address before introducing my fieldwork site and methodology: does the able-responsible man represent a universalizing and stereotypical version of the masculine ideal?

Situating the able-responsible man within a global context

I agree with other scholars that masculinity has to be understood in specific spatial and temporal contexts; it is embedded within the wider socio-economic and political milieu which is never static, unitary, or unidimensional (Yanagisako & Collier 1987; Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994:12; Gutmann 1997a; Seidler 2006; Campbell, Bell and Finney 2006; Synnott 2009; Song and Hird 2014; Connell and Messerschmidt 2015).

The term *able-responsible man* may sound familiar and even stereotypical of many other masculine ideals in different parts of the world. Men, after all, can be easily associated with the responsibility to protect and provide. Gilmore (1990: 229) concluded in his cross-cultural and trans-historical study on masculinity that there was a ubiquitous, if not universal, ‘quasi global personage something like “Man-the-Impregnator-Protector-Provider”.’ I am conscious of the risk of reproducing the idea of a universal ideal masculinity or an essentialized portrait of Chinese men. Gilmore’s perspective has been criticized by many; in the words of Hart (1994: 51), his attempt is a ‘pursuit of harmonic integration’ and ‘chasing an illusion’. Whilst I agree that there cannot be a singular and uniform way of perceiving and performing gender, the male qualities that Gilmore found indeed reflect some fundamental expectations of men in many world regions even nowadays. Osella and Osella, for instance, show in their study

in India ‘the production of a new hegemonic ideal family form at whose heart (and head!) stands the man of substance – the man with financial resources, earning power, a network of dependents and, a wife and children’ (2006:2-3). Similarly, Tomoko Hidaka construes a hegemonic ‘salaryman’ in Japan as ‘a loyal productive worker, the primary economic provider for the household, a reproductive husband and a father’ (2010: 3) despite subtle differences across three age cohorts. Nevertheless, if we go through the texts of these earlier works in detail, we notice considerable variations in how the dominant masculinity is expressed in each geographic site. This has vital bearing on our understanding of masculinities across cultures. While the basic tenets of ability and responsibility may be common male expectations, their nuances and historical formation are particular and deserve understanding. More thoughts on this point will be provided in the Conclusion. I stress here that I pursue the specific construction, manifestations and negotiations of a masculine type that may sound universalistic, but I locate the formation and interpretations of the able-responsible men in a specific city in China.

Hegemonic masculinity, once established and legitimized, propagates itself and regulates men’s behaviours in everyday life. How the ideal is represented and reacted to are never homogeneous; we must allow for considerable variation and even contradiction. I engage readers with a number of masculine trajectories to show the complex meanings of able-responsible men, and the different ways through which boys and men push for their achievable versions of the ideal. At this juncture, it is necessary to look into the specific place where empirical support of this model of masculinity was collected.

NANCHONG: THE FIELDWORK SITE AND ITS PEOPLE

Nanchong people like to say in a self-derogatory tone that theirs is ‘a small city (*xiao chengshi* 小城市)’, even though it has a population of 7.55 million. The perceived ‘smallness’, or ‘bigness’, of a city reflects the level of economic development and urbanization which people subjectively experience. From what I experienced in Nanchong, the city can be described as ‘peri-urban’. The term ‘peri-urban’ generally refers to peripheral regions of urban areas that attract settlers who mix with indigenous residents to form a heterogenous region that comprise rural and urban characteristics. Peri-urbanization is considered as a pathway for transitioning from rural to urban context. (Guldin 2001; Legates and Hudalah 2014; Abramson and Qi 2011; Cobbinah 2015). In China, the process can best be understood as ‘urban and village integration’ (*chengxiang yitihua* 城乡一体化), a term I heard a lot in the field. Nanchong city was much smaller until 1993, when a number of counties were drawn under its jurisdiction, with a consequential addition of a large ‘agricultural population’ (Wang and Li 2008). From the city

centre in Shunqing Administration District, it takes only an hour to drive to villages in counties such as Longmen. It is a common sight on the street to see farmers selling vegetables, fruits and peanuts which they grow in their rural homes. I will explain in a moment that the city area is a melting pot of migrants from the countryside in Nanchong as well as from further afield. Nanchong is actually one of the ‘top nine cities’ in Sichuan Province.¹⁵ In a national context it is classified as a third-tier or fourth-tier city.¹⁶ However, according to the 2011 Census (published in *2014 Statistical Yearbook of Nanchong*), Nanchong’s urban (non-agricultural) population accounts for only 22% of its total population, which is substantially below the national average of slightly over 50%. In China, a large component of rural residents signifies a low level of ‘culture’ (*wenming* 文明) and ‘quality’ (*suzhi* 素质)¹⁷ of its inhabitants, as well as slow economic development. The following statistics, further illustrates the peri-urban characteristics of Nanchong:

	Urbanization rate (%)						
Year	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2004	2006
Low income countries	21	22	38	29	31	31	
Mid income countries	52	48	60	60	50	53	
High income countries	75	77	77	75	77	78	
World average	40	41	50	45	47	49	
China	19.36	23.71	26.41	29.04	36.09	41.8	43.9
Sichuan					26.7	31.1	34.3
Nanchong					18	25.6	30.1

Source of reference: Geng Haiqing and Gu Shuzhong’s *Chengshihua jinchengzhong de chanye zhengce xuanze* (城市化进程中的产业政策选择), from *Chengshi Wenti* (2007) No. 2, P.3; and China Statistics from 2000 to 2006. Cited in Wang and Li (2008), P.102.

¹⁵ The ranking is based on a composite index including per capita GDP, personal income and population size etc. (Wang and Li 2008:8). Sichuan Province is made up of one municipal city (Chongqing), one capital city (Chengdu), 17 ‘prefectural-level’ cities (*dijishi* 地级市, including Nanchong), 183 ‘county-level’ cities and counties (*xianjishi* 县级市, *xian* 县), and three autonomous prefectures (*zizhizhou* 自治州).

¹⁶ There are different ways to classify cities in China. Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen are often referred to as first-tier cities. Provincial capital cities and some big cities with high GDP are second-tier. Cities at county-level (*xianjishi*) are fifth tier. The third and fourth tier cities are classified more ambiguously. Interlocutors often describe Nanchong as a ‘third or fourth-tier city’ (*sansixian chengshi* 三四线城市).

¹⁷ For a full exploration of the notion of *suzhi*, see Anagnost (1997: 75-97; 2004); Kipnis (2006, 2011a), and Judd (2002).

It is interesting that most of the introductory comments I heard about Nanchong from residents there were negative. Knowing that I came to the city to do research for my PhD study, people would be surprised because ‘there is nothing in Nanchong’ (*zheli shenme dou meiyou* 这里什么都没有). When I asked taxi drivers to take me to the biggest book store and a place where I could find cultural artefacts, I was told ‘the biggest bookstore here is small’; ‘I don’t know where to take you to, we in Nanchong have no interest in culture or art’. Knowing that I had lived in Shanghai and Beijing for many years, people would say ‘then you must find Nanchong very backward (*luohou* 落后)’. I asked several people why Nanchong was called ‘thousand-year capital city of silk’ (*qiannian choudu* 千年绸都) and yet I could not even find a silk factory or workshop. People answered me with disinterest: ‘Oh that was a long time past.’

On a more banal level, people would comment that Nanchong is ‘a comfortable place to live in’. The environment is nice because the city is full of hills, with a river called Jialing Jiang crossing from north to south. The air is relatively clean because of the absence of heavy industries and factories. Unlike some other Sichuan cities, Nanchong has never suffered from any major natural disasters. It is within two hours ride to both Chengdu and Chongqing, making travelling to other bigger cities easy. Being a ‘small city’, the living standard is relatively low. There are very few big enterprises and joint ventures or foreign companies in Nanchong. Even when the Central government announced the ‘Develop the West’ plan in 1999, Nanchong did not benefit from it. Many would recall that the economy took off only after the earthquake in 2008 when the government injected capital to help rebuild cities in Sichuan.

I chose Nanchong as my field site from a short list of third- and fourth-tier cities in Sichuan that were suggested to me by two friends in Chengdu. I had visited or heard of all the other cities except Nanchong. The ‘foreignness’ of Nanchong interested me. Official online information showed that Nanchong was an old city which aimed to be a regional hub in ‘northern Sichuan’ (川北); the urban districts of the city looked small and easily commutable, it was easy to travel to adjoining rural areas; unlike many other cities in Sichuan Province, it had no reputable tourist attractions or cultural heritage; the size of the minority groups was insignificant (0.12%). I was attracted to the thought that Nanchong was just an ordinary, small city in the mainland. Most people in China, after all, live in ordinary cities which cannot boast any spectacular attractions or achievements. I imagined the city was compact and researchable. Besides, the empirical research of most gender and masculinity studies was carried out in more developed locations.¹⁸

¹⁸ Farrer (2002): Shanghai. Zhang Li (2010): Kunming. Everett Zhang (2001, 2007): Chengdu and Beijing. Yang Jie (2010): Beijing. Osburg (2013): Chengdu. Lin (2013): Guangzhou. Song and Hird (2014): Beijing. Jankowiak and Li (2014): Hohhot, Shanghai, Beijing and Nanjing. Kim (2015): Qingdao.

Nanchong carries a provincial cultural characteristic: it is called ‘a city of leisure’ (*xiuxian chengshi* 休闲城市) by its people. This sounds like a positive attribute, but the association of leisure in Nanchong is suffused with negativity, much more so than, for instance, Chengdu (cf. Osburg 2013: 17-19). The unwelcome fact is: ‘there is not much one *can* do’ in this small city. Leisure will be a subject of detailed exploration in the next chapter. Together with leisure, I will explore another bewildering comment, that Nanchong is ranked one of the ten most violent cities (*shida baoli chengshi* 十大暴力城市) in China. With these attributes on Nanchong in mind, I will proceed to examine other characteristics of the population which arise from the fact that the city is a melting pot of rural residents and migrant workers. Using Nanchong as a field site, I study a population that can be considered as peri-urban.

The majority of people I met in Nanchong who were over the age of twenty had moved from rural villages or towns more than ten years ago. Almost everyone still had a plot of land and a house in their home village. Many of them had not changed their *hukou* registration in their resident permits; their children might be registered as ‘agricultural’ even though they were born in the urban city. I assumed that it was difficult for them to make a change. Later, I understood that it was not the case. As revealed by my interlocutors, nowadays a rural identity is difficult to obtain whereas it is easier to change from rural to urban. Since the 1990s when China started urbanization in larger cities, a lot of old residents in townships and villages have become rich overnight as their lands were appropriated and redeveloped. Now the same thing is happening in Nanchong. Many rural dwellers got rich because of land expropriation; in return they were compensated in cash or with a new property in the city area. Many of my neighbours belong to these ‘resettled households’ (*chaiqian hu* 拆迁户). What is more, the Central government has announced plans to offer more welfare and subsidies to the rural population, be they migrant workers living in big cities or people choosing to stay in villages. My informants are looking forward to receiving these benefits in the future. It explains why the urban population of Nanchong is only 1.7 million by official statistics despite a common remark that only the elderly and some grandchildren are living in villages now.

Nanchong is a melting pot of migrant workers. Almost nine out of ten working adults I met were migrant returnees from other cities, or currently, migrant workers coming from other cities. The migrant movement began in the early 1990s. People as young as fourteen left their village to work, mostly in the Guangdong Province. Their experiences varied. Some returned happily with pockets full of hard-earned money; others came back half-broke. Some were on the active lookout for new opportunities; others vowed never to walk that path again; still others were prepared to leave if they could not find something better in Nanchong. Apart from returnees, Nanchong residents consist of a large number of young workers who have moved in from other smaller cities.

Nanchong does not attract outstanding academic achievers. Even for native Nanchong students, those who study well in high school always try to apply for universities and jobs outside of Nanchong. To give an example, I know a woman whose son has entered a top university in Beijing. She told me that she missed her son very much, but she would not want him to return to Nanchong to work: ‘No way! Who would care to come back to this small place after *Beida* (Beijing University)?!’ On the other hand, Nanchong attracts many young aspirers who do not excel in formal schooling, but instead manage to make their way up through hard work. These are people who typically joined the migrant labour force after nine to twelve years of formal schooling. Most of them grew up in the countryside in Nanchong, or some other cities within Sichuan Province, with a smaller proportion from other provinces. Many of these young migrant workers started in bigger cities before moving to Nanchong. In the last ten years or so, there is also a trend for young workers from other cities in Sichuan to come directly to Nanchong city. They mostly come from the countryside from those cities, but some are urban citizens too. Nanchong’s lower cost of living compared to big cities means that even though one earns less in Nanchong, one can afford a more comfortable life and also save more money. For those with an entrepreneurial spirit, Nanchong is not as saturated and competitive as the upper-tier cities. For workers from other Sichuan cities, it offers the advantage of being closer to home. During fieldwork, I joined quite a few of my core informants on visits to their homes in rural Nanchong as well as other cities in Sichuan. It is here that I move on to specify the research methodology used in this thesis.

RESEARCH METHOD

My first trip to Nanchong took place in September 2013. Prior to making that trip, I searched online for accommodation. The plan was to stay in a hotel for two weeks and rent an apartment during that trip; then I would go back to Hong Kong to pack my luggage and return to live in the new flat. I called up four property agents I found online from Hong Kong; only one was responsive and happy to take me on as a customer. I later learnt from that property agent that I did not sound like a serious customer. Why would a woman want to rent a flat in Nanchong, a city she did not even seem to know? That property agent happened to be new to the trade; he was encouraged by his girlfriend to pursue me as a customer. The girlfriend went with us on my property hunt and liaised more actively with me than the agent himself. She and I became good friends. This shows how I built up my informant circles through daily encounters and happenings.

The property hunt was worth mentioning for another important reason: the flat I chose after seeing about a dozen options (with two other agents I found subsequently) proved to be a wise decision. I ended with a flat which was located in a huge residential complex (*xiaoqu* 小区)

called *Guidu*. It has two phases, each of which consists of approximately 1,600 households. I liked the Phase Two area immediately because it had a very lively and pleasant communal park. I saw many people hanging out there during my very first visit. The neighbourhood was also very lively. Within twenty minutes' walking distance, there was an open-air wet market and several grocery stores, clinics and pharmacies, banks, telecommunication service providers, property agents, laundromats, fashion boutiques, a piano school, a church, a kindergarten, massage parlours, hair and beauty salons, restaurants, tea houses, and bakeries. At the end of the street was a shopping mall which had a gym and a big supermarket which I frequented. I moved to Guidu in October 2013 and left in November 2014. In September 2015, I revisited the field for three weeks.

Guidu was a very productive site for my fieldwork. During my stay, I met many neighbours who became close informants. I got to know most of them initially by hanging out in the communal park. Usually, I met the elderly, or housewives, or nannies first. Some invited me to their families, where I met their other family members and friends. Many neighbours operated small businesses in the neighbourhood. It was convenient for me to drop by those shops as a patron as well as a neighbour. I offered free labour to a couple of shops from time to time. Time spent in those neighbourhood outlets was rewarding because they were common sites of public chats. I also acquired valuable contacts through membership in the gym and church nearby.

I arranged formal interviews with only a few of my informants. Those meetings were relatively formal because I made prior appointments with the informants; I described the appointment as an interview (*fangwen* 访问), which inferred a question-and-answer session on a specific topic. In those interviews, I jotted down notes. I soon gave up on the notebook, and I did not record any conversations right from the beginning. I relied on memory to produce field notes almost every day. My research method was essentially participatory observation. To meet ethical requirements, I always introduced myself as a student who had come to Nanchong to collect information for my thesis, which was related to gender relations. I told people it was specifically about masculinity if anybody was interested to know. Similar to the experience of most ethnographers, once I built up rapport, people seldom raised any questions about my research. In any case, some of them did not believe that I was a student doing serious fieldwork in Nanchong. They were especially suspicious when I said that I was not paid and did not receive any funding for working on a doctoral thesis (*boshi lunwen* 博士论文). They would ask 'So what is the point?' My age (fifty-five for most of the fieldwork) definitely made my status as a student questionable. The hair salon owner whom I met quite frequently asked me twice if I was a spy from America. The second time he posed this question, I asked if he was joking; his wife replied for him that he was serious.

I initially tried to find a job teaching English in order to gain access to networks of people; this was not an uncommon approach for English-speaking anthropologists working in China. The job-finding experience proved to be very frustrating. I made several attempts at the biggest talent market in Nanchong in the first month I arrived.¹⁹ No recruiters who worked for agencies or employers who set up booths there even bothered to ask me any serious questions or arrange an interview for me. All the staff who manned the booths told me I was too old to be a teacher. They said a suitable age would be between twenty and forty. They might consider somebody of my age, which was over fifty, only if I were a foreigner (*waiguoren* 外国人) or native English speaker. Hong Kong people enjoyed no privilege in this respect. A man told me frankly that most of their clients were primary schools which preferred female over male teachers, but children liked younger and cheerful-looking teachers. English schools catered to adults were neutral on gender, but age and appearance also mattered for them; the staff commented quite explicitly that I was not young, attractive or trendy enough. This I consider my most humiliating experience in Nanchong, and it gave me my first lesson about gender in the field. Despite this setback and the disbelief and suspicion about my status as a student, I was able to build a wide informants' network once I settled down in the city. Several factors have helped in the process.

First, I believe there are more advantages than disadvantages for me as a female ethnographer in researching men. There are different arguments on whether and how the gendered identity of a researcher affects the choice of topic, the actual field experience, and the production of knowledge.²⁰ In my case, I found it very easy to connect to both men and women. Male informants disclosed their experiences and feelings, including their emotional distress and weaknesses, to me. It might have been more difficult for them to reveal their vulnerabilities to other men. Naturally, I was welcome to enter the women's circles. My femininity also made it easier for me to connect to schoolboys. As the staff in the talent market said, women could build affinity more easily with schoolchildren than men. An 'auntie' (*ah yi* 阿姨) was assumed to be in a better position than an 'uncle' (*shushu* 叔叔) to chat about various subjects in mundane lives. Nevertheless, I believe that it was the gender in conjunction with age which facilitated my cross-gender integration – 'one is never *just* a man or a woman' in the field (Grimshaw 1986, cited in Callaway 1992: 34, original emphasis). I would imagine that people's acceptance of me to their social worlds would be hampered if I were a younger woman, especially because I was single. A Latin dance teacher, whom I will mention again in the chapters, told me honestly that

¹⁹ The talent market is located in a park called *Beihu Gongyuan*. See Hoffman 2010 to understand how these talent markets run. Her study was done in Dalian but the set-up in Nanchong is very similar.

²⁰ Callaway 1992 provides a very useful review on this subject. See also Gregory 1984; Caplan 1988; Gutmann 1997b.

his girlfriend would be very upset if he was to go out alone with younger women in his classes, 'even in the name of an academic research'. His girlfriend was relaxed that he was going out to see me, the 'Elder Sister Wang' (*Wang jie* 王姐). People as young as twenty-something and as old as in their seventies called me Elder Sister Wang. I was Auntie Wang²¹ (*Wang ah yi*, or *Wang yi*) to younger people or those who met me through their parents. A few addressed me fondly as Dr. Wang, whereas a couple of men who were similar to my age called me Little Wang (*Xiao Wang* 小王). These reflected a kind of positionality which I felt was socially constructed 'for me', with which I felt comfortable. The impact of my gender and age on the data which I collected is worth more reflexive consideration, which will be dealt with in the Conclusion.

The fact that I am a native from Hong Kong was also helpful. Knowing that, people simply took me as an ordinary Chinese person. However, I was sufficiently different to make awkward-sounding questions justifiable, and to make some people curious enough to want to talk to me. In addition, my *putonghua* (the national dialect) is good because I grew up speaking Shandong dialect²². I was able to pick up an elementary level of Nanchong dialect (*chuanhua* 川话) in due course. This helped because people usually conversed with one another in *chuanhua* rather than *putonghua*, though most would switch to *putonghua* when I was supposed to join the conversation. Furthermore, there were a few advantages to my thirty-odd years' experience in consumer and market research in China before I took up PhD study. I was very familiar with qualitative inquiry methods such as in-depth interview, focus group discussion and ethnographic observation. I had ample experience travelling to different cities in China; therefore, I felt easy moving around in Nanchong.

Being an anthropologist, I was conscious of the fact that my presence in some circumstances might affect my research subjects' experiences and how things unfolded. It was impossible to always maintain a position of a neutral outsider or observer. For example, the parents of a teenager often asked me to help 'educate' their son. Likewise, a woman tried to use me as a counsellor to tame her gambler-husband. My strategy was to take those opportunities to listen and understand rather than to give any personal advice. Nevertheless, I felt compelled to express my opinion on some occasions. As put by Scheper-Hughes (1995: 419), witnessing itself is in the active voice, it 'positions the anthropologist inside human events as a responsive, reflexive, and morally committed being'. My reflexivity can be read in the text in various chapters.

²¹ My surname is Wang by national *pinyin* Chinese. In Hong Kong, my surname is translated as Wong.

²² Shandong is from the northern part of China, the dialect is similar to Putonghua. My parents and close relatives who migrated to Hong Kong in the 1940s speak in the Shandong dialect.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

This chapter presents the specific objective of this study, which is to explore the hegemonic masculinity and its ramifications that exist in a city in Sichuan Province. I introduce the notion of the able-responsible man. It builds on the masculine ideal of the ‘moneyed elite’ which, as suggested by various scholars, has emerged in the post-reform era. I argue that (financial) ability and responsibility are the two interconnected and defining characteristics of the ideal men in present-day Nanchong. Male responsibility has a strong purchase in the post-reform era because of a morality crisis, which is called to attention by both the government and popular discourse. The judgement of men’s abilities and responsibilities, which are essentially family-centric, are made publicly. Finally, the field site and methodology are reviewed.

In Chapter Two, I take the emic dichotomy between leisure and violence that is presented to me by my informants and use it to structure my chapter. Leisure is a notion imbued with self-cynicism. It reflects the perception of a city that is boring and lagging, and the perception of a people that is laidback and sluggish. These stand opposed to the masculine values that are lauded in contemporary times. Boredom nurtures the practice of gossip, which I will discuss in detail. Abusive and violent language is often used with the intention of shaming those who have failed to meet standards of honour and propriety. They reinforce the hierarchical relationships in the social and gender order.

In the next four chapters, I examine the meanings and lived experiences of different masculinities by going through several male trajectories. Chapter Three begins by describing how hegemonic masculinity exerts its influence in the formative years of two teenage boys. In both cases, I had close relationships with the boys as well as their family members. Both boys caused concern for their parents because of their docile and unmanly characters, and lacklustre performance in school. The boys belonged to a class of left-behind children at certain periods in their lives. They developed varied strategies to mitigate their left-behind status and accusations about their male inadequacy. Throughout the chapter, I discuss the impact of three sources of influence in shaping youth masculinity: the schools, the family, and the peer group. The nature of youth agency will be problematized.

Chapter Four looks at men in their marriageable years. The one-child policy has produced a high sex ratio, which amongst other factors eventually privileges women in the marriage market. The male marriage squeeze takes its toll especially on men who come from lower economic class backgrounds. Through the story of two ‘new-generation migrant workers’, I explore the aspirations and anxieties of men as they seek romantic and spousal relationships. I highlight two particular challenges for men: first, the negotiations that they have to make not only with the women they love but also with the women’s kin group; second, the dilemma for

men to prove their potential as a strong provider and also a tender loving husband who foregoes patriarchal tendency. Altogether, the chapter points to the persistence of some traditional male and marriage norms which are interweaved with new expectations in the ‘modern’ era. These produce fragmented, unstable, and sometimes incoherent demands on male performance.

The challenge for men continues after they become husbands and fathers. This is the topic of Chapter Five. The ‘new men’ narrative which has taken root in the West, especially in Europe, is evident in China. What is special about Chinese men is their performativity as responsible sons. A married able-responsible man is one who has to perform not only as a good husband and a loving father, but also a filial son. Whilst the culture of reciprocation remains strong, I argue that the turn for a child to reciprocate is delayed in Nanchong’s current socio-economic circumstances. This chapter investigates changes in husband-wife and inter-generational dynamics, and the corresponding strategies that married men develop to face those changes.

The idea of ‘complicit masculinity’ is dealt with in the previous three chapters. What follows is ‘marginalized’ and ‘subordinate masculinity’. The chapter brings to fore the complex issues of domination and subordination among men as well as between men and women. The ethnography will expose the assertion of masculine power and respectability in the family and also social circles. The traditional patriarch in a family will emerge as the influential father-in-law, whose presence has been largely ignored in the scholarly literature. The chapter reveals the status of subordinate men who enter uxori-local marriage. It continues with the exploration of love, conjugality, and domestic violence.

From family and personal relationships, I move on to nationalism in Chapter Seven. I posit that President Xi Jinping is the supreme bearer of hegemonic masculinity in China. Through the comments of my informants and readings from various sources of material, I trace the construction of Xi as the hegemonic leader who exemplifies the qualities of an ultimate able-responsible man. Xi’s popularity shows that the masculine/patriarchal ideal still holds in China – including at the state level. The second focus of this chapter is the expression of militaristic nationalism of ordinary citizens in Nanchong. This shows that a commitment to protect the nation state is ingrained in the masculine ideal.

It is in these chapters that the able-responsible man found in China will emerge through the experiences of my informants in Nanchong.

CHAPTER 2: CITY OF LEISURE, CITY OF VIOLENCE

It was close to midnight on an April day in 2014. I had been milling around near a hawker's stall and a bakery shop, which were about 100 meters away from each other, to chit-chat with different people. In between were a newsstand and the East Gate, which opened out onto a huge residential neighbourhood called Guidu, where I resided for fifteen of my sixteen months' fieldwork. Almost every day, I would pass through the East Gate several times to go out shopping, meeting up with people, and commuting to other places. I was told that six years ago, this area was sparsely populated with very few shops. Guidu was the first sizeable and modern property project at the time. Today, numerous buildings have appeared in the neighbourhood with many more being built. One big billboard on a new development site nearby proclaimed in Chinese characters: 'The coming of Shanghai Bund to Nanchong'; another announced something along the lines of: 'Heroes have the same investment vision, French leisure in a bustling city'.²³ The flats and houses at Guidu, amongst all the new developments, already looked old and weary.

From the East Gate, I usually walked just far enough to reach a shopping mall. The whole area around the mall had only been developed that year (2014). In a similar fashion to many central locations in many Chinese cities, there is a square in the middle and a pedestrian area (*buxing jie* 步行街) by the side, consisting of a street dotted with shops that are inaccessible to vehicles. One special element is a Chinese-style, austere-looking building standing boastfully at the centre of the square. Three big Chinese characters, *Shun Qing Fu* (顺庆府 Administration House of Shun Qing), are engraved on a wooden plank above the entrance. A notice inscribed against the monumental walls explains that this was the site of the original Administration House of Shun Qing, the largest and oldest district in Nanchong, during the Song Dynasty.²⁴ It housed the top city officials in the olden days. Now, the 'House' is a grandly decorated establishment which functions as a property sales office. From outside, one can see beautiful chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, displays of property models, and a reception table. Two uniformed guards always stand dutifully outside the entrance, with a serious look to deter non-

²³ Zhang Li (2010:79-97) observes that new commodity housing in urban China is often packaged in terms of modernity and a foreign flavour. The advertising I noted built on the 'brand image' of Shanghai and France. The Shanghai Bund (外滩 *waitan*) is the icon of Shanghai city, it is famous for western-style architectures, most of which were used in the 1940s as headquarters of international financial institutions such as HSBC and AIA.

²⁴ The House of *Shun Qing* was established in the year 1227 during the Song Dynasty (Yang Xiaoping 2010:6).

customers from standing too close. In the evening, starting at 7:30pm, the open space in front of the House metamorphoses into a huge dancing ground with shockingly loud music until 9:30pm. The crowd, which can reach well over two hundred at prime time, mostly consists of middle-aged and elderly women.²⁵ Many entertainment venues such as karaoke bars and coffee shops, which cater to the younger and wealthier crowd, flourish around the square.

Until one reaches the square, the neighbourhood is rather calm and tranquil. Many passers-by are local inhabitants who know one another. Sometimes, I would stop and chat with the shopkeepers. However, the only places I would hang around for hours were the bakery and the hawker stall mentioned in the opening paragraph. The hawker stall was essentially a mobile cart with trays of cold meat, noodles and vegetables and a big chopping board. Every afternoon around 4pm, Lu the operator would set up his cart on the street. In addition to trays of food, he would pull out a small folding table and three chairs from the bottom of his cart for customers (and himself) to sit, in case they wanted to eat on the spot. Four other similar vendors were around. All except Lu closed by 9pm; Lu closed only at 11:30pm. Tian the newsstand operator, who was less than ten steps away, also closed just before midnight. About 50 meters from the newsstand was a bakery shop owned by Sun and his wife, Pan. These three businesses and families became my close informants in Nanchong.

That late evening in April, Pan suggested that we go for a late night snack after they closed. She seldom went out and worked from 7am till 11pm every day in their bakery shop. Her husband would stay for another half hour. All the shops that stayed open so late at night could make an extra profit of perhaps RMB40-50 in total for an extended two to three hours. For them, the profit was worth their time. Sun and Pan's teenage son, Alvin, explained to me that for small entrepreneurs like his parents, 'They have nothing to do anyway. It is the same for them – staying at home watching TV or watching TV in the shop'. It was true that the couple, especially Sun, was always watching TV in the evening when no customers walked in. I was happy to go out with the couple to a barbeque place, where Pan's best friend worked. It was here that I ended up having a very interesting chance encounter with a young man who was working there.

The barbecue store was empty when we arrived. There were three big tables inside and four small tables outside with wooden benches, where Sun chose to sit. Sitting there, I could see and smell the rubbish and sewage close to me by the street. Pan's friend was in her early fifties. When we arrived, the only other person there was a young man wearing a tight black shirt and

²⁵ Many scholars have studied this kind of dance (generally called *guangchang wu* 广场舞) and other similar activities performed by the grassroots leisure class in China. These everyday leisure and cultural practices reproduce collective identities. See Orum et al. 2009, Qian 2014.

trousers with well-polished shoes, lounging on an armchair and reading. Intuitively I found the man interesting. He looked too young to be the boss, yet too well-dressed to be a staff member in that kind of restaurant. Once we were seated, Sun urged us to go inside and choose our food from two big coolers, one for meat and another, vegetables. All the meat was frozen and skewered, piled up neatly inside the coolers. Pan's friend and the young man barbequed our food using two stoves inside, then sent the food to us in batches. Sun and I had beer while Pan had a canned coconut drink. We ate and chatted in leisure, just like the many customers I saw sitting outside in different hawker stores and restaurants. It was very quiet after midnight, but from time to time waves of laughter or heated conversations would burst out in the air. When the last batch of food was finished, the friend came to sit with us, bringing with her what she said was a special delicacy - two small pots of grilled pig's brain curd. I was sickened by the mere prospect of it and tried only a bite; Sun happily finished my portion. I got up and started to take some pictures around the place. I noticed that the young man, having finished the barbequing, had taken a seat behind our table and continued his reading again. It was a self-help book entitled *How Not to Miss an Opportunity*. When I saw him moving back inside and starting to barbeque, I went to chat with him. Knowing that I was a mature PhD student from Hong Kong, he was a bit surprised and curious. As with many other people I had met, his expression said that I would be knowledgeable, but at the same time naïve in many things, which was always a useful catalyst for a productive conversation.

The man's name was Liang Ziyong. He grew up in a small township in Nanchong as the only son of two migrant workers. He became a migrant worker himself at the tender age of fourteen and had just come back to the city. However, he would soon return to his hometown to help his father with a new start-up business. His parents had accumulated some wealth and contacts over the years and were about to open a shop selling building materials. I said I thought he could be the son of the boss in that barbeque restaurant. Hearing that, Liang looked at the chicken he was grilling and told me softly, 'It would be shit if I was the owner of this restaurant. This is worse than any barbeque place in my hometown. You shouldn't eat too much of this food. The chicken is safer because we buy and prepare it ourselves; all other meat is from a wholesaler, you never know what kind of meat they give you.'²⁶ At that point, we heard people quarrelling; apparently two men across the street were fighting. Liang said that people in this city were very rough. He asked if I was aware that Nanchong was ranked one of the 'ten most violent cities' (*shida baoli chengshi*) in China; I told him I did. Noticing that his arms were tattooed, I asked if he had ever engaged in violence. Liang seemed to be energized by this comment. He unbuttoned his shirt and showed me his chest which was also tattooed. He said: 'I

²⁶ The emergence of fake and faulty foods in the marketplace has created what is called 'food scare' in China. It is a widely reported and researched social problem which is one of the many examples demonstrating the moral crisis in post-reform China. See, for example, Yan 2011: 55-62; 2013.

was once a gang member.... but I'm not young anymore, I know what I ought to do and what I ought not to do now.' When I asked how old he was, he said nineteen! I asked what he considered to be things that a man 'ought to do'. He thumped his chest with his fist and declared in a loud, righteous voice, 'Very simple: a man has to be responsible for his parents, his *xiongdì* (brothers, or male buddies), and his girlfriend or wife.' At his age, girls were not so important. Parents, however, were 'important from the beginning to the end' (*cong tou daowei douzhongyao* 从头到尾都重要). What about his 'brothers'? He thumped his chest again and replied: 'Good brothers are forever. If one has problems, we will go and fight for him no matter where we are (*yifang younan, bafang xiangying* 一方有难, 八方相应)!' He then told me, with a heroic tone and a bit of detail, how he nearly lost his arm when he fought for one of the brothers about three years ago.

We left the place a little before 1:30am. The couple lived about ten blocks away from me. Pan linked her arm through mine as we slowly walked from the East Gate back home. I knew she had enjoyed this rare, leisurely evening out.

This chapter sets the scene of and provides the backdrop for my fieldwork site. Nanchong is in the province of Sichuan. It is a typical medium-small city in some ways, and it bears a good deal of Sichuan characteristics. Throughout my sixteen months' stay in the city, I came to learn of its peculiarities. The features which I seek to explore in this chapter are leisure and violence, as I alluded to in the episode above. I focus on the representation of leisure and violence, not because people mention these as the most distinctive characteristics of Nanchong – they don't – but because I have observed enough to believe that leisure and violence constitute an important part of the lived realities in this city, and they are crucial sites in which masculinity is performed. My interlocutors call Nanchong a city of leisure (*xiuxian chengshi*) and paradoxically, a city of violence (*baoli chengshi*). These two terms immediately bring some contradictory images to mind. Leisure should be relaxing, pleasurable, and enriching, whereas violence is coercive, torturous, and destructive. Can a city be both leisurely and violent simultaneously? Suppose that leisure and violence coexist as realities in this city. What therefore is their impact on the cultivation of masculinity, especially the hegemonic model of masculinity which I call the able-responsible man?

A CITY OF LEISURE

The description of 'a city of leisure' can evoke images of a place that offers a number of entertainment and recreational options; it may also signify the existence of a reasonably-sized middle-class; or a city where people have the means to pursue freedom, the good life and

happiness (Liu et al 2008; Purrington and Hickerson 2013). In Nanchong, however, the emic representation of leisure often conjures up a sense of unease, tension, and negativism. In order to grasp this properly, it is important to understand the context of both the philosophy of leisure in traditional culture, and the new ways in which leisure is interpreted and played out in post-reform China.

The cultural underpinnings and current interpretations of ‘leisure’ in Nanchong

A group of scholars from China, Taiwan and the US (Liu, Yeh, Chick and Zinn 2008) sought to uncover the meaning of leisure in traditional Chinese culture from classical texts. Their detailed epistemological research shows that leisure, in Chinese *xiuxian*, carries a host of pleasant meanings. The first character *xiu* refers to ‘taking a break’, ‘rest’, ‘beautiful’, ‘precious’ etc., the second character *xian* means ‘free and unoccupied’, ‘a physical opening of space’, ‘an interlude’. Together, *xiuxian* suggests ‘a comfortable social status, a spiritual or aesthetic condition’; it can also suggest idleness or freedom from activity, which was valuable for peasants in the history (2008: 485). The authors further distil the meanings of *xiuxian* from Confucian and Taoist writings. They conclude that the state of leisure is aspired to by Chinese philosophers, the literati as well as common people in ancient times. In brief, the ideal state of being is to live in ‘a society of leisure for all’ where people can enjoy the freedom of play and communion with nature (ibid: 487). Taoism in particular embraces a personal and harmonious immersion into the nature (Wang and Stringer 2000). Although not necessarily contradictory to the above interpretation, other scholars share the idea that Confucianism instils a strong ethos of industriousness. Therefore, Chinese people are work-oriented and usually hold a negative attitude towards leisure (Wei et al. 2015: 568-9); the ‘ideal child’ traditionally ‘disliked play’ (Bai 2005), and the school curriculum does not encourage ‘leisure education’ (Su 2010). While the practice of leisure and its meanings are culture-bound, we can expect changes as economic and cultural lives in China have transformed through millennia.

My research shows that for my informants, the notion of leisure is highly desirable in some respects, but it departs from the classical sense which emphasises a restful and relaxing state of being. On the one hand, leisure in the modern era is more orientated to entertainment and social activities. On the other hand, it must follow achievement, without which leisure can imply a state of idleness and sluggishness, which is especially undesirable for men. These need to be appreciated within the context of three decades of frantically-paced development in China: the stability or even a slowdown of growth means retrogression. On a national level, people applaud actions, industriousness, and advancement. This mentality provides a fertile ground for the development of a masculine ideal that is defined by an individual’s competence combined with an ethos that allows for progress to be made on oneself and one’s family: hence the able-

responsible man. People from villages and townships are encouraged to leave their hometowns to work in the cities. Staying in a small place represents immobility, which is not the path to the promised future that country leaders after Mao have mapped out for their countrymen.

Nanchong people like to ridicule themselves for their craving of ‘eating, drinking, play and enjoyment’ (*chi he wan le* 吃喝玩乐). These activities can be encapsulated by a single word that is extremely popular in the Sichuan dialect, *shua* 耍.²⁷ The meaning of *shua*, according to an epistemic study of Sichuan dialect (Yang 2010: 269), refers to play; obtaining fun through leisure activities, and performing something cheeky and interesting (*wunong* 舞弄). Acts of *shua* are largely social and communal, not solo. If a group of friends go out, they say ‘Where should we go and *shua*?’ A common gesture of friendship is for somebody to say: ‘Do come to my home and *shua* when you have time.’ On the other hand, it is a sign of sympathy or mockery if somebody says ‘Oh, do you *shua* by yourself?’ These imply that leisure, or *shua*, is commonly framed as a social behaviour. It is not difficult to imagine that money is a prerequisite of socialising. In a moment, I shall describe the social practices of entertainment and consumption, which open up an avenue for masculine performance and reinforce the hierarchical relationships that are existent not only between men and women, but also among men uniquely. Before this, an important dimension of leisure in Nanchong must be examined: boredom. Compared to the bigger metropolitan cities, life in Nanchong is more relaxing, but less productive and more boring. This can certainly be felt when living in the city.

Between about one and two o’clock, the whole city of Nanchong seems to be asleep. Many people, including students and the working class, maintain the habit of napping straight after lunch. Many shopkeepers and workers can be seen falling asleep against their work counters. Even mahjong houses would be emptied during these hours. There is a joke that in China, a city’s relative development from rural to modern can be measured by whether its people maintain the habit of taking an afternoon nap and spitting everywhere. Nanchong maintains both habits. Even women who are dressed elegantly can be seen spitting in public. People on the street never seem to be in a hurry. Those who walk their dogs – a common sight in wealthier neighbourhoods – never run; even the dogs look very tame and slow. In a city with very few factories and corporations of significant size, many people make their living by starting up small businesses. A woman who owns a made-to-order curtain company told me that small businesses like hers operate as if in a simple exchange economy: ‘I open a shop and buy things from you and you buy from me.’ Leisure is generally defined as time spent outside work, ‘behaviour that occurs apart from the necessities of life, or in free time’ (Purrington & Hickerson 2013:131). But, in Nanchong, leisure and work are intermingled for a lot of working

²⁷ The equivalent of this word in many other dialects in China is *wan*.

people. Lu, who sells cold meat on the street, always watches TV programmes or movies, listens to downloaded music, or reads Wechat news on his mobile phone whilst at work. Many other street vendors do the same. For businessmen heading larger enterprises, the line between work and leisure becomes even more ambiguous given the prominence of networking through leisure activities (*yingchou* 应酬).²⁸

Because of the prevalent practice of networking through leisure and the ambiguous line between play and free time, a person who is active in entertainment is generally recognized to be busy at work or making money. Leisure is perceived to be a good thing only when one has money: *youqian youxian* 有钱有闲 (has money and has leisure – in this order). The majority of people do not classify themselves in the *youqian youxian* class; their leisure time is thus an excess, they virtually have ‘nothing (meaningful) to do’. I heard from many small entrepreneurs that life is hard, not because of the technical difficulties of their jobs, but because they are stuck in their shop for the whole day performing repetitive tasks. Likewise, people working in offices and service industries, especially young people and male workers, generally complain of boredom in the workplace, not the challenging nature of the job. Many feel that time spent at work does not require much effort, and is also meaningless (*mei yisi* 没意思). The unchallenging nature of work and the time spent on it causes unease, which is framed relative to the stimulating lifestyle of the more developed parts of China. Men who are seen to be often in leisure are admired only if they are rich men. That is, they have money (*youqian*) and can buy leisure and enjoy their free time (*youxian*). In other words, they are able and have done their duties. It can also mean that these successful men are still working hard to forge their business relationships and accumulate their social capital. Those who are not rich and seen to have excessive free time are perceived as lazy and incompetent. To be called a ‘*xianren* 闲人’ (literally, ‘leisure person’ or ‘idler’) has negative connotations; they are certainly not able-responsible men. People sometimes describe themselves as *xianren* in self-deprecating jokes. Women of leisure are generally assumed to be dependent on the provisions of rich men, which can prompt jealousy or spite.

Rest is valued less than opportunities to make progress in life. The nineteen-year-old man at the barbeque restaurant reading ‘How Not to Miss an Opportunity’ in his spare time, would certainly agree with this. I often heard people, especially men (ranging from their twenties to forties), expressing how few opportunities there were in Nanchong and how keen they were to develop something. It is extremely popular for people to discuss large or small ‘investment projects’ (*touzi xiangmu* 投资项目) together. A specific function of chatting is to

²⁸ *Yingchou* is best interpreted as reciprocal entertainment; its most common form is eating and drinking. Both Boretz (2011) and Osburg (2013) provide rich descriptions of *yingchou* behaviour. Everett Zhang (2001) uses the term *goudui* to describe a similar type of social engagement.

build *guanxi* and to discuss business opportunities: ‘business grows out of chatting’ (*shengyi shi tanchulai de* 生意是谈出来的). Overall, there is constant chattering about business opportunities, with the hope that something will materialize one day. For example, I had a close informant who was a restaurant-owner. During my stay in Nanchong, I saw him opening a tuck shop in a secondary school and also a shop selling lighting equipment. He was in further discussions about extending his business ventures to interior design and renovation. I met him through two female friends. One woman finally co-invested in his interior design company. However, the other woman wanted his help in entering into a supermarket business. They often exchanged business ideas and contacts over meals, tea drinking, and karaoke entertainment. Sun, the man from the bakery, was constantly seeking other investment opportunities. He was less well established than the restaurant man. Therefore he kept having discussions, but none of the ‘projects’ came to fruition. Lu the cold meat hawker was worse. He did not even have the minimum social and financial capital, nor the ambition or eloquence, to discuss any project. The more able-responsible man in the public eyes is crystal clear. Talk without action is better than not having anything to talk about. Talking is social, not solo. In contrast to the solitary kind of leisure inspired by Taosim, leisure activities in present-day Nanchong emphasize sociality which is the topic in the next section.

Construction of masculinity in the field of leisure

A common regimen of social entertainment at night consists of three steps: eating at a restaurant (very often hotpot cuisine), karaoke singing, and finally barbeque food in hawker places, a lot of which are open air. This three-step regimen is especially popular when there are both men and women together, but they are usually hosted by men. I sometimes went to dinner followed by karaoke singing with females only, but women seldom eat on a street at night without a man. (For that matter, people found my habit of sitting around the hawker stall at night rather ‘masculine’.) On the other hand, men seldom go to karaoke without women. If they do, paid hostesses are expected. Another activity that is commonly inserted in-between the eating and drinking and carousing is massage. There are numerous types of massage parlours in the city. Theoretically all are open to both men and women, but practically no man would go to the beauty salon type whereas women seldom go to the upscale massage venues which are designed for businessmen, at least not alone. Men can establish their big-man or big-brother status on these occasions by paying. Although I describe the night activities as a three-step regimen, they are highly fluid in the sense that when to call an end to the night and where to go next are usually decided on the spot, without prior agreement. It is very acceptable for guests to invite friends to join them in karaoke clubs and midnight barbeques. It is a gesture to ‘give face’ for the host, who is usually a man, by bringing more people in. I have seen, on various occasions,

men whose big-brother position was made explicit by having younger brothers make arrangements for them at karaoke clubs. Men who withdrew a thick stack of RMB100 banknotes paying at the end would express their respectable generosity. (Nanchong is a cash-based economy. The largest banknote is RMB100, therefore people have to carry a deck of banknotes if they expect to have to spend much.) I noticed quite a few times that men would consciously show their deck of cash when taking money out from their bags or pockets, as a visible display of their ‘moneyed’ status.

What is apparent from all these practices is that masculinity can be conveniently performed by showing one’s social conviviality and economic power. Men who can build up a hyperactive and merry (*renao* 热闹) atmosphere during eating and drinking occasions are admired. This is typically done through a strong capacity to drink and to toast in humour, and better still with meaningful words and anecdotes. It is a ritual for everyone around a table to toast (*jingjiu* 敬酒) each person and drink in pairs, with their small shot glasses filled up again and again, typically with beer. Everyone is supposed to say something when a toast is made. Those who can drink without limits and toast with skill usually dominate the group, and this role is rarely played by women unless the whole group is female. Both the atmosphere and a sense of camaraderie escalate as the rounds of toasts increase,²⁹ especially when more sexually-insinuated jokes are invoked during the toasts. For example, a man toasted a woman at a feast like this, ‘Come on, you can drink just a little; I am aware of your *depth* (*shenqian* 深浅)’. As people laughed understanding that this was a dirty joke, the woman accepted the toast and replied, ‘Yes of course, and I know about your *length* (*changduan* 长短)’.³⁰ Occasions where fewer toasts are made at a banquet, suggests that the hosts and the guests are educated at a lower level. I have attended some banquets or meals like this; the wives of those men would tell me on different occasions that their husbands were ‘short of words’ (*yanyu buduo* 言语不多), sometimes in embarrassing manners.

In the field of leisure, apart from the capacity to drink and to toast, and the financial ability to host social entertainments, another crucial masculinizing activity is gambling. A few weeks after I arrived in Nanchong, I asked a taxi driver what he would consider to be the biggest industry in the city. He said: ‘Gambling (*du* 赌)! If you add all the gambling places and customers together, they will make the largest production in Nanchong!’ At a church, I found many people seeking spiritual help for themselves or their family members to quit gambling.

²⁹ A noisy and merry atmosphere is highly valued in Chinese culture. Madsen (2013) exemplifies the preference for ‘hot and noisy’ (*renao*) over ‘cold and quiet’ (*lengjing*) in public events in China. Chau (2008) pinpoints the importance of a ‘red-hot sociality’ (*honghuo*) that is created by banqueting.

³⁰ *Shenqian* in Chinese also means how deep or shallow a person is, whereas *changduan* (length) means strengths and weaknesses.

Every now and then, I would hear from men through chance encounters, recounting their bankruptcy as a result of gambling. Inside the Guidu compound alone, there are nine mahjong houses. Within fifteen minutes' walk, one can find more than ten gambling venues which operate as tea houses (*chafang* 茶房) or restaurants. Some of these are friendly places where neighbours who know one another go to play mahjong or cards (*chuanpai* 川牌 or *changpai* 长牌); this is what I consider as 'neighbourhood gambling' where more women can be seen. Some are for high-stake gambling which involves mainly men; still others provide private rooms where people meet for business and play cards as a break-out activity.

People in Nanchong would say that gambling is of course popular throughout China, but even more so in Sichuan. A recent study (Lam 2014) provides a long list of reasons why Chinese people like to gamble: it induces pleasure and enhances self-esteem; it provides a chance for socialization and networking; it is used as an escape by the working class and the poor from everyday frustrations, and as a shortcut to financial gain. Steinmüller (2011) provides further insight into this by examining the significance of gambling for local sociality and expressions of cultural intimacy. Gambling produces social heat which is a way to display happiness and a socially meaningful way of living. I offer a brief example to illustrate how gambling produces cultural intimacy. This example elucidates how a woman who rejects her husband's frequent participation in gambling is excluded from his circle of friends, and how their disputes over gambling lead to violent acts.

Zhao was in his early forties. I met him through his wife, Ting. They operated a cybercafé with a few other partners. Their marriage was highly unsatisfactory. Ting blamed her husband for indulging in card games. Zhao described his wife as a 'fierce tigress' (*mu laohu* 母老虎), which in Nanchong refers to a woman who is as fierce and daunting as a tiger. They always quarrelled and sometimes entered into physical fights. Zhao told me he shared no common interests with Ting; he also found his wife's ambition of making money a distraction in life. He preferred a simple and leisured lifestyle, which Ting took as signs of laziness and lack of aspiration. Zhao looked sombre and reclusive at home. He prepared lunch most of the time. Right after the meal, he would retire to his bedroom to surf on the computer, or watch TV in the living room. After he or Ting sent their daughter to school, he would go gambling for the whole afternoon. He would come back home for a simple dinner and then go out to gamble again. In-between, he would go to the cybercafé for a couple of hours. I saw that at work he was as sombre as he was at home. Zhao was a starkly different man only when he did two things: playing with his nine-year-old daughter, and gambling. Zhao as a loving father will be discussed in a later chapter. Here, I present Zhao, the gambler.

The gambling hall Zhao frequented was a small, shabbily decorated mahjong store. He was so familiar with the couple who operated the store and the customers there that it became a social endeavour for him to go every day. Zhao played cards only, and he was liberated as a boisterous man when he played. There were of course quiet and concentrated moments, but overall people could always be seen smoking, drinking (tea), clamouring, swearing, bantering, and sharing insider jokes. One evening around midnight, I saw only Zhao, a middle-aged man and woman, and the owner inside the mahjong house. The number was not good enough to start a game. After a moment or two, a few other customers dropped in. They all seemed to know one another well, chatting and teasing one another. When the atmosphere heated up, a man and a woman had a mock fight with pushing and shoving, just like two brothers, with Zhao participating by handing the woman a broomstick with which to hit the man. When a few others dropped in and they seemed to have enough mirth and participants, the small crowd dissipated naturally into two tables, one playing mahjong and the other cards.

Ting, Zhao's wife, hated the place and the company, which she complained was rough and had led her husband astray. She preferred her husband to chat with her friends about investment ideas. In her opinion, Zhao wasted his time on leisure that he did not seem to deserve, before he fulfilled his responsibilities as a family man. Once she was so angry over her husband's absence that she went to fetch him at the mahjong place; she overturned the mahjong table on which Zhao and three others were playing cards. The operator asked her to compensate for the broken table; Zhao asked for compensation of 'a husband' in return: '*peige laogong geiwo* 赔个老公给我'! Zhao told me many times that he did not consider his gambling as gambling (*du*), he was only 'having fun' (*shua*) which everyone should be entitled to. He defined a gambler as one who ignored his work and forfeited his family duties; one who put big money at risk. He looked after the cybercafé well; he did more housework than his wife; and he betted small amounts of money only. Playing cards was his only 'entertainment' (*yule* 娱乐), it gave him 'spiritual support' (*jingshen jituo* 精神寄托). He could not explain to me what he meant by spiritual support, but he said that without gambling, there was nothing to look forward to in a day. Zhao always repeated this rhetoric to me, 'so what can a man do otherwise?' This feeling of 'having nothing else to do' resembles in some ways the phenomenon of *timepass* in India.

In a study done by Craig Jeffrey (2010), the author uncovered how the young, unemployed, but well-educated men in a city called Meerut referenced their boredom and disengagement by 'doing timepass'. Those men in the lower-middle class were isolated from the time-spaces that characterized 'modernity' and 'development' cropping up in India. Timepass emerged as a strategy for these young men to mark their insecurity and build a hyper-masculine subculture. In Nanchong, a similar sense of disengagement is noted with lower-middle-class men. However, the men who seek to pass time are of a wider age range and of a

much lower education level than those we see in Meerut; they are not frustrated by the problem of unemployment, but by a lack of activities with which to spend their days gainfully. In Zhao's case, he is doubly frustrated by a dissatisfying conjugal relationship. Everyday duties at work and at home were easy for Zhao, but repetitive and aimless. Gambling was an outlet for him to consume his time and have some fun, even though he admitted that it was a non-productive and rather meaningless pastime after all. The couple's quarrels sometimes turned into domestic violence. Friends gossiped that Zhao was laidback, non-enterprising, and irresponsible, and that Ting failed to manage her husband and their relationship. People are always judged through chats and gossip. For Zhao and Ting, it might have created only minor blemishes in their reputation as a couple with little honour; in other cases it can be more brutal and fatal, as we shall see in this next section.

Social chat and gossip

Chatting is a basic social activity in everyday life among the people of Nanchong. As I mentioned above, the ability to chat is considered a positive socializing skill, particularly for men in business. A kind of chat I found especially interesting as a medium of masculine performance and sociality is called *bai longmen zhen* (摆龙门阵), which I translate as 'dragon-gate chat'.

The term '*bai longmen zhen*' is used in other provinces too, but it originates from Sichuan. '*Bai*' is to display. '*Longmen zhen*' has two different but related interpretations. One interpretation is that *longmen* was a typical kind of pavilion (called Dragon Gate) built in old Sichuan rural communities where neighbours gathered to talk during their free time. Another interpretation says that *longmen zhen* was a military plan drawn by a famous militarist (Xue Ren Gui 薛仁贵) who mapped out the positions and tactics of soldiers and weapons in a war; the maps are dynamic, perplexing and mind-boggling. *Bai longmen* has come to refer generally to social chats that take place in neighbourhoods; they are communal, spontaneous, impromptu and inviting in nature. People can participate as active speakers or passive listeners. Those who speak are usually good storytellers with a breadth of experience, who can shift from one subject to another and go with the flow. I have observed that when people use this term, it is more likely to be a male-dominant gathering. Women's talks and gatherings are more often called *liaotian* 聊天 or *bagua* 八卦, which is more private and domestic, and considered more frivolous.³¹ Dragon-gate chat, on the other hand, is very open and public, and dominated by men. The subjects discussed centre more around social issues than personal affairs. In its classical form, the chat is a subtle and performative occasion for men to compete. Those who can express their views in

³¹ Gossip in many other cultures is associated with women. See for example Besnier 2009: 14; Capp 2003; Recuero 2015. Men who are gossipy (*bagua*) are often teased for being effeminate.

an elaborate and persuasive style easily control the chat and the audience, from which men gain their sense of recognition and fulfilment. My evening chats at the hawker store were sometimes described by people as *bai longmen*. Usually, I was the only woman who would sit there and actively participate in conversations. Lu's girlfriend often came to help him in the late evening, but she conversed freely only with Lu, Tian (the newsstand man) and myself. This kind of communication would not constitute a dragon-gate chat. I would join a chat which could have started before I arrived, or begin chatting with customers who ate there. An old man who was nostalgic about communist China and a middle-aged retired soldier appeared from time to time; both were very articulate and keen to share their experience and views. The old man attracted our attention more than the retired soldier for his breadth of knowledge and humour. Tian and a young manager at a piano school chipped in when they had a moment to spare. At times, passers-by who shopped at the hawker area joined or even overtook the conversation. The group usually consisted of only three or four persons, which was smaller than what the term '*longmen zhen*' usually suggests. We chatted at Lu's stall, but he never participated due to an apparent lack of confidence. However, he was happy to have us around because it created a lively environment for his business.

Whether it is *bai longmen* or more private gossip, these chats can generate and circulate popular discourse; they often entail a moral dimension. People make judgements on others and on social happenings through chatting. A man's 'ability' or lack thereof would emerge easily and collectively in daily chats. These can provoke grave consequences. As expressed by Stewart and Strathern (2004: 198), gossip and rumour do not simply pass on news, but they form its narrative shape and meaning; they can mobilise popular support, cause ridicule, ostracism, or even death. Anthropologists discuss the agentic power of gossip, which can work vertically as well as horizontally (Harrell 1990). Brison (1992: 245), for instance, wrote that for the big-man in many Melanesian villages, 'it is "just talk" that they have most to fear'. Besnier (2009) summarised the fundamental argument in his study in Nukulaelae Atoll in two words: 'talk matters'. It means that talk or gossip matters in 'the assertion of power and its contestation, the construction and destruction of reputations, the manipulation of truths, and the formation of alliances and conflicts among people and positions' (ibid: 189). Gossip can be launched against those higher up in the hierarchy, thus working like a 'weapon of the weak' (Scott 1987) from below. For example, I heard that people had gossiped about a pastor of the largest church in Nanchong city, for garnering financial advantages for himself and an overseas study opportunity for his son because of his privileged position. The things said about him might have been totally ungrounded realities, but gossip reflects the social realities from the perspective of gossipers (Stewart and Strathern 2004: 56). Leaders in power, such as this pastor, are held to higher moral standards than ordinary people. Their behaviours are watched and judged by those who have

less access to power and sometimes no right of voice. In Nanchong, it is rare for the weak to have the opportunity or the guts to criticise the great face to face, so they resort to gossip. Leaders can be a victim of gossip. However, the rich, the powerful and the authoritative are quite unlikely to be shamed face to face. The poor are the most vulnerable targets.

The poorest of all people I met in Nanchong was a woman named Cai and her husband Zhang, both in their mid-fifties. Cai worked as a cleaning lady at Guidu, and took up extra housecleaning jobs and find things from the garbage to sell; her husband works on construction sites. They are classified as a ‘household in difficulty’ (*kunnan hu* 困难户) by the village office. Cai told me terrible stories of their sufferings in earlier years due to poverty. They were looked down on (*qiaobuqi* 瞧不起) by neighbours because they were the poorest, and the fact that they had two daughters but no son was a curse on them. Cai’s mother-in-law was very cross with her because although the old woman urged them to abandon the second daughter when she was born, Cai resisted. Her husband was torn between his mother and wife. He told me also, in a regretful tone, that their poverty gained them no sympathy because they were almost the only couple in the village who did not leave for migrant work. In a way, they did not deserve sympathy for they could have taken up migrant labour jobs to improve their status. Life had become so depressing that Cai said her husband went mad and lost his memory. Once, Zhang disappeared, only to be found hiding in a neighbour’s wardrobe three days later. A few times, he grabbed a knife and said he would take somebody’s life. Cai tried very hard to borrow money from relatives and friends to send Zhang to a mental hospital. Many people including their close relatives were not willing to lend them money. They doubted the likelihood of Zhang’s recovery and Cai’s ability to repay the debt. After much effort, Cai raised RMB120,000 and sent Zhang to a psychiatric hospital. He recovered after several months. It was so miraculous that the villagers, in Cai’s words, ‘thought he was a god (*shen* 神)’. Villagers flooded in to ask Zhang for help, such as healings of long-standing illnesses. Cai was convinced that her husband’s madness was a result of their suffering at the hands of poverty, and people’s scornful eyes and gossip against them.

Scornful eyes and gossip are no trivial matter. Apart from Zhang, I knew two other women who had been sent to psychiatric hospitals, and a few others who suffered from neurasthenia³² (*shenjing shuairuo* 神经衰弱). One, whom I called Mei, shared a lot with me before and after she was locked up in a hospital. To put the story briefly, Mei’s first marriage ended because the parents of her husband discovered that her mother had a mental illness. Mei

³² See Kleinman and Kleinman (1985). The two authors found neurasthenia to be the most common psychiatric outpatient diagnosis for neurotic disorders in China at the time of their study in 1980. Neurasthenia relates to nervous exhaustion and physiological symptoms which, according to the authors, is a more culturally approved diagnostic category than depression.

married a different man while I was in Nanchong, only to be put into a hospital by her cousin and husband after a short honeymoon period. She suspected her husband of having an affair, which she had gleaned from friends' gossip. She employed a detective to follow her husband, consulted witches (*shenpo* 神婆) and asked for sorcery to trick her husband; she also threatened to kill herself, even in my presence. Mei received very strong medication and regular electroconvulsive therapy at the hospital; unfortunately, she was not healed before her release. Gossip about her and her husband accelerated. She kept saying that she was under surveillance and that everyone was there to wrong her and harm her.

I found the high incidence of mental disorders that I encountered quite disturbing. I shared this observation with some interlocutors hoping to obtain some folkloric understandings. People had no idea how Nanchong compared with other cities in this respect. The most common response I received was a reference to the geo-cultural characteristics of the city. Mei's cousin said that Nanchong and many other cities in Sichuan Province are very mountainous and deserted, hence, the famous saying '*Shudao nan* 蜀道难 (the *Shu* path is difficult)'. *Shu* is Sichuan's official name in the past. *Shudao* refers to the huge pathway that was first built for military troops to pass through. In an anthropological study of regional characteristics in China (Xu et al. 1999), the difficulties created by the mountainous frontier life are said to give Sichuanese their strength of character, endurance, and a strong sense of pragmatism (ibid: 1162-7). Mei's cousin explained that there are many historical as well as mythical stories regarding the dangers of people passing through the mountains. This kind of environment gives rise to mythical imaginations such as associating a rock with an animal, snakes turning into human beings, etc. Therefore, in his view, Sichuan people are more superstitious than residents in other more developed regions. Another interlocutor drew upon the same frontier issue, but emphasised the tough rural lives, making people more susceptible to hallucinations and violent behaviours. Kleinman and Kleinman (1985:468) report that certain types of stressors provoke more stressful reactions for people in a certain cultural context than in others.³³ In China, they find the stressors that break up the family system or undermine the sociocentric moral underpinnings of the Chinese self especially harmful. If we were to ask Mei to give an explanation for the high incidence of mental problems in Nanchong, she would probably point her finger at the disparaging culture of gossip. She told me many times that 'Nanchong is too small, everyone knows everyone, rumours spread easily.... It is a ghostly place (*gui difang* 鬼地方), not safe.'

An informant used this jargon to describe the pervasive and malicious nature of gossip: 'Saliva can drown people to death' (*tumo kouyi yansiren* 吐沫可以淹死人). He was ashamed on

³³ Wu Fei (2005) finds family conflict the major reason for suicide in rural China. Members play games of power (gambling for *qi*) to win moral capital, dignity and authority in the family.

account of an unsuccessful business and two ex-wives who deserted him successively for men who were wealthier and more powerful; he was also said to engage in criminal activities. He told me that people whispered all sorts of rumours behind his back; their gossip (saliva) could have killed him. A female teacher used a proverb to express the fearfulness of gossip that surrounded her upon her divorce. It was a four-character phrase that was famously cited by a female movie star who committed suicide due to pressure from gossip – *renyan kewei* 人言可畏 (people's words are frightening).³⁴ Her relatives and colleagues 'made rude and humiliating comments' to her, and she was consequently deprived of promotion opportunities for many years for not being a model teacher. Lu, the meat hawker, taught me another folk saying: 'There is no wall through which air cannot pass' (*meiyou bu toufeng de qiang* 没有不透风的墙). He explained that there could be no secret in the neighbourhood; your words and deeds would be subject to exposure through gossip. He was aware that he was gossiped about for not being an able-responsible man (this particular story will be expanded upon in Chapter Six).

Problematization of leisure

In summary, leisure activities provide an arena where masculinity is performed and reproduced. What makes leisure problematic for men in Nanchong is two-fold. One is entitlement: a man is not supposed to have an overabundance of time for leisure until he has worked hard enough and performed his duties. To relax is to be idle, and idleness easily meets public disapproval. To problematize leisure further, a city of leisure – just like a man of leisure – can refer to a deficit of energy and activity. Nanchong's economy and urban spaces have both undergone staggering changes since the 1990s. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the local people, those living in Nanchong can easily become lazy as there is little to do there, and hard work is often non-productive and unexciting. Some scholars advance the idea that men make their bodies work hard to gain a sense of control, and the Protestant work ethic makes men feel uneasy about relaxing (Edley and Wetherell 1995: 161). Regarding China, one may attribute people's industrious mentality to the Confucian ethics. I cannot comment on this from my research, but what I find quite explicit is the influence of the reform ethics, which placed emphasis on the enterprising and entrepreneurial self, and the capacity for individuals to progress in upward mobility as they are emancipated in the new market economy.

³⁴ The movie star, Ruan Lingyu 阮玲玉 (1910-1935), committed suicide and left a testament which ended with this phrase: *renyan kewei* (people's words are frightening). Lu Xun wrote an article about this incident: *Writing about renyan kewei* (1935). Lu also famously wrote 'A Madman's Diary' (1918), in which he attacked the feudalistic moral teachings and practices as hypocritical and oppressive forms of 'people eat people' (*ren-chi-ren*, or dog-eat-dog in English). Public disgrace is an important theme in Lu's novels.

In many Western countries, a man makes his body work hard through sport, which provides a gratifying physical sense of maleness.³⁵ Boys learn about the need to exert bodily power to prepare them for physical challenges and confrontations, therefore top sporty boys often have a higher status in a group (Swaine 2005). However, in Nanchong, sport can hardly be determined as a central site of masculine performance. It is the immateriality of sport in Nanchong which makes the subject noteworthy, as I briefly cover below.

During the course of my fieldwork in Nanchong, I did not come to know even one adult man whose routine included any kind of outdoor physical activity apart from *taiqi* and swimming, which were practiced only by a handful. Several men went fishing and hiking occasionally. Competitive sports are included in school curriculums, but people rarely carry on with these after leaving school. There are few organized sport events or facilities in the whole city. Parents can invest a lot of money in training their children for sports such as skating, swimming and taekwondo, but this is limited to wealthy families. For adults, going to the gym is an up and coming activity. However, to use a marketing idiom, the ‘innovators’ of gym membership are those rich, middle-aged housewives who want to lose weight or keep fit, and who are said to have plenty of time and money for leisure. Men who are economically well-off, many of whom are businessmen or white collar workers, are the ‘early adopters’. For them, the gym is a place for health and fitness as well as for social networking and entertainment. All in all, physical force and strength through sport does not appear to be a defining characteristic of masculinity in Nanchong. This is evidenced in Brownell’s study in China in the 1980s. In the chapter titled ‘Those who work with their brains rule. Those who work with their brawn are ruled’ (1995: 180-209), Brownell made use of extensive textual readings and participant-observation data to point out that it was usually the peasant-class from the countryside who committed to serious athletic training. Unlike much of the rest of the world, surveys which Brownell cited revealed that higher levels of education actually contributed to *less* participation in physical/ athletic exercise in China.

Due to its significance in the discussion of the ‘able-responsible’ man, sport and the physical body will surface again in the thesis. Some chapters will touch on the topic of sexuality. Nobody can deny that in every city, there would be men (and women) who like sport and bodybuilding, and those who don’t. Many men in Nanchong are indeed passionate about sport. A man who is tall, stout, fit and strong is always more attractive than one who is not; and a boy who performs well at sport is always a pride to their parents. The main point here is that sports

³⁵ Connell pinpointed sport as a common site of masculinising practices in many Western countries (1987, 1995). Archetti (1999)’s ethnography of Argentine men’s involvement with football, polo and tango showed how masculinity was represented in sports, and how these built the national identity. Also see Messner and Sabo eds. (1993).

credentials and the physical build of a man are not the dominant criteria by which masculinity is judged in contemporary Nanchong. Ironically, the reason why Nanchong is called one of the ten most violent cities in China is related to sports.

A CITY OF VIOLENCE

Several interlocutors mentioned to me that Nanchong was one of the ten most violent cities in China. Ranking charts on this subject can be easily found on the internet. However, no official source or definition was provided in these reports,³⁶ some of which claimed ambiguously that it was based on the number of criminal cases under police records. According to my interlocutors and some online reports, Nanchong had earned its title as a violent city in 1988, when groups of hooligans amongst an audience of 30,000 spectators of a football match started a mob after the Sichuan team lost its chance to advance to the next round in a national match.³⁷ I was told that the crowd got out of control because people were not used to big sports events in the city.

Anthropologists are conscious of the fact that what is perceived as a violent act may be perceived differently in other cultures (Gilmore 1978; Riches 1986). Violence defies easy categorisation; it is in the eye of the beholder: 'It can be everything and nothing' (Bourgois and Scheper-Hughes 2004: 2). This may partly explain people's ambivalence towards Nanchong's inclusion as a violent city. Some of my interlocutors agreed that Nanchong was a violent place and reminded me to be careful as a woman; to some, Nanchong was very peaceful; others recalled that triad societies were active in the past, but they had largely dissolved; still others described Nanchong as a terrible place, permeated by violent gossips. There is no uniform view as to what a 'violent city' means. Gossip, for instance, can be taken as an ordinary social time-killer; but it can also be considered a form of psychological and emotional violence (Sims 2008). Violence, like sport, is a common vantage point to study masculinity. What I set out to do for the rest of this chapter is to describe the violent interchanges that I observed and heard in Nanchong, and to analyse how those violent behaviours have a bearing on our understanding of masculinity. I start by giving an account of the various practices of violence which are consistently present in the city. These consist of what can be called 'low-level' violent activities

³⁶ Rankings can be found on the search machine Baidu.com. The 'ten most violent cities' varied year by year but not substantially; Nanchong always appeared on the list. The cities included in the latest 2014 ranking were: Shijiazhuang (Hebei Province), Nanchong (Sichuan), Neijiang (Sichuan), Ziyang (Sichuan), Anyang (Henan), Xiangtan (Hunan), Shaoyang (Hunan), Nanning (Guangxi), Dongguan (Guangdong), Huainan (Anhui).

³⁷ See details of the event on <http://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%8D%97%E5%85%85%E7%90%83%E8%BF%B7%E9%AA%9A%E4%B9%B1?fr=aladdin>

(Roche 2012) such as petty theft, street fighting, verbal threats of violence, and more serious gang confrontations which may involve weapons, and finally domestic violence. It can be seen that women also actively participate in violence, which defies the common expectation that they are always the victims whereas men are the perpetrators. I bring to light the contradictory nature of violence, which can be a means to exert the masculine identity as well as a source of emasculation.

Practices of everyday violence

Violence which is bred out of boredom seems to be quite common among youth. The teenage boy Alvin told me that every day at his school, there was a feud (*qundou* 群斗) waiting to happen. Some of the students were gang members. They would start a fight for no reason; it could be for fun or to intimidate fellow students whom they disliked or wanted to attract as members. Alvin was punched and tripped a number of times by those students. Some female students were also involved in these feuds. A nineteen-year-old girl who worked at a beauty salon told me how she and her classmates always brought knives with them when she was studying at a township school a few years ago. They once bullied a girl by taking off all her clothes and slapping her. She could not explain their behaviour apart from the fact that they felt bored, and that the victims 'look displeasing to our eyes' (*bu shunyan* 不顺眼). She and all the other students were 'left-behind children' at some point, with parents leaving home for migrant labour work (more about left-behind children in the next chapter). They felt deserted and unloved. The boredom at school and the small township made them, as the young woman said, trouble-seekers. A couple of older male adults conceded that they participated in street fighting when they were young, sometimes involving weapons. They also described that life was boring; they had to make things happen by 'finding trouble', again *zhao mafan* (找麻烦). One of the men was in his early forties already. He recalled that it was in the 1980s, when he was a teenager, that he always joined his friends in feuds (cf. Lamley 1990). They were influenced by movies from Hong Kong which romanticized the deeds and brotherhood of triad society members. They entered into fights without any particular reason, sometimes just to show their bravado in front of girls. I cross-checked other informants about street violence and violent activities at school; different answers were given. On the whole, I do not have sufficient data to reveal how common or how intense the problem is, but I certainly find the threats and display of violence more commonplace than what the leisurely reputation of the city suggests.

One day, I heard that a couple had returned to their apartment to find their home void of all their belongings. They were the only occupants who refused a compensation package from a developer who had bought the building. The developer hired gangsters to break into their home, move all the belongings to a truck which they dumped somewhere. At Guidu where I stayed,

there was a large conflict between the residents and the developer because a residents' clubhouse, which was promised in the buyers' contract, was not delivered. The developer decided to sell the site to a third party, leaving the structure of the clubhouse standing as a big 'empty shell' somewhere inside Guidu. The residents protested by organising neighbours to 'occupy' the clubhouse during day time. The conflict escalated to a point where the developer sent a group of gangsters to kick the residents out one day whilst they were preparing for a hotpot banquet at the venue. Several people were injured. Police came, but they simply forced everyone to go home. Until the day I left Nanchong, the 'clubhouse' was still an empty shell.

There were many more incidents related to gang activities during my time there. I knew a few men who worked in conjunction with these gang groups even though they did not seem to be highly organized. They called themselves '*shehuishang de ren* 社会上的人'.³⁸ For my safety and disinterest in this area as a research topic, I did not try to get close to their circles. However, I observed that a middle-aged neighbour who had operated an illegal video game centre and lending business had his house broken into one day. Another younger man who worked as a debt collector was forced to flee the city because he was purged by a rival group over disputes. The first man, Huang, told me that he was once able to operate the game centre because he married the daughter of a police chief and he was a gang member. But after their divorce and his subsequent withdrawal from gang connections, various parties demanded he make payments for protection and threatened violence otherwise. Both Huang and the debt collector told me how money and sex and brotherhood were glorified in their circles. A man recollected that when he was young, 'if a woman wanted something, I would get it for her even if it meant stealing and robbing.' Young men such as these could easily be lured in by gangs, the participation in which guaranteed them the support of a closely-tied group of brothers (*xiongdi*). Without question, they had to reciprocate the support when needed. Sometimes they would fight for parties who paid them for settling conflicts, just like the Guidu dispute over the clubhouse. I was familiar with one of the managers at the property management office. He claimed that the 'promise' of the clubhouse was open to interpretation. Many of the residents had used the clubhouse as an excuse simply to not pay management fees. For him, it was not wrong for the developer to resort to some violent actions; it is almost like using violence for righteousness.

Huang, the ex-gang member, told me that a good proportion of women in Nanchong adored men like him when he was a younger man. The girlfriend of the debt collector I mentioned above told me frankly that she loved macho men and did not mind them being 'gangster-like', as far as they could give respect and get respect in their own ways. There is a certain kind of fascination with martial masculinity. A man in his sixties told me that men had

³⁸ It means they are connected to what Boretz (2011: 33) describes as people in the *jianghu* (rivers and lakes), which is synonymous with the outlaw world of the 'dark path'.

to be hardened in their growing-up process, metaphorically explaining: 'Do you prefer to be the butcher's knife that chops the meat, or to be the meat being chopped?!' A violent attitude can be heard amongst women too, but always in the context of self-defence or righteousness. A very gentle woman I met at the gym told me that she had always instructed her teenage daughter to react forcefully if she was abused: 'I told her to retaliate. If there are stones around, take the stones; if there are bricks, take the bricks!' A woman recounted to me how she scolded and hit pickpockets who tried to steal from her handbag, 'I shouted very loudly to that short and lousy man, "Get away! You are not a man to try and steal money from a woman! You are not even a good pickpocket!"' Another woman told me how she beat the boyfriend of her mother who was betrayed after cohabiting with him for years after her divorce. She described graphically how she crawled on the man's back to hit him, throwing all the breakables she could see in his home against the wall out of rage. A close informant proudly said that when she was young and living in a village, she would beat up boys who jested at her deaf and mute mother; she felt a responsibility to protect her family by retaliating with force.

Retaliation is a common theme in these accounts of violence. In some cases, individuals feel powerless to defend their interests and they have to use force to fend off intimidation and threats. The local government is weak, negligent and corrupt, which further encourages people to take justice into their own hands. Apart from these, a cultural observation made by scholars is useful in explaining the use of violence. According to a study by Madsen (1990), who drew on the ethics of reciprocity (*bao*) explained by Yang Lien-sheng (1957), the politics of revenge demands that people should redress injuries done on them and their related ones. It is deemed to be almost like a responsibility: 'Stalwart people who dared to redress these injuries deserved to be considered heroes, like the knights-errant of old China' (1990: 188). Many famous Chinese novels are filled with horrifically violent scenes, and yet they exemplify the values of the chivalrous hero and homosocial friendship (Brandauer 1990; Harrell 1990; Huang 2006; Vitiello 2011). All these attest to the fact that there is a long Chinese tradition of representing violence in the name of righteousness, responsibility, brotherhood, and even honour, all of which are positive elements of the makeup of masculinity. On the other hand, people nowadays understand that violence is improper, illicit conduct. All those chivalrous images, no matter how heroic they can be, belong to the underworld and do not represent mainstream masculine values. The glory and honour a man gains from violent engagements are also fleeting. For men like Huang, they can feel emasculated when they grow older and lose their fighting capacity, virility, and in many cases also money, alongside their network of both male and female followers.

Domestic violence, responsibility, and ‘face’ (respect)

I have found child beating quite a common practice in Nanchong. From my apartment, I was woken by the noise of fathers disciplining their boys a few times very late at night. People such as Alvin and the beauty salon woman told me they were spanked and shamed by their parents severely. They conceded, however, that their parents were trying to discipline and teach them, just as their parents would say. Parents I spoke to concurred that children had to be punished if they ran astray; otherwise, they were not responsible parents. Teachers often beat students who misbehaved with rulers or other instruments on hand. Many interlocutors understood that corporeal punishment was not encouraged in modern societies or the big cities in China, but they could not find a better technique to discipline their children. At home, severe beatings were usually administered by fathers rather than mothers, and more on sons than daughters. Mothers were said to be more lenient and forgiving to children. Sons were said to be more disobedient. By the logic of a local idiom, parents have to ‘nurture a girl as if she is from a wealthy family (*nüde fuyang* 女的富养), nurture a boy as if he is a kid from a poor-family (*nande qiongyang* 男的穷养).’ In other words, girls can be pampered whereas boys have to be toughened up. Nevertheless, as the evidence I provided above shows, women in Nanchong are far from fragile and defenceless beings. Some would say that Sichuan women are generally tough and hot-tempered because of the hot and spicy food they eat; some refer to the hardships in rural lives and the heavy duties women must shoulder, which nurtures their toughness. Quite a few proudly reminded me that the only female Emperor in Chinese history came from a city in Sichuan!³⁹

Despite the fact that women in Nanchong appear to be stronger and more aggressive than what is usually expected of women, wife beating is not uncommon. A group of professional women I befriended in Nanchong consisted of lawyers and counsellors. Many of their female clients were victims of domestic violence. At one point during fieldwork, I dislocated my jaw. I persevered for six days before finally deciding that I needed to go back to Hong Kong for treatment. A neighbour became aware of this and insisted on bringing me to a massage parlour. Miraculously, the ‘doctor’ spent just about thirty seconds readjusting my jaw. I said casually that he must have cured many patients like me. The doctor replied, ‘Oh yes, there are quite many women coming for help.’ I asked why they had dislocated jaws, he said ‘because they had fights with their husbands!’ It is easy to assume that women are the victims in spousal abuse. However, my ethnographies suggest that quite a significant proportion of physical confrontations in Nanchong could be initiated by women. Several men reflected that they beat

³⁹ This is Wu Zetian 武则天 (624-705), who was born in Guangyuan, Sichuan.

their wives because their wives caused them to ‘lose face’⁴⁰. They sometimes explicitly used the word *mianzi*: ‘She does not save face for me (*bugeiwo mianzi* 不给我面子) in front of people’; or, ‘I don’t know where to put my face (*mianzi fangbuxia* 面子放不下)’. This issue deserves more discussion and attention at this point as it relates directly to the hegemonic masculinity in Nanchong.

As mentioned, women often make judgments on men in daily chats. Some wives complained about their husbands in front of their parents and in-laws, or even around their friends, which was a big loss of face for men. The complaints varied but centred around accusations that the husbands were not doing well enough in their marriages. Ting, the wife of the gambling man, humiliated Zhao in the presence of his elderly mother, which he found intolerable. Ting admitted that she was always the one who hit her husband first and he responded by fighting back. Being a man, Zhao hurt her more badly than the other way round. Another middle-aged man beat his wife because she always gambled. She had racked up debts which he had to find ways to repay, but then she accused her husband of giving her too small an amount of money as an allowance. The man was especially infuriated when she said this in front of his parents, making them feel they had a worthless son. The newsstand man, Tian, admitted that he hit and punched his wife when they had big disagreements. The wife enraged Tian by not treating his mother well and by siding with her own parents in times of conflict (more of this will be detailed in Chapter Six). His pride and ‘face’ were stripped by his wife. Huang, the ex-gang member I mentioned, beat his first wife when he discovered the affair she had had with another man. It was a big loss of face for him even though he admitted to having relationships with other women in the first place.

In some cultures, wife beating is justified as a responsibility for husbands to control their wives who behave against social norms (cf. Ghannam 2013). In China, however, wife beating is considered to be uncivilized and unmodernised, more so than child beating. Men would speak of their behaviour with embarrassment, not honour, even if they defended themselves as the one being provoked. This can cause a vicious circle because by committing violence against an intimate partner out of a loss of face, the man risks ‘losing more face’. These male perpetrators are frustrated by the fact that they are often blamed as irresponsible, dishonourable men whereas women are spared as victims. At the same time, the wife beaters, especially those who consider their wives to be women who make them lose face in public, are frustrated by a sense of powerlessness in satisfying or managing their wives. These bear some resemblance to the case studies in Gutmann’s work in Mexico. Gutmann (1996: 201) observed that many men exerted violence because they felt they were losing control over their wives who

⁴⁰ Hwang (1987) provides a detailed analysis of the concept of ‘face’ in Chinese culture. The literature on gifts and reciprocity in China also typically reference the concern of ‘face’.

had gained growing independence from men. Overall, Nanchong men reckon that in modern society, the use of violence is no longer a legitimate means to treat family members, even when those members are supposed to subordinate to them.

VIOLENCE, LEISURE, AND THE ABLE-RESPONSIBLE MAN: A SUMMARY

Based on the limited empirical data that I have obtained, I am nowhere close to being able to assess how justifiable it is for Nanchong to be considered one of the ten most violent cities in China. I do have a strong impression, however, that violent interchanges of a verbal and physical kind are everyday events in the city. People share a sense of unease over the roughness and backwardness of their city. This sense of unease may well be influenced by the discourse of '*suzhi*' (quality), which has been building since the late 1980s in China. As highlighted by Anagnost (1997: 77-78), the issue of 'low quality' has come to signify the root cause of China's failure in making itself a strong nation, there is 'a new sense of mission to remodel the Chinese people from a state of backwardness and ignorance'. Good *suzhi* is directly opposed to the use of uncivilized means of violence. The notion of the 'able-responsible man', which hinges on qualities of competence and the moral ethics of responsibility, would naturally reject violent behaviour because it is raw, hurtful and denigrating. Nevertheless, there are times when the use of violence is deemed to be righteous (such as to bring order to a place or to support brothers in trouble), responsible (such as disciplining a child or protecting related ones from being harassed), and 'face-saving' (such as retaliating when one's honour is threatened). It is well said by Jeff Hearn (2012: 602) that 'Constructions of men and masculinity may be quite contradictory, with complex connections between "responsibility" and "violence", "honour" and "violence", "respect" and "violence".... All these combinations contribute to the construction to men.'

I have in this chapter delineated what leisure and violence – in all its local specificity – mean, and how they are expressed in everyday social lives. The dilemmas which are generated around the notions of leisure and violence point to the anxieties people face in a small, peripheral and rough city. The boring and non-productive daily lives do not fit into the ethos of progression and modernity which are promoted on a national level. Men's entitlement to leisure and free time is linked to their productivity as an able-responsible man, of which many fall short. The rough and marginal geographical, economic and political environment in Nanchong has prompted a permission to use force to achieve self and communal interests. Martial masculinity and the associated ethics of honour and righteousness are endorsed even by some women. However, violent solutions are discredited for being uncivilized in the modern era. They certainly do not deliver the values of an able-responsible man.

The remainder of this thesis will continue to show how masculinity is defined and negotiated in Nanchong. These illuminate further the power of social chat in shaping public discourse, the pressure for men to engage productively with leisure, the impulse to use violence as unruly but justifiable solutions, and the reinforcement of hierarchical relationships in the social and gender order. We will begin by exploring youth masculinity.

CHAPTER 3: TROUBLING TEENAGE BOYS

The world is yours, and also ours, but in the end it is yours. Young people are in the bloom of life, just like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. [Our] hopes are placed on you. (Chairman Mao, speaking to a group of over 2,000 Chinese students studying in Moscow, 17 November 1957)⁴¹

The verse ‘the world is yours, and also ours, but in the end it is yours’⁴² was sung loudly and proudly to me by an old man whilst we were chatting about his two properties. The old man, Xia, wanted to explain to me why it did not bother him how much stake he owned in the properties he had bought together with his son and daughter. It was less important that he contributed a relatively small amount of money than that, in the end, the properties would belong to his children and grandchildren, with whom the future lied. ‘Children are the future’ is a well-known truism which has been used in many times and places (Cole and Durham 2008: 21). Nonetheless, I was stunned when Xia communicated his point to me because his answer came in the shape of a ‘red song’, and the lyric was composed of that famous verse from Chairman Mao. Xia was in his late sixties. He would have been in his twenties when the Cultural Revolution broke out, and when Mao mobilized the youths in the country to become Red Guards – the young proletarian fighters who were told by Mao that ‘it is right to rebel’ and who would resort to all sorts of violent means to eradicate the old and the repressive. I could sense Xia’s affection and regard for Mao when he sang the ‘red song’.

There are good reasons to begin with Mao in exploring boyhood or male youth⁴³ in China. Mao revolutionized the status of youth in the family and the country; he also radically

⁴¹ The visit to Moscow was made by Chairman Mao and a group of his senior statesmen including Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai. <http://www.todayonhistory.com/11/17/MaoZhuXiShuo-ShiJieShiNiMenDe-YeShiWoMenDe-DanShiGuiGenJieDiShiNiMenDe.html>.

⁴² In Chinese: *shijie shi nimende, yeshi womende, danshi guigenjiedi shi nimende* 世界是你们的，也是我们的，但是归根结底是你们的。 This is a famous saying of Chairman Mao, and the verse was used in a ‘red song’ (*hongge* 红歌) – songs which were composed to praise Chairman Mao and revolutionary China.

⁴³ Numerous terms are used to refer to young people in China. There is no strict and uniform way of differentiating one term from another. Roughly, young children under the age of ten may be called *ertong* 儿童, *xiaohai* 小孩, or *haizi* 孩子. They become adolescents (*shaonian* 少年) between the age of ten and sixteen, and young adults (*qingnian* 青年) from seventeen to their mid-twenties. From about fourteen to twenty, they are described as *qingshaonian* 青少年 or *xiaoqingnian* 小青年. Seniors may refer to young people as ‘children’ for life, even if they have no blood relations. Boys and girls are denoted by adding the character ‘*nan*’ 男 or ‘*nü*’ 女 to the above terms. In this chapter, I use the terms ‘children’, ‘youth’ and ‘young people’ interchangeably.

redefined gender relations and the representations of femininity and masculinity in his time. Mao was himself an exemplary man, but he forcefully promoted a selfless young soldier, Lei Feng, as the new model man. For decades, Lei Feng's hard work, loyalty, subservience and sacrificial deeds would make him the perfect model of revolutionary masculinity, which both men and women were supposed to emulate⁴⁴. The masculine ideal of the 'able-responsible man', which I explore in this thesis, is completely different from that promoted by Mao. It shows that hegemony is 'a historically mobile relation' (Connell 2005: 77), so that the hegemonic 'ideal man' can be reworked according to circumstances. In the next section, I provide a very brief outline of the changes to youth and gender under Mao and in the post-Mao period. The historical transformation helps us make sense of the present. By comparing masculinities in the past and the present, we can also see clearly that hegemonic masculinity in China is not only socially constructed, but also politically crafted.

Following this brief historical account, I investigate the ways in which the notion of the 'able-responsible man' has framed the hopes and expectations vested in male youth, and the varied efforts of young people to deal with those expectations. In the two ethnographic cases I provide, it will become evident that in some areas, boys accommodate what is envisioned by their parents as the characteristics of an acceptably good young man (or a good child); in other areas, they contest and try to liberate themselves from the demands. I follow Durham (2008)'s view that youth have agency, but what is more significant to an anthropological inquiry is to explore the kind of agency that is manifested in specific social and cultural environments. In Durham's study in Botswana, the youths were agentive but in ways which were different from what the author described as the 'interesting – and agentive – anthropological youth' of many Western societies, who were usually assumed to enact qualities of independence, leadership, creativity, resistance and rebellion (2008: 157, 165).⁴⁵ The teenage boys in my research were self-aware and self-reflective, and they exercised agency in creating paths which deviated from their parents' wishes. Nevertheless, their approach was conciliatory and practical, with one boy being more rebellious than another. Similar to the youth in Botswana, they pursued 'interdependence' in the adult world rather than 'independence'. Interestingly, the hallmarks of the 'anthropological youth' which Durham pinpointed could be found in the young Mao, to whom I now turn.

⁴⁴ See Hinsch 2013: 152-153; Bakken 2000: 185.

⁴⁵ A similar point is expressed by Ghannam in her study in Egypt. She concludes, in a chapter on boyhood, that 'we do not see the opposition between individual and society that structures conceptions of individuality in the West and that regards agency "as the capacity to realize one's own interest against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles"' (2013: 56).

GENDER AND YOUNG MASCULINITY IN THE RECENT PAST OF CHINA

According to the famous biography written by Edgar Snow (1937), Mao was a rebellious youth. He ran away from school at the age of ten because the teacher was 'harsh and severe, frequently beating his students' (ibid: 127). At the age of thirteen, he had two open conflicts with his father who accused him of unfilial conduct and laziness. He later refused an arranged marriage. Mao said that he had learnt to hate his father, a small merchant who became a landowner and who demanded that his son follow in his footsteps. Mao was close to his mother who opposed the 'Ruling Power' (his father) but only in quiet ways. The following reveals the revolutionary thoughts which took shape in Mao's young mind. Also in this account, Mao talked about his 'discovery' of the kind of masculine heroes which had traditionally dominated in China:

I [Mao] continued to read the old romances and tales of Chinese literature. It occurred to me one day that there was one thing peculiar about these stories, and that was the absence of peasants who tilled the land. All the characters were warriors, officials or scholars; there was never a peasant hero. I wondered about this for two years, and then I analysed the content of the stories. I found that they all glorified men of arms, rulers of the people, who did not have to work the land, because they owned and controlled it and evidently made the peasants work it for them. (ibid: 130)

Mao enchanted and empowered a generation of youths to rebel. Historian Xu Luo reflected on his mentality as a youth at that time: 'I pledged my unconditional loyalty to Chairman Mao, trained myself to be a "revolutionary successor", and devoted my young life to the Communist cause' (Xu 2010: 144). Mao actually empowered the whole peasant class, including men and women, to establish a totally new regime. His attention to women's rights and power was especially unprecedented. In his *Report on the peasant movement in Hunan* (1927), Mao specified 'four thick ropes binding the Chinese people, particularly the peasants'. They were the authorities of the state, the clan, the supernatural system, and the masculine (the husband). He urged for the overthrow of these four authorities which he said embodied the whole feudal-patriarchal ideological system in China.⁴⁶

Women appeared to have gained equal rights with men in Mao's time. But instead of dealing with real structural issues of inequality, Mao pushed for equality by masculinizing women according to the normative standard of men. Anything overtly feminine was condemned as feudal and counterrevolutionary. Women became 'Iron Girls' who would

⁴⁶ The Report can be found in many publications. The above citation is from Cheek 2002: 62.

contribute to the construction of socialism.⁴⁷ On the other hand, the neutralization of gender and the oppressive political order disempowered men and left many feeling emasculated. A sense of impotence hit men in the 1980s and 1990s with the end of the Mao era and the opening up of China. Feeling disillusioned by communist promises, and incited by the modernization programmes and increasing exposure to the images of foreign men, there was a collective urge to pursue 'real manhood'.⁴⁸ I foregrounded in the Introduction that a new manly ideal, defined by wealth, was reconstructed in the post-reform period. In the new millennium, a moral ethos of responsibility was injected into the masculine ideal, henceforth the able-responsible man. For the remainder of the chapter, I examine how male youths are made conscious of this current dominant masculine ideal and how they respond to it. This generation of youth have come of age under the one-child policy and the volatility created by the countrywide rural-to-urban labour migration. Both boys in the ethnographies are the only sons in their families and grew up with absent parents for a significant period of time.

LEFT-BEHIND CHILDREN AND THE ONLY SONS

I have explained that Nanchong had supplied many migrant labour workers in the past. The trend for the city to attract migrants and returnees only began in the last decade. The majority of interlocutors I met in the age range of ten to twenty, from rich or poor families, were left-behind children at some points in their lives.⁴⁹ This is a category which has received extensive attention in academia as well as in popular media. Many studies have set out to investigate the extent of 'harm' done to children, in other words how children are victimized as a result of separation from parents. Surveys have found that China's children suffered from a range of

⁴⁷ For the development of femininity (and masculinity) in the Maoist and post-Mao eras, see Honig and Hershatter 1988, Hershatter 2004, Brownell 2000 and Mann 2011 who provide detailed historical accounts. See Judd 1994, 2002 for gender relationships in family contexts; Evans 1996, 1997, 2008b for cultural representations of femininities.

⁴⁸ See Zhong 2000; Brownell 2000: 212-213; Baranovitch 2003: 112-144; Zhang Xinkui 2011; Hinsch 2013: 155-160; Zhang Hongjie 2013; Song and Hird 2014: 7-13.

⁴⁹ Various definitions of 'left-behind children' (*liushou ertong* 留守儿童) are used in the media and scholarly field. It is generally defined as those who live in rural areas with one or both their parents leaving them behind to work elsewhere. According to the 2008 report of the All-Women's Federation, there were 58 million rural left-behind children under the age of fifteen: <http://gongyi.sohu.com/20140904/n404065868.shtml> (also see Beh and Ye 2012). The left-behind children I met in Nanchong are mostly registered (in their *hukou*) as 'urban' residents, therefore they may not be included in the official figures.

problems related to health, academic abilities, moral character and behaviour.⁵⁰ The government has shown growing concern for the ‘mental health’ of the nation’s children and therefore stepped up attempts to recover a free and playful childhood (Naftali 2010). Parallel to the worries on left-behind children would be the earlier concern over single children coming of age. Numerous publications by mainland Chinese and foreign researchers have revealed a wide range of issues related to the one-child policy. Vanessa Fong was one of the first to focus on the everyday life experiences of single children, and she pointed out some unexpected outcomes of the one-child policy such as the empowerment of urban daughters (2002, 2004).⁵¹

It is easy to assume that children are victimized in those unusual circumstances when they grow up with an absence of or dramatically fewer siblings than in the past, and when they have to spend childhood away from their parents. Whilst these are to certain extent true, we should not underestimate young people’s ability to adapt and to collaborate with their parents in these difficult circumstances; nor should we lose sight of the fact that children are also at times responsible for creating the difficulties which they encounter in their lives. The temptation to see children always as victims has to be carefully attuned because children are ‘not only aggressed against but also aggressors’ (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007: 242);⁵² ‘we need to confront the messiness and untidiness of social reality, not reduce it’ (ibid: 245). My ethnographic gaze is on two teenage boys aged fifteen and sixteen. They are subject to social and historical influences, and yet they are also capable of giving shape to their relationships and their lives. I endeavour to assess from the children’s own perspectives what the predicaments which they experience mean for them. I show that there are ‘alternative ways of doing boy’ (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2002: 50) amidst a messy and untidy social reality that is sometimes created by adults, sometimes by themselves. I also direct ethnographic concern towards the performative aspect of boyhood. Boys, like grown-up men, are conscious of their male performativity. This is the age when they start to form their subjectivities of the kind of look and performance that would make them more ‘like a man’, and their perceptions always differ from those of their parents.

⁵⁰ A vast literature on this topic is available. Majority of the studies used questionnaire surveys and random interviews and do not delve into the subjective experiences of left-behind children (Liu Zhijun 2009). Just to name a few which contain good background information: Duan and Zhou 2005; Liu and Zhu 2011; Beh and Ye 2012; Hu, Lu and Huang 2014; Zhou, Murphy and Tao (2014).

⁵¹ Scholarship of the one-child policy started from the angle of human rights and governmentality (e.g. Wong 1984; Greenhalgh 1986; Aird 1990; Mosher 1993; Rigdon 1996). From the late 1990s, more and more writers found a population that accepted the policy (e.g. Milwertz 1997; White 2006; Hardee, Xie and Gu 2004). Scholarly interest later shifted to the lived experience of different groups of people under the policy (e.g. Fong 2004, McLoughlin 2005, Deutsch 2006; Goh 2011).

⁵² For an anthropological perspective of the study of children and youth, see Montgomery (2009) and Waterson and Behera (2011).

The first informant I am going to introduce is called Alvin, the son of the bakery couple whom I mentioned in the previous two chapters. The second informant, Yifan, is the son of the manager of a beauty salon I frequented. I came to know the two boys quite well, partly because of their parents. In the case of Alvin, his parents Sun and Pan always wanted me to coach their troublesome boy, on his studies as well as his 'attitude'. The couple had invested a lot of money and energy in developing Alvin; they set high hopes on him as their only son (they have two elder daughters, a point I will explain later). However, Alvin presented them with many 'juvenile problems': inattentive study, mediocre exam results, frivolous consumption habits, indulgence in the internet and mobile media, and confrontational behaviour. Sun and Pan thought that I could be a role model to their son. I impressed them as somebody who did well in both my studies and my career. They always told Alvin that he had to 'learn from Auntie Wang' (*xuexue Wang ah yi*). Nobody in Nanchong had heard of the London School of Economics, but they assumed that to be able to pursue a doctoral degree in London was something remarkable. Sun, Pan and my other close informants also judged that I had had a good career, meaning a job with a good salary, since I was able to retire to study and I could afford a rather expensive flat by Nanchong living standards.⁵³ Having the blessing of his parents does not mean that one can get close to a teenager; it can even be counter-productive. However, for about a year, Alvin and I were very good friends. His sister did not live in Nanchong, making him essentially a single child in the family. We occasionally went out on Sundays, his rest day from school, but usually, we met at lunchtime in their bakery shop or late in the evening when he came back from school. One thing which helped was that Alvin was very keen to learn about the outside world. He saw me as a window to the West. He enjoyed testing his English and his understanding of the wider world by chatting with me. I took him or allowed him to take me to his choice of movies or restaurants. Slowly, Alvin confided to me his problems, his stresses and questions in life. His mother would check with me how Alvin was doing and whether he mentioned any rows in their family. The couple occasionally sought my opinion on issues. As an ethnographer, I tried to stay neutral as a listener and avoided giving opinions. However, this was at times impossible. I found myself being more sympathetic to Alvin most of the time. However, towards the end of the fieldwork, I started to feel more for the parents and ended up distancing myself from the boy.

My association with Yifan was simpler. His mother, Chen Hui, moved from another Sichuan city called Guangyuan to work in Nanchong. Yifan lived with his grandparents most of the time after his parents divorced. He was the sole child in the family and was much loved.

⁵³ This was a three-bedroom flat with a monthly rental of RMB1,200, which is very low compared to accommodation in bigger mainland cities such as Shanghai.

After taking the high school entrance exam (*zhongkao* 中考), he came to Nanchong to spend his summer vacation. Yifan shared a bedroom with his mother and another female staff member at the beauty salon. Being a homebound boy and new to Nanchong, Yifan dared not go out on his own and spent all his time on the smart phone which his mother would let him use whilst she was at work. In due course, I became his only friend in Nanchong. Chen Hui was all too happy for me to take her son out for a meal, a movie, or just a walk with an ice-cream treat at the KFC nearby. Yifan's interest was not global but regional. He was very keen to ask me about Hong Kong and other big cities in China. He also delighted in my interest in what he knew. I went with Yifan and his mother to Guangyuan and stayed with them for almost a week. Even though I saw Yifan for only two months, his mother kept feeding me with news of her son. As a result, I learnt about the teenage boy from his own perspective and the perspective of his mother, and by briefly participating in their family life in Guangyuan.

These two young men informed me on a number of issues. The first one concerns effeminacy. The parents of both Alvin and Yifan were troubled because their sons were 'not like a man'. The fact that the two boys are the only male heir in the family (and in the case of Yifan the only child) means that their parents' expectations on them would be even higher. Alvin was also called a 'sissy' by his peers. In this chapter, I will analyse the indigenous interpretation of an effeminate boy, and examine how boys cope with the constant reminders and accusations that they are not meeting the manly standard. A defining factor of young masculinity is academic success, which opens a pathway for one to become an able-responsible man. Boys learn at an early school age the importance of academic achievement, which promises access to a respectable job, handsome economic returns, a good wife and a satisfying family life. But what happens if young people are not interested in academic pursuits or if they fail in their studies? How anxious are they when the most 'normal' route for upward mobility is blocked by underachievement? Can they develop alternative masculinities which transcend the dominant perceptions of what makes a boy acceptably male? Moreover, I explore how the subjectivities of left-behind children are constituted in a continuously shifting web of relationships with different kinsmen or caretakers. How do they make sense of their seemingly unstable and unpredictable social world? Overall, the trajectories of Alvin and Yifan may paint a picture of them as victims of the education system, labour migration, the one-child policy, coercion of hegemonic masculinity, and even promises of globalization. However, victimization or marginalization does not seem to be the subjective experience of the two teenage boys. My research shows that they are effective agents who manage to negotiate the constraints and possibilities in the face of different events in their lives.

A MAVERICK TEENAGER

Alvin has a sister seven years his senior, and a second sister, whom their parents gave away to a friend after she was born because they did not want to raise a second child. However, when Pan got pregnant again and was told by the doctor that this time it would be a boy, they became very excited. Sun recalled the moment to me, 'I said, let's go home quickly and have this baby born!' Sun was a hard-working man; graduated from college by studying part-time. Pan had only a few years of primary education. Theirs was an arranged marriage. Sun told me that his father liked Pan because she was very strong and she worked the fields diligently. When Sun resisted the arrangement, his father hit him in the face with a wooden stool and threatened that he would not support Sun in finishing his university programme if he refused to marry. Sun submitted. The couple moved to the city in the early 1990s. Sun successfully ran a Western-style steakhouse after working in restaurants. When Alvin was ten years old, Sun had a relationship with another woman and almost broke up with Pan, but the divorce did not proceed. Hoping to change the situation, Sun decided to go to Malaysia with two relatives as a migrant worker. Pan insisted on going with him. After much deliberation, they decided to leave their two children with Pan's sister and left for Malaysia. The couple spent close to three years there before returning to open a bakery shop in Nanchong.

Alvin and his sister moved from the city to a township to stay with their uncle and aunt. His sister and cousins were living in dormitories at that time, leaving Alvin mostly alone with his uncle and aunt. The uncle had a retail business and seldom spent time at home. The aunt played mahjong every day. She was so engrossed in the game that she often did not cook for Alvin, who would be given some money to eat out. Alvin felt very lonely in those days until he found music, which was therapeutic for him. He said that in those solitary days, he found composure only when he had his headphones on, 'I felt like somebody was talking to me'. From then on, music became his biggest hobby. He always had his headphones on when he slept.

Despite the aunt not acting like a careful guardian, Alvin was close to her. When I was not so familiar with the family but sufficiently well acquainted with them, Pan told me one day that she felt very sad because her son did not feel comfortable calling her 'mom' (or *ma* in Chinese). He was more used to referring to Pan's sister as mom. I noticed that Alvin became closer and closer to his mother as the year passed. He would comb Pan's hair and say in a loving voice, 'Your hair used to be all black; but it has turned so grey now.' Later on, Alvin even started to help his mother dye her hair. He sometimes crossed his arms across Pan's shoulders from behind; Pan would smile sweetly at him. Alvin's relation with his father, however, went from bad to worse. They disagreed on everything. Since Alvin's youth, Sun had had the habit of beating him when he did not perform well or when he did something wrong; his

motto was, ‘A good person is born from the sting of the stick (*huangjinbang xia chu haoren* 黄金棒下出好人)’. Alvin once ran away after a big fight with his father and slept in a park for the whole night. He still felt lingering shame from the day when his parents stripped him naked and left him outside the flat. Another time, he was beaten by Sun with a leather belt until the buckle came off. Sun told me he found Alvin so annoying that he always wanted to beat him. I strongly advised him not to do it again. Sun told me one day as a joke that he could no longer defeat his son in a fight (*da buguo erzi* 打不过儿子) as Alvin was now taller and stronger than him. Alvin told me he would lose the fight only if he chose to give in, or if his parents joined forces against him.

Reflecting on their ‘troubling son’ (*hen fan de erzi* 很烦的儿子), the couple always wondered if his behaviour was caused by their move to Malaysia, ‘but it was only a matter of two or three years.’ They could not comprehend how these few years of absence could be so critical. Alvin also doubted whether his rebellious character and bad relationship with his father were due to his parents’ migration. He seemed to feel more resentful towards his father for his unloving attitude towards his mother. Alvin hated his father for always complaining about his mother’s stupidity. In my presence, he accused Sun of buying a smartphone for himself while insisting on a cheap ‘elderly handset’ (*laorenji* 老人机) for his mother. He criticized his father for being an old-fashioned Chinese man who resolved everything through building *guanxi*. For example, one day Alvin told me how he was bullied by his classmates; I suggested that he should consult his father. Alvin replied that what his father knew was to buy people cigarettes or a meal - the traditional way of building relationships or achieving reconciliation. Sun felt powerless in mending the gap between him and his son. He contended their differences could be a result of Alvin’s absorption of Western culture.

Vanity and effeminacy

Alvin is tall and fit; he has manners like a cosmopolitan guy; he talks to people freely and confidently as an adult, he always has a point to make, and he expresses himself well. Even his father said that his son never lacked in verbal skills. What makes Alvin stand out even more is his embodiment of Western culture.

Alvin studied at a private school that was famous for its strict discipline. Sun told me that it was favoured by parents who did not have time to look after their children and who wanted to delegate this role to the school. Sun also sent Alvin to an English learning institute. Apart from regular classes, he attended the spring and summer camps which the institute organized in Chengdu. These cost the parents horrendous sum of money, but Sun was dedicated to grooming his only son for excellence. English capability is a critical skill set for students

wishing to find a good job in the future. The acquisition of foreign cultures also grants the children and their parents a ticket to class differentiation (Kipnis 2011a, 2011b). However, after two years at the English institute, Sun regretted that Alvin had picked up some unwelcome culture and lifestyle from his classmates and teachers. Alvin became very fond of foreign brands and had developed expensive tastes. He would ask for a pair of Adidas trainers which cost over RMB600, and a Vans rucksack and T-shirt. I had seen him quarrelling with his mother several times when he did not get the money he wanted. More often than not, the couple gave in whenever their son asked. Sun told me one day that Alvin had returned from a summer camp which cost him a fortune; Alvin was excited by the trip and kept boasting how many cowboy caps he had received from the participants as a kind of exchange or souvenir. Sun could not figure out what was so intriguing about those caps. He worried that his son was too materialistic and superficial; he lacked ambition in his studies and career. He was afraid that Alvin was becoming a useless, unaccomplished person.

Alvin admired things from Western culture. He once expressed admiration for a Spanish teacher who encouraged the students to pursue their dreams boldly, instead of burying themselves in their books. The teacher had travelled to different parts of the world and found jobs as she landed in new places and ran out of money, which Alvin envied as something unimaginable for Chinese. His English was exceptionally good by Nanchong standards. He told me a few times of his frustrations with their English teachers, whom he thought could not even pronounce English words properly. He had adopted some 'Western' mannerisms such as opening a door for ladies and eating comfortably with a knife and fork. He once told me that his classmates criticized him for being arrogant and vain (*xurong* 虚荣) for his adoration of Western culture (*chongyang* 崇洋). These criticisms did not bother him too much, though he asked me if I found his overt preference for Western culture over Chinese culture vain. The image Alvin embodied became increasingly metrosexual in the six months after we first met. He did away with his track suits with loud cartoon characters on them, and replaced them with tight-fitting tops, pants and jeans, usually in black or navy blue. He also reduced his intake of snacks when he learnt that they were very fattening. Instead, he indulged in three bottles of yogurt drinks every day, which Pan complained was becoming unaffordable. Sun was very concerned about his son's increasing consumption and materialism.

The second time I met up with Alvin, he asked me for the meaning of the English word 'sissy', which his classmates had called him in English. The newsstand man, Tian, also criticized Alvin's androgynous look. One evening, Alvin appeared on the street with a silky scarf which I did not even notice. Tian saw it and said, 'Won't you take that thing off your neck? It makes you look like not-a-male and not-a-female (*bunan bunü de* 不男不女的)!' Alvin was

embarrassed. He told me many times that he was bullied by some tough rascals (*hunhun* 混混) in the school. He was hit and challenged to fight, or harassed verbally. Some classmates who were not *hunhun* also mocked him as ‘sissy’. He found the term and the tone of his classmates unpleasant and asked me if the English word ‘sissy’ meant ‘gay’. It appeared to me that people who called him sissy used the word with different connotations. I thought that he did not want to be associated with being gay. Gradually, I understood that this was not the point. Alvin detested the girly association of being timid, fragile, unassertive and small-minded, but he did not resist being perceived to be gay. He was curious about the status of homosexuals in the West. He found two of his classmates who had ‘come out’ as gay to be very trendy and righteous: ‘Many university students, especially those in big cities like Shanghai and Chengdu, do this [coming out] nowadays.’ He indicated he was not gay. He was indeed very disappointed when the top girl in another class, whom he had dated for some time, suggested that they were not compatible. He admitted that quite a few girls were after him though he was attracted to only that one. Despite his interest in girls, he did not mind being seen as having a ‘gay look’. Homosexuals may represent a kind of individuality, difference, culture, passion and modernity (Kong 2010) that is attractive to young people like Alvin. What Alvin resisted was the image of being feeble and ineffective, which was his father’s perception of him.

Sun complained that Alvin did not have ‘a male heart (*xiongxin* 雄心)’; he wanted his son to be more ‘hot-blooded’ (*you xuexing* 有血性). In other words, he found Alvin a bit petty, soft, cowardly, and short of ambition and ‘proper male passions’ in life. Alvin was attracted to idols in the trivial entertainment business, but not more serious stuff such as politics and social affairs. He never worked hard or showed a competitive spirit; he did not feel responsible for his future. Despite the fact that Alvin looked tall and fit, and that he was extremely confident in riding a motorbike,⁵⁴ he nearly failed a physical education exam. He did not enjoy any kinds of sports. To train his boy, Sun took Alvin up a mountain when he was about twelve years old; he forced Alvin to do push-ups on a slope. Alvin recalled the incident to me and said he freaked out and cried miserably. His father threatened to abandon him on the mountain if he could not finish his push-ups. A woman passed by, saw what was happening and advised Sun to treat his son more kindly. Sun told me that his priority was not his son’s physique, but his perseverance, tolerance of pain, and a will to push forward and test his limit. These were all what he referred to as being ‘hot-blooded’. In this sense, masculinity is close to, but not identical to the merit of *wu* which emphasizes martial valour and physical rather than mental strength (Louie 2002; Boretz 2011). What Sun wanted from his boy was more of a tough mind than a tough body. He

⁵⁴ Many schoolboys of Alvin’s age can ride a motorbike (*dianpingche* 电瓶车, which is operated by battery) and use it to commute to save time. I hardly saw girls do the same. Alvin had taken me on the bike which belonged to his parents many times when we went out.

did not require his boy to be a macho and brawny male or a hero-warrior; but he wanted ambition, boldness, endurance and determination, which can be summarized by the Chinese term *gangjian* 刚健⁵⁵. These qualities are also essential for one to sustain the harshness of study and succeed in a competitive society. Alvin said that he understood what his father considered important and he almost agreed with him. Sun was also strict on his sister and wanted her to have a good career, but the overall expectations were different. In many ways, Sun's wishes for his two children reinforced the traditional views on gender difference (see Kim and Fong et al. 2010). Despite these understandings, Alvin felt that his father's methods and means to train and discipline him were wrong.

Conciliation for a future of hope

After meeting the family in October 2013, I was reminded now and then that Alvin was to attend *zhongkao* in May 2014. From Monday to Saturday, he had to attend school from 8:45 in the morning until 10:15 at night with a lunch break in between. At noon time, Alvin would come back and eat at the shop and then browse the computer. His parents would always push him to go back home and take a nap. They controlled Alvin's daily regime closely. Pan told me Alvin's results slipped because he was under some bad influence from his classmates, especially girls. A girl came by their apartment for a surprise visit one day, only to be scolded away by Pan. Pan went to the school to observe Alvin's attendance in class from time to time, a practice common among some parents. They got so concerned that Sun installed a camera in Alvin's bedroom to monitor if he was studying. Alvin knew that he was under constant surveillance (*jianshi* 监视). A few months before the exam, the couple took away their son's headphone and handset to keep him more attentive. Pan pushed me to tell Alvin the dire consequences of not studying well. Sun never asked me to do so; he himself continuously threatened his son that if he failed in the exam, he would not be able to enrol in a good school and the chance of entering university would become slim; following that, he would have to join the ordinary working class and become an ordinary man for life. I felt Alvin was burned out by tiredness and pressure. One day, he ran away because his father said that his results were so mediocre that he could be 'as inferior as dirt between the toes of *so and so* (some bright children they knew)'. After two days, the boy called his mother, asking her to meet him and give him some money. He was staying in a guest house. I went to meet him in a shopping street with Pan. He refused to go home and

⁵⁵ *Gangjian* means hard, strong and resilient. Xu Jiexun (1999) considered *gangjian* to be a crucial personality trait embraced in Chinese culture. He cited from *Yi Jing*: 'A gentleman is one who ceaselessly strengthen himself', and *Tze-Lu* of the Analects: 'The firm, the enduring, the simple, and the modest are near to virtue.' (Xu ed. 1999: 51-59).

quickly escaped from us after getting the money. He returned home after a week. Sun promised that he would not upset his son until he finished the exam.

As the exam proceeded, I went to the bakery shop every day. Alvin gave the impression that he was doing well. The results would not be released until early August. In the meantime, students had to start applying for schools. It was another round of anxious competition. For example, the best school is called Nanchong Senior Middle School; any student can make an application and attend an entrance exam by paying a fee. Acceptance is based on the results of the entrance exam and that of the *zhongkao*. One who cannot reach the required 'marks' may be admitted by paying a fee; the lower the marks, the more one has to pay. Students will not want to waste money if their marks are too far off. At that time, Alvin expressed a strong wish to go overseas to study. Two boys in his class, including the son of a pastor I mentioned (Chapter Two), had been accepted by overseas schools. Sun calculated the costs with Alvin and said there was no way that the family would be able to afford it. The family discussed and decided together that Alvin would apply for three senior middle schools, two of which are top schools in Mianyang city, which is famous for its 'education enterprise' (the production of many high-ranking schools on a national basis). He would also apply for the top school in Nanchong. I went to Mianyang with Alvin and his sister. On that day, I sat together with tens of thousands of parents or relatives around the campus when the students sat the exam paper. At 5:30pm, Alvin came out and said in despair that he would fail. He was right, and, what was worse, he did not pass the exams for the two other schools either. He thought he could stay in his original school, but a further blow came when his *zhongkao* result did not even meet the entry requirement of that school. It looked as though he had no other options; however, a couple of weeks later, Sun got his son into a school ranked average in Nanchong, through *guanxi* (the idea which Alvin had said he loathed) and paying a sum of money.

Life went on as usual for the family, but Alvin became more reclusive and quiet than before, seeming to have lost his pride and cheerfulness. Sun and Pan, however, were unperturbed. I asked Sun why they had tried the top three schools knowing that Alvin had not done so well in school. Sun gave a very strange response, 'I want him to learn a lesson. He has always been overly confident in himself; he thought life was easy. Now he knows how hard he has to work for it!' I am not sure if that was a genuine answer or not, but indeed Alvin had learnt a painful lesson. After maybe a few months, Alvin seemed to have readjusted. However, he became even more lax with his studies and he spent more on consumer goods. He even started to borrow money from me. I tried to remind him of his priorities, and advised him to appreciate that his parents' money was hard-earned. I could sense Alvin's gradual withdrawal from me. When I revisited Nanchong after a year, Alvin had succeeded in convincing his

parents to pay for his enrolment in a DJ training course. He explained to me the prospect of becoming a DJ for an English radio channel. He hoped this would be his destiny. It was still important for him to enter a university, but he was sure that he would not be just another professional like an accountant or a lawyer, which was the dream his father had for him. He was going to pursue his own dream. Sun had huge reservations. Nevertheless, as he always said, he had to give what he could afford to his dear son. With a note of pessimism, he said that Alvin had to be responsible for his own future after he was done with the higher education entrance examination (*gaokao*). He was less insistent on what he thought was right for his son, but he knew too well that his son would continue to need his support and occasional disciplinary guidance.

For more than a year, I saw Alvin and his family going through a roller-coaster journey of anticipation and anxiety. Alvin told me positively the last time we met that his father had promised to send him to an overseas university if he could pass *gaokao* with high marks. It is not clear whether eventually Alvin will be able to study overseas, or even enter a local university. What is clear is that whatever he ends up doing in the next stage in life, it will be a future that the young man has actively negotiated as a child. He is determined not to be an ordinary man; and as a fully engaged social actor, he has affected those around him in substantive ways. Alvin can be called a young rebel, but in completely different ways from the young rebels under Mao's regime. He fully understands the good intentions behind his parents', especially his father's, harsh demands on him. It is, after all, a wish that he may stand out in the future as a man with good capabilities (*benshi*). I asked Alvin what he understood as *benshi*, he replied that in the conventional sense, it would mean somebody who could make good money and perhaps make a name in his profession. Being young, he did not mention responsibility. Alvin's determination to be a successful DJ, to participate in Western or global culture and to afford expensive consumer items is another version of a man of *benshi*. This may represent another form of hegemonic masculinity which is implied in some recent studies (Song and Hird 2014; Louie 2015), and which is becoming more apparent in the economically developed cities in China.

We can say that the destination Alvin hopes he can reach is not too dissimilar from his father's – both pertain to achieving success in a promising career with good financial returns – though they envision different routes to that destination. The next teenage boy takes a very different approach in pursuing and performing his masculinity.

A GENTLE HOMEBOUND BOY

Chen Yifan lived in Guangyuan, which is a journey of about two and half hours by bus from Nanchong. His mother, Chen Hui, worked in a beauty salon in Nanchong. In the summer of 2014, I met Yifan when he came to the city. At first sight, Yifan struck me as a totally different character from his fiery mother. He was a very gentle introvert. He had a pretty face but was less than five feet tall, making him look younger than fifteen. He spoke softly, and always with a nice and sincere smile. It was clear to me why his mother worried about her son not being masculine enough (*bugou nanziqi* 不够男子气). Chen told me several times, ‘He is so shy and “domestic” (*zhai* 宅)⁵⁶, and he has no qualifications. How can he compete with others in the future? What kind of girl will be keen on him?!’ As I got to know Yifan further, I also started to worry about the boy but for quite different reasons. To explain this, I need to elaborate on the family’s background.

Chen Hui is the elder daughter in the family, with a sister two years her junior. When the two women reached a marriageable age, their parents requested that one of them find a husband who would agree to ‘marry into’ their family. Having only two daughters, they wanted to have one who would stay with them in their old age, and they wanted a grandchild, preferably a boy, who would bear the family name of Chen. Chen Hui married first, to a man who agreed to the arrangement. As may be expected, he came from a family that was very poor. According to Chen Hui, as well as her son and parents, Yifan’s father was nice, gentle and kind, he never lost his temper, and he was good-looking. Sadly, the marriage did not last long. Chen recounted that soon after they married, she found her ex-husband fell short of the masculine qualities she desired in a spouse. Chen fell neatly into the category of ‘spice girls’ (*lameizi* 辣妹子), a Chinese stereotype for Sichuan women. She was energetic, strong-willed, bold and expressive. She was decisive and aggressive in business. She could speak charmingly but could also yell louder than any man when needed. On the other hand, she enjoyed cultivating her gendered self by emphasizing a feminine appearance. Her usual attire was sexy hot pants or a mini dress with a very tight fit; her heels were four inches high even when walking up a mountain, albeit with well-constructed footpaths; her hair was long with a slight perm. I heard a few times from different interlocutors that Sichuan women were fiery and capable, both charming and malicious if necessary, because the only female Emperor in Chinese history, Wu Zetian, was from Sichuan. Chen was very proud that Wu was born in her city, Guangyuan.

I met two of Chen’s boyfriends during my fieldwork; she was fond of macho, rough and rowdy men. As such, it was not difficult to understand why Chen said her ex-husband was not

⁵⁶ *Zhai* literally means ‘domestic’: it carries the connotation of a nerd, one who is unsociable, quiet, who always stays home surfing the internet. See Song and Hird’s chapter on *zhainan* (2014: 79-119).

the right man for her. She had an extramarital affair with somebody working in the army. By that time, Chen and her then-husband were running a very successful business and had bought a nice flat. Chen's husband did not want to divorce, so they lived in the same house for a few more years. Chen finally obtained a divorce by offering to sell their flat and business and letting her husband pocket most of the money. She asked for RMB250,000, about one quarter of everything that they owned, and Yifan to be put under the father's custody. Chen told me that it would be less convenient for her as a divorced woman to take care of her son. Chen's parents, whom I met later on, said that they were completely devastated when they heard the news, by which time their daughter had already signed the legal papers. To add insult to injury, Chen's army boyfriend broke up with her a year later. On the other hand, her ex-husband remarried a young woman within a few months of the divorce, and they had a daughter a year later. Chen's parents told me that their daughter was crazy; she acted too impulsively, 'Look at her, she is thirty-seven now, and she is still alone. Of course it is easier for a divorced man to find a wife!'

Yifan stayed with his father after the divorce. But soon after his stepmother came, he found life difficult and returned to his mother's family. Since Chen worked in Nanchong, Yifan was effectively taken care of by his grandparents. The trouble was, since Chen's divorce, her parents had drained all their savings to buy a new flat with their daughter. To make ends meet, they had to resume their migrant worker jobs. The old man was a labourer on construction sites while the old woman cooked for the workers; they followed a construction site leader and usually worked in remote cities. Whenever the old couple had to leave home to work, which could last for a few months at a time, Yifan would go and stay with Chen's sister. Yifan's father gave a certain amount of money to the Chen family every month as alimony, but he had been neglecting his responsibility for some months. Chen's sister threatened that she would not go on taking care of Yifan any more without a fee. I met the sister during a visit to Guangyuan. She seemed to have a similar character to Chen. She told me she operated a pharmacy. Yifan told me, however, that it was an adult shop selling sex aids. Yifan was always asked to look after the shop when his aunt played mahjong nearby. Sometimes he would sell products directly to customers; if he could not handle the sale, he would go and fetch his aunt. He said most men came to buy medicines which would help 'if they have problems with their reproductive system or sexual ability.' He said in a semi-professional tone that the most popular items were tonics which enhanced kidney functions. Last summer, Yifan's father took his young family including Yifan to Yunnan to look into business opportunities there. After a couple of weeks, he decided to stay in Yunnan and sent Yifan back to Guangyuan without giving him any money. Chen and her whole family were furious. That was how Yifan became a left-behind child.

I felt sorry for Yifan, who seemed to be passed around from one party to another like a commodity, and a fee was always negotiated. One day when we talked about this, the teenage boy noted my concern for him. He told me with an understanding tone, ‘Don’t worry about me. My father is actually a good man. If I need money and ask him, he will give it to me. My mother is quite crazy, but she is also a lovely woman. When it comes to adult matters, I don’t concern myself (*daren de shi wobuguan* 大人的事我不管). I live my own life ... And of course, my grandpa and grandma are such a lovely and funny pair (*huo baobei* 活宝贝), they can always make me laugh!’ I asked if he did not find his life too nomadic and uncertain. Yifan explained to me that many of his friends and classmates did not live with their parents; in his case, he was lucky to find both his father and mother accessible to him when needed. He considered his grandparents to be the most intimate people in his life, and now he was living with them. I suddenly realized that the young man’s sense of self was stronger than his physicality and his mother might suggest.

An androgynous boy

Chen worried about Yifan’s effeminate nature, ‘He is exactly like his father’. When Yifan stayed in Nanchong, he never went out on his own. Since he lived in the beauty salon where Chen worked, the boy remained in the tiny bedroom until his mother took him out after work. Chen hoped that her son would be more adventurous and sociable. His appearance and body language also gave a sense of frailty. He did not seem to have confidence in his body. For example, he asked me questions such as why he would get car-sick so easily, or why his ears would pop from time to time. In Guangyuan, we went swimming together with Chen’s whole extended family and two other friends. None of the women apart from me could swim, so the men had to take care of the adult women, leaving me to look after Yifan. He trembled terribly, with his lips turning blue and his shoulders shivering above water. He stood there with his arms crossed defensively over his chest, feeling too weak even to get himself out from the pool. I spent all my efforts encouraging him to submerge himself in the warm water and learn to float and paddle his legs. Yifan finally found joy doing some simple things in the water. At home, he always lay on the sofa or in bed, watching TV or playing on his computer.

Yifan had no desire to study. The year I met the family, he had to take the *zhongkao* exam. His mother gave him RMB500 to pay for a tutoring course; the money spent would have been too little, too late. In any case, Yifan spent all the money with his classmates in an internet cafe. As expected, he failed the exam terribly, leaving vocational schools (*zhongzhuan* 中专) as his only option for furthering his education. Students who enrol in vocational schools are considered to be a failure in the *zhongkao* exam. The curriculum is wide, but the schools are

generally badly funded and the classes are poorly designed; students just pass the four or five years there, waiting to graduate before finding lower-end jobs in the service or production sectors (Woronov 2012). Chen Hui was very disappointed. She kept saying how much she wanted her son to study well, so that he could earn the qualifications he needed to get ahead in life. Like Sun, she was afraid that Yifan would be forever stuck as a working-class lad. Both she and her ex-husband received little education. They managed to do well in their business but Chen did not think her son could be enterprising enough to follow in their path. Yifan, fortunately, did not think his deficit in education would halt his career opportunities. He wanted to study hair styling, and told me self-righteously, ‘Not everyone has to study; I am not that type of “study champ” (*duba* 读霸).’ He was embarrassed to tell me how bad his *zhongkao* exam result was, but ‘these things [in books] just don’t get inside my brain.’ He did not consider himself stupid but he was just not book smart. He considered it more realistic for him to invest time learning a technical skill than trying the academic course. As described by Kipnis (2011b: 302), the exam-oriented education in China has produced a subject position that he calls ‘the practical person (usually man) of action’. Yifan seemed to envision himself to belong to the working-class in the future. But unlike Alvin, he did not resist the idea of becoming a proper, responsible, but ordinary man, just like his grandfather, though not working ‘minor jobs’ (*xiaogong* 小工) at construction sites.

The grandfather provided the boy with a model of a responsible man and a spousal relationship which was accessible and healthy for him. Yifan had endless stories to tell about his grandparents. He was often amused by his grandfather, who did all sorts of unhelpful things out of good intentions. The old couple always teased each other to soften the unpleasant experiences they faced. For example, during my stay in their home, the grandmother sent her husband to buy breakfast for all of us. When he returned, I said it should be us, the younger people, doing the work. The grandmother winked at her husband and said, ‘The old man (*laotou* 老头) was afraid that I would run away if he did not serve me well enough!’ Yifan was very moved that whenever he came back from school late in the evening (after 10:30pm) during the bitterly cold winter, one of his grandparents would get out of bed and prepare a warm bowl of noodles or congee for him. The grandfather used interesting folk analogies when he explained to me the importance of familial support: ‘Everyone needs someone to lean on (*youge yikao* 有个依靠); even an ox or a pig requires somebody [to feed them].’ He also talked about the importance of having a child: ‘I am poor, but “a child won’t despise an ugly mother, a dog won’t despise a poor family” (*zi buxian muchou, gou buxian jiaqiong* 子不嫌母丑, 狗不嫌家穷).’ He would continue the conversation by trying to convince me that my single status was worse than that of their daughter, who at least had a son. He would have continued, but his old wife winked at me and stopped her husband by saying, ‘*Wang Jie* (Sister Wang) has money, she is better off not

having a husband now. What is the use of having an old man like you!’ Yifan subtly expressed that his grandmother was a happy and blessed woman because she had a very caring and supportive husband, who gave all his heart to his family members. He always brightened their day by making them laugh, or offering help here and there. Yifan praised his ‘funny’ (*gaoxiao* 搞笑) grandfather as the backbone of the family in the humblest manner; he made them feel warm, secure and happy. He found a kind of respectable, authentic masculinity in his grandfather.

Performing as a good playmate and a good brother

Yifan did not like studying, but he enjoyed going to school where he found good playmates (*wanban* 玩伴). In Guangyuan, I saw a boy coming to Yifan’s home one day. The boy was as gentle and soft as Yifan, and he appeared to be just as humble and natural, like a regular guy next door. Yifan was a different person with his peer. He chatted in an animated manner which I seldom saw when he was with his family members. On that occasion, his seven-year-old cousin was in their home. The young boy clung to Yifan and was never far from his side. All the while, Yifan behaved like a big brother. He switched on the desktop computer and taught his cousin how to play some games on it; he offered to come back after an hour or so to play with him. The cousin was reluctant but soon became absorbed with the computer games. Having settled the young cousin, Yifan left happily with his friend.

Needless to say, friendship with like-minded peers is utterly important for young people. Friendship is all the more crucial for the generation who were born when the one-child policy was fully enforced. The collective identity which Yifan shared with his friends differed from Alvin’s. Yifan was as engaged with music, movies, the entertainment world and social media as Alvin, but in different ways, which I will come to in a moment. Importantly, Yifan practiced ‘authenticity’, or ‘being myself’ (*zuoziji* 做自己). He was ambivalent to consumer modernity which privileged the material as ‘real’ (Liechty 1995: 169). Yifan liked to tell me about the scary movies he and his friends watched online, such as *Ghost Whisper* and *Medium*, and to challenge my tolerance of horror stories. One day after we watched *Transformers III*, he happily explained to me all the characters in the series, and how those characters were perceived by his classmates. He also shared with me the music he and his friends enjoyed. Yifan’s English was very poor, but miraculously he knew a lot of songs in English. He would borrow my mobile phone to demonstrate how he downloaded English music. He could identify the songs roughly from the look of the spelling without knowing the words. Yifan had only a basic mobile phone (what is called ‘elderly handset’) at that time; he wished to have a smartphone but did not express a sense of deprivation. Yifan’s mother and grandmother told me how angry they were to

see Yifan's step-mother spending only RMB20 on a pair of shoes for the boy, and not buying him any new clothes for the whole season. Chen Hui spent more than RMB300 to 'repackage' her son. Yifan told me in private that he was perfectly alright with the RMB20 pair of shoes. He did not think it was worth spending money on fashion, especially since he was a man! He agreed that his mother was a beautiful woman and it was alright for women to spend time on their looks. However, for him, 'image work' (*xingxiang gongcheng* 形象工程) built around clothes and fashion was all pretentious, as men need not spend time and money on their appearance.

Despite the oddities in his life, Yifan is able to mediate the different relationships and situations in which he is entangled, and define his place within them. He is aware that he fails by a certain normative standard of manhood, and he is not likely to be the kind of man his mother and many others endorse. Nevertheless, at least at this stage in life, he is comfortable constructing a type of masculinity for himself which is realistic and authentic, like his grandfather's. Just as Amit and Dyck (2012) discussed in an Introduction to a collection of work they edited, young men of the working class in many parts of the world subscribe to a set of dominant and pervasive orthodoxies which promise upward mobility through education. However, not everyone can succeed in schooling; and even if they do, they may not be able to find the kind of 'good jobs' that their education is assumed to enable. These young men could be 'angrier'. Instead, many remain committed to mainstream values about the value of work and domestic respectability. Research has found that these young men sustain their sense of continuity by distinguishing themselves from a more sullied and rough working class (ibid: 9-19). This can well explain the strategy taken up by Yifan. His mother told me that one thing she had to praise in her son was that 'he never causes trouble outside' (*conglai bu reshi* 从来不惹事). We can say that Yifan is 'practicing ordinariness' – an antiheroic and antimacho everyman form of nonchalant masculinity which has emerged amongst young adult men in Western cultures (Korobov 2009). Similarly, Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2002: 83) speak of the ways in which teenage boys in London try to establish their authenticity as masculine in various ways while diverging from the masculine ideal. Yifan's acceptance of his failure in schooling, and his cool attitude towards the 'image work' and consumer modernity can affirm those possibilities of the everyman.

CONCLUSION

I have in this chapter illustrated how two young individuals, with all their particularities, life circumstances, and social positions, intersect with the local cultural context and their

continuously changing web of relationships to construct their male personhood. Yifan and Alvin are both aware of what is expected of them now and in the future. Through family and state education, it is hard for young people not to be aware of the hopes which their parents and even the nation have placed on them.⁵⁷ In contrary to some previous studies which focus on the unrelenting efforts which parents and/or their children make in ensuring students' success in the education system, and the resulting sense of gratitude which children feel towards their parents (Stafford 1995; Fong 2004, 2011; Hoffman 2010; Kipnis 2001; Johnston 2013), what comes to the fore in my study is 'failure'. The number of students who fail their own and/or their parents' expectations probably exceeds the proportion of those who deliver results that are better than expected. Parents like Chen Hui may sound very keen and supportive but, in reality, they do very little to help their children succeed academically. Sun and Pan paid tremendous efforts to develop their son, with the hope that he could achieve greatness in a conventional manner through the national exam system. Their son unfortunately reckoned many of their efforts unavailing. The question is: how would the incoherent views and experiences affect the sons' gratitude towards their parents?

The two boys in the ethnography know that they fail to meet the dominant masculine standard. However, they use opportunities to choose their pathways and to develop alternative masculinities which coexist alongside the ideal form. Yifan is a worrying docile son to his mother, yet he is subtly directing his future towards a masculine self which he believes to be more authentic, accessible, and practical. Alvin is a failure to his father, but he continues to negotiate the expectations and creates his own cultural script. Despite all the chaos and unpredictability in their lives, I did not get any sense of victimization in speaking to the two teenagers. They never blamed their parents for leaving them behind. Alvin ran away from home at least twice to my knowledge, and he might even appear to be the 'perpetrator' by putting aggressive demands on his parents. Nevertheless, he would always remind himself that what his parents did was for his future benefit. He was certain that he would take care of his parents as a filial son as they aged. He denied the domination of his father's authority in the family, but he never denied the Chinese culture of filial piety. Yifan declared that the most important persons in his life were his grandparents and then his parents; as the only child in the family, he would do everything to support them in the future. Their experiences share similarities to the single children who appear in Xu Jing's (2014) recent anthropological study. The author concludes that, against the panic of raising 'selfish' children under the one-child policy, Chinese children are constructing their own moral universe that depart from the orthodox adult norms.

⁵⁷ See Anagnost (2008), Brownell (2000), Kipnis (2001, 2012b) on the development of 'quality' children as a modernization and nation-building project in China.

Nevertheless, they do not become the amoral, selfish ‘little emperors’, the imagination of which has caused much concern in the past (2014: 224-226).

The ethnography of the two boys also sheds light on the topic of effeminacy. Both Alvin and Yifan are not desirable ‘manly boys’ in the eyes of their parents. Both are considered to be effeminate. Yifan’s passive, domesticated ‘*zhai*’ character means that Chen Hui fears that her boy, being so shy and so underperforming in his studies, will have difficulty finding a (good) wife. In his father’s eyes, Alvin is ‘not like a man’ because of his lack of toughness in character and his trivial orientations in life. When Sun and Chen Hui say that their sons lack masculinity (*meiyou nanziqi*) or are not manly (*buxiang nande* 不像男的), they refer to mental strength including ambition, competitiveness and endurance, and an ability to study well to prepare themselves for future responsibilities. They show much less concern for physical strength or a macho body. I once brought the two boys together by going out to see a movie, followed by a meal. Because they were not the same type of persons, they had little to share during the day. The conversation between them became livelier only when they talked about music, and funnily, their common disinterest in sport! Unlike the case in many Western countries where sport is a typical site of masculine performance (Connell 2000; Messner 1992, 2007), it does not seem that boys (and men) in Nanchong would feel ashamed on the basis of their poor sport credentials.

Yifan may look androgynous and he is not so confident in his physique, but he does not seem to find himself ‘unmasculine’ because of his body. He knows that he is a handsome young man. Alvin looks masculine, but he does not mind if people associate him with stereotypical characteristics of gay men that may seem unmanly. In other words, from my research, an androgynous look does not define whether a young man is ‘like a man’ or not. The two boys also do not seem to bother about the conventional toughness which is required of a man. Yifan looks up to his grandfather who is amusing, loving and caring, and from time to time ridiculed by his wife even without any ill intentions. Alvin simply enjoys the expressions of a new breed of men, who are culturally versatile, socially competent, and who stand out with assertive but ‘gentlemanly’ manners. What matters to both of them is performing like proper young men amongst like-minded peers rather than in the eyes of their parents. With interviews conducted with adult men and women in Beijing, Hird (2012) contends that androgynous masculinities in China have been made popular because of the influence of consumer culture. The acceptance of androgynous men is merely a play with the aesthetics of gender; in actual fact, people are still resistant to androgynous men. To certain extent, the same attitude can be observed in my field site: hence, the sarcastic comments about Alvin’s ‘sissy’ and androgynous presentation. However, my study suggests that the androgynous culture has gone deeper since Hird did his

research between 2004 and 2011, and young people are enacting a new set of codes that define masculinity.

Needless to say, young people are not autonomous beings. There are ‘structural limitations placed upon children’s lives, from the institutional constraints they encounter at school or in the family to the discourses that circumscribe their lives and actions in significant ways’ (Spyrou 2006: 126). The same can apply to adults. As a teenager develops into manhood, he will become subject to more expectations and pressure to make himself an able-responsible man. Many men will be frustrated by people’s judgement of them against certain negotiable but still persistent norms and requirements. In the next few chapters, we will continue to explore the dilemmas encountered by men, and their interactions with other men and women in their lives. Romantic experiences will be the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: ASPIRING YOUNG LOVERS

In death or life, together or apart, this oath is made. Your hands I hold, together
we grow old. (Anonymous, from *The Book of Songs* [*Shijing* 诗经]: *Beifeng* 邶风,
Jigu 击鼓篇)⁵⁸

It was about nine o'clock at night as I waited by a newsstand in my neighbourhood for Jiang, who was ten minutes late. He arrived on his motorbike with Duan, his fiancée, in the back seat. They saw me, gave me their wedding invitation pack, and happily drove off. We only chatted briefly because they needed to send invitations to a few other friends. Duan looked very content with her head against Jiang's back and her hands wrapped around his waist as they sped off. I returned home and unbundled the invitation pack. It contained a card and two small packets of sweets, one with a cartoon image of the bride-to-be printed on the pack, the other of the groom. The card had a traditional design: a celebratory red colour on the outside with a pink insert stating the name of the couple, date and place of the wedding, and an invitation to a banquet made by the parents from both sides. Somewhere on the card there is this line: 'Your hands I hold, together we grow old.'

Six months prior to the wedding, Jiang had told me how much he wanted to tie the knot with Duan. They had been cohabiting for several months by that time, but Duan, eight years younger than Jiang, felt that it was too early for her to commit to marriage. She was only twenty-two and Jiang was her first boyfriend. Jiang was very keen to marry, not only because he loved Duan, but also because at his age, he should have already married and fathered a child. He had had a close girlfriend for many years but they split a few years ago. Jiang taught Latin dance. His classes, like many dance classes in Nanchong, were catered mostly to children from middle-class families. I attended his class for adults, the attendance of which was 100% women. Jiang was admired by those students as he is handsome, gentle and pleasant, and a very good teacher. However, these qualities did not make it easy for Jiang to find a wife. He said perhaps he was too choosy and too serious. He also thought that women who had 'good qualifications' (*tiaojian hao* 条件好)⁵⁹ would not consider him as a husband. The current popular view is that it is more

⁵⁸ The poem is from *Jigu* of *Beifeng*, the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*). It is a collection of 300 poems written by folk people around the earlier period of Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BC.). The original Chinese version is *Sisheng xiekuo, yuzi chengshuo. Zhizi zhishou, yuzi xielao* 死生契阔，与子成说。执子之手，与子偕老。

⁵⁹ The Chinese term *tiaojian*, like *suzhi*, refers to a collection of personal characteristics which indicate a person's overall quality. But in current usage, *suzhi* represents an impression of how 'civilized' a person is, whereas *tiaojian* implies the 'offer' that a person can bring to an exchange. In other contexts, *tiaojian* means 'terms and conditions'.

difficult for a man to find a wife than for a woman to find a husband; a man has to labour more and perform better in order to win a good woman. (This refers to first marriages because women become much less desirable and ‘marketable’ in second marriages.) Jiang mentioned that he did not make an ideal husband in the minds of many women because his earning power was not strong and his family was not rich. Besides, at the age of thirty-one, he was a bit too old already. Jiang picked up Latin dancing as an amateur. Although he had obtained the necessary professional certification to teach, he would not get very far in this career. Besides, this was a highly labour-intensive job; even working as much as possible, the most he would be able to make would be about RMB9,000 a month. His earning ability would only decrease with age. His parents are ordinary workers in a small Sichuan city which Jiang left behind about ten years ago. He wanted to start a business, but was short on funds; he owned no property. The current apartment where he stayed was bought by Duan’s parents, who lived in another flat they owned. When Jiang revealed this to me, he was quick to add that he hoped to save money to buy his own flat someday.

Jiang finally succeeded in asking Duan to marry him. He did not hold back from sharing a few pictures on social media to show how he moved Duan’s heart that special evening. He used some thirty or forty candles, each on a nice little stand, to make a big heart on the floor in their living room. The room was decorated in a romantic pink colour. Jiang told me afterwards that he had consulted a special agency to help him design the evening.

It is worth pausing at this point to ask the following question: Why would Jiang be so keen to marry if he had already been cohabiting with his girlfriend? Surely he would have remained happy enjoying his bachelorhood by staying with a girl he loved whilst being admired by many females at the same time? Intrigued, I asked Jiang why he was so anxious to marry. He reiterated that a (proper) man ought to ‘start a family’ (*chengjia* 成家). To marry is also to fulfil his duty as a son and his parents’ hopes for his future. He is a single child, and has a strong desire to have a child himself. He said, ‘Yesterday a girl (seven or eight years old) in a class came to me and said she did not know how to tie her shoelaces. She was very lovely. I bent to tie the laces for her. Suddenly I felt very sad. I wondered how nice would it be if she was my child. Perhaps fatherhood is just a natural instinct for men?’ I then asked if he had ever thought of having a child outside of wedlock? The question was so irrelevant for Jiang that he did not even give me an answer apart from saying that this ‘Western’ practice would never become popular in China. Based on what I had learnt from other interlocutors, Jiang would consider it irresponsible and pointless to give birth to a child and then not offer the necessary family relationships to the child. In addition, his parents would want a proper daughter-in-law to their family. Taking all this into account, we can say that Jiang is a ‘traditional’ man who not only follows his manly instincts but also the norms and marriage customs in China. However, we can

also see that he is 'modern' shown in his cohabiting before marrying, and employing an agency to help design a romantic evening for him to propose to his girlfriend. Therefore, the traditional and modern elements involved in romantic relationships become entangled when acted out in real lives.

Various sociologists and historians (for example, Macfarlane 1987; Stone 1988; Giddens 1992; Beck and Beck-Bernsheim 1995) have contributed thoughtful theses on the connection between romantic love and modernization. Their broad thesis stipulates that industrialisation and capitalism give impetus to ideas about modern personhood and conjugal love, which emphasizes individualism and free choice of partners instead of collective interests and values. Macfarlane (1987) argues that the existence of romantic love serves as a necessary condition in which capitalism may flourish, since love has the power to give a sense of meaning to an otherwise dead and cold modern world. Beck and Beck (1995) locate the 'chaos of love' in post-Christian modern society, a disenchanted world. Love acquires its significance almost like a quasi-religious belief, through giving people hope and satisfaction as the structure of industrial society, which previously laid down gender, family and occupational roles, begins to crumble away (1995: 170-176). However, Beck and Beck stress that chaos may arise as people follow the dictates of the heart in forming love marriages. For example, freedom of choice also means that the sense of stability and permanence inherent in the traditional marriage system can no longer be relied on.

The power of the idiom of love as a signifier of modernity has been a subject of immense anthropological interest (see edited volumes by Jankowiak 1995; Hirsch and Wardlow 2006, Cole and Thomas 2009). Many scholars have begun to problematize the modernist narrative which asserts global cultural homogenization and an underlying logic that modern love implies progress and improvement. Through ethnographic engagements with people from diverse cultural and historical settings, anthropologists have exposed the ambiguous and fragmented nature of modern loves, and the various strategies that social actors have employed to rework the old and contemporary ideologies of love. One can best discern the ambiguities of modern loves by looking into the complex embroilment between material provision and emotional interests invoked by love.⁶⁰

The anthropological study of intimacy in China has developed since the 1990s. From the literature, it is not difficult to detect parallels between the state of affairs in China and other world regions. Earlier studies emphasize the transformation of love and marriages, which

⁶⁰ For a small sampling of ethnographic work in this area, see Rebhun's study in Brazil (1999), Cornwall's in Nigeria (2002), Knauft's in Melanesia and Amazonia (1997), Lipset's in Papua New Guinea (2004); Cole's in Madagascar (2004). Also see Zelizer's *The Purchase of Intimacy* (2007), which argues forcefully the complementary and compatible nature of money and love.

reflects the growth of individualism and larger societal changes accompanying the process of modernization and urbanization. For example, the move to neolocal residence, a decline in fertility, the decreasing power of the senior generation, the growth of women's power, the acceptance of premarital sex, and the vision of the purpose of marriage as being for conjugal happiness rather than the continuation of the family line (Jankowiak 1993, 2002; Yan 2003). In Jankowiak's and Yan's field sites – the relatively 'small' Huhhot city in Inner Mongolia and Xiajia village in Heilongjiang – intimate love in the 1980s and 1990s seemed to be a positive force in creating emotional bonds in an increasingly capitalist society, even though Yan also noted the disruptions on intergenerational relationships as a result of the shifted priority to conjugal love. Another set of studies focuses more on sexuality and romantic behaviours that are driven by the whims of passion and pleasure. The literature discloses a more chaotic picture of love, such as heightened tensions between material fulfilment and romantic feelings, short-term dating strategies, prostitution, possession of concubines, and anxieties to improve male potency (Farrer 2002; Rofel 2007; Everett Zhang 2011a). Problems entailed in gender relations due to social inequality and conflicts between money and love are prevalent in Farrer's account. For example, men gained status in sexual conquests, whereas women gained status through sexual relationships with high-status men that led to marriage. Poorer Shanghai men complained of their inability to pay for dates alongside their inability to hold on to the women they date. Poorer Shanghai women complained of the inability of poorer men to treat them to dates and the lack of respect richer men accorded them (Farrer 2002: 185, 277). Based on fieldwork in urban Beijing, Rofel (2007) makes a case of neoliberalism: The urban women, described as 'desiring subjects', are characterised by a strong desire to demarcate themselves from the self-sacrificial mentality of their mothers' generation, and a quest for consumption, transnational cultural production, sexuality, and possessive individualism. She quotes this of a female interlocutor: 'Sex is the measure of humanity – a measure of China's progress toward that humanity' (2007: 121).

All the above writers suggest a tendency for young people to take for granted that the form of romantic love they have come to embrace is modern, and Western. They make a conscious attempt to detach themselves from the ideology and practice of love as represented by their parents, considered to be 'traditional'. Instead, young people celebrate a modern notion of love that is more liberal and free, and pleasurable for the individual. Whilst these observations are timely and valid, there is a risk that the emphasis on changes and transformations (Yan refers to a 'romantic revolution' whereas Zhang uses the term 'sexual revolution') would give an impression that traditional ideologies and practices of intimacy are disappearing, which is far from the truth. If we return to the opening vignette, we can see that Jiang is asserting both traditional and modern mores of love. He still upholds many of the values and customs of marriage, which define the meanings of being a proper and responsible man in the most

traditional sense. Jiang's case fits exactly into the framework of how love and marriage are conceptualized in a recent issue of articles based on research done in China and India, and co-edited by Donner and Santos. This is seen in the following statement made by the editors:

Our model highlights the increasing centrality of individual choice, confessional and affective modes, and personal autonomy, but it does so without overstating the extent to which individuals have become unmoored from broader moral and normative structures, including the institution of the family, larger kin groups, neighbourhoods, caste, and other associational identities. Modernity, we argue, does not entail a breakdown of broader moral and normative structures, but a reconfiguration of these structures and the way they are implied in marriage, love lives, and other close relationships. But just as modernity can take many different forms depending on the social and cultural context, so this process of reconfiguration can take place in many different ways. (Donner and Santos 2016: 1130)

The six articles included in this special issue are arranged into three common themes: anxieties, negotiations, and frictions. They evolve around the tensions created by two sets of interests: the material and emotional, the collective and individual. My ethnographic material attests to the truism of the statement made by Donner and Santos. Using this as a reference point, I explain the analytical perspective and structure of this chapter.

My overall intent is to interpret and assess the impact of the changes and continuities in practices of romantic love on men. I seek to consider the ways in which the masculine self is questioned, enacted, sometimes boosted and sometimes crashed, as a man pursues his marriageable partners in Nanchong. I aim to examine this by drawing on real-life cases which will reveal manifold anxieties, negotiations, and frictions experienced by men and women during their courtships. Through these experiences, I make three specific arguments which relate to love and masculinity in the city. First, the interplay between traditional and modern practices of love has resulted in new codes of romantic relationships, and new expectations of romantic performance. These new circumstances put men into a more difficult position than women. In other words, men are required to labour more in their pursuit of spouses. They have to show that they are the right 'able-responsible man' for the woman they love. Second, I concede the importance of money in forming and securing intimate relationships. However, I argue that because of the challenges which men have to face, they (specifically the non-elite men) sometimes fall into the trap of self-victimization and denigrate the integrity of women by exaggerating the efficacy of money. My ethnographic cases will show that money is more important for women on a discursive level than it is in reality. The third point I make is that

ordinary men have to prepare to perform the duty of a traditional provider without enjoying what Connell (2005) calls the ‘patriarchal dividend’. Men are expected to be generous and supporting to women both financially and emotionally; at the same time, they have to forego their privileged, dominating position vis-à-vis women. These three points will feed into our understanding of how the hegemonic notion of the ‘able-responsible man’ is manifested and negotiated as men and women enter into romantic relationships.

The rest of this chapter is structured by first contextualizing the current landscape of romantic love in Nanchong. This describes the interplay of traditional and modern practices of love, and the ways love and marriage are covered in daily conversations or social discourse. I then proceed to detail two cases which provide evidence for the three arguments mentioned above. Although my focus is ultimately about masculinity, women will be featured heavily in the chapter. Finally, I draw conclusions about masculinity in the context of love and marriage; I intend to show that hegemonic masculinity is a negotiable and contestable notion in modern China.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THE TRADITIONAL AND THE MODERN IN THE LANDSCAPE OF LOVE AND MARRIAGE

Heterosexual marriage and reproduction continue to be central components to the construction of personhood, and therefore masculinity and femininity, in modern China. Over the course of my fieldwork, amongst people whom I met and who were above the age of thirty, I did not encounter even one voluntary bachelor. Men who remained single in their late twenties became very anxious of ending their bachelorhood, whereas single women started to feel the pressure in their mid-twenties. I also didn’t encounter any couple who seriously decided not to have a child after marrying. Some informants told me that they themselves did not want to have children; they instead preferred to be *dingke* 丁克 (DINKS), that is, ‘double income no kids’. However, they had to have children for the sake of fulfilling their parents’ wishes: it was a blessing to have descendants, and a curse to have a discontinued line. Several women told me that they wanted *no* children, but just as the young man Zeng told his girlfriend Vivian in Chapter One, they naturally had a child and subsequently enjoyed the motherhood. I knew several couples who had desperately consulted medical help because of infertility. According to Li et al. (2010: 679), in China, ‘singlehood is a state of frustration, and even of deprivation, for which it is difficult to find socially acceptable compensations’. Greenhalgh (2013: 133) notes that ‘marriage and fatherhood remain essential to being a “real Chinese man”.’ Other scholars explain that the Chinese government has promoted a normative heterosexual model of marriage

and birth control policy to '[keep] the population productive and growing, at the right pace and with the right quality' (Mann 2011: 193).

A common signifier of modern love is the permission of premarital sex. In Nanchong, of all the young single adults I spoke to on this subject (about a dozen of them), only a twenty-one year old woman confided to me she was a virgin. Men and women engage in sex for various reasons and it is therefore difficult to generalize. However, what I have found to be generally true is that virginity is valued, but not expected. Just as young people in many other places, young lovers in China consider an early transition to sex to be both desirable and almost inevitable; it is a marker of being modern, a rehearsal for marriage (Smith 2009: 164; Twamley 2013). Naturally, I gained more information about sexual behaviours from my female interlocutors. A young woman recounted bitterly that she lost her boyfriend to a girl who was a virgin. She said that her boyfriend was intrigued by the girl who was still a virgin. Some young women told me frankly that sex was important for them. Two girls were upset because the men they loved were not keen on having sex with them. Both had broken up; one with explicit disappointment that the man had not tried to make love to her. A few women described moments of warmth, security, affection and care while having sex with their boyfriends. One recounted her 'first night' (*chuye* 初夜) with a man who also had no sex experience, with a satisfying tone that they had learnt how to do it better as they continued their relationship. There were also women who said with contempt that they had refused men who seemed to be interested only in their bodies. With these testimonies, we can assume that men, especially those who are not experienced in sex, would find it hard to judge when and how they can engage in sex with the woman they are courting.

While premarital sex and cohabitation have become very common, it remains as a rule that a couple must finally go through the legal procedure of marriage, and the ritual of arranging a wedding ceremony and a face-giving banquet. Every first marriage has to be legitimated by a banquet, with relatives and friends bearing witness to the couple's vows of love. However, the demand on brideprice is quite loose. There is increasing pressure to pay more nowadays, but as the Latin dance teacher Jiang told me, 'this doesn't really matter because we are our parents' only children, so all the money that is given and taken falls back into the same pockets.' The obligation which falls heavily on the groom's side, however, is for he and his parents to prepare a 'wedding apartment' for the couple to live in after marrying. Without an apartment (such as in Jiang's case), a man's ability to attract a prospective wife is substantially reduced. The groom is also expected to shoulder the cost of the wedding banquet. When these basic conditions are unmet, much tension will arise between the two families.

Parents can reject a potential son-in-law on different grounds, and those within the close kin circle can also discourage a relationship. It takes a great deal of tactics and effort for young couples to resist the objections. As is the case in many rural places and less developed cities in China (Zhou and Zhu 2004; Zhang and Sun 2014; Obendiek 2016), it is very common in Nanchong for parents to arrange match-making meetings for their children even though they cannot force a decision. Marriage is considered to be a matter of two families, not of two individuals: it is conceived as a process of negotiation and dialogue between two families (Liu 2000: 62). A wealthy woman living in my neighbourhood once told me that she had successfully deterred her son from continuing a romantic relationship with a girl from a poor family. She lectured her son with the folk idiom ‘bamboo door to a bamboo door, wooden door to a wooden door’⁶¹. She challenged her son by asking, realistically, if he could tolerate ‘seeing your wife standing there at our family gatherings like a “nobody”, while the wives of your cousins present themselves with the demeanour of “a fair lady from a good family” (*dajia guixiu* 大家闺秀)’. Her son took her advice. Therefore, despite that ‘freedom of love’ (*ziyou lianai* 自由恋爱) defines the tone of the desire of young people and has become an iconic statement of modernity,⁶² people are not completely free agents in choosing their spouses in the twenty-first century. On the other hand, we cannot overstate the power of parental influence in determining spousal choice because young people can negotiate and resist their parents’ wishes. The neoliberal concept of the autonomous individual who seeks romantic partners by free choice (cf Rofel 2007) is therefore more complicated than it is presented discursively. I will show the complications through an ethnographic case in a moment.

Another concept I consider to be a discursive rhetoric that does not always work in reality is hypergamy. It is generally true that the marriage market in China is stratified by class, or a hierarchy based on economic power. The wealthy woman who objected to her son marrying a ‘nobody’ can serve as a verdict to the phenomenon. Hypergamy, or for women to ‘marry up’ and for men to ‘marry down’, is often described as the rule of the game (Fong 2004: 112; Obendiek 2016). Men who have ‘no house, no car, no money’ are called the ‘three NOs’ (*sanwu* 三无), they are deprecated to be the much less competitive suitors in the marriage market. A popular Chinese expression of an ideal boyfriend, which first appeared on the internet and subsequently became popular in everyday conversation, is ‘*gao-fu-shuai* 高富帅’ which means

⁶¹ The proverb in Chinese: *zhumen dui zhumen, mumen dui mumen* 竹门对竹门, 木门对木门. It says that the two families who marry their sons and daughters have to match in class.

⁶² According to research by Yang Lianfen, it was some foreign missionaries in the 19th century who first translated (or back-translated) the English word ‘love’ to the Chinese word ‘*ai*’. Prior to that, love was described generally as ‘*qing* 情’ (affections) in Chinese literature. It was after the May Fourth Movement that *lian ai* (romantic love) began to be popularly used in Chinese fictions, and that freedom of love became a signifier of modernity (2014: 66-71).

‘tall-rich-handsome’ or simply somebody high up on the social hierarchy. The equivalent for an ideal girlfriend is ‘*bai-fu-mei* 白富美’ (white-rich-beautiful).⁶³ Fundamentally, the man is expected to be richer than the woman in a relationship; and it is assumed that the prettier the woman, the easier it would be for her to find a marriage partner. Nevertheless, we have to take notice that these principles are not incontestable, and they probably represent a rhetorical ideal rather than the real experience of many couples. In my field site specifically, it is not uncommon for men to end up marrying women who come from wealthier families and possess apparently higher ‘qualifications’. All women would say that they want their husbands to be rich, but I witnessed quite a few who gave up on richer prospects for men who were economically less well-off. Women always balance the pros and cons in assessing who they would accept as their intimate partners, and money is only one of the factors of consideration. One case in particular arose during my research that illustrates how emotional interests sometimes take precedence over material concerns.

Zhu was twenty-two when I met her and had a tame and sweet character. Because of the early divorce of her parents and the horrible memory of a wife-beating father, Zhu told me of her wish to find a dependable husband. Her boyfriend, who was her classmate in junior high, performed the role of a ‘protector’ since they first met. One day, Zhu confided a dilemma to me: she was courted by a young man who later on revealed that his father was one of the top five richest men in Nanchong. He told her his father’s name and took her to a big development of villas which he said was owned by his family. Zhu shared this with several friends, who all said that she was ‘as silly as a pig’ because she had refused the rich man in order to stay loyal to her boyfriend. The boyfriend worked on construction sites outside of Nanchong; he was about to move to Chengdu and learn the car repair trade. Zhu told me she did not fancy marrying a ‘second generation in a rich family’ (*fuerdai*) because she would then become a ‘shorter, inferior’ (*airen yijie* 矮人一截) member in the family. She was loyal to her boyfriend also because his parents had always treated her affectionately as their own daughter. In fact, they had pooled in all their money to buy a nice new flat for the couple. As the boyfriend returned, Zhu was delighted to show me all kinds of consumable products that he had bought for her. She said she was moved to tears one day when she found her boyfriend had hand-washed all her clothes and cleaned the kitchen while she was at work. We went out for a hot pot meal one night. As the young man was very shy, Zhu and I did most of the talking during the meal. At one point, Zhu took off a wrist chain she was wearing and said that it was an expensive gift from her boyfriend. For the first time, the young man asked me with interest and anxiety if I could tell it was made of ‘real white gold’ (*baijin* 白金) or not. I was sure that it was only silver or a kind of white

⁶³ ‘White’ refers to fair skin, a highly aspirational attribute of women in China (Zheng 2009:187-188). Men who have fair skin are also associated with upper class background, therefore generally more desirable in China.

metal called palladium, not platinum or white gold as he thought. He did not know how to distinguish between the real and ‘the fake’; he relied on the salesman who persuaded him into buying this expensive ‘real’ piece. I felt he might have been cheated, but said instead that it was probably ‘real gold’. Zhu reminded him sweetly that he need not spend money on these luxuries again because they needed to save money for their future. The shy man released a look of content and assurance that he had done the right thing to please his girlfriend.

Zhu worked in a tea house which I sometimes visited. A few of her colleagues were aware of Zhu’s boyfriend and the billionaire’s son. I said I admired Zhu for her faithfulness to her boyfriend. Two colleagues, with jealousy, told me not to be fooled by Zhu’s apparent innocence: she was more sophisticated than I thought. They suspected that Zhu had given herself to the rich man for some material benefits; otherwise she would not have been able to afford to rent an apartment for herself. The young women repeated the rhetoric that they looked for true love and wanted to be modern independent women; they would not submit themselves to the traditional ‘virtuous housewife’ (*xianqi liangmu* 贤妻良母) role like women in the past. However, if the man who pursued them was very wealthy, this would be something they might reconsider. They then moaned over the dilemma of ‘*gaobucheng dibujiu* 高不成低不就’: the high is unattainable and the low is not desirable. The women would say they were actually not asking for too much and conclude with a sigh, ‘I am a failure’ (*wo hen bai* 我很败), or a self-mocking statement, ‘I am not good enough’ (*wo bugou youxiu* 我不够优秀). As put simply by Cole and Thomas, ‘Affect and exchange are entangled rather than opposed’ (2009: 21).

Women always tell one another about the gifts they have received from their suitors. It is custom for men to buy things such as clothes and makeup products for women even in the early stages of dating, and this spending increases over time. Gifts have become necessary seals of love due to massive advertising and marketing efforts, which place love at the centre of consumption. Advertising paints an alluring picture of the ideal romantic pair with the man giving a surprise gift to the woman on a variety of occasions. Young men are therefore not short of reminders to give a romantic treat to women with this growing commercialization of romance. Nowadays in Nanchong, as in many ‘modern’ cities in China, people celebrate both the traditional Chinese Valentine’s Day (*Qixi* 七夕, which falls on the seventh day on the seventh month in the Lunar Calendar) and the Western Valentine’s Day. Therefore, the pressure on men exists not only to financially provide for a woman, but to treat them with gifts as an added obligated value to the relationship.

My interlocutors generally agreed that men had a harder time finding spouses than women. One might assume that people would blame the one-child policy which has created a

highly unbalanced sex ratio.⁶⁴ Interestingly, my informants in Nanchong rarely referred to the sex ratio when speaking of the difficulties to woo eligible women. Even when I probed, people would think that this only created difficulties for men who had special problems such as disabilities or who were poor bachelors in rural China; it was not a problem for ‘normal men’ in urban cities. Some men suspected that the marriage squeeze would be a problem for the younger generation, not them, which cannot be correct because the one-child policy was introduced in Sichuan in the late 1970s already. It is possible that this evasive response to the marriage squeeze may be based on feelings that there are as many single women as there are men looking out for potential spouses. Women tend to be more vocal in sharing their anxieties about this. The evasive response may also reflect the unconscious attempt by men to show their capabilities and to differentiate themselves from the rural bachelors who are stigmatized.⁶⁵ Or, it could simply be that people are unaware or unconcerned about the sex ratio. In this regard, Huang Kuangshi (2014)’s research paper is thought-provoking. Huang reviews the sex ratio in Chinese population from 1950 to 2011 with the conclusion that the marriage squeeze phenomenon has existed in China since 1950, and it peaked in the 1960s. The proportion of excess male population in the future is estimated to be lower than that in the 1960s’. If we accept Huang’s argument, it is no wonder why men do not see the marriage squeeze as an acute problem created by the one-child policy.

Most male informants explain the bigger challenge for them is due to the empowerment of women in the modern age, and their successful bargaining for greater egalitarianism and privileges over men in courtship. Men also blame the influence of foreign media, which always portrays fantasy tales and Cinderella-type stories with men being the heroes who would pamper and fulfil the dreams of women. All these trends make it more challenging for men to navigate their romantic relationships. In addition to the above, men of lower to middle backgrounds have to deal with other problems if they are rural-to-urban migrant workers. A young woman told me that she could not accept a man who had moved to Nanchong from a city in Northern China, Zhengzhou, as she could not tolerate his strong northern accent of ‘*er-er-er*’ (this refers to the rolled tongue accent of Putonghua, the national dialect). I met the couple and saw that the young man was extremely patient to the girl. He told me during the gathering that he could not bear speaking in the Sichuan dialect; it was too awkward for him to learn and he could not see why it mattered so much. The girl told me afterwards that it mattered because she could not

⁶⁴ The proportion of newborn babies was 117:100 by the 2000 Population Census. It is estimated that by 2020, males in the age bracket of 22-34 will exceed that of females by more than 26 million, nationally one out of every five men would be unable to find a wife. See Liang and Li (2011:116); Greenhalgh 2003, 2013; Deutsch 2006.

⁶⁵ A young married man boasted to me that for him and his male friends: ‘It is only that we don’t go out to chase girls. If we chase, we’ll get our hands full (*yi zhua yi daba* 一抓一大把).’

communicate intimacy in a natural manner when she had to speak in Putonghua, and yet it would be awkward for them to communicate in different dialects. The dialect may not be the killing factor for the relationship, but it does disadvantage the young man from Zhengzhou. I have observed that in the current landscape of romantic love in Nanchong, men have to make more effort than women ‘to learn’ how to perform as a boyfriend. The two ethnographic cases I show in the next section will expose more of the problems encountered by young migrant workers who try to find a spouse in Nanchong, and the vastly different strategies that men deploy to secure their love. In order for us to better understand the trajectories of the young men, I need to contextualize their migrant background.

Most young men I met in Nanchong belong to a category which is officially called the ‘new-generation migrant workers’ (*xinshengdai nongmingong* 新生代农民工), defined as those who were born in or after 1980, and who have joined the urban labour market in the late 1990s. According to the 2013 National *Nongmingong* Investigative Research Report⁶⁶, there were 123 million new-generation migrant workers in China. They are quite different from the migrant workers in classic literature. The classic migrant worker studies in China were primarily carried out in big cities, they appear as the ‘subaltern’ (Sun 2014) who often engage in low-paid, service and manual types of work; and much of the earlier work is focused on the experience of female migrants. As explained in Chapter One, Nanchong has attracted young workers from other small cities in the past decade. In contrast to the subaltern status which is experienced by many who work in the developed cities, migrants in Nanchong have more opportunities to take up senior positions in companies or start up their own businesses. Many of them would end up finding spouses in Nanchong, which sets the background of two young men I now turn to.

AN UNWELCOME SON-IN-LAW

Yuan is twenty-five years old, the second son of a couple living in a village in Chongqing. The couple was so poor that they gave him away to the bachelor brother of Yuan’s father. Yuan left home for migrant labour work and was brought to Nanchong by a boss who considered him a ‘high-flyer’. The company franchised a karaoke club and massage parlour at a five-star hotel in Nanchong. Yuan was a business manager who could make over RMB5,000 in a month. Outside of work, he always wore tracksuits. Yuan had healthy dark skin and liked to smile, showing off his white teeth. His favourite hobby was running up and down mountains, an activity which is easily accessible in Nanchong city. He said that he might have picked up this activity as a child in a poor village. Yuan did not seem to feel ashamed that he was given away by his parents and

⁶⁶ http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-05/12/content_2677889.htm.

was brought up by a bachelor uncle. He enjoyed his childhood with his grandmother, who passed away two years ago. Yuan has been in touch with his biological parents as well as his adoptive father, all of whom had moved to Chongqing city as migrant workers.

I met Yuan through Qiu, who was a cleaning maid working in the neighbourhood where I lived. She has two daughters and her husband worked on construction sites as a supervisor. Her eldest daughter, Hehua, married an electrician who worked in Zhejiang. Several years ago, Qiu had gladly imagined that her ‘good times’ had finally come after she and her husband bought a flat and both her daughters no longer depended on them. Qiu always said she ‘liked to play’ (*hao shua* 好耍). She was the first person who took me to a neighbourhood store to play mahjong. However, both she and her husband were diagnosed with diabetes a few years ago. Her husband’s salary was cut due to his inability to perform tough duties anymore. Qiu felt compelled to take up more part-time cleaning work. Hehua had a daughter and when she got pregnant again, she came back to Nanchong from Zhejiang and had been staying with her parents ever since. Hehua’s husband later came to stay with them as well when his contract in Zhejiang ended. Qiu said with a grin that she did not really enjoy taking care of so many people anymore, but ‘there’s nothing I can do (*mei banfa* 没办法), family members have to support one another (*huxiang fuchi* 互相扶持).’ Her hope rested on her younger daughter, Heye, who had quit her studies at fifteen. Heye was nineteen when I met her, and working as a supervisor at a massage parlour. She and Yuan began dating shortly after I met the family, which was a nightmare for Qiu.

Qiu told me right from the start that Yuan was ‘not welcome’ (*bushou huanying* 不受欢迎). She kept introducing Yuan as a ‘very dark and short’ (*youhei youai* 又黑又矮) man, even though she failed to explain why that would matter. I guess this was her way of showing her contempt for a man who was of peasantry descent, with few prospects, contrary to the ‘tall-rich-handsome’. Qiu, Hehua, and even Hehua’s husband, told me of the many reasons why Yuan was ‘not ideal’ (*bulixiang* 不理想). The reasons all boiled down to a matter of money. Yuan was considered an ‘unskilled labourer’ with an unstable income. His salary dropped sharply in early 2014 when the nightclub was forced to close for a month due to staggering debt. Working in a karaoke club also bears a stigma; it insinuates sex work. Qiu urged her son-in-law and I to take her to the hotel and examine the place, though we managed to convince Qiu that this was unhelpful. Yuan’s family background caused a big concern. His adoptive father had retired, whereas his biological parents were washing dishes at restaurants, a job which was one of the lowest in society. Qiu did not want affines like them: she imagined that if the couple were to marry, she would need to subsidize their wedding. What was worse, Yuan had decided that he had to ‘set up a home’ (*anjia* 安家) in Chongqing, not Nanchong. For Qiu, it meant losing a daughter: ‘We would end up seeing each other only on birthdays and Chinese New Year.’ She

also objected on the grounds of fairness: ‘Why is it that they have to move to take care of the old man, instead of staying here to take care of me?!’ Hehua, as an elder sister, also revealed some other practical concerns. She said Heye had always been a very delicate girl; she never handled housework; she was a spoiled child in the family. Hehua predicted that there was no way her sister could get along with Yuan’s father and parents; her life would become even more intolerable when she would have a child.

The young couple were aware of all these perceived negatives about their relationship. Yuan expressed that it was unfair for people to judge him negatively for his work at a karaoke club; theirs was a rather clean place. He would not consider setting up a home far away from his father, who had adopted him for the purpose of having a son around as he aged. Both the old man and his biological parents had promised to contribute to his flat if he had it in Chongqing, but not in Nanchong.

Without Yuan’s knowledge, Heye had complied with her mother’s wish to meet three men introduced by Qiu and a matchmaker. For various reasons, Heye did not accept any of them after the initial meeting even though all of them came from wealthier families. She jokingly recounted to me, ‘It doesn’t seem as if the men whom mom likes are tall at all!’ She added self-deprecatingly, ‘To be honest, my qualifications (*tiaojian* 条件) are not that great either.’ She defended Yuan by describing him as a reliable man and one who just fitted her. Yuan was caring, and she trusted that he would be a responsible husband (*keyi dandang* 可以担当). She loathed the idea of marrying for money, even worse for a flat. For some time, the three women at home had quarrelled over Yuan. He was not invited to their home during the Moon Festival, nor to the ‘hundred-day banquet’ of Hehua’s young son.

Yuan is by all standards a progressive young man. Rejection of him as a potential son-in-law seems to be beyond sense. I was often surprised when Qiu, one of the most cheerful middle-aged women I met in Nanchong, would suddenly turn sour and fierce when she talked about Yuan. However, given her belief that mutual support amongst family members is for life, one cannot blame her for her fear of seeing her daughter marrying a man who would likely need their financial assistance. In rejecting Yuan, the family demonstrates the hegemonic power of the current ideal for manhood. Yuan seems to be a pleasant, responsible young man, but he is far from ‘able’. He does not have a good educational background or a respectable job. Many young men could cross this threshold with familial support. In Yuan’s case however, there is no fall-back. Without the fundamental cushion of economic ability, men like Yuan are considered to be unable to perform their responsibilities.

Nevertheless, Yuan was able to sustain the relationship, partly by his performance as a tender loving boyfriend. I have seen how Yuan indulged Heye by saying yes to everything she

said, and responding to her short temper with permission and smiles. He told me with a lovely smile that he was afraid of (*haipa* 害怕) Heye's family. His strategy was to keep Heye happy rather than to compromise his decision to buy a flat in Chongqing. He sent gifts to Qiu through Heye during festivals and important occasions, but he did not push the idea of meeting up with the family. By the time I revisited Nanchong after a year, Yuan was still not quite welcomed as a future son-in-law, but the family had become more relaxed towards him. Qiu told me Heye had obtained a good job and that the couple was doing well with their savings plan. The daughter comforted her mother by asking her to let go and be easy, 'children can naturally sort themselves out and enjoy their lives with blessings' (*zīnǚ zìyǒu zīnǚfú* 子女自有子女福). This simple phrase seemed to work on Qiu, who repeatedly rehearsed it to me with a nod on her head.

It is clear from this case that marriage in Nanchong is still subject to tremendous parental influence, and filial piety continues to be taken as an unconditional duty across generations. It is also clear that money and love are entangled rather than opposed. Couples have to perform financial duties to parents on both sides, but the material expectations are negotiable. Heye is an assertive young woman who claims the right to freedom of love, but at the same time she handles the intense pressure from her family without causing a rupture. She understands too well that her mother and sister have good intentions behind all their objections. Yuan has to balance the interests of his own parents and his future in-laws and this he does by collaborating with his girlfriend. The conflict between conjugal power and parental authority is a key source of conflict and tension in many people's lives. However, I find that young people do make efforts to mediate and negotiate between the interests of different parties rather than take advantage of their parents; the sacredness of parenthood still exists and conjugal choice is not completely driven by individualistic concerns (cf Yan 2003; Rofel 2007). Even though we cannot say that the intimacy between Yuan and Heye is built on 'pure love', nor can we underestimate the importance of financial solvency in their relationship, we can safely conclude that the young couple is committed to their choice of each other as longstanding partners, and they labour to pursue their love and marriage.

So far, the young men whom I portray in this chapter all appear to be accommodating and caring towards their girlfriends. They cannot claim 'financial ability', but they are trusted for being responsible men. A recent article spells out exactly the same point that *responsibility* has become a dominant theme in judging the credentials of a prospective husband:

Throughout my fieldwork I found that most of my unmarried, heterosexual informants had similar expectations of marriage. Words like 'responsibility' (*zeren*) and 'fulfilling (one's) responsibility' (*fu zeren*) kept recurring during

interviews and were extremely prominent during ritual occasions linked to coupling, marriage, and childbearing. (Zavoretti 2016: 1202)

In Zavoretti's analysis, the state government and media have advanced the idea of responsibility as a means to build social cohesion and stability. The discourse of responsibility brings traditional values back to the centrality of intimate relations, and provides the moral foundation for modern marriages.

Women want to depend on men as responsible providers, but it does not mean that men have to be the sole providers. Nationwide in China, the vast majority of women inherit the system which started from Mao by staying in the workforce even after marrying. This practically gives women greater negotiating power in families. Men are sensitive to the fact that in this modern age, the old patriarchal order can no longer be justified. However, the transition to egalitarian models poses many challenges. In the next ethnographic case, I show how difficult some men may find it to relinquish their onerous authority and at the same time perform as a tender loving man in the romantic space. The case also illustrates how easy it is for men to exaggerate the significance of money in romantic relations, and to simplify the complicated dilemmas by reducing it to a single dimension: money, or love.

A DISORIENTATED CHAUVINIST

Tao, at the age of twenty-six, looks like a sophisticated middle-class man. He has a good build because he works hard on his body. He wears smart casual attire of visibly good make and material. He is eloquent but appears to be a strong quiet man rather than a sociable chatterbox. When he talks, he often borrows some grand theories to prove a point. I met Tao through Wen, who was the girlfriend of the property agent I used to find an apartment when I arrived in Nanchong (Chapter One). Wen broke up with the property agent after three years' relationship with him. She is a pretty, talented and fashionable girl. She graduated from a technical college in Chengdu. Being an administrative staff working in a small private company, however, she made a low salary of less than RMB2,000. Through an online dating service, she got to know Tao. Very quickly, they fell in love.

For the first few months, Wen told me delightedly about Tao, whom she considered a promising husband. Apart from his full-time job at an interior design and decoration company, Tao operated an online shop selling premium nutritional supplements. In two months, Wen agreed to marry Tao before he could afford a property. With all incomes added together, Tao made close to RMB10,000 in a month. It sounded like a good salary, but it would take many

years before he could buy a property without family assistance. They were hopeful that they could save enough to buy a decent flat in Nanchong within a few years; the families from both ends had promised to subsidize them. At Wen's birthday, Tao gave a budget of RMB900 to Wen and asked her to choose a present she liked. She bought a Swarovski necklace online for RMB780, which she proudly showed me. However, after another couple of months, the couple broke up. Initially, Tao blamed Wen for wanting to find a richer man. He complained constantly that young women nowadays were not willing to go through hardships with men like him, who had no property and no car. Wen described Tao as a hypocrite and he was trapped by an inferiority complex. From their narratives, Tao assumed a patriarchal position which is untenable for young women in China nowadays.

Tao told me in our second meeting when Wen was not around that what defined manhood was honour (*rongyu* 荣誉). He considered honour as success and therefore the acquisition of reputation (*mingsheng* 名声), money, and an ability to protect and provide for his family. He cited Beckham, Yao Ming, and the Hong Kong singer Cheung Hok Yau as examples. His earnest desire for honour could be related to his humble background. Tao told me his hometown was Xichang, a small city in southwest Sichuan. Wen told me that his hometown is actually a mountainous village in Liangshan, the short form for Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture. The prefecture is one of the poorest regions in China and hosts a large population of a minority group called Yi. As a result, people from this region are naturally associated with a minority origin. Xichang is the capital city, but Tao cannot practically claim that he is from Xichang. Tao left the village and became a migrant labourer when he was 16. He worked at the infamous Foxconn⁶⁷ factory for a year, taking the 6pm to 6am shift most of the time. He said Foxconn trained him in perseverance. Three years ago, he came to Nanchong. Through some means, Tao reapplied for a new identity card. The place of birth was changed to Nanchong, and he renamed himself from Tao Yu to Tao An. The practice of reapplying for identity cards was not too uncommon for people in Nanchong. Some changed their names and dates of birth after consulting fortune tellers for auspicious reasons; others added a few years to facilitate a job search; a woman I knew made herself three years younger so that it would be easier for her to find a spouse; still others changed personal details to evade fines from the one-child policy; a woman changed her parents' names back to her biological parents after many years living with relatives. In Tao's case, Wen told me in private that he did not want people to know he was from Liangshan and warned me not to ask too much about it when we met. I noted in our first meeting that Tao had a tendency to present himself as an honourable man with authority. Apart

⁶⁷ Foxconn is the world's largest electronics manufacturer which supplies products to companies like Apple. In 2010, a string of 14 suicides were committed by young workers (with a total workforce of 930,000), which triggered widespread media concern both inside and outside China. See Ngai and Chan (2012).

from sending money regularly to his parents, he mentioned that he gave some money to a neighbouring boy to support his education, an act which had won him a good name in the village.

Tao's sensitivity to his identity is reflected in many ways. In Bourdieu's term, he is keen to accumulate and display his 'cultural capital' and even a sense of 'distinction' (1984). Bourdieu described a 'petite bourgeoisie' social class that wanted to gain cultural legitimacy in France. Their 'pretension' becomes 'pre-tension': 'the thrust to continue along the upward inclination has its reverse side in the economizing mentality and in all the "small-mindedness" associated with the petite bourgeois virtues' (1984:334). This is a fitting description of Tao's efforts in tuning his lifestyle. Because of the attention to his body and his middle-class, cosmopolitan taste, Tao is fastidious with food. In our first meeting, we went to a mid-range steak house in Nanchong. As the waitress was taking the order, he asked about the beef dishes on the menu: which part of the cow was it, how many grams of it would be served. The waitress could not answer the second question; Tao suggested that she go back to the kitchen to verify. Wen told me afterwards that he had done the same in another restaurant. When a waiter came back telling him the weight of the beef in ounces, he was embarrassed not to understand ounces and insisted that the waiter use the measuring unit of grams. In another instance, they were at a cheap dumpling place and Tao did not like the fish dumpling that was served. He ordered Wen to go and ask what fish it was. The question was so odd that the owner of the restaurant almost ordered them to leave. Tao always criticized Wen for going out with her friends to karaoke bars. Tao despised her friends for having no taste and no class. He did not allow Wen to smoke because it was too unladylike, though he himself smoked at home. He also criticized Wen's fashion sense, which he considered too immature for her. Wen told me that she had changed her wardrobe after dating Tao. All these things appeared refreshing for Wen at first, but gradually, it overwhelmed her.

Wen said Tao pretended to be a '*daye* 大爷' or simply '*ye* 爷'. *Daye* is traditionally a title used to address somebody's brother-in-law, elderly male relative, or any old man aged over sixty. The term is still used as such nowadays. However, depending on the context, it can carry a sarcastic connotation, implying a man who pretends to be the powerful patriarch who has a 'big face'. As could be gathered from the above, Tao had a tendency to ask Wen to run errands for him. Once I was invited to have hot pot at Wen's home, Wen did all of the work while Tao would lounge lazily in front of the TV. Wen said that if they went to a fast food restaurant, she had to ask what Tao wanted to eat, then go to the counter to buy and carry the food to the table. He worked more flexible and longer hours than Wen, who sometimes visited Tao at his office. From time to time, he would ask Wen to bring him some food such as buns and fruits. Later on, he suggested to Wen that they have lunch together at her home. Wen lived in a flat which her

mother bought, but her mother worked as a nurse and often slept in a dormitory provided by the hospital. Tao proposed that he give Wen RMB500 a month for cooking ingredients. It sounded like a nice idea to Wen, who thought that it would take their relationship to another level. However, Tao gave her only RMB200 for a start, which was soon used up because he wanted meat or fish with every meal and insisted that Wen buy fresh ingredients every day. What was worse, he asked Wen to tell his colleagues and her friends that he had spent RMB1,500 on a maid to cook for them. More and more, Wen found Tao very mean and hypocritical. One day, she told Tao that she had to skip lunch because her high heel shoes made her feet sore, so she did not want to go to the wet market for groceries. Tao told her this would be good training for her. Wen often had to go and find good meat and vegetables at the lowest price in a wet market. She grew sick of his demands and said to me: ‘You cannot expect a steak when you can only afford *tofu*.’

The trigger point for their separation was a visit to Chengdu. It was the wedding of one of Wen’s best friends and few things went wrong during the visit. Wen said that Tao looked down on her friends and embarrassed her. He refused to go to karaoke the night before the wedding day, and did not take Wen to the bride’s home early the next morning. Wen’s friends all told her that Tao was not a gentleman. Tao did confess to me that he hated all those rituals in weddings, and he found Wen’s friends a group of ‘pig and dog friends’ (*zhupeng gouyou* 猪朋狗友), which means worthless friends. Wen reflected on their relationship and decided to break up. Tao was devastated. He suspected that Wen had met a richer boyfriend. When he confirmed that this was not the case, he started to blame himself and women in general. With a mournful tone, he commented, ‘Girls today are very greedy, they want many things from men: money, time, care, and love. If they cannot be satisfied, they run.... If a man does not spend time with his girlfriend, he is chastised. If he spends too much time with the girl and does not succeed in his career, he is accused of being useless and becomes a negative example (*fanmian jiaocai* 反面教材) amongst friends.’ He also accused Wen of her petite bourgeoisie (*xiaozi* 小资) pretensions: ‘She spends all her money on perfume and handbags, she wants high-tea every day and to own a piece from Tiffany.... She said she didn’t mind me not having a property, but she couldn’t stand letting her child live in a tiny rented flat. Women are the same.... Rose in Titanic abandoned her wealthy fiancé for Jack, but had she and Jack married and lived on, very likely Rose would run away because when the passion is over, she would want to be with a rich guy.’ After all, Tao refused to believe that material provision was not the key factor that caused Wen to leave him. Alternatively, we can also interpret that Tao has self-victimized himself by accepting the hegemonic masculinity that a man has to be able to make good money and provide for the woman.

I revisited Nanchong after about a year and met Wen again. She had just become engaged to a man, who was completely different to Tao. I spent a day with the couple and went to their new flat in a nice area. Wen told me that she did not particularly love her fiancé named Yang. He was an ordinary man working as a low-ranking supervisor in a factory. Yang made around RMB4,200 a month, which was more than double her own salary, but less than half of Tao's. Wen specified that his ability was very average (*nengli henputong* 能力很普通). What was important for her was that he felt 'simple' (*jiandan* 简单) and dependable, he loved Wen and let her decide on everything. I went out one evening with the couple and paid a visit to their new flat which was co-invested by Yang and his mother. They were in the process of furnishing the flat, and all the soft furnishing ideas came from Wen. Yang's mother liked Wen so much that she ordered her son to give his debit card to Wen, who had started to control his expenditure. The mother complimented Wen for being an angel whom her son did not quite deserve. She urged Wen to take care of her son. Wen gave her fiancé only RMB5 to spend in a day. Wen felt good to be so trusted and in command. After several failures in relationships, she believed that this man was a safe bet even though he was quite far from her ideal.

From a country boy in the poorest region of China to a respectable semi-professional, Tao has managed to transform himself: he embodies middle-class taste in his appearance and lifestyle. Even with his occasional awkward, embarrassing, and pretentious habits, by all appearances, he can hardly be seen to embody a 'habitus' of bachelor peasants, which Bourdieu (2008) famously described in a village setting in France in the 1960s. Nevertheless, as Wen commented, Tao is torn by contradictions and struggles (*jiujie* 纠结) in life. His denial of his family background and class by birth may grant him some advantages socially. Yet, given his attachment to the family and his commitment to be a filial son, an identity link with his village in Liangshan is something that cannot be removed. Because of his economically deprived family background, he is very sensitive to the power and evilness of money. He can easily relegate all his shortcomings to one single factor – a shortfall of money. As a matter of fact, Wen considers Tao satisfactory financially, and his ability higher than that of Yang. What she cannot bear is Tao as an individualist and a misogynist. While Tao learns to perform as a new-age cosmopolitan man, he subconsciously upholds traditional patriarchal values that has a declining currency and cannot be tolerated by young females anymore. He has miscalculated and misconstrued how much Wen can tolerate for love.

Love and the romantic spaces it inhabits are highly charged political arenas which put masculinity, and also femininity, to the test. Many men bemoan to me that women want the best of both worlds: they want to have gender equality and independence, yet they pressure men to support them financially. Tao is a typical example of these men who feel disorientated. For him, when a girl wants to be treated as a sweet, fragile princess, the man must assume the role of a

strong protector, one who can easily become chauvinistic. One might think that his aspiration for upper-class manhood and practice as a superior patriarchal *daye* could be more compatible if he truly belonged to the upper-class. The fact is that he is a man of ‘three NOs’ and he is disqualified to act as a *daye*. However, I doubt that Wen would accept Tao even if he was a much richer man. From my observations and understanding, young women in Nanchong nowadays are not prepared to serve men’s superior ego for the sake of material promises. The experiences of several women presented in this chapter should have proven that point. Wen made a very interesting comment concerning this: she could accept herself to be ‘humble emotionally’ (*ganqing shang de qianbei* 感情上的谦卑), but what Tao required of her was to be ‘humble behaviourally’ (*xingwei shang de qianbei* 行为上的谦卑). Her rationale was that she could surrender herself to a man who was worthy of her submissiveness by feeling meek and small. She was willing to serve the man by cooking for him and washing his clothes, which she had done for Tao. But these should be voluntary and premised on emotional humility. To put it another way, Wen would prefer to marry a man whom she could depend on financially, in which case she would naturally take up more household chores, which, according to Wen, is a form of mutual cooperation between a couple who love and support each other. She described what gender equality was for her by using a popular Chinese expression: ‘You can’t expect absolute equality, but only relative equality’ (*meiyou juegui de pingdeng, zhiyou xiangdui de pingdeng* 没有绝对的平等, 只有相对的平等). However, Tao was assuming a superior position, and he presupposed that a woman should be at his service as if men are inherently superior and deserve women’s service. This is what Wen, and many other ‘modern’ women I met in Nanchong, reject.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this fieldwork, numerous unmarried and divorced men and women shared with me their love stories and the joy, anger, angst and contentment that they derived from either anticipating or undergoing a romantic experience. Strangers with whom I only had a chance encounter, such as a taxi driver or somebody who washed or cut my hair in a hair salon, would talk to me about love. It always started by the person asking me something like ‘do you come to Nanchong to visit your husband or relatives’, or ‘how many children do you have’. After I explained my status, it was very easy for us to carry on the conversation by chatting about love and marriage. I always got an impression from these encounters that people who were single and at a marriageable age had only two immediate aims in life: to make more money and to find a lifelong partner. Towards the beginning of this chapter, I presented the importance held for men to marry and have a child. Failure to find a wife is a marker of failed masculinity. I

explained that in this instance, men often place the blame on their own inadequacies or on women's inordinate demands when they are 'behind schedule' in finding a wife. They seldom consider external factors such as the marriage squeeze created by the one-child policy, making a man's masculinity all the more central in seeking a spouse.

I also explained that with the ongoing discursive articulations of female power and yet their 'privileged' position of being the receivers of romantic treats and tender loving care, men who have limited resources are required to work especially hard to court the ones they love. Many men therefore express that they are in a learning process to perform the acts of an appropriate if not exemplary lover. Men use different strategies to negotiate changes in the romantic landscape; their strategies are considerably conditioned by their economic and cultural capital, the collaboration or resistance of their girlfriends and their families, personal interpretation of men's duties, and their moral reflections on love and marriage. Women take a man's financial ability into consideration, but it is made clear from the ethnographic cases in the chapter that money does not have primacy over various other considerations in many women's eyes – a point which can be missed by men, and hence opportunities lost. I reported how a woman gave up a prospective wealthy boyfriend for the fear that she would become 'a shorter person' both in the relationship and in the rich family, and how other women rationalized that they might yield to the domination of a man and his family, should the prospective husband be rich. Nevertheless, the latter may speak into women's yearnings for love rather than what they would actually take. As the interlocutor Wen explained that she could not humble herself as an inferior partner in serving a man's superior ego. As far as everyday young men in Nanchong are concerned, it is hard to see how they can enjoy what Connell called the 'patriarchal dividend' (2005: 79).

Song and Hird (2014) suggest that in the twenty-first century, patriarchal modes of male dominance have strengthened in China. As men become more disadvantaged, they try to fight and maintain their privilege: 'many men are quick to embrace the myth that they are now the disadvantaged gender, and are fighting what seems like a successful battle so far to strengthen their dominance' (ibid:263). Their empathetic pro-feminist stance leads them to conclude that the formation of different masculinities has acted to 'maintain men's privileged position in all realms of Chinese society' (ibid: 264). The authors have based their argument on a number of observations: the dominance of men in senior positions in the workplace, men's role as high-earning breadwinners, their pride in making 'big decisions' which legitimize their hierarchical superiority in families, and their exclusive consumption of some leisure activities which exclude or exploit women in positions such as sex workers. Whilst these practices of gender inequality exist in China and in Nanchong, I question the conclusion drawn in the study (not because their evidence is based on a sample of well-to-do white-collar men in Beijing, a point which the

authors have made clear). Taking patriarchy in a general sense as the authority and privileges men hold over women, I have observed many relationships in which women have genuine power and the men do not exert a patriarchal ego. Tao belongs to a minority whereas Jiang, Yang, and the boyfriends of Heye and Zhu are more typical of the young men I met in Nanchong.

I do not suggest that egalitarianism is finally and genuinely achieved in China, not even in Nanchong. I also do not contend that male domination over women has extinguished. As I spelt out earlier, wealthy men command more privileges than those who have ‘no house, no car, no money’. Nevertheless, in the private sphere, there is definitely a growing detachment of both men and women from the idea of male domination. This concerns a gradual transformation of gender relations since Mao’s era. Patriarchy, which is vernacularized in China as ‘rule/authority of the father’ (*fuquan* 父权), or ‘rule/authority of the male’ (*nanquan* 男权), is an old-fashioned idea to both young men and young women. The acceptance or rejection of male domination, therefore, is undergoing a transformation in China. I will continue to discuss this point in the successive two chapters. In Chapter Seven, I will also examine patriarchy on a different level: the rule of the country leader.

We have seen more about the financial competence of a man than the responsibility of a man in this chapter. In fact, women told me that they would not even consider a man if he did not appear to be somebody who could shoulder future responsibilities for the family. I contend that they are prepared to compromise on financial ability but not responsibility. During courtship, it is not so easy to tell if a man is responsible in practice or not. Some women indicate that a man can be judged on whether or not he will be a responsible and dependable husband by looking at how he treats his parents. One can only assume that a good son will likely be a good husband, father, and son-in-law. This is the real test of an able-responsible man, and my central point of examination in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5: RESPONSIBLE FAMILY MEN – THE FATHER, SON, AND HUSBAND

Chinese parents who are enlightened (*juexing* 觉醒) must liberate the young but also please the elderly; they must pay old debt whilst trying to construct new paths.... This is a matter of grave significance and importance, and a matter that is extremely difficult and painful. (Lu Xun, from *What is required to be a father today* 我们现在怎样做父亲 [1919:10])

Lu Xun (1881-1936) was one of the most influential writers in Chinese history and a leading figure in the New Culture Movement. In the article extract above, Lu acknowledges the universal challenge faced by a new generation of fathers of his era, but highlights the specific difficulties for men in China caused by the stubborn ideology of filial piety. In another essay, he more directly attacked the detrimental effects that classical teachings such as *Twenty-four stories of filial piety* (*Ershisi xiao* 二十四孝) had perpetuated in Chinese culture. Writers such as Lu were not against filial piety per se; Lu considered himself a filial son in his essay. What he attacked was filial piety in excess, a kind of ‘ignorant filiality’ (*yuxiao* 愚孝) and relatedly, a strong patriarchy, that were both upheld in China for thousands of years. At that time, there was a wake-up call for the Chinese to break free of stifling traditions and find new paths of development.

A century has passed since the New Culture Movement. Today, filial piety remains a pillar of Chinese culture but many of those practices which Lu would consider ‘ignorant’, such as a child sacrificing his life for parents’ wellness, are discarded. Lu also warned of the dire challenge in developing new fathering attitudes and behaviours. What he did *not* envisage or write about, however, are the difficulties that arise in being a good husband, which I have observed to cause even more distress and unrest in families in my fieldwork site. My attempt in this chapter is to pick up Lu Xun’s argument and that which he considered to be difficult for the men of his time. I suggest that with the ongoing shifts in gender power and relational dynamics within a family, the most difficult adjustment for family men is not becoming a good son and a good father, but how to become a good husband. It is certainly not my aim to undermine the very real challenges men face in being responsible fathers, sons, and in fact sons-in-law at the same time. What this chapter instead intends to express and examine, are the dilemmas faced by family men who need to perform their multiple duties whilst fulfilling the cultural vision of the able-responsible man.

In some cultural settings, a man's familial responsibility may not be expected to go beyond the boundary of a nuclear family in a substantial way. In China, however, a married man must be responsible to his parents and in-laws, and even to his siblings and close affines. Despite growing individualization in Chinese families and an apparent 'deinstitutionalization' of marriage (Davis and Friedman 2014), many traditional ideals and practices involved in married life and family responsibilities are reconfigured but not discarded (Whyte 2003; Shen 2011; Donner and Santos 2016). Traditionally, life after marriage is hardly only about a conjugal couple in China, but rather the merging of two families, despite the fact that the range and size of kinship bonds continue to shrink. According to Su & Wei's research (1994), the two characters of 'marriage' in Chinese, or the term *hun yin* 婚姻, has evolved since the Han Dynasty (202B.C. to 220 A.D.). *Hun yin* has represented different but related meanings including rituals in marriage; the husband (*hun*) and wife (*yin*); the fathers of the husband and the wife; and the affines from the two families that are brought together (1994:3). Marriage, therefore, has been considered as a union of two familial bodies, not of two persons in Chinese culture. This is a point I heard emerging from some of my interlocutors, which were highlighted in the last chapter. As written by Jankowiak (1993: 224-225): 'Marriage and the establishment of a family remain a critical, yet truncated marker that the urban Chinese use to sort one another out into relative degrees of social maturity, adulthood, and psychological stability'.

More and more studies about fatherhood and family men have emerged in the last two decades. There are studies by Coltrane (1996), McKeown et al. (1998), Hobson (2002), Shwalb et al. (2013) and Boratav et al. (2014) in different parts of the world; and Jankowiak (1993), Song & Hird (2014) and Lin (2013) in China. However, this new body of literature is dominated by the study of men as husbands and or fathers, hardly as adult sons. Lin (2013) provides a more well-rounded picture of men as fathers, sons and husbands in China, though his focus is on migrant workers away from home. In most research in China as well as elsewhere, the identities of a father and husband are dealt with separately, rather than as twin identities carried by the same person. In other words, family men are approached quite intentionally as fathers or husbands rather than as men who are simultaneously a father and a husband. What is more, sons appear primarily as children or students under the age of twenty or so. The strategy of focusing on a specific dimension of a man in a family is natural when issues such as fatherhood, education, intimacy, sharing of labour and resources are the main themes of investigation. However, for us to truly understand family men in China, we need to study the multiple dimensions of a father, a husband, and a son in the same man at the same time. Only then can we understand the relational dynamics that is so critical in Chinese families.

I argue in this chapter that it is relatively easy for men to take up their changing roles of sons and fathers because of the delayed cycle of reciprocation. In order to enhance this point, I will borrow Charles Stafford's 'cycle of *yang*' (2008, 2000a, 2000b) to refer to the obligations for parents to nurture and to support their children, and the care children reciprocate to their elderly parents. I observed that in Nanchong, parents give more to children for a prolonged period, with eventual reciprocation happening at a much later stage. This extended process of giving (by parents) and the delayed start of reciprocating (by a child) serve the interest of married people until they themselves age and become elderly. On the other hand, the shifting gender power relations and new expectations for men to perform as 'good husbands' (in Chinese, *hao lagoon* 好老公) create greater strife and unfulfilled feelings for men; the changes are of an ideological nature. Husbands find the manifold demands of their wives exhausting but, admittedly, legitimate. Moreover, in the last chapter, we see that men work hard as romantic lovers to court the woman who could be their prospective wife, but men become less patient and accommodating after marrying.

The generation of family men covered in this chapter ranges between age twenty-seven and fifty-five: roughly the last generation of those who could give birth to multiple children and the first generation of single-child parents. Patrilocality and joint or stem families are much less dominant than they were in the past, and neolocal residence has certainly become very common in urban settings. However, intergenerational cohabitation is alive in a different form in many families. More about the changes in family patterns will be revealed in the ethnographic accounts later in this chapter. What I want to establish is that intergenerational and intra-familial relationships constitute a crucial part of a man's (and also a woman's) daily life. These create multi-layered demands on men. I begin by considering the phenomenon of 'new man', which has taken root in many Western countries and has become evident in China.

THE 'NEW MAN'

The so-called concept of 'new man' which has emerged in popular culture and masculinity studies, refers to the phenomenon of men becoming more egalitarian and communicative husbands, and more nurturing and involved fathers at the same time. In the words of a sociologist, a twentieth-century new liberated man is 'expected to be in touch with his body and his feelings, to be non-violent and refuse to fight, to be able to cry and to cook and to "emote"' (Synott 2009:49; also see Hochschild 1995). Lupton and Barclay (1997), drawing upon Foucauldian perspectives and psychoanalytic theories such as that of Chodorow, plus empirical research in Australia, provide this analysis:

Appropriate masculinity, in this sense, is related to the ability to express and engage in fatherly love for one's child as well as to provide material resources for the family. The men not only wanted their children to love them as they themselves wanted to love their own fathers, but also wished to be able to invest their own love freely in their children, in a reciprocal, mutually loving relationship which was not 'forced.' (Lupton & Barclay 1997:144-5)

A similar picture for Chinese men is drawn by Jankowaik (1993) and Song & Hird (2014). The latter, for instance, describe 'the newly minted sensitive man' who can express a full range of emotions to realise themselves as a complete individual (2014:26). The emergence of this typology of new man of course only represents a general social trend, not a uniform picture of what men are like or will become. Even within a single cultural setting, there are variations (Shwalb et al. 2013). What is perhaps universally true is a general discourse favouring the new man, which presses on to overtake the older masculine norms, in a contemporary world. In some countries, particularly in Northern Europe, the new masculinity has become more or less a reality. In other words, there is a more consistent way in society to support the behaviour of the 'new man' (Hearn et al 2012). Changes in the same direction are taking place in Nanchong, but perhaps not dissimilar to many places in the world, men (and women) are still at the point of adjusting to or contesting shifting norms in masculinity.

Two particular case studies from Nanchong illustrate this point. The first centres around a man named Fang: Fang is praised as a good husband by his wife and peers. His case provides a vivid example of how men take on the task of performing as a good husband, father and son. We will see that the task is easier said than done. The second case follows a man called Zhao whom I mentioned in Chapter Two. Zhao falls short of being a good husband in the eyes of his wife. Nevertheless, a few common friends of the couple describe Zhao as a faithful, gentle husband, with his daughter also praising him as a great father. Delivering the duties required of a good father and husband simultaneously, appear therefore to be highly problematic and difficult to navigate. Not to mention the duties of a son and son-in-law. In the first case study, I describe Fang largely from the vantage point of his wife, Gu. This is not only because I was very close to Gu during fieldwork, but also because it truthfully reveals the ways that a husband and a wife affect each other's familial and spousal roles in a mutually constitutive manner.

A QUIET DEFENDER OF THE FAMILY

Fang was twenty-nine years of age when I met him. I knew him through Gu, who grew up in a very poor rural family in Jiangxi Province. Her mother was deaf; her parents always had serious

fights which involved suicide attempts and which required mediation from leaders in the village where Gu spent her childhood. Gu obtained a university degree and left home to work in Guangdong for a year. Following that, she came to Nanchong where her brother had obtained a position in the army. Gu started as a hawker on the street selling different merchandize. Subsequently, she rented a small outlet to sell Taiwanese pancakes. She recounted her strength in carrying a refrigerator from the ground floor to the fifth floor where she lived. Fang told me that Gu attracted him partly because of the capability and concentration she had shown at work. They married after a year and had a son. Slightly more than a year after marrying, the couple was able to pay the down payment on a new flat in a middle-class area. I gathered that they could afford the property partly because the old house and land which belonged to the Fang family were expropriated by the local government for development purposes. Fang is the only son in the family; he has two elder sisters who were married long before he married. It appeared that Fang inherited a larger share of the ‘compensations’ his parents had received. This could have been the root of some of the family conflicts, which Fang disclosed to me later on.

Fang is a good husband by Nanchong standard. He arrived home punctually after work; he worked hard to make money for the family; he honoured his wife (in Chinese, he ‘gave face’ to his wife) by always offering a ride to her and her friends when she went out. His best friends were a group of male classmates who met a few times a month, usually fishing. His only other hobbies were video games and TV. Fang did not smoke or gamble. He held a middle-ranking position at a government department that looked after rural land developments. Fang was easy to talk to though it might be an effort for him to warm up in social situations. Once he was in the mood to chat, we could talk over a wide range of topics such as Sichuan culture and the property market, new gadgets sold in the market, the pleasure of fishing, his son’s education, political development in China, and so forth.

Gu worked as a salesperson in a property development company for half a year, but she left at Fang’s urging. He detested the idea that Gu had to entertain many different customers, especially men, at work. Gu, later on, moved to work for a human resources department in another property development company. Aside from their full-time jobs, the couple had always been engaged in some investment projects. Fang spent his time investing in a plantation to grow fruit trees. Gu was negotiating with friends running supermarket and restaurant businesses. The couple always discussed these investment opportunities and committed their money only if both agreed. Overall, Gu was more energetic and ambitious; she was keen on new projects and did not tire of networking and negotiating. At the same time, she was responsible for all housework; she particularly enjoyed cooking. Fang seldom helped out. Their three-year-old son was taken care of by Fang’s parents who lived quite close to them. The child therefore only slept at his

parents' house for weekends. Fang's parents usually took their two grandsons, the older one born by their daughter, to Fang's place on Saturday and had lunch or even dinner together. Both loved their son but found it more tiring to take care of their son for two days than to work for five; they were only too happy to let the grandparents do the job.

I met Fang's parents a few times when I paid a visit. They were both around sixty years old and looked healthy. Fang's mother was always with her two grandsons; she was often busy acting as a standby maid for the two grandsons, who were both friend and foe to each other. Fang's father liked to stay in the kitchen. He could be occupied for hours there doing anything from preparing the meal to cleaning up all the utensils. He did the washing, chopping, frying, double-boiling, washing again, tidying up, and cleaning of the stove and cupboards. After finishing all these, he would take a nap in the bedroom. He would then come back again to sit on the sofa, and watch TV together with everyone, and peel some fruits for us.

This older couple lived with their two grandsons. Their eldest daughter lost her husband some years ago; she left her son's care to her parents and moved to work in Guangdong. Fang's second sister had given birth to a daughter. Gu used to say that their son was the Fang family's only heir in three generations (*sandai danchuan* 三代单传), therefore a precious jewel to the grandparents. Daughters' children, even if they are sons, are not as good as a son's son. Gu was treated very well by her parents-in-law when she was pregnant, especially after giving birth to a son. Her father-in-law cooked all her meals while the mother-in-law helped take care of the new-born baby. She concurred with her friends' view that, had she given birth to a daughter, she might not have enjoyed the same treatment. Both she and Fang thought that their son was too spoilt by his grandmother, which was the cause of his bad temper. Gu had quarrelled with her mother-in-law over her son. For example, the boy only ate in front of the TV or if he was given a mobile phone with which he could play games. Gu hated this and would beat her son for it. The grandmother took it as a criticism of her as well; she told Fang she would not take care of the grandchild anymore if Gu continued to criticise. Gu also did not like the ten-year-old nephew as a frequent guest. The nephew stayed in her house for almost two months during the summer vacation. She thought the boy was old enough to help out with some housework such as sweeping the floor and setting the table. However, he did nothing apart from playing or fighting with her son. She told me she could not instruct the boy to do anything because he was not her own child, so she instead put pressure on her husband to discipline the boy.

Gu's parents presented a bigger problem: They lived with their son, Gu's brother, and his wife. Gu's mother could neither hear nor speak, but she was very keen to relate to people. Her husband translated some of her signs and body languages to me during a conversation, but at times he would give up and simply say he did not know what she was mumbling about. The

wife would show her frustration at the break in communication. It was clear that this old couple could easily be a burden to Gu's brother's family. Gu introduced me to her sister-in-law, Liu. Slowly, I discovered that the two women had some conflicts with each other on account of Gu's parents. A few months before I left Nanchong in fact, they were virtually no longer speaking to each other. Liu found the longstanding presence of her in-laws in her home intolerably tiring; she felt that they should rotate their stay between their two children's homes. Gu, on the other hand, felt that responsibility for the care of her parents should fall to her brother rather than herself since she was a daughter. Fang firmly did not want to have his in-laws staying with them. His rationale was that priority should be given to his own parents if the elderly were to stay in their house. This kind of conflict emerged from time to time. For example, Fang once had a chance to take two more family members on a company trip, he thought of taking his parents along. Gu objected because it would be unfair to her parents, who did not have a chance to go. In the end, nobody ended up going. Additionally, the disagreement between Gu and her sister-in-law deepened. Gu claimed that Liu was not sharing good food with her parents; Liu complained that Gu was not giving any money to the old couple and that she was keeping some of her father's savings. Gu declared that they were financially tight because they still had to pay their mortgage. Besides, they had not been giving any money to the old Fang couple either. If they were to give any money to her parents, they needed to do the same to Fang's parents; at the moment they simply could not afford to do that.

Apart from not giving her in-laws money, however, Gu was a dutiful daughter-in-law. Once, when Fang's grandfather came to stay with them for two weeks, Gu washed his feet every night to make him warm and comfortable, and took him out for a walk from time to time. Gu told me 'these gestures were small, but important matters for Chinese people'; she described herself as 'a woman of traditional values' and took pleasures in performing those moral virtues. She was happy when her filial act of taking the great grandfather out for a walk was noticed by neighbours, who told the old man, 'You've got a good daughter-in-law'. The things which Gu valued, however, were not without contradictions. She willingly performed some traditional roles such as washing the feet of her grandfather-in-law; but she hated the fact that China was still very patriarchal, that men had more power and opportunities in society and family. Gu adhered strongly to the belief that, no matter what, women should have their career, interests, and financial independence; full-time housewives were like parasites that could easily turn into 'yellow-faced old women' (*huanglian po* 黄脸婆)⁶⁸ and lose the interest of their husbands. One

⁶⁸ 'Huanglian' literally means 'yellow face', or facial skin with yellowish colour. 'Po' is a noun standing for a senior woman. *Huanglian po* generally describes women who are unattractive housewives who have lost their charm. In Chinese culture, people, especially females, who have fair skin are seen as being more refined. Somebody with 'yellowish skin' is considered to be unhealthy and not well taken care of.

day, Gu told me she had a quarrel with her mother-in-law as the latter had said that all domestic duties should be a woman's job, which irritated Gu. Her salary was about the same as her husband's; she spent much more time on their son when he was at home; and she handled all housework with some occasional help from the in-laws. She rejected the idea that women were supposed to handle all these domestic duties; her effort should be credited instead of taken for granted. Actually, the fact that Fang did not do any housework did not bother Gu. She was instead most upset by two other things: first, Fang was always very critical of her; second, Fang fell short of being a romantic man.

Husband and wife tensions

From my encounters with Fang, he was gentle and easy-going. However, he did give Gu a hard time by snubbing her in situations in which Fang might have over-reacted. For example, we were once in his car when Gu casually mentioned that she was thinking of learning to play the guitar. Fang interrupted with a very stern voice, 'You have no talent for music. Please stop thinking about impractical things!' In another case, Gu jokingly said that she would love to own a Jaguar which we saw passing by. One would understand that Gu did not really mean it. Fang turned to us and said with a sarcastic tone, 'You will have it only in your dreams, your husband will never buy you a Jaguar.' In another instance, Gu started taking pictures of Fang when we were in a restaurant. While doing so, Fang shouted at her with impatience, 'Can you stop doing that? You don't have a handsome husband, there is nothing to show off!' Then he turned to me and said mature people wouldn't waste their time posting pictures on social media, but Gu was immature; she acted like a young girl who was still dating somebody rather than married. Gu was usually quiet when her husband made these accusations. Perhaps she wanted to keep the peace or 'give face' to her husband by not quarrelling with him in my presence. Behind his back, she would pour out her sour feelings about being belittled by her husband all the time. She said, 'He always finds wrong with me and belittles me (*daji wo* 打击我).' Her husband's accusations stripped her of confidence. I considered that this could also be a control mechanism on Fang's part, who found his wife overly strong and competent, which might challenge his masculine authority.

Gu was also unhappy with the fact that Fang was not a romantic person. The first time I heard Gu talking about this was when we had tea with her best friend. The friend admired Gu's handbag; Gu told us that her husband had given it to her on Valentine's Day. We both expressed our envy. She said it was a 'forced gift', she demanded that her husband gave her something. They had been married for three years at that point, yet Fang had never given her a single gift, not even on her birthday or anniversary. She then started to tell us how disconnected and unloved she felt as her husband was very cold to her; he only watched TV or played video

games when he was at home, and he seemed to enjoy his time out with his friends more than with her. She had to drag her husband to go for a walk with her in the evening, under the moonlight. In short, Fang lacked the sweet talks and romantic gestures, which Gu considered to be signs of love.

At that time, for about three months, Gu often went out with a man called Ni. They met at a business occasion; since then, Ni constantly contacted Gu. Gu liked to ask her best friend or myself to accompany her on her outings with Ni because she did not feel comfortable being alone with him. Ni worked in the construction business. He told me honestly that he was attracted to Gu, but he found it very difficult to have a real relationship with her (which would mean having sex). He described Gu as ‘the kind of woman that has become extinct (*juezhong* 绝种) in China’ – she is a modern woman who is far too modest and chaste for a sensuous creature of her capabilities, she is faithful to her husband and constantly speaks of her family. Gu told me Ni had expressed his affection for her, but she could not do anything that was unfaithful and immoral to her husband and family: ‘A family has to be nurtured over many years, but it can be destroyed overnight.’ Besides, ‘he [Fang] is a good husband (*hao laogong*)’. With a troubled heart, Gu decided to tell Fang that a man was pursuing her, but she had been faithful. She said there was nothing to hide from her husband; she probably also wanted to test his love for her. Fang’s response was reassuring; he told Gu that if she loved the man more than she loved him and their son, he would let her go. Gu reaffirmed that her husband was a sensible and loving man. During dinner one evening with Ni, Gu mentioned something good about her husband, probably in an attempt to declare her chastity. I saw Ni getting irritated. He stopped her by saying, ‘Yes, I know! Your husband is even better than Xi Jinping (*ni laogong bi xijinping hai qiang* 你老公比习近平还强)!’

I thought Fang was both a *hao laogong* and a happy family man, until one day when he spilled out his woes to me as a man who was torn apart by his multiple roles as a son, a father and a husband.

The woes of a dutiful family man

It happened that a few days before I left Nanchong, Fang and his wife had a farewell with me at a teahouse. The couple quarrelled over some trivial matters, but for the first time Fang lost control in front of me and poured out the anger and strains of his life. Things in the family troubled him so much that he said it was a relief when he stayed at the workplace. Every time he entered his home after work, he sighed at the doorstep. He did not want to talk to people at home because it was always about unpleasant things. His getaway was to watch TV or play video games on the computer; those were the only ways he could avoid conversations. He said

he physically suffered from migraines; all his anguish and anxieties came from his family. Everyone was putting too much pressure on him: his wife, his wife's family, and his own parents and sisters. He did not know how he should face the future. Fang said, 'You can dislike your colleagues and friends, and you can choose not to be with them. With family members, however, it is for life.'

As the best-educated member of his family as well as the only son, Fang was always consulted by his parents on family issues. He said his father suffered from neurasthenia (the symptom I mentioned in Chapter Two), which surprised me. His sisters also needed help from him, details of which I did not come to fully understand. There were conflicts that he had arbitrated effectively, but in the last year or so, he had found himself incapable of handling the conflicts. He also found it difficult to help Gu resolve the tensions with her sister-in-law. He acknowledged that they had responsibilities to let the in-laws stay in their home, as the sister-in-law requested, but he did not think he could handle the situation. Regarding Gu, she only doubled his pressure by demanding too much. He said, as I have heard from so many men during fieldwork, that his wife had incessant demands on him. He felt he was a good husband by working hard to make money, not developing any bad habits, and remaining faithful to Gu. However, Gu always felt that he could do more. She had urged Fang to find a job for her through his *guanxi* in the government circle. He said, 'She has no idea how difficult it would be, she thought I was somebody with undue ability (*benshi*) and authority at work.' Gu always expected him to go out with her friends and business acquaintances, which he did not enjoy. Then he mentioned romance. He said Gu always complained that he was not romantic enough; for him, what she desired lacked significance. He could have bought more presents for her, but this was really not meaningful for him. He even expressed with apparent regret that he might have found the wrong woman, saying, 'I had no time for dating at that time; all my energy was focused on my career. Unlike many girls of her age, Gu was down-to-earth, hardworking, and not gossipy. I thought she would help me and not cause me trouble.' He said that he felt helpless, lost, and powerless, probably also an element of guilt. During the conversation, Gu was initially around, but she kept silent. She later on receded to another table and concentrated on her mobile phone, letting her husband speak to me alone.

I met the couple again after almost a year. Fang told me he had started to receive acupuncture treatments. His son had started nursery and his mother had moved to stay with them so that she could take care of her grandson more conveniently. His father stayed in his own flat with the other grandson. It looked as though it might take many more years before his parents could retire from their caretaker roles. Gu had received a promotion in her new job. Fang told me they would eventually send their son to the best and most expensive kindergarten

in their district. He seemed to be robust and committed to carrying through with his responsibilities. Gu told me her husband had not improved in becoming a more romantic man, but both of them were too busy making money, which they agreed was their top priority. She was impressed that her husband had full trust in her and she had not been in touch with Ni anymore.

Even with occasional burnouts and setbacks, Fang's behaviours are directed towards a masculine ideal which requires him to be responsible for the welfare of all those immediately related to him in the family, through which he can act as a competent, able man. What I proceed to show next is an example of a man who decides not to strive for the ideal. I will bring together the two cases and draw a number of issues and observations after I present the second ethnographic story.

A RESIGNED FAMILY MAN

Zhao is six years older than his wife, Ting. The couple met and married in Guangzhou where they worked. After having a baby, they came back to Nanchong. Zhao managed an internet café which he co-invested with two friends, whereas Ting worked flexi-hours in an insurance company. Like many other couples in Nanchong, they relied on a lot of domestic help from an elderly, and the husband took up a fair share of the housework. Ting took their daughter to school in the morning before going to work. Zhao picked up the daughter at noon time and all of them would return home for lunch, which was prepared by Zhao's mother. His mother stayed with her elder son's family who lived nearby. She prepared breakfast for the family of three, came to the younger son's home to prepare lunch, did some washing and cleaning and went back to the elder son's around 4:30pm, which would give her just enough time to prepare a simple dinner. Zhao bought vegetables and meat at a wet market and prepared dinner. Ting never cooked. She suffered from pain along her spine, and she felt dizzy easily, which disallowed her from standing too long in the kitchen. She took Chinese medicines to regulate her 'internal energy and blood' (*qixue* 气血). Regardless of this medical problem, she did not have time to cook because she spent a lot of time with their daughter. Before and after dinner, Ting would review classwork with the nine-year-old, do readings with her, develop her hobbies, and arrange different activities for her during the weekend. Ting also handwashed her clothes and her daughter's, whereas her mother-in-law washed her husband's clothes.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ In Nanchong, laundry is largely reserved for women who usually handwash despite the ownership of washing machines. Adults' and children's clothes are always washed separately, so are the underwear of

Unpaid debt to loving parents and unfulfilled responsibilities to a commanding wife

I felt sorry for Zhao's mother every time I visited the family, which was always during lunch. The old woman was over seventy already. She looked quite frail and her hair had all turned grey; her movements were very slow, though steady. She told me that she did not want to stay alone in the village, which had been mostly vacated by now. For elderly people of her generation, who have gone through so much turmoil during the Second World War and Japanese occupation, followed by the internal civil war, natural disasters, Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution under Mao's regime, the toiling nowadays around the two households is immaterial regarding hardship. Nevertheless, elderly people who are considered to be more blessed are those who need not take up heavy household duties anymore; better still, they should have the service of domestic helpers employed by their children. Zhao's mother did not look like a happy woman. I believe her unhappiness was not so much about her own welfare, but about the relationship between her son and daughter-in-law. The couple always quarrelled, which was often sparked by the fierce and complaining wife. Zhao detested the way Ting scolded him in front of his mother and his father before the latter passed away. Zhao told me how his mother had walked away one day when he and Ting had a big fight, saying 'I don't want to see this anymore'. He felt bad that his father had passed away before he and his siblings could reciprocate to him. None of them was sufficiently rich to let their parents enjoy the blessings of an easy elderly life (*xiangfu* 享福). He did not want his mother to help them with the housework, but he consoled himself by thinking that it was a kind of exercise for his mother and that they could see each other on a daily basis.

Ting had good reasons to be an angry wife because Zhao gambled every day. Their daughter was once playing around the mahjong house and broke her arms, necessitating an operation which left a scar. Zhao seemed to feel shameful and regretful when I saw them at the hospital, but he went back to the mahjong place soon after the accident. Zhao admitted to me that he was not a good husband; to be exact, he did not know how to perform as one and he gave up trying. He had problems dealing with his strong-willed wife, who demanded that she had to lead the family (*dangjia* 当家⁷⁰); it was agreed by Zhao but not without hard feelings. Zhao quoted a Chinese proverb to depict metaphorically the ideal state of spousal relationship: 'The husband sings and the wife echoes' (*fuchang fusui* 夫唱妇随). He said he would be happy to echo or to follow his wife if she was sensible and capable, but she was not. He appreciated that

men and women. To handwash clothes for somebody is an indicator of intimacy. A migrant returnee told me he came back to Nanchong because he thought about his wife whenever he did his own laundry.

⁷⁰ *Dangjia* is an old term which refers to the one who oversees family economic and financial affairs and administrative daily routines.

Ting taught their daughter very well; other than this, Ting had no talents. However, Ting insisted on making decisions and she always changed her mind, with the result that things in the family could never get done. She also asked Zhao for many favours such as sending her off to work and running chores for her, ‘as if I have nothing to do apart from being her husband’. Ting also upset Zhao by being very aggressive in seeking opportunities to make money and consuming her energy in unrealistic investment ideas. For example, Ting once tried to participate in a loan business which earned her interest but ended up almost in fraudulence. When Zhao refused to work with her on what he considered as unwise ‘projects’, he would receive harsh comments such as ‘You just want me to do all the hard work and let you enjoy the sweet return (*wolai xinku ni xiangfu* 我来辛苦你享福)!’ The couple always quarrelled because of money matters. Ting found her husband not progressive enough in trying to earn more to improve the living standard of the family; in her words, he was a lazy and indecisive man. For example, Zhao once agreed to work with his brother to breed chickens on a farm. They had already bought 200 baby chickens. But very quickly Zhao dropped out, which, according to Ting, was because of the hardship involved in business.

The couple quarrelled and also physically fought with each other, sometimes with foul language in front of their family members. Ting seemed to always be on the offensive whereas Zhao defended, yet this would sometimes end up in violence until the woman broke down. Zhao also adopted a strategy which Ting described as ‘cold violence’ (*leng baoli* 冷暴力), that is, he simply ignored Ting and kept a cold distance from her. Slowly, this built up an impression for their daughter that her father was the victim. She often asked Ting ‘Why is it that you always scold father?’ Ting was heartbroken hearing that, she also felt it unfair that her husband had become the victim and she was the ‘bitch’ (*chou poniang* 臭婆娘). Zhao’s solution was going to the gambling place, whereas Ting resorted to more constructive means to find solutions for their relationship. She had consulted psychologists and counsellors a few times; she tried to drag her husband with her but he refused. She then sought comfort and help from a church, which was where I first met Ting. She became a hungry seeker of Christianity, which she found helpful for her peace of mind and temperament. Zhao initially complained that Ting was spending too much time at the church, but gradually he stopped complaining as he began seeing positive changes in his wife. He attended some activities at the church too but could not engage himself with the congregation and the Bible, which he described as ‘that strange, thick book which is all about death’. Ting was so thirsty for biblical knowledge and truths that she slowly found the teachings at the church not satisfying enough. Through an incidental encounter, she came across a Chinese-speaking Japanese woman who did some sort of evangelising work in the city. From then on, the two women met once a week for Bible study at a fast food restaurant, which I attended once. By my observations, Ting continued searching for solutions to the family

problems whereas Zhao had given up. For Zhao, his daughter seems to be his only prize and pride in life.

Fathering: masculine pride regained

Zhao has the look of a teacher. His appearance and manners are gentle, serious and intelligent, which belies his limited junior secondary education level. Seeing Zhao in different scenarios reminds one of the various sides of masculinity that are embedded in a man. At the internet café, Zhao was a studious, stern and concentrated manager. At the gambling house, he was a rough and rowdy man who seemed to be liberated from any command for manners. At home, when he cooked in the kitchen, he appeared as a tame and skilful homemaker. Over the meal table, he would kindly ask his daughter to eat more so that she could grow taller and stronger; he would kindly assure me that he tried to buy pork from pigs (*tuzhu* 土猪) that were not fed with artificial feed and were, therefore, tastier and healthier. But nothing amazed me more than seeing Zhao spending time with his daughter, Feifei.

Fei is very pretty. Her parents agreed that she has inherited the best features from them. She is very active and curious. She dances well and has a talent for storytelling. Fei behaved like an attentive girl in front of her mother, who always tried to implant new knowledge and manners into her daughter. It appeared to me that Fei enjoyed spending time and playing with her father more. Zhao could play different kinds of child games with Fei. A treat for her was being carried on his shoulders and walked around in the house as well as outside. They always joked to each other and giggled loudly. Zhao was like a boy with his daughter. His face relaxed and mellowed; his weariness would be displaced by a cheerful glow. At times, he would carry out a more serious parenting role, advising Fei on different matters, but with a touch of warmth. Sometimes, I saw the little girl just leaning comfortably on her father's shoulders or sitting on his lap as they watched TV together. I seldom saw Fei sharing moments of intimacy similarly with her mother. Fei, however, was aware of his father's bad practices. She once told me during a visit that she had successfully made her father quit smoking, which was obviously not real and evoked an uneasy, embarrassed look on Zhao's face. On another occasion, she mentioned that she had never watched a movie in a cinema. I asked her why. The reply was 'because my father has no money, he lost it all gambling.' With an adult-like discernment, she said one day that her father and mother had an equal share of responsibility for their constant quarrels. To both Ting and Zhao, Fei was the prize of their lives.

If we set Fang and Zhao's scenarios side by side, we see a distinct similarity: Like Fang, Zhao reflects a sense of loss in dealing with his wife who he feels commands too much. I once was with Ting and her two male friends in a tea house. One of the two men was Ting's best

friend. He knew the couple since their times as migrant workers. He called Zhao a ‘*qiguanyan* 妻管严’, which is a play on words to describe a man who is tightly controlled by his wife – *qi* (wife), *guan* (control), *yan* (strict); *qiguanyan* (in this case 气管炎) is also the Chinese word for tracheitis. He meant to ask Ting to think more positively about her husband and give permission to his gambling. Ting, as usual, tried to persuade us why it was so difficult for her to give way. I was stood next to the friend but at one point, we passed a smile to each other acceding to the thought that we should stop arguing with Ting, who as her husband complained was always prepared to argue. This incident is significant because it shows that Ting could be an overly demanding and dominant wife, which even her best friend advised against. Zhao’s failure as a husband, at least in his wife’s eyes, made him an unfulfilled man. He described himself as an unfilial son, but this seemed to bother him only at a superficial level. Ting’s aggressive manner and frequent accusations of irresponsibility would have a stronger effect making Zhao feel emasculated. Research shows that those men who are disapproved domestically tend to seek confirmation and male companionship outside the home (Kandiyoti 1994: 209), typically through profligate spending such as gambling. This partly explains Zhao’s circumstances, but it seems that what really helps Zhao construct a positive masculine subjectivity is the satisfaction he gains from fatherhood, not gambling.

NEGOTIATION OF MASCULINE SUBJECTIVITIES IN A NEW FAMILY ORDER

In the same way I began this chapter, I maintain that we need to understand a family man in China as one who simultaneously embodies the three dimensions of a father, a son and a husband. In Nanchong, I found men to be more adaptive and agreeing to the changing expectations of a father and son, but much less so to the changing expectations of a husband. My hypothesis is that spousal relations have changed more substantially on an ideological level, whereas changes involved in father-child and son-parent relations are in daily practices, not fundamental ideologies. Ideological changes, especially when they are still at a stage of oscillations along the dimension of ‘traditional’ to ‘democratic’, would cause greater uncertainties and meet with greater resistance (Boratav et al. 2014). I explain this first with an analysis of the changes of the parent-child relationship in China.

Renewed cycle of ‘*yang*’

The single most important ideology which dictates a parent-child relationship in Chinese culture is filial piety (*xiao*). According to Sangren (1997: 10), ‘Filial piety is widely assumed, by both Chinese intellectuals and common people, to be at the core of what it means to be Chinese –

filial piety is what distinguishes Chinese culture from others'. The notion of *xiao* appeared in ancient readings long before Confucius' time and had survived throughout the dynasties; it was the mainstay of a hierarchical and patriarchal order within families and also between the emperor and his people; it legitimated absolute respect and obedience to seniority (Hsu 1948; Liang 1987; Xiao 2002). The ideology was severely attacked by intellectual reformists during the New Culture Movement, and later by Mao during the Cultural Revolution. Nevertheless, the thought of having to be filial to parents has never disappeared, and filial duties were restored formally by the new Marriage Law (Chapter One).

The focus of filial piety is reciprocation by children to parents; it presumes care provided by parents to children when they are young. This is a cycle which promises that every person is taken care of at any time during their life: the old are supported, the young are nurtured. Stafford's theory of 'the cycle of *yang*' (1995, 2000a, 2000b) is particularly useful in explaining this phenomenon:

The cycle of *yang* (which means 'to raise/ nurture') is a very involving system of mutual obligations between parents and children, and it certainly entails the provision and sharing of money and food. Parents *yang* their children, by providing them with housing, clothing, food, financial support, emotional inclusion, and 'education' (*jiaoyu*) of some kind. Parents should also see that their children are properly married. They can then expect to receive 'respectful support' (*fengyang* or *shanyang*) back from their children in old age... (Stafford 2000b:108).

Stafford makes an important point that women are at the centre of this cycle of *yang* through their everyday tasks and engagement in family matters (2008). As far as I can see in Nanchong, people still hold dearly to the principle of the cycle of *yang*. But two things have changed in practice: the first is a delay in piety and prolonged parenting; the second is the increasing role of men in performing this cycle of *yang*.

In China, parents' obligations of *yang* can end on the child's wedding day, at which time reciprocation is expected to start from the child's side – a point made explicit in Stafford's writing. However, as we can see from the two cases in Nanchong, the grandparents in their sixties and seventies are still very active on the giving side, whereas children continue to receive. This can be highly contentious among family members, as exposed in the case of Fang. Conflicts arose between Fang and Gu on the treatment of their parents and in-laws; tensions were high between Gu and her sister-in-law concerning the responsibilities and distribution of resources; Fang and Gu frequently argued over sibling support. Financial ability makes a significant difference as wealthier children can afford to give more back to their parents despite

the fact that in many wealthy families, a child's money essentially comes from their wealthier parents. The one-child policy creates even more of a general expectation that parents' money will ultimately belong to the single child.

The one-child policy and shrinking family size have impacted the practice of the cycle of *yang*. State birth-control campaigns have initiated the idea of eugenics: fewer births, higher quality. Parents are more ready than ever to devote all their resources to their one or two children irrespective of gender (Fong 2004:107). The massive labour move which started in the early 1990s has intensified the role of the elderly, with young parents leaving their children to the elderly for migrant work. Moreover, sky-rocketing property prices and a move away from patrilocal residence result in parents subsidising property purchases for their children, a phenomenon which should have become clear in the last chapter. Even for parents whose finances are tight, they will try their best to arrange a wedding apartment for their son; and the parents of a daughter who does not marry a rich man must be prepared to subsidise. The reality of double-income couples and the deficiency of welfare support from the government necessitate help from parents in looking after their grandchildren. It is also true that the cohort of parents who were born after the 1950s are generally physically and financially stronger than their predecessors, therefore they can afford to give more material assistance to their children. All these prolong the period of which parents support their children, while delaying the time for children to reciprocate. This change works in favour of children rather than parents.

Following the logic of the cycle of *yang*, everyone has an equal chance of being a parent and a child (given an extremely low rate of bachelorship in China); therefore people may not see the change to be unfair. Furthermore, the elderly such as those who appear in this chapter are often generous and gracious givers to their children, thus relieving the financial and psychological burden on children. In Nanchong, I have observed strong emotional connections between older parents and their grown-up children, which is perhaps what compensates for the delay or lack of material reciprocation. Earlier writings of Yan Yunxiang presented the victory of conjugal power over the elderly and 'unfilial' acts made by a number of young couples (2003; 2006). In a recent essay (2016), he observed the development of a new intimacy between generations, which he explains using the term 'descending familism'. This refers to a downward flow of care, love, and family resources from the parents to the younger generations. Yan posits that elderly parents strategically retreat from their previous hierarchical superiority in exchange for the adult children's care and support. To a certain extent, this holds similar familiarity to my argument regarding the delayed cycle of *yang*. However, I emphasize the continuity of mutual support, albeit delayed in favour of the children, as a practical adaptation made by different parties rather than as a strategy initiated by the elderly. There are certainly varying degrees of

filial piety and even unfilial children. What I want to stress is that the moral ideology of filial piety maintains a firm grip in China. Unfilial children are condemned and made to feel shameful. Nonetheless, children are privileged in the changing practice of reciprocity. This helps to explain the relative ease with which men have taken up their new role as responsible sons and also nurturing fathers. People like to say, ‘You see how much your parents have done for you? How can you not do the same for your child?’ We can look to younger fathers to examine this more closely.

I mentioned a Latin dance teacher in the last chapter. I attended his wedding banquet and saw that he became a father during my fieldwork. He showered love and attention on his new-born baby by helping his wife feed and bathe the son. A tailor around forty is an affectionate father with a sixteen-year-old daughter. I visited the tailor shop quite often, initially as a customer and gradually as a friend. I also enjoyed sharing their family meals at their workplace. The tailor was very conversational. He could conveniently work while I chatted with him on political and social topics. His charming wife was a pleasant, quiet listener. Their daughter always came back for lunch. The father and daughter liked to exchange a few doting gestures and conversations, such as the father reminding the girl that she was getting fat, or fondly joking that she spent too much time drawing and reading fashion magazines but too little on her study, with the mother looking on them fondly. I have participant-observation materials of a total of sixteen fathers aged twenty-seven to fifty-four, only two of whom (including Alvin’s father in Chapter Three) are traditional ‘stern disciplinarians’ (*yanfu* 严父) who beat their children. Three men in their late forties were very strict towards their teenage children, with open clashes arising between them. However, all these middle-aged fathers showed their love and concern for their children, and they made efforts to be more effective fathers.

The overall impression I received is that for the generation of fathers in the age range between twenties to early forties, their involvement and affection towards their children is very similar to that demonstrated by their wives. This trend is signalled by Jankowiak in his anthropological study in the early 1980s. Jankowiak observed the emergence of a new folk notion that encouraged fatherly involvement, which however, was not promoted in state publications at that time (1993: 246); fathers wanted to get closer to their children, despite the idea that mothers were supposed to be the main nurturer. Some men felt undermined and became ambivalent (ibid: 245-257). Using Jankowiak’s study as a benchmark, I found the ambivalence and confusion that men expressed in the 1980s to have been replaced by a more rested and assured mindset. It is necessary to mention the one-child policy again as younger parents frequently use it as a reason to explain their fondness of their sole child. It may not be the most significant reason in reality, but this has become a public consensus. The cycle of *yang*

also comes into the picture. Some people regaled the lack of attention from their parents when they were young, their bad experience made them feel committed to be better fathers. At the same time, some would acknowledge that their parents were indeed very loving to them and yet the ways and means to show love and care were much more restrictive in those days. The wider discursive environment is clearly encouraging changes. The market is full of self-help books and materials which promote the image of new nurturing fathers. A handbook which is the official manual for examining Marriage and Family Instructors (counsellors) in China writes that:

Traditionally, a father's role is to provide what the family needs.... gradual equalizing in gender authority has led to key changes in parenting.... Nowadays, the roles of father and mother do not differ much anymore.... Parenting is seen as an obligation that has to be equally shared.... and mutually negotiated.... Gradually, the father has to share the role of waking up at night to feed the baby, and increase the time spent with child. Who has to go home to take care of a sick child depends on the nature of the person's work, not gender roles. (Zheng ed. 2005: 195-6)

An extremely popular TV reality show, *Papa where are we going?* (*Baba qu naer* 爸爸去哪儿), has been broadcast by Hunan Satellite TV since 2013. In each programme, a few children aged four to six are featured going on adventures with their fathers, who are entertainment celebrities in China. The show reveals different sides of father-child relationships and provides a new face of young fathers, which arouses much empathy from the audience. On social media, pictures of David Beckham carrying and playing with his sons and daughter are used as an icon representing an international breed of new loving fathers. Being involved and caring does not necessarily mean that someone is a successful father. Suffice it to say here that Lu Xun's vision of the need for parents to be enlightened and to liberate the young is fulfilled. It is uncommon to find serious family disputes arising from a disagreement on how to take care of a child. I also seldom observed spouses competing to be the more attentive parent or the closer one to their children. The child easily acts as the glue within a family that keeps parents together.

Marital partnership: the contested terrain

Many anthropologists and sociologists have written about gender relations in China with an emphasis on the fact that whilst changes have privileged a woman's position within families and society, patriarchy remains strong and alive. For example, in the volume of work edited by Evans and Strauss (2011), the main theme is about the resilience of deeply embedded, traditional, gendered expectations. A multi-disciplinary study conducted by Kim and Fong et al. (2010) in Nanjing city finds that in families of all income levels, the cultural models of the

breadwinning husband, and virtuous wife and good mother, are still highly salient. Many scholars suggest that the emancipation of women, which was once introduced by Mao as a communist vision and subsequently as a social rhetoric for modernization in the post-Mao era, has not brought genuine changes to the patriarchal family system (Stacey 1983; Honig and Hershatter 1988; Parish & Busse 2000; Yuan 2005; Shen 2011; Mann 2011; Choi and Peng 2016). Choi and Peng (2016) conclude in their study that changing practices in domestic arrangements are not matched by an equal measure of gender-equality awakening, men still hold on to traditional ideology which positions men as the dominant partner. Shen Yifei (2011) offers a dynamic, intersectional view by alerting that women have gained more rights and power in family life, not from men, but from older females or the mother-in-law. While these findings hold many truths and good insights into understanding gender in China, they may lead readers to assume that men are still the happy bearers of patriarchy, which undermines the complexities of gender power and relations in society and families. I have already shown the difficulties encountered by male suitors who want to assume patriarchal privileges in romantic relations in the last chapter, and discussed the concept of egalitarianism (cf. Song and Hird's study). I indicated that it is more likely for men with money to enjoy the patriarchal dividend. The shifts in gender power and ongoing experimentation with each other's rights and responsibilities become even more problematic after a family is set up.

A middle-aged man who manages his marital relationship well said this to me, 'Now women are rising in power. Men have to give way to them (*rang yixia* 让一下)⁷¹ because the two genders are complementary (*hubu* 互补) as one unit. One side recedes as the other grows (*cixiao bizhang* 此消彼长).' Popular vernacular to describe the shift in power towards women is *nüren qiangshi* 女人强势 (literally, trending towards strong women). The trend is not dissimilar to the empowerment of women witnessed in many other world regions: a sharp increase in women joining the workforce, more emphasis on husband-wife companionship, more equality in domestic decision-making and sharing housework. Division of domestic labour in Chinese families is often studied as the main source of tension between husband and wife (for example, Davis and Harrell 1993, Shu, Zhu and Zhang 2012; Zuo & Bian 2001). Interestingly, in Nanchong I did not hear men expressing discontent in taking up part of the housework; almost as many husbands (aged up to late forties) cooked for the households as wives did, it was also not uncommon for men to share in the cleaning and grocery shopping. The sharing of housework, together with childrearing, appears to be something that men can most easily perform to prove their newly acquired equalitarian attitude in response to the rise of women's

⁷¹ *Rang yixia* is an expression that can be used in different contexts to implicate a polite gesture. For example, one says '*qing rang yixia* (please excuse me)' when one tries to squeeze through a crowd; an adult can ask an older child to '*rang yixia*' if two children are fighting for something.

power. In families where the husband does not help with the housework (such as Fang), there is usually sufficient help and the wife is willingly committed to the chores.

Then what is the crucial cause for opposition and tensions between husbands and wives? It appears that the crux is what the husbands consider to be insistent demands from their wives for them to be progressive and capable as well as unashamedly romantic after marriage. Women want their husbands to be strong and capable first and foremost, and be gentle and romantic in addition. Even if a man cannot meet the ideal of an able-responsible man, he has to show ambition for this ideal and try to achieve it. Both Fang and Zhao in my ethnography (especially Zhao) find their wives too aggressive in pursuing their careers, and they push their husbands to do even more. I heard three women on separate occasions using almost the same wording when complaining about the men in their lives. Included in these women was Ting and a fifty-year-old woman, who accused their (ex) husbands of being sluggish, and a young woman who spoke of her father. They said something like ‘he has no goals, no aspirations’ (*meiyou mubiao*, *meiyou lixiang* 没有目标没有理想). The fifty-year-old woman is a lawyer who divorced her husband about twenty years ago. She found her husband not catching up with the times. She and her close friends, all middle-aged professional women, alleged to me that because men of ‘high quality’ always leave Nanchong for larger cities, many capable women are left to win favour from a smaller pool of good, eligible men.

The tension between a conjugal pair is exacerbated by the fantasy that ‘they will in some way “fall in love” with their spouse after marriage’ (Osella and Osella 2006: 100), and that the man will continue his labour of love which he generously accorded to the woman during courtship. As another anthropologist expressed, ‘Expectations of marital satisfaction often increase – sometimes fuelled by modern notions that link romantic courtship with images of enduring love. Such expectations easily lead to a sense of marital despair or betrayal as they go unfulfilled’ (Knauf 1997: 248). Unfortunately, these romantic imaginations and expectations apply more to wives than husbands, at least for couples who have been married for about five to ten years according to my research. Both Fang and Zhao agonized over how frequently their wives expected them to be at their service. Fang defied his wife’s fussy hankering for romance; Zhao in particular disapproved of his wife’s desire to take charge (*dangjia*) of the family. Many men blame movies and drama series from China as well as overseas for overly romanticising love, promoting an indulgent fantasy of men who always set out to spoil women. Many women complain that it is in the nature of men to take their wives more lightly once they become husband and wife. Men such as Fang are annoyed that their wives expect flippant romantic gestures as if they were still young lovers; they feel they have over-taxed their energy in making money for the family already.

Both men and women in Nanchong are very conscious that the traditional set of gender rights and obligations, based on patriarchy, are dated. The new gender regime is understood to rebalance the power between men and women, and there is hardly any debate for society to return to the old Confucian ideology of ‘women’s three obediences and four moralities’ (*sancong side* 三从四德). However, as expressed by the young woman Wen in the last chapter, there is no absolute equality between the two genders, which means that constant bargaining and adjustments are to be expected. Men and women are trying to negotiate and construct new paths in their daily interactions and behaviours. Gu is an excellent example. She sometimes talks like a feminist and defends gender equality in both the domestic and public sphere; however, she values very traditional and stereotypically female duties. She praises her husband as a *hao laogong* by performing the traditional duties of a family man but his deficit in romantic performance upsets her. Zhao describes the ideal state of spousal relationship as ‘the husband sings and wife echoes’; unfortunately, he feels besieged by a wife who wants ‘the wife to sing and the husband to follow’. Zhao cannot deny that women should be entitled to an opportunity to lead, but he may find it difficult to surrender to the new order of power and has come to the conclusion that his wife is not fit for the role. In describing the tensions experienced by the new generation of fathers, Hochschild suggests that ‘many men live with a contradiction between thinking new father but acting old father’ because the cultural ideal of what a father should be like has changed much faster than what men could cope with in reality; this Hochschild calls the ‘reality gap’ (1995:225). In Nanchong, the concept of the ‘reality gap’ can be used to explain the internal conflicts that men suffer. They acknowledge gender equality as a legitimate ideal in the modern world; nevertheless, they have not developed ways to cope with the demand of this relatively new ideal.

CONCLUSION

I suggest that in understanding Chinese men in a family context, we need to use a three-dimensional view; we have to stretch out from and synthesise the husband-wife and father-child dyads, which have dominated the studies of family men worldwide. It is the three roles altogether which a family man has to perform on a daily basis that makes it especially challenging for them. As shown in the first case in the chapter, Fang at one point lost control in front of me, and exposed his vulnerability as a man who was caught in the middle between conflicts of his close agnates and affines and his wife. He believed that the emotional stress had caused him migraine headaches. Family conflict in China can cause much graver problems. According to a study of some 200 cases of suicide and attempted suicide done by anthropologist Wu Fei (2005), family conflict which leads to games of power is the major reason for suicide.

Wu argues that the new family structures which have emerged after 1949 upset the traditional power relationships in Chinese families, consequently, people have to play games of power to win dignity and authority which can end up in suicide in some unfortunate cases.

In this chapter, I have used two particular case studies alongside a number of other encounters and anecdotes to illustrate the common dilemmas that are faced by men, and the various strategies they have undertaken. Through these, I show the formation of different kinds of masculinities and relational dynamics in families. By examining the changes that have occurred in intergenerational relations, I find that what is expected of a father and grown-up son has changed in a temporal sense; the trend is one of prolonged parenting and delayed reciprocation. However, the essence of the cycle of *yang* has not changed. Married men between the age range of twenties and fifties in contemporary China can continue to enjoy support from their parents rather than having to give much in return. Because the changes are not makeshift, it does not take great pains for men to adjust and accommodate to them. Of course, a man has to manoeuvre his duties as a son and son-in-law, which sometimes cause conflict of interest. Changes in husband-wife relationships, however, seem to pose the biggest challenge. The ideology of gender rights and power has fundamentally changed since the early twentieth century. Nowadays, in Nanchong (and I believe in China generally), patriarchal attitudes are considered to be feudalistic and outdated. These are replaced by modern, liberal ideologies such as equality and democracy in gender relations. Women are seen to be rightfully empowered, and they exercise their agency in bargaining for greater egalitarianism at home and demanding more from their husbands. Men react in diverse ways. Despite a consciousness that the old patriarchal order can no longer be justified, many have yet to come to terms with how to relinquish their leadership and authority over their family. This difficulty is, to a certain extent, brought into being by the hegemonic demand on men to be the strong and able breadwinner in the family.

It would be wrong to see men as victims of the changes produced from the rebalancing of gender power. I also do not mean to say that women are too imposing on men, or that, as clarified aptly by Gerson and Peiss (1985: 322), ‘women somehow ask for the sexism they experience’. Instead, I emphasise the complexity of what it means to be a family man in a local context where changes seem to bombard men. Sadly, social class and status add another layer of complexity, which makes it even more difficult for men (and women) who are marginalised. Marginalised masculinity is therefore, the subject of exploration in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6: MARGINALIZED MASCULINITIES

Woman (looking at a man not far from us): I heard him talk about you. He said you're a good person.

Me: Oh yes, I think I'm pretty good! He's an honest (*laoshi* 老实)⁷² man.

Woman: Yes, very honest. He's my daughter-in-law (*xifu* 媳妇).

Me: Your daughter-in-law?

Woman: Or, you can say daughter (*jiao nüer yexing* 叫女儿也行).

Me: When did he move to your house?

Woman: August last year – they first lived there (looking and pointing afar) but they decided to come and stay with us.

Me: Then is he going to move out sometime?

Woman: No, I will not forsake him (*wo buhui buyaota de* 我不会不要他的).

Me: You won't forsake him? But what if he forsakes you?! He is young, capable, and a good person.

Woman: Will he dare?! He won't leave (*Ta gan?! Ta buhui zou de* 他敢! 他不会走的).

The above conversation took place between a sixty-six year old woman and myself, on 3rd January, 2014. By that time, I had lived in Guidu for slightly over three months. I had settled well into the community and made friends with a number of neighbours, including the man in discussion named Lu, who was referred to as the 'daughter-in-law' by the woman. I mentioned Lu in Chapter Two: He operated a portable cart and sold ready-to-eat food outside the East Gate of Guidu. Lu was thirty-one. He cohabited with Shou, the widowed daughter-in-law of the elderly woman who spoke to me. He was expected to marry Shou in a year or so, and had moved into her in-laws' place. In local terms, he could be considered as the daughter-in-law of the family. The old woman started the conversation when she brought dinner to Lu at his cart. I had only a vague inkling of who she might be when she greeted me. I did not warm to the old woman during that first conversation; I felt the way she talked about Lu was cruel and demeaning. However, as I got to know more about the family, I came to realize the complicated relational dynamics in the family which would grant me new perspectives of Lu and the whole family.

⁷² The closest translation to *laoshi* is honest. It is a personality trait which carries meanings of being simple, genuine, down-to-earth, and trustworthy. It is more often used to describe males, not females. It has both positive and negative connotations depending on the context; it can refer to somebody who is rural, unsophisticated, and old-fashioned.

Not far from Lu was a newsstand run by Tian and his wife Yan, the couple also mentioned in Chapter Two. Yan worked from 8am to around 4:30pm, leaving when her husband came to take up his shift. Tian would arrive at the store just before lunch to give Yan a chance to take a toilet break. Immediately after, Tian would pick up their daughter, Yuanyuan, at kindergarten, take her home for lunch, and then back to school again. He would return to the store around 4:30pm with Yuanyuan in tow, whom he would have picked up from school and who would go back home with her mother. Tian only left the newsstand at around 11:30pm. Their store was made of steel; it was stuffed with merchandize, with space for only one person to move around inside. Yan said it was virtually a 'tin box' (*tiepi xiang* 铁皮箱), which made her feel like she was 'burning in fire' on hot summer days. Tian could often be seen outside the 'tin box' where they also displayed many products such as toys, snacks and drinks. But Yan always sat inside, with just half of her face visible behind the counter top.

Tian told me his business was so financially unrewarding that he couldn't even describe it as a 'small business' (*xiao shengyi* 小生意), it was a 'micro business' (*wei shengyi* 微生意). I discovered later on that his business size and profit was substantially bigger than Lu's. They could make a profit of RMB7,000-9,000 in an average month, but that meant full-time work for two persons, seven days a week without break. This kind of earning was similar to the business of the tailor shop and hair salon with which I was familiar, but was lower than that of the bakery shop run by Sun and Pan. All these businesses were very labour intensive and had to rely on close cooperation between couples. When Tian's wife was on duty, Tian had to go and buy all kinds of products directly from a wholesale market, clear the stock of newspapers and magazines and return the unsold publications to the Post Office. Partnership in small businesses like these is out of necessity, never a long-term plan to develop a family business. Every single small entrepreneur I spoke to said in a determined voice that they did not want their children to inherit their trade: 'What is the use for them to do this!' Occupationally, Tian and Lu belong to a very ordinary class of petty proprietors in Nanchong. Their social status as a group is generally higher than that of the manual workers who have to labour on construction sites or shop floors; at least they are their own boss (*laoban* 老板). Some petty proprietors may even be better-off than middle-ranking office workers, but the economic positions of Lu and Tian are far from that.

This chapter draws on two main case studies to illustrate how male subjectivities and behaviours are affected by their marginalization and the methods of resistance. In order to reach a complete image of marginalized masculinities, I will examine the intersection of gender with other social divisions, including economic class, occupational status, and education level, to assess their contribution to the construction of this marginalization. To briefly set the scene, Lu's education, social and economic background put him in the lowest social class for men of

his age. He is a peasant worker who moved from a small village in rural Nanchong to work in the city. Moreover, he moved to live with his partner's family, which makes him a *shangmen nüxu* 上门女婿 (or *daochamen* 倒插门 in Sichuan dialect), which means an 'in-married son-in-law'. *Daochamen* literally describes a door lock (in traditional Chinese houses) that is installed upside-down, in an abnormal position. In Nanchong, men who commit to uxori-local marriages and the bachelors who are called 'bare sticks', or *guanggun* 光棍, are obviously subordinate to the hegemonic ideal of the able-responsible man. Their inability to marry in accordance with traditional norms and continue the family name, denies them status as manly men.⁷³ Instead of playing a provider's role, *daochamen* become dependents within their wives' families. Tian's marginalized status is more subtle and debatable. He told me he was 'shortened' (*aihua* 矮化) by his parents-in-law in comparison to his brother-in-law from Hong Kong. He also described himself as belonging to 'the lowest rung in the social hierarchy' (*shehui shang de zuidiceng* 社会上的最低层), though I feel it is an exaggeration and a form of persistent self-mockery. At the very least, Tian owns a very nice property and will potentially inherit his mother's property, where they have lived together since his father passed away.

What I found to be thought-provoking in the cases of Lu and Tian is that their feelings of being marginalized are closely tied to their uncomfortable relationships with the patriarchal head of the family. In one case, the patriarchal head is the father-in-law; in another it is the father of the live-in girlfriend's deceased husband. In a traditional patriarchal and virilocal system, men do not *have* to have a close relationship with their fathers-in-law, not to mention the father-in-law of a girlfriend's late husband. However, the shrinking number of descendants and the process of massive labour migration and urbanization have altogether reconstructed the traditional living arrangements and relational boundaries between close kin members. For example, in Chapter Four, we saw the middle-aged woman Qiu and her husband with only two daughters, letting their elder daughter and her whole family stay in their apartment after the daughter gave birth to a second child. In Lu's case, he lives in a flat that is co-owned by his girlfriend's late husband and her in-laws. Even though Lu is not the son-in-law in a legal sense, the mother-in-law (and very likely the father-in-law too) introduced him as a daughter-in-law.⁷⁴

⁷³ For more analysis of uxori-local marriages in China, see Hershatter (2007: 12-15) and Judd (2010). For the problem of 'bare sticks', see Han (2008) and Greenhalgh (2013). In Judd's ethnographic account of uxori-local marriage in rural villages, however, men do not suffer much discrimination; the marriage arrangement is considered a practical strategy for families in poverty. I did find in Nanchong that some 'married-in' sons-in-law were treated well (I met three), and that uxori-local marriages were accepted by people as practical solutions for different parties. However, all the three married-in men I met were very passive in the family.

⁷⁴ I heard the mother-in-law using the term 'daughter-in-law' or 'daughter' only once, which is narrated in the epitaph at the beginning of the chapter. At other times, she and her husband addressed Lu as 'Xiao (Little) Lu', or simply as 'ta (he)'.

For the purpose of simplifying the text, and to follow the way Lu is perceived by the key members in the household, I shall define the relationship between Lu and the old couple as son and parents-in-law for the rest of this chapter.

Even in China where intergenerational relations are significant, it is not common for studies to address the tensions between the father-in-law and son-in-law, or between the grandfather and other male members in the household. To give several classic examples, Francis Hsu (1948) dealt with the ancestral line and father-son relationship. Wolf (1968) focused on women and her 'uterine' circles. Watson (1985)'s interest was on 'brotherhood' within and across lineages. Sangren (1997; 2009) wrote about the father and son; for Evans (2008a), mother and daughter. Yan (2003; 2006; 2016) centred on shifts in power from the elderly to the young and men to women. The patriarchal authority of the father-in-law is often mentioned in passing in these studies, whereas the focus is about the ubiquitous presence of the mother-in-law. This can be explained by the fact that according to traditional patrilocal and patrilineal customs, it was the daughter-in-law who would move into her husband's family; subsequent tensions that often developed were mainly between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. The eldest patriarch customarily assumed his authoritarian role and position as a figurehead, but did not enter into domestic affairs directly. The middle-aged and older women usually became the arbiters of social life within an extended family or a small community. Many anthropologists have provided useful and compelling analyses on this subject in the past (Wolf 1968; Watson 1985: 101-103; Jankowiak 1993:236; Stafford 2008). Wolf, for instance, wrote that 'Most fathers in Peihotien [the fieldwork site] administer an occasional lecture or formal beating, but the mothers do most of the disciplining, teaching, and directing of the children's daily lives' (1968: 42). With many kinds of changes to kinship structure and practices in contemporary China⁷⁵ however, the father-in-law may have a new kind of relevance in relational dynamics within families.

Another common thread I found in my ethnographic material is that both Lu and Tian compared themselves to another male member in the family: the brother-in-law (or the potential brother-in-law in Lu's case). Both felt bitter that they were seen as inferior to the brother-in-law, who enjoyed a privileged position over them. This strained relationship was not so much between *brothers-in-law* in strict kinship terms, but rather between men who were at a similar hierarchical level within an extended or joint family. Again, these male kin members would

⁷⁵ The volumes of work edited by Davis and Harrell (1993), Martin Whyte (2003), Brandtstadter and Santos (2008), Davis and Friedman (2014), and Donner and Santos (2016) trace many historical changes in Chinese families. The Introductions in these collections are especially helpful. Nevertheless, none of the writers interrogate the changing position of the father-in-law or grandfather.

have had very loose contact with one another had they not been brought together by new living arrangements and practical needs in contemporary times.

In addition to the complex relationships between male kinsmen, we shall also explore man-to-man friendship or fictive brotherhood in this chapter. The key point I want to make is that friendship engenders another field of hierarchical subordination even though it causes less concern to the oppressed ones. For the acutely disadvantaged group, marginalization by friends is less consequential because of the dispensable nature of friendship vis-à-vis the indispensable nature of close kinship. From the angle of the oppressor or the dominant group, masculine power is achieved by gaining control over friends or fictive brothers. This bears resemblance to the male dominance that is exerted by some men over their intimate partners. The two ethnographic cases used in this chapter give evidence of the use of violence and withdrawal of love enacted by men to compensate for their loss of masculinity. I continue with the exposition that patriarchy is still alive and potent in China, and yet the patriarchal ideology does not benefit all men in the same ways.

Connell (1987, 1995) deserves much credit for conceiving a model of hegemonic masculinity that emphasizes the existence of plural masculinities and a hierarchical gender regime between men, and between men and women. The scholar describes those who live by characteristics which are in direct opposition to the hegemonic ideal, such as the gay community, as men of 'subordinate masculinities'. 'Marginalized masculinities' can be defined as the interplay of gender with other external structures such as class and race, seen for example in ethnic minority men, even though Connell admits that the term is 'not ideal' (1995:80). In fact, it is apparent that Connell and Messerschmidt, in their reflective article in 2005, tend to merge the two categories and use them interchangeably: 'The concept of hegemonic masculinity presumes the subordination of non-hegemonic masculinities' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 846). This is a point I adopt in my analysis. I draw together the notions of marginalized and subordinate masculinities as 'marginalized men'. These men are judged to deviate from the cultural ideal of able-responsible men, and are thus subject to certain kinds of exclusion of rights or opportunities. Marginalization is invoked by gossips, and a rather acceptable practice of using language and gestures to abuse those in a lower social class. I will begin to unfold this by giving an account of Lu.

LU: THE 'DAUGHTER-IN-LAW'

Many neighbours presumed that Lu and his girlfriend, Shou, were married. Even if that was known not to be the case, people assumed that Lu had 'married into' the woman's family. If

they have descendants, the children would likely follow the wife's family name. Uxorilocal marriage is accepted as a viable family strategy of poor parents and sons (Judd 2010). However, no man would want to commit to this if they had better alternatives. I have followed two other cases of uxorilocal marriages; the men were pleasantly treated in the families they moved into, and their children declared that it made no difference to them having fathers being *daochemen* and themselves bearing the mother's family name. Nevertheless, the men were unmistakably poor and their maleness was to a certain extent diminished in the public's eyes. Despite the fact that the patrilineal and patrilocal traditions in Chinese families have largely subsided in contemporary China, it remains a mark of inferiority for a man to move to his wife's natal home after marrying. People told me that some *daochemen* were capable enough to make a good fortune and prove themselves to be 'able men' after marrying, therefore winning respect in the neighbourhood; the majority of them however would remain as subordinates without power in their families. From the way the older woman introduced Lu to me in the opening vignette – 'my daughter-in-law' or 'daughter', and that he would not be forsaken – Lu's 'non-man' identity in the eyes of this woman could not be made more obvious.

Lu's status as a *daochemen* is closely linked to his economic and social position. People at his age would usually have finished junior high school, but Lu seemed to have primary education only. He never made clear to me the age he was when he left school, though he once revealed that he had to brush up on his mathematics because he easily got lost with numbers at work; the book I saw him reading was for primary four students only. His father was still working on construction sites in Beijing, whereas his mother was looking after his eleven-year-old son in their village. The son was born outside of wedlock, the woman ran away two months after their son was born while Lu was working in Tianjin. Lu told me that he made himself drunk for the first and only time in his life upon hearing the news from Tianjin. Lu's only brother is also a hawker, and he has married uxorilocally too. This speaks to the deep poverty of the Lu family.

Lu is muscularly built and stands at about five-feet-six inches tall. He speaks in a mild voice. He is not expressive, but looks attentive and curious, which gives him an air of boyish innocence. Getting to know the real Lu was challenging but unexpectedly rewarding. At first, he appeared to be somewhat shy but straightforward. He answered my questions in a matter-of-fact way even though he never offered any details. I started to befriend Lu by buying food from him, principally cold noodles with some cooked meat. Lu seemed to begin to enjoy my company about a month after I introduced myself to him. Whenever I passed by and if Lu had no customer, we would say hello to each other and Lu would ask something like 'where have you been', 'let me see what you've bought'. Sometimes I would show him my shopping bags, which he would look into and check the price of the items bought. He would sometimes offer a chair

and ask me to ‘sit’ (*zuo* 坐) and have a chat. For the first month, Shou seemed to be skeptical of me. In time though, she also became a friend. I was sensitive to the change in Shou’s attitude as she ‘upgraded’ the snack food she freely offered me, which started from a handful of fried peanuts to a piece of chicken feet, then chicken wing, and eventually a bottle of beer together with Lu.

For about three months following our first conversation, Lu told me he had three children. I became curious after hearing from the elderly woman that he was married-in. Lu explained his situation to me as if the old woman was Shou’s mother, not her mother-in-law. Shou called her mother-in-law ‘old mum’ (*laoma* 老妈), which led me to assume a mother-daughter relationship. Then one day, the ten-year-old son of Shou, Yandong, brought dinner to Lu. When I happily exclaimed that I knew he was Lu’s son, the boy replied in embarrassment that Lu was his uncle (*shushu*), not father. I felt totally confused. I therefore asked Lu about their relationships only a week later. He told me in an assuming manner that he had agreed to let Yandong use Shou’s family name because they had no male heir in their family. It created greater confusion because Shou’s family name is Shou, whereas Yandong’s family name is Guan. Lu finally admitted that Yandong and his sister were not his biological children. The ambiguous information Lu revealed to me showed how awkward he felt his status was in the Guan family.

Lu was a chef when he met Shou, who was then a supervisor at the same restaurant. They cohabited one and a half years after Shou’s husband died in 2011 in a car accident. They rented a small room initially, but it was broken into by burglars twice. Shou suggested moving back to stay with her children and in-laws. The household had old Guan and his wife, Shou’s fifteen-year-old daughter Taidong, ten-year-old son Yandong, and Guan’s elder brother who was a bachelor. Old Guan is a retired doctor; he received a handsome pension of RMB2,000 every month, showing his reasonably senior position at work. His wife was a respectable secretary in the village where they lived. They had two sons and a younger daughter. The elder son was Shou’s late husband. The other son and daughter have given the family granddaughters only. Guan himself has six siblings, but altogether, they produced only one grandson bearing the Guan family name and that is Yandong. Yandong therefore became a priceless male heir in a big family. The grandmother always wanted me to coach Yandong mathematics and English. The young boy was interested in learning to speak Cantonese (the Hong Kong dialect) from me instead. Gradually, I became a familiar guest in the Guan family. Because of my senior age and educational background, old Guan was very welcoming to me. The other family members always said that Guan was a very chatty person but nobody in the household wanted to have a conversation with him. They were happy that they did not have to pretend to be listening to him over lunch when I was there, for I could ‘entertain’ the old man.

As in many other families I came to know in Nanchong, money was a source of tension. The car accident which caused Shou's husband's death was brought to court, the case was settled with a fine of RMB900,000 to be paid to the Guan family. However, during my time in Nanchong, they had received only RMB450,000. It appeared that the family had agreed to share the money equally between Shou, her two children and the two in-laws. However, old Guan the patriarch of the family asked not to split the money until such time that they decided to 'divide the family assets' (*fenjia* 分家), including the flat which was a co-investment of the father and son. One day I had an opportunity to ask old Guan about general family issues after we finished lunch at his home. He emphasized that a family was an 'indivisible unit' (*buke fen de danwei* 不可分的单位); everything within a family belonged to a 'complete whole' that could not be divided, and members within a family should generously give and share everything they owned. To divide meant a shattered unit, which would be no good for anybody. Unfortunately, the family invested part of the compensation in a factory in Chongqing managed by the younger brother; the factory was closed down in merely a year. Shou said she was never aware of how much money was put into the business; she received not a cent after her husband died.

Lu's arrival exacerbated conflicts over money. On the day Shou announced to her in-laws their plan for Lu to move in, the old couple asked what they were prepared to pay. They reached an agreement whereby Shou would pay a monthly fee of RMB600 to cover the expenses for herself, Lu, and her two children. The grandmother often complained that the money could not even cover the meal costs and the snacks and milk which she had to buy for her grandchildren. She was a free nanny for the grandchildren; she shared the housework with Shou, prepared breakfast and dinner, and bought all the groceries. She did not mind taking care of the grandchildren who were her family members; however, Lu was an outsider, and really so was Shou, although this was moderated by her being the mother of the male heir. The old woman told me Shou was crazy to live with a man whom she needed to subsidize. I heard of many other conflicts within the family. When the mother-in-law got too frustrated, she would tell me that she would rather leave the grandchildren and move out with her husband. 'But, they have to do all the calculations right and give back to us what we deserve! A nanny can make at least RMB1,500 these days, how much do you say they owe me!'

The mother-in-law had reason to have nothing but misgivings towards the couple. Apart from the feeling that Lu was a freerider, she told me, in unambiguous terms, that Shou and Lu had had an affair before her son's death. A neighbour who was close to the mother-in-law gossiped to me that Shou's husband had died the same day that he saw his wife and Lu lying together on the sofa in the morning. This shouldn't be true because Shou and Lu gave me a totally different account of what happened on the day of the accident. Regardless, the scandal was deep. Despite all of this, the woman was generous in lending Lu a helping hand with his

business. Lu had to prepare a lot of garlic and condiments every day, a very manual chore which he seemed to loathe. I always saw the woman sitting on a small bench on the floor, peeling garlic one by one for Lu. She would tell me with a resigned tone: ‘I have to help; he can’t handle everything on his own.’ She also often prepared and brought dinner to Lu. One can only postulate that this woman genuinely wanted the family to be harmonious and her two grandchildren to develop healthily with both a mother and father figure. She might also have had compassion for Lu, whom she had taken in as a family member and ‘would not forsake’. In fact, I hardly heard Lu or Shou say anything bad about the mother-in-law. Shou expressed many times how grateful she was to the woman, who had been a gracious supporter to her. The problem was with the father-in-law.

Lu told me how he was often shamed by old Guan, who despised him and made him a lesser man in the family. Everything he did was wrong (*shenme doubudui* 什么都不对); and he was ignored as ‘transparent’ (*touming* 透明) with no position and respect in their family life. For example, Lu was responsible for lunch when everyone in the family gathered. Guan always found fault with what he cooked. Lu demonstrated to me how Guan would use his chopsticks to tap a dish and complain how badly cooked it was – ‘this has too much salt’ or ‘this is not the way I would prepare this vegetable’. Once when they were watching TV during lunch, the programme mentioned something about changing one’s fate. Guan said fate could not be changed, ‘you are born who you are’. Lu believed Guan was cynically and indirectly speaking to him. He felt sensitively that the Guan often subtly implied accusations about him by pointing to somebody else. He would be chastised for using the toilet for too long or waking up too late, and other trivial matters in daily life. He also felt that Guan’s son and daughter looked down on him, such as complaining the lunch was prepared too slowly or too late. Lu compared his status with that of Guan’s son who was supposedly his future brother-in-law, who did nothing when he came but gave Lu a ‘hard-nosed face’ (*geiwo lianse kan* 给我脸色看). Very often when Lu came back from work, which was around midnight, Guan would shout from his room because Lu made too much noise, ‘Do you want me to have no sleep and die?!’ The 2014 World Cup was on during that time. Guan’s son lived in the house for over two months and he watched the football matches on TV every night. Lu was angry that Guan never complained about the loud noise from the TV. Lu and Guan had two big quarrels, with Guan telling Lu to ‘*gun* 滚’ (leave), which is a very rude way of asking somebody to ‘roll out’ like an animal or a menial person and never return. Old Guan had an outburst on one occasion over a trivial case in which Lu told him he had turned the gas heater in the wrong direction, ‘Nobody ever dares to speak to me in this way; how dare you cause this row with me!’ Shou and the grandmother resolved the conflicts; they sympathised with Lu for being a convenient target for the old man to vent his anger and distress.

The two men's relationship showed signs of slight improvement after Guan suffered from a major stroke during the year. He was rendered mostly immobile and became a much quieter man ever since. For a few months after his release from the hospital, he could not walk without help. Lu was the one who carried the old man up and down six flights of stairs from their home to the ground floor when needed. Guan's son tried, but could only walk a few steps with his father on his back. I thought that Lu, the strong man, would finally become a worthy member of the Guan family. Lu was ambivalent when Shou mentioned this to me – 'This, is almost nothing' (*zhe, meishenme* 这没什么). He might not be conscious of any change in the relationship; or, the sense of subordination might be too strong to be indemnified by his display of physical strength.

Lu has a strong sense of being subordinated. He said that Guan, his wife and their two other children despised him for being a man who had to 'seek shelter in somebody else's family' (*jiren lixia* 寄人篱下), and who was undeservedly trying to match up (*gaopan tamen* 高攀他们). Sadly, Lu submitted himself to the marginalization by saying that he could not blame those who considered him inferior, 'If I were them, I would think the same.' In this way, Lu gave consent to the hegemonic ideal of able-responsible man. From a material perspective, Lu is not even able to provide independence for himself and his intimate partner. As a subordinate, he had to absorb the indignation of old Guan as well as Guan's younger son and daughter; he could not even use the facilities such as the toilet freely. Over and over again, Lu told me he had 'no right of voice' (*meiyou huayuquan* 没有话语权) and 'no position' (*meiyou diwei* 没有地位) in the family. On the one hand, he tried to befuddle his identity, which was witnessed by his early conversations with me. On the other hand, he accepted the marginalization. In Nanchong, it occurs to me that people who are poor and financially dependent often take abusive language and gestures with a high level of tolerance. Old Guan's assaults, however, are over the top for Lu. Before turning our attention to Tian who experienced similar problems with his father-in-law, it is worth taking a look at the relationship between the two men, Lu and Tian, which in itself evidences another kind of inequality and marginalization.

HIERARCHICAL MAN-TO-MAN RELATIONSHIP

Lu and Tian are friends. However, between them, a hierarchy can be easily observed in their daily interaction. Tian is older, more financially capable, and much better educated. Both men complained about being 'shortened' by their fathers-in-law, yet Tian also bullied Lu.

Lu's low peasantry background provided much fodder for Tian to poke fun at. With few reservations, Tian called Lu by different derogatory labels ranging from 'peasant/ dumb peasant'

(*nongmin* 农民/ *tu nongmin* 土农民), ‘rural dumpling’ (*tu baozi* 土包子), ‘brainless/ brainless person’ (*yumei/ yumin* 愚昧/愚民), ‘gross person’ (*suren* 俗人), to ‘dumb dog’ (*tugou* 土狗) and ‘pig’s head’ (*zhutou* 猪头). Sometimes, he greeted Lu as such. Sometimes, he jeered at Lu when we talked about something to which Lu did not respond intelligently. He would snatch a newspaper or magazine away from Lu and say, ‘Forget about it you dumb peasant! How many hours will it take for you to finish one paragraph?!’ At times, Tian would even cuff the back of Lu’s head, just like a father would do to a son, or a big brother to a young brother. In the beginning I was appalled and tried to verbally defend Lu a couple of times. Tian would say he was only joking or playing with Lu. Lu did not welcome Tian’s actions, as he usually reacted with an uncomfortable look. Shou’s presence did not encourage Tian to control his tongue. Lu never said anything except once when Tian snatched a paper away from him. He said, ‘Hey, can you not let me pretend to be a civilized person for a moment!’

On one occasion, I had a discussion with Lu about Tian’s ‘bad mouth’. He replied that this was a small matter which he could just ignore; Tian could be joking anyway, and he was known for his bad mouth. Gradually, I noticed that this kind of abusive joke, preying on the weak and vulnerable is quite common amongst friends, but only to somebody one is very familiar with, so that one knows the limit of the ‘joke’ he or she can make. Nonetheless, there is an element of abuse and it always comes from the superior to the inferior, or at least from people of the same position. I saw Tian interacting with many other customers and friends; his tone and manners changed drastically depending on whom he spoke to. Because he graduated from a top university in Nanchong and worked in a bank before he went to Shenzhen to set up a business, many of his classmates had made successful careers. A few lived in our neighbourhood; they came to buy things from Tian occasionally; sometimes they would sit down and chat with him. I had never joined their conversations because I could see that Tian did not welcome my intrusion in those private chats with some seemingly middle-class friends. Nevertheless, I noticed Tian shifting to a polished tone and demeanour when he spoke to them, and when he briefly introduced me to them. Tian’s manners changed when he was with Lu, whose company I observed he quite enjoyed as well. Lu could give Tian an opportunity to express the raw side of him. Tian sometimes came to pick up a drumstick from Lu to eat, whereas Lu would go and take a Chuppa Chups from Tian’s newsstand. They exchanged a fair amount of conversations in a day, usually checking with each other how much money they had made. My usual joke was to ask them not to compete for who came out worse in the day’s business. On a miserably cold evening, the street was empty. Lu said his feet and ears were freezing. Tian came and moaned about how bad the business was. He asked what would be the most miserable song in this world and wanted to sing that song. I intuitively replied, ‘Les Misérables!’ (I spoke in its translated version, *Beican Shijie* 悲惨世界). Tian laughed, ‘Oh yes,

Hugo's!' Lu was baffled. Tian looked at him and said sympathetically, 'Oh my uncivilized (*meiyou wenhua* 没有文化) brother, how can you understand!'

We may be under the impression that being described as 'uncivilized' (*suzhi di, meiyou wenhua*), a 'peasant worker' (*nongmingong*) or a 'rural dumpling' (*tu baozi*) in China, if not everywhere in the world, is deeply humiliating. I found in Nanchong, however, that these labels were inconsequential for the seriously marginalized. I asked Lu what would bother him most in daily conversations with friends or gossips behind his back. He indicated two things. First, when his business was badmouthed; second, when his responsibilities to his parents and son were badmouthed. If people spread the news that his food and business were not good, he would lose customers and 'the game will be over' (*wandan* 完蛋); anything related to money is important. Without money, there is no respect. Regarding his responsibilities as a son and a father, Lu repeated the popular and public discourse that I so frequently heard: one who cannot fulfil his duties as a filial son and a responsible father is the worst sort of man. This suggests that for men like Lu who fall on the lowest rung of social stratification, their male subjectivity is primarily built on their responsibility to family members, which is fundamental and relatively within one's control. Sociologist Lin Xiaodong discussed that, whilst away from home, Chinese male migrant workers maintained their responsibilities to family members and gained support from a network of male friends who were of similar status. These helped them make sense of 'who they were, what they wanted, as well as what they could do within an extended familial social context' (2013:74). If domestic duties and bonding is of paramount importance to Chinese men, what about the significance of social bonding?

There is no doubt that everybody needs friends. Many scholars mention the camaraderie and 'manly love' of the ancient Greeks as a vantage point in studying male friendship (Nardi 1992; Hammond and Jablow 1987). Classics scholar Zhou Yiqun (2010) offers a penetrating comparison of gender relations between Greece and China through their festive and feasting practices. Even though the study is based on what happened during the ancient period of tenth to fourth centuries BCE, what it says about the cornerstone status of the patrilineal kinship relationship in China and friendship-based relationships in Greece still has relevance in modern-day China. The quote below speaks to this point:

In Greece the fraternal bond provided the conceptual basis and metaphor for the egalitarian civic community, but in China the fraternal relationship did not denote equality. Instead, it was governed by hierarchy among the brothers, and it has to be understood within an overarching hierarchical framework that has filial piety at its core. (Zhou 2010: 122)

What we learn from Zhou's study is that friendship was recognized by the Greeks to be the most noble and intense bond that a man could have (ibid: 157). The Chinese son's filial piety was envisioned first of all within the familial context, and it was focused on his mother (ibid: 243). I imagine that Zhou's perspective of the values Chinese people put on kinship vis-à-vis friendship would resonate with Lu. He appeared to accept his subordination to Tian and seldom complained of the latter's abusive language towards him, but he found the words and manners of his father- and brother-in-law to be really hurtful. It suggests that close kin relationships bother a man much more than friendship. To put it bluntly, while friends are dispensable, in-laws are not. As many informants say, family members are 'forever' or 'for life' (*yongyuan de* 永远的).

Lu's acceptance of Tian could also be motivated by Tian's occasional show of affection, taking Lu as a young brother whom he could teach and tease at the same time. Friends, according to the Confucian 'five human relationships' (*wulun* 五伦) principle, should be egalitarian by nature. Apart from friends, all the other four relationships under '*wulun*' are clearly hierarchical: emperor-ministers, father-son, husband-wife, elder-younger brothers. However, in real life, friends are easily subject to the subtleties of hierarchy. Rubie Watson (1985: 99) says it right that 'Chinese attitudes toward hierarchy and socioeconomic differences are complex and somewhat contradictory.' According to her study, pre-revolutionary China (and indeed contemporary China too) was by no means an egalitarian society in thought or in practice, but neither was it rigidly hierarchical. Watson recounted how poor villagers explained others' wealth in terms of geomancy and luck, which was what I heard a lot from my informants in Nanchong. This mentality help people, such as Lu, submit to their inferior position. Richard Solomon argues that a hierarchical calculus is also imposed on peer relations because of the strength of authority and the dependent submission to it. The practice of status deference in social contact means that people feel more at ease in dealing with one another when the dominant and subordinate positions are clear, even amongst friends (1971: 122-134). This perspective is useful if we think of the habitual way in which people address one another in China. A hierarchy is immediately implied when one calls the other 'Little (*xiao*, or junior) X' or 'Elder (*lao*, or senior) Y'. Lu was excited and moved when I suggested to him and Tian one evening that I would start to call them 'classmate Lu (*Lu tongxue* 陆同学)' and 'classmate Tian (*Tian tongxue* 田同学)'. The title '*tongxue*' (classmate) might give Lu a respectable sense of egalitarianism and education. That was how I addressed the two men ever since, though they insisted on calling me Dr. Wang (*Wang boshi* 王博士). I felt that the special way we addressed one another created a special bond between us. With this, we turn to Tian.

TIAN: THE MAN WHO FELL FROM GRACE

Tian was one of the few people I met who was born and raised in the urban part of Nanchong. After graduating from the best university in the city, he worked in a bank. He married Yan, whose younger sister married an expatriate business executive from Hong Kong. After marrying, Yan's sister moved her parents to live with her in Shenzhen, where her Hong Kong-born husband was based. They suggested that Tian set up a business in Shenzhen and he took the advice. Subsequently, Tian lost his entire investment in a joint venture with some Taiwanese partners. For a couple of years, he and Yan stayed in his brother-in-law's home, making it a three-generation joint family household. The experience was humiliating for Tian.

During that period of time, Tian had frequent outbursts of conflicts with his father-in-law, whom he said disparaged him and favoured his brother-in-law. To give some examples, the old man sometimes asked Tian to massage him, which was totally subservient and emasculating for Tian. The father-in-law complained about Tian's impulse for good food, that he picked all the good meat to eat during meals. They once had turtle soup, a delicacy in China. The father-in-law forewarned Tian that he had to leave some for his brother-in-law who was not home yet. Tian retaliated by being purposefully self-deprecating. He brought his bowl to his young nephew and said that only he, the young boy, deserved the turtle soup. Another example was that Tian used to take a briefcase-like bag with him whenever he went out. His brother-in-law once casually asked what he took with him. Before Tian gave an answer, the father-in-law said, 'There is nothing inside, only useless papers! He pretends to have business to do.' On the other hand, the father-in-law treated his Hong Kong son-in-law 'as king' (*huangdi* 皇帝). Seeing no chance to recover his business, Tian returned to Nanchong and set up the newsstand business. But his rivalry with the in-laws continued. The biggest clash came when his daughter was diagnosed with a brain developmental problem at the age of two; she had to stay in a hospital in Chongqing. Tian and his wife urged his in-laws to come and give them some assistance. The in-laws refused because they had to take care of their other two grandchildren. Tian accused them of constantly favouring 'the capitalist family' (*zibenjia de jiating* 资本家的家庭) and ignoring his. He said he would never forgive his in-laws and his wife, who had 'no sense of right and wrong', for she stood by her parents' side even when the parents treated them as subordinates.

Tian and Yan were in their thirties already when their child, Yuanyuan, was conceived. Their daughter suffered from serious meningitis at the age of two and subsequently was diagnosed with abnormal brain development symptoms. Judging by what the couple told me briefly, Yuanyuan could simply have symptoms of ADHD (Attention Deficit and Hyperactive Disorder). The hospital suggested a series of complex therapeutic treatments for the girl which the couples accepted, costing them a hefty sum of almost RMB400,000. Tian recollected to me

the treatments, one of which was to put the girl in an ‘oxygen room’ for hours. He was happy that Yuanyuan was cleared after almost half a year’s treatment. But this left him owing RMB110,000 to his father-in-law, and almost another RMB100,000 to his mother and sister. Because of the debt, Tian declared he was forever broke. He formulated the argument of Karl Marx to describe himself as a member of the working-class whose basic needs could not even be satisfied, therefore he was unable to consider any ‘superstructural’ or higher-order needs. He called himself a ‘high-class person in the lowest class’ (*zui diceng de shangdengren* 最底层的上等人), whereas for him, Lu was a ‘low-class person in the lowest class’ (*zui diceng de xiadengren* 最底层的下等人).

Tian also found fault with his mother-in-law but he expressed much less animosity towards her. His accusations about her were mainly centred around her favouritism and impoliteness towards his own mother; but these did not seem to cause as much humiliation as those caused by his father-in-law. Because of the animosity, Tian showed only a couple of moments of sympathy when his father-in-law was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Knowing that his death was imminent, the father-in-law returned to Nanchong from Shenzhen. Because of this, the newsstand was closed for several mornings. One day, I saw Tian back at work and asked about his father-in-law’s condition. Tian angrily announced that his sympathy would not go to the family anymore because the old man did not thank him for arranging all the hospitalization for him and bringing him food. During one visit, he affirmed his promise to his father-in-law that he would return the debt to his family one day in the future. The old man interpreted it as a curse from Tian wishing him death - he would not live to see the money returned. He virtually accused Tian of ‘cursing me to death’ (*zhou wo si* 咒我死). Tian did curse the family, for example, ‘the old man deserves it’ (*huogai* 活该); or, it is ‘bad karma’ (*baoying* 报应) for the family. On the funeral day, I went to the funeral house with Tian. Throughout the service, his brother-in-law was more in charge even though Tian was the elder son-in-law, who should lead various proceedings by Chinese custom. The following day when the family hosted a post-funeral meal, Tian excused himself to tend to his business. During the meal, Yan’s uncle made a toast first. He thanked different members in the family, and then went on to say that he was aware there was disharmony in the family; he toasted for unity and harmony for all members. I assumed this toast was subtly referred to the absent son-in-law.

Tian did not feel bad being side-lined or side-lining himself at the funeral. Like Lu, he said, ‘This is *their* family, *their* funeral’. Tian, like Lu, felt excluded from the family’s welfare. He had no rights within the family, and therefore felt no sense of responsibility towards them. Both men considered themselves as oppressed and marginalized in the family, especially by the eldest patriarch. Both expressed a dire sense of inferiority to another male member who was in a comparable hierarchical position within the family. They did not compare themselves with any

female in the kin network. These findings suggest that there is an inescapability of competition between men (Seidler 1992: 18). Moreover, kin relations are still highly hierarchical in Chinese families. Only one patriarchal head is allowed in each family. Whilst it is easier for sons to accept the domination of their fathers in daily lives, it is hard for sons-in-law to do the same. By the same token, fathers can feel more affectionate towards their own sons whereas sons-in-law can be threatening, both in terms of taking their daughters away and competing to head the family. These do not necessarily indicate a difference between affinal and agnatic relations (cf. Watsons 1985: 117-8) because in Tian's case, it is competition between two sons-in-law, not between a son-in-law and a son. What is clear is that economic power sets a hierarchy between men in a family context. The one with fewer resources tends to be taken as the subordinate member. This prompts the next question of our analysis: how do these men respond to the subordination?

MARGINALIZED MEN AND THEIR INTIMATE PARTNERS

Many studies observe that men with fewer resources may use overtly coercive behaviour to maintain relationship control and to compensate for their demeaned status. These compensatory acts of manhood are 'aimed at claiming privilege, eliciting deference, and resisting exploitation' (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009: 281), and these happen in China (for example, Kim 2015). Men can often resort to hyper-masculine practices such as violence, a game which women may never win. A valid example of this can be found in Tian's case which I will discuss shortly. Yet what appears more obvious in both cases is a withdrawal of love and attention, and an abuse of the women's labour.

Shou provided much free labour to Lu. Though she worked as a full-time saleslady in the nearby shopping mall, she went to help Lu whenever she was off duty. She was always around when Lu started to close at 11:15pm. It was a laborious process because Lu had to put all the unsold products into plastic bags and baskets; wash all the oily trays, the chopping board, and utensils with a bucket of water which he saved in a big plastic canister; wrap up the long cord which was connected to an electricity box outside a building at Guidu. Shou always handled the cord, she had to wipe the dust and dirt off with newspaper as she collected the wire. When everything was packed up, it would be around 11:45pm and Lu would be ready to push the cart back home. It was a bumpy road and the cart was very heavy. I had tried but could not even move it. It took 15 minutes to walk to the entrance of Guidu through the North Gate. Two guards were usually around the security office, where Lu habitually handed two cigarettes to them. He would fill the big canister with water inside the office and keep it there overnight. The

next day, he would pick up the canister at 4pm for another day's use. With all the other stuff that the couple had to carry up and down their flat with no lift service, the water canister solution helped. Arriving at the block where they lived, Lu would unload all the food and give some of it for Shou to carry upstairs. Lu had to continue pushing it to a carpark where his cart would be locked up. It was all very hard work and it seemed that Lu easily took Shou's help for granted. When they had a quarrel and Shou disappeared for a couple of days, Lu would declare that Shou was useless to him anyway: 'She always complains when she sits here, it's better if I handle everything myself without her disturbance.' However, he could not hide his frustrations until Shou 'reappeared' to help him.

The way Tian treated his wife was worse. As I gained her trust, Yan disclosed to me that her husband was treating her poorly. Tian controlled all the income and their household finances. For all the work Yan did, she was given RMB1,500 a month as her salary. When her father was about to die, Yan asked for RMB20,000 to buy a graveyard space and was rejected. The problem resolved eventually because by a new rule from the district governance at that time, all dead bodies were required to be cremated. During the negotiation, Tian said the newsstand belonged to him and his mother, who had injected capital into it, whilst Yan had zero stakeholding and that she had already received her monthly remunerations. In a fit of rage, Yan quit for three days. Tian had to close the store in the morning during those three days. Similar to Lu, he told me that his wife was useless and he was better off without her. Similarly, he was clearly relieved when Yan returned to work.

Both Shou and Yan made the claim that their men would not be able to manage the business without their help. They protested that their labour was abused but the protests never lasted for more than three days. The two women were as accommodating to their spouses, if not more so, in their private lives.

The relationship between Lu and Shou was a rollercoaster. Shou wanted to tie the knot legally, but Lu was reluctant. In times of conflict, Shou would tell me how stupid it was for her to stay with Lu, a man who seemed to treat their relationship instrumentally; a man who did not really love her. Signs of love include generosity with one's time and money. Shou found Lu exceptionally mean and selfish with money. He did not shoulder any living costs in the family; he never bought anything for her two children, whereas she would buy something for Lu's son who stayed with Lu's mother in a village. Lu once went to Shou's mother's birthday banquet empty-handed, which was a big loss of face for Shou. Shou's daughter once asked Lu to give her RMB200 to buy a bicycle but he refused. Lu explained to me that he had contributed more in the past, but he had given up because his effort was not recognized. Besides, he told me that he had hardly been making any money during the first year operating at the Guidu spot; he

simply had no money to give. I am not sure how true that was, but Lu's interactions with others revealed how financially tight or 'stingy' he was, as Shou would put it. For example, I saw Lu arguing quite seriously over money with Tian one day. Lu asked Tian to give him a 'commission' as he had referred a customer to buy cigarettes from Tian's newsstand. Tian told me in private that Lu was senseless. The customer bought a cheap pack of cigarette which cost RMB5, from which he made a profit of RMB0.4, but Lu asked for a commission of RMB1. On another occasion, Pan, the woman from the bakery, came to buy goose liver for her dog. She gave Lu RMB0.5. Lu cut a small piece of liver to her with frustration, 'I can't give you any liver again with this small amount of money.' Pan told me afterwards that Lu was ridiculous because fellow workers on the same street should give one another a good deal. Lu was constantly criticized for being stingy and calculative; but to blame the poor man for not being generous enough only further marginalized him.

Aside from material concerns, Lu's emotional aloofness was upsetting for Shou. Lu spoke to his mother on the phone almost every evening after rush hour. Each time they spoke, Lu walked several steps away from Shou. I initially did not understand why Shou was agitated by this move, until she told me one night, 'They don't consider me as family member.' The exclusion from the mother-son conversation made her feel like an outsider. Shou was sensitive because Lu's mother did not like her. Shou's husband died of an accident, then Lu's bicycle crashed when he took Yandong to his home village for the first time, causing injury to both; Lu had to stop working for twelve days as a result. Lu's mother feared that Shou would bring bad luck to the family; she took the couple's birth dates to a fortune teller to make sure that their 'fates' (*ming*) were not in opposition with each other's. Shou was also upset because Lu never took responsibility for her son, a very athletic and outgoing boy. For about a year after I met Yandong, I witnessed the boy heading into adolescent problems such as indulging in video games, fighting with classmates, and slipping in his studies. One day, the boy happily told me he could now make money by lending it to classmates. He earned an interest of something like RMB0.2 by lending RMB5. I asked him whether he knew the nature of what he was doing; he replied with a cunning expression that he was acting like a 'triad society (*heishehui* 黑社会) member'. I witnessed his grandmother chasing him with a stick a couple of times, for Yandong used foul language when speaking to her and he did not do his homework. My hairdresser informed me that Yandong had told him that his father was working in Shenzhen. I felt that the boy badly needed a father figure. Lu told me he would never try to father the boy because everyone in the family, including Yandong's uncle, was keeping an eye on the boy. He was the last one who could have a voice for Yandong.

Lu was aware that he was seen as a freerider in the family. At times, things might have seemed to be too heavily weighing down on him. Looking at his trays of unsold food, he would

murmur, 'it is meaningless (*mei yisi* 没意思), really meaningless'. A good reputation for doing good business and being a responsible father and son were most critical for him as a man. He seemed to fall short of the ideal in both ways, and his manliness was constantly in question. Shou, the woman who seemed to love him so much, was the only source from which Lu could claim his sense of control and self-worth as a man. The feeling of being loved is empowering. I saw Lu exuding a sense of masculine pride when he asked Shou to clean the house, help him with his garlic, or buy him a bottle of beer. He felt amused and gratified when he made Shou giggle like a happy woman. Shou could always be seen serving Lu by bringing him water to drink, or muffs to warm his hands and ears. When the kiosk had many customers, Lu would call Shou to come down and help even if she had not finished dinner; he would give her a look of disapproval when she arrived from work too late to help. Shou handwashed all his clothes, which became dirty easily due to the nature of his work. When the laundry was not done promptly, Lu complained. He also complained that Shou did not clean the house or their bedroom frequently enough. In a nutshell, Shou was required to provide services for him to his expected standards, at all times.

Shou explicitly expressed that her relationship with Lu was unfair. However, she always turned into a contented and blissful woman when Lu behaved fondly towards her. Love alone seems to be the reward that makes all costs and obligations worthwhile for Shou. I asked Lu why he did not marry Shou. The replies varied. He would talk about having no money, but he also expressed that Shou was not the kind of woman he fancied. He felt trapped by Shou; he claimed: 'she coils around me and does not let me go' (*sichan landa, si lazhewo bufang* 死缠烂打, 死拉着我不放). He conjectured that Shou might regret their relationship, but she could not end it as she did not know 'how to manage her face' (*mianzi fangbuxia* 面子放不下). Once, he complained that Shou was not treating his son well. For instance, Shou took the three children to an amusement park but she only paid for her own two children to play a shooting game. He also felt Shou wasn't understanding enough about his relationship with his mother. Appearance is also important in this equation. One evening, when Lu was in a happy mood, he told me he was ready to marry Shou and that I would be invited to their wedding banquet before I left Nanchong. I was thrilled and went to tell Tian at his newsstand. Upon hearing the news, Tian said coldly, 'Let's wait and see'. He mentioned that Lu would be less hesitant to marry Shou if she were prettier. I heard a few neighbours mocking Shou's unattractive looks behind her back, and saying that she looked like an older sister to Lu. Lu criticized Shou's appearance occasionally. Finally, Lu resisted the uxorilocal status. 'Once we are married, I would become married-in (*shangmen de* 上门的), now I am not.' Or, simply, 'I would be worse off if we marry.' He learnt when working in 'big cities' that cohabitation without marrying could end up better than marrying, therefore, 'why bother!'

Similar to Lu, Tian was very close to his old mother who lived with them. To be more exact, Tian's family moved into his mother's home when they returned from Shenzhen. Tian handled most of the housework. Yan was responsible for preparing dinner for herself and their daughter, and washing their clothes. Tian was an exceptionally loving and anxious father; but his love for his mother and daughter never extended to his wife. Tian never called Yan by her name or even as 'my wife' (*laopo* 老婆); he addressed her as 'you' (*ni*), or 'she' (*ta*). He often said that Yan did not treat his mother well enough but I did not have any concrete details on this. Tian told me twice that he had not had sex with Yan in four years. He also admitted to physical violence including slapping, punching, and kicking his wife, sometimes causing bleeding. I got a chance to clarify this claim with Yan one day when we walked together. To my surprise, Yan was very calm. She asked if that was what her husband told me. The next question she asked was whether Tian appeared to be very proud or not when he related his beating to me. I said no, he just phrased it as if he lost his self-control. Yan was pleased and made excuses for her husband, 'Yes, he is a man who easily loses control. His emotionality is weak (*xinli suzhi hendi* 心理素质很低). His words are foul but actually he doesn't mean it.' A few days later, Tian asked me in an interested manner how much I had told his wife about our private conversations. He repeated, 'She said even Dr. Wang said you are not right in treating me so badly!' This was hugely embarrassing for me, but neither Yan nor Tian made me feel that I was to blame. At times, I got the impression that Tian felt regretful and ashamed. As I discussed in Chapter Two, wife-beating is considered 'uncivilized' behaviour in Nanchong, men are condemned for domestic violence even if he seems to have a righteous cause. Yan claimed to have suggested a divorce but Tian refused. Tian admitted to be the one who did not want to divorce. Probably, Yan was too faithful and useful as a mother and working partner for Tian to let go. I once discussed prostitution with Tian. He disclosed his 'understanding as a man' that no normal man could stand having no sexual contact for too long, which made me think he might satisfy his sexual desire somewhere else if he truly had not had sex with his wife for four years. Yan never talked to me about these matters, but she was clearly not confident in her appearance even though she looked nice.

Shou and Yan were frustrated when trying to understand why their love was not reciprocated. Both had asked with helplessness: 'What about me is not good enough?!' Yan once said, 'He is in my heart, but I am not in his heart. I don't know why. I don't overspend like many other women do, I look after our daughter well, I work hard for the business. I qualify as a virtuous wife and good mother (*xianqi liangmu*). But he doesn't care.' She also asked me a few times if she looked older than her age, and if she was very dull and unappealing. Both women mentioned quite a few times that they would give up, but they would quickly find reasons to maintain the status quo. Yan mainly talked about their daughter and the fact that Tian was

actually a good person; he was only emotionally weak and erratic. Shou also complimented Lu as a good and honest man; he did not deserve a 'runaway woman' for a second time. Yan sometimes told me how envious she was that I could afford to be a free and independent woman.

It is very likely that Shou and Yan will carry on helping their intimate partners at work and sustaining their relationships for some years to come. There are a number of questions we could raise here: how are we to account for the two men's controlling behaviour and the two women's willing submission? Does it give evidence to a patriarchal relationship that is alive in China? Are women the victims or the self-victimized? Can we say that Lu and Tian are exercising compensatory manhood acts to claim membership in a dominant gender group (Pyke 1996; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009)?

It is tempting to simply use a feminist angle here to analyse the two couples' relationships and conclude that men inherently enjoy a privileged and oppressive position over women. Connell established that it was this privilege that motivated men overall to legitimize a dominant, hegemonic form of masculinity. In both of my case studies, the women are the more loving and giving party, whereas the men seem to garner more power and manage to exercise their will more freely. Lu's and Tian's behaviour towards their intimate partners can be described as a compensatory form of masculinity. We can also say that there is evidence of a persistent patriarchal culture in Nanchong. Nevertheless, it does not seem fitting to use a one-dimensional, dominant-subordinate analytical theme to explain the dynamic power processes and relationships.

Lu is upholding certain patriarchal principles by resisting marrying into Shou's family; however, agreeing to an uxori-local and matrilineal marriage would not signify gender equality. Lu's resistance strategy towards his marginalized status is withdrawal from certain happenings within the family and aloofness towards Shou. He does not demonstrate any hypermasculine behaviour. Lu's other strategy in dealing with the stresses in his life is to forget and take things easy. He once gave me this good piece of old advice when I shared my problems with him: 'All problems can be solved. Friends help, time helps. If it still doesn't work, forget about the problems!' Even in the case of Tian, it may not be totally fair to blame him as a violent husband. As researchers, we can get only snapshots of our informants' lives. I managed to get a very limited understanding of the conflicts between Tian and his wife. I have to trust Yan's verdict that her husband is after all a good man. This is not to ignore Yan's suffering, but we cannot conclude that women are always the victims and that emancipating women from oppression would achieve an egalitarian gender order. Men can be the oppressor but also the oppressed. Unfortunately, as we have seen in the previous chapters, different 'classes' of men are situated

differently in the gender regime. As such, masculine domination can never be separated from an understanding of the intersection of class (Greenhalgh 2013; Ghannam 2013).

CONCLUSION

This chapter began by looking into the overt manner in which a man who has limited resources and thus is unable to marry in a normative manner, becomes marginalized, and then in addition, the subtle ways in which a second man found himself marginalized. Both men suffered a subordinated status within their close affinal kin network, especially with the father-in-law. Both men compare their disadvantaged and unfair status directly with another male member in the family, who are the son and another son-in-law of the parents-in-law. I emphasize that I am using the kinship terms quite loosely in this chapter because in fact, Lu is not even legally married to Shou, and she is a widowed daughter-in-law, but not the daughter of the Guan couple. This broad and loose usage of the terms is justified by the changing boundaries and definitions of the kin network in China due to various factors, such as the shrinking number of children, the absence of male descendants in families, and the new residence patterns necessitated by urbanization and labour migration. These changes demand that kin members, especially affines, who previously kept their distance, may now live under the same roof and rely on one another in running their daily lives. This can generate greater cooperative opportunities across generations, but at the same time will breed greater tension because he who can be crowned as the patriarchal head becomes contestable. Intergenerational relationship in China has been a popular research topic, but the father-in-law is an absent figure, and we know very little about the relationship between male family members. As China's patriarchy has defined the kinship system for so long and that it has declined within the household only in the last century, these would be a promising area for future ethnographic investigation.

I have interrogated specifically in this chapter how men negotiate their masculinities with people in their family including their parents, in-laws, and intimate partners. Masculinity is called to test when one feels his desired manly position is threatened, or when one denies subordination to the dominant man in the family. It is more testing for men of lower social status because they cannot easily enact their masculinity in public or the workplace; the domestic domain may be the only place left where they can claim their masculinity. When this last resort is threatened, the harm is unbearable. The upper-class men can claim their male privileges elsewhere; hence they may feel more at ease deferring to their fathers or fathers-in-law even if they may have naturally been granted a dominant position.

Male to male subordination exists not only within the family, but also the social circle. A hierarchical ideology puts those who have lower socio-economic abilities, the *non-able-responsible-men*, in a further under-privileged position. Tian, who felt so sour being a subordinate in his in-law's family, outclassed Lu and treated him as a menial companion. The key point I make in their relationship is that despite the distasteful treatment that Lu receives from a friend, this is far less afflictive and consequential for him than the sense of failed masculinity he feels at home. This can be explained by the importance of a man's filial identity which precedes that of the extramarital homosocial bonding (Zhou 2010). This in no way undermines the importance of friendship and social capital for a man, but rather highlights the paramount significance of familial responsibilities and the honour or dishonour that is derived as a result. It also does not refute the existence of egalitarian friendship in Nanchong. I mentioned the friends of both men I encountered during fieldwork, in particular the changes in attitude and manners of Tian upon seeing those friends. The picture of domination and subordination between men can perhaps complement Boretz's work (2011) which, although also representing the social marginality of men, depicts mostly the comradeship and fraternity enjoyed by men socially.

The ideology and practices of male domination and subordination must necessarily include the male-female angle. The contradictory subjectivities of domination and subordination are negotiated between different members in the same family. The men in both cases withdraw their love from their intimate partners and even engage in violent acts towards them. Understandably, rich and middle-class men beat their wives too. Compensatory masculinity is not confined to working-class men. I have given very little attention to domestic violence during fieldwork. What we can draw from this study is that masculine dominance over their intimate partners allows the subordinated men to gain a sense of power and control that they would otherwise have been denied. Shou and Yan are in their mid and late thirties irrespectively. Shou is a widowed woman whereas Yan feels highly insecure about her femininity. But above all, both women seem to love their men dearly. It is hard to generalize the two cases to the overall generation of women of their age in Nanchong, not to mention the younger generation who appear to be much more assertive and individualistic in romantic relations. These are certainly worthy topics for further studies.

I have provided several trajectories of manhood in the last three chapters that touch on intimacy, kinship, conjugality and friendship. It should be clear that the masculine ideal of able-responsible men has affected how a man performs and how he is judged by the others in his family and social circles. In the next chapter, we will continue to examine the notions of ability and responsibility, but the focus will be on the national exemplar model and the inspiration that it has on ordinary men (and women) in Nanchong.

CHAPTER 7: NATIONALISM AND MASCULINITY

Why did the Soviet Union disintegrate? Why did the Soviet Communist Party collapse? An important reason was that their ideals and convictions wavered. Overnight, the flag flying over the fortress was changed.... all it took was one quiet word from Gorbachev to declare the dissolution of the Soviet Communist Party, and such a big party was gone....The Soviet Union had a larger proportion of Party members than ours, but not a single person was a real man (*jing wu yiren shi naner* 竟无一人是男儿), nobody came out to resist and fight (*kangzheng* 抗争). (Xi Jinping, November 2012)

China's head of the state, Xi Jinping, said the above to a group of Communist Party officials behind closed doors during his tour of Guangdong Province in 2012. Xi cited a line from a little known poem, composed by a concubine of the last emperor of the Late Zhou Dynasty (951-960 AD), cautioning Party members to learn from the dishonourable downfall of the Soviet Union. In the poem, the poet (*Huarui Furen* 花蕊夫人) conveyed her dismay at knowing that a flag of surrender was flown over the fortress and 'all 140,000 soldiers took off their armour'; she sighed and said, 'not a single person was a real man'. After the young dynasty was overthrown, the concubine was kept by the new emperor of the Song Dynasty.⁷⁶

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent difficulties faced by former Soviet states have challenged generations of Chinese leaders to reassess both their domestic and international strategies. Xi's comment as captured in his speech to the Army would not be his only response to the event, but it certainly reflects his orientation in dealing with political and military threats. Xi said that the Soviet army had failed to stand for their nation and defend the Soviet Union against the West. He alluded to the instruction that should China be faced with similar threats, the army should resist and fight 'like a real man', so as to protect the interests of the state and its people. Xi's call for patriotism is unsurprising. Since ascending to power, he has taken every opportunity to promote his nationalistic and patriotic ideology. It is also not uncommon for country leaders to inculcate patriotism to serve the interests of their nation states or governments. What is more gripping is how Xi summed up the call of duty for Party

⁷⁶ For the original version of Xi's speech, see Xing 2014: 93-94; Gao 2015: 106-7. The translated copy I cite is largely borrowed from Chris Buckley's report in the New York Times; I made minor revisions based on a fuller version of the speech and my understanding of the poem.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/15/world/asia/vowing-reform-chinas-leader-xi-jinping-airs-other-message-in-private.html>.

members, specifically the army, to fight for the country as ‘real men’. Interestingly, the sum-up was inspired by the accusation of a woman who saw the army surrendering their duties and letting down their countrymen and countrywomen. It would be naïve to think that Xi had the intention of lecturing on masculinity in that anecdote. But what he said did reveal what masculinity was for him. His interpretation is important because Chinese people look up to their great political leaders as role models whose words and deeds are to be trusted and emulated (Munro 1977; Bakken 1999; Delia Lin 2012), even if only discursively. This perspective will be further elaborated in this chapter.

We have explored throughout this dissertation what it is for Chinese people in Nanchong ‘to be like a man’. We will end this exploration by turning our gaze to the ideal model of masculinity and the relationship between masculinity and nationalism. There are two strands of argument here. The first is that ‘big’ political leaders in China set the iconic characteristics of what a real man should be like. This is grounded in an authority system that legitimizes leaders as the patriarchal chiefs of their countrymen, and a culture in which people model themselves on exemplary figures. Xi Jinping, who was the leader during my fieldwork and still serves in that capacity, has established a personality cult and a ‘big man’ status that may be compared to that of Chairman Mao, ‘who was portrayed as the sacrosanct father-figure of both nation and Party’ (Unger 1996: xv). The image that Xi constructs, however, reflects changes over time in how political subjects relate to their patriarchal leaders. Second, a discursive military culture is spreading in Nanchong, with many people expressing a sort of militarized nationalism and desire for China to go to war, mainly with Japan, to defend its rights and to redeem itself from a humiliating past. However, the outbreak of nationalism is also tempered by a sense of ambivalence and misgiving. These two strands of thought are interrelated because what the country leaders say affects what ordinary people think.

My ethnographic observations in Nanchong provide substance for me to assess the current articulations of nationalism and sentiments towards the country’s leader. My field approach was non-directive. I rarely inquired about nationalism in the format of an interview or even in intentional discussion. Nevertheless, there was no shortage of opportunities to find manifestations of nationalism, implicit or explicit, in daily encounters. To start the investigation, we need to look at the historical conception of nationalism in China, not least because the term is subject to different interpretations in the academic field, but also because the historical development will help us understand its current expressions. Scores of scholarly works have provided thorough discussions on this topic. In the following, I make a synthesis of only a very small fraction of those pertinent to my analysis.

THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Many scholars⁷⁷ take the view that the Chinese terms for ‘nationalism’ (*minzu zhuyi* 民族主义) and ‘the Chinese nation’ (*zhonghua minzu* 中华民族) came into being at the beginning of the twentieth century, mainly through the work of Chinese reformist and intellectual Liang Qichao. Starting from the reign of the King of Qin (221 BC) to the end of the Qing Empire (1911), China was ruled by emperors.⁷⁸ Until the end of the nineteenth century, Chinese people conceptualized the world as *tianxia*, the ‘universal world’. Whoever accepted the universal values of that civilization, which were Confucian-based, could be incorporated as the same people. This concept of *culturalism* differed from the modern concept of *nationalism*, which is associated with an entity of the nation-state. As summarized by Henrietta Harrison (2001) and Zhao Suisheng (2004), the shift to nationalism in China happened as people were awakened by a series of internal and external crises. Before the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), there were the two Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860) and the subsequent Self-Strengthening movement, the anti-foreign and anti-Christian Boxer Uprising (1899-1901), the siege of the eight foreign countries, the downfall of the Qing Empire and inauguration of the first Chinese republic in 1911, the May Fourth movement, and resistance against the two Sino-Japanese Wars during the 1930s and 1940s. Finally, in 1949 there came the establishment of the PRC.

How one accounts for the subsequent development of Chinese nationalism is more controversial. Observers from outside China tend to see the nationalism as state-led and an extension of authoritarian control.⁷⁹ For them, Communist leaders cultivate patriotism (*aiguo zhuyi* 爱国主义, or ‘loving the state’) as a nation-building project to develop national identity and motivate a deep sense of loyalty to the state. Patriotic calls as a means of unifying power for the state were deemed to be necessary in the 1990s due to a number of circumstances: the collapse of the communist ideology, the democratic Tiananmen movement in 1989, the emergence of popular doubts about the ‘capitalist’ economic reforms, conflicts between Han Chinese and the minority ethnic groups, sharp contrasts in living standards between the rich coastal regions and the poor interior cities, the moral panic, and so forth. On the other hand, scholars inside China

⁷⁷ See Harrison 2001: 102-104; Wang Gungwu 2002: 117-118; Zhao Suisheng 2004: 16-19; Zheng Dahua 2007: 7; Yu Ying-shih 2011: 21-35.

⁷⁸ The term ‘Emperor (*huangdi*)’ was introduced by the King of *Qin* as he united different warring states into one country and called himself the ‘First Emperor’ (221 BC). But a number of leaders with equivalent positions to that of Emperor were recorded before that: one might say that China’s dynastic history started from *Xia* (around 2070 BC) instead of *Qin*.

⁷⁹ See, for example, Barrow 1996; Wang 1996; Pye 1999; Zhao 2004; Hughes 2006; Lam 2006, 2015.

would describe a more autonomous and genuine nationalist spirit developed from below, in conjunction with Party leadership.⁸⁰ A nationwide patriotic campaign was launched in 1994, with students of all levels being the special target audience. In the campaign, foreign intrusions and earlier sufferings were invoked, as was national pride in China's glorious past and recent economic and diplomatic accomplishments. Traditional attitudes that favoured hierarchy, order, stability, unity, harmony, duties and responsibilities were reaffirmed. Much like what Allen Chun (1996: 131), largely inspired by Ernest Gellner, wrote about the construction of national culture in Taiwan, the government played an active role in 'writing culture' by resuscitating elements of the past. The Confucian values of filial piety, respect for social authority and everyday ethical conduct were emphasized. School textbooks were written in ways congruent with state ideologies (Zhao 2004: 218-247). In such an environment, students in China would be persistently reminded of such famous patriotic mottos as Zhou Enlai's 'Study for the rise of China', and Liang Qichao's 'The country is wise when youth are wise the country is strong when youth are strong'⁸¹. It is no wonder that anthropologists have found strong articulations of nationalist commitment such as 'patriotic professionalism' expressed by young professionals (Hoffman 2010), and 'filial nationalism/ patriotism' amongst transnational students (Fong 2004a; 2011). Moskowitz (2013) observed that Beijing parents used the chess game *weiqi* to train up boys toward 'proper manhood'. The game was traditionally used to instil the qualities of a Confucian gentleman as well as a martial strategist; hence, parents express in a nationalist spirit that 'a healthy and well-educated son will lead to a robust race and nation' (2013: 22).

The above implies that nationalism has been cultivated as a moral discipline in modern China, and it certainly forms an important aspect of masculinity. This fits with Joane Nagel's (1998: 254) hypothesis that nationalism worldwide is conservative and patriarchal. Nationalists tend to be 'retraditionalizers' who make tradition a legitimating basis for nation-building and cultural renewal, hence reinventing the tight connection between masculinity and nationalism. Nagel offers a useful analysis of the relationship between manhood and nationhood by drawing on the perspectives of a number of scholars including Connell (1987), Enloe (1989), Anderson

⁸⁰ See, for example, *Nationalism in Modern China* (2007) edited by Zheng and Zhou. Such work published in China may express state interests. A recent doctoral thesis by Justice Ren (2016) at LSE, however, argues convincingly that the state campaign is successful only because the nationalist messages ring true to the public.

⁸¹ Zhou Enlai said this famous line in response to a question from a teacher at the village school where he studied. The teacher asked the students why they had to study; Zhou answered he studied for the rise (or rejuvenation) of China. The lines by Liang Qichao are from his '*Shaonian Zhongguo shuo* 少年中国说' (1900). In Nanchong and Mianyang, I saw these mottos posted on the walls or notice boards in a few schools I visited. See Benei (2008) for a parallel study of the education of nationalism in India's schools.

(1991), and Mosse (1996), to name just a few. Her analysis makes use of research material mainly from Western countries, but as I show below it is also highly relevant for China.

Nationalism and masculinity

Nagel (1998, 2005) pinpoints three reasons in explaining why nationalist politics is a major venue for accomplishing masculinity. First of all, the national state is inherently a masculine institution. This is true in China where women's participation in the political system is low. According to recent research, the percentage of women in the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China was 16.6% as of 2008. The majority of women in politics face a glass ceiling. In 2012, only one female member (i.e. 4%) was in the Politburo, the top leadership group in the country (Zeng 2014: 145-6). As such, the 'big decisions' in Chinese politics are primarily made by men.

Next, Nagel reasons that the culture of nationalism is constructed to emphasize and resonate with masculine cultural themes such as honour, patriotism, bravery, strength, duty and face-saving, with the microculture of masculinity in everyday life thus articulating with the demands of nationalism, particularly in its militaristic aspects (2005: 402). According to Nagel's research, the colonial and imperialistic projects in Europe and America in the nineteenth century were tightly woven with the ideals of masculinity. She argues that nationalism and militarism go hand in hand, as do nationalism and chauvinism. This can be read together with the work of Joshua Goldstein (2001). Using a multi-disciplinary analysis, Goldstein shows how nation states employ the discourses of nationalism and militarism as tools to induce men to fight in wars as protectors for the country, whereas women perform various other material and psychological roles such as nursing, and shaming men who fear or avoid war. (This certainly recalls the poem cited by Xi Jinping which forms the epigraph of this chapter). He asserts that those parts of masculinity that are found most widely across cultures and time – physical courage, endurance, strength, skill, and honour – are shaped by the 'war system'; boys are toughened up from youth under the influence of this system. Nagel and Goldstein may not intend to say that all men are trained to be militaristic, or that men who do not embrace a militaristic attitude are less manly. But they are clear that the warrior qualities in men are groomed by nation states so that when needed, they are ready to fight. Literary historian Martin Huang (2006: 201) advances a comparable point of view that throughout Chinese history, educated males were often compelled to reflect upon their manliness when a dynasty fell – especially when the fall was the result of an invasion by 'outsiders'. Manhood and nationhood easily came together in response to such self-reflective moments. I conjecture that this observation has relevance even for present-day China. The point will be revisited later.

In Nanchong, I came across quite a few men who were regular readers of martial magazines with titles such as *Weapons* (*Bingqi* 兵器) and *Global Military* (*Huanqiu Junshi* 环球军事). I asked a teenage son of one of my close informants, what made him read those magazines. He answered plainly that *all* his male friends read them, as if an interest in military affairs was a universal masculine trait. I was not very happy with his answer and mentioned that this kind of publication was not sold in Hong Kong. He responded with some ambivalence, saying that ‘Hong Kong is different; you don’t have that part of the history’, with the implication that because Hong Kong was colonized for so long, people did not receive the same patriotic education and would not understand warfare. He was studying helicopter technology and aspired to join the Air Force. Quite a few of my Nanchong informants have husbands, brothers or sons serving in the military. Some were proud to talk about the discipline, hardships, willpower and physical challenges that the soldiers have to endure. Two parents whose sons had just joined the ‘volunteer soldiers’ (*ziyuan bing* 自愿兵) each told me how happy they felt about this development, because their sons were lazy and aimless and had done poorly at school. One also described his son as being timid and delicate. Army training could discipline and toughen up the boys to become more masculine men, which seemed just as important as providing them with an opportunity to build a career. Both parents said that they were happy that their sons had an opportunity to ‘pay back to the nation’ (*baoguo* 报国). Nevertheless, this sounded a lesser motive than the prospect of a respectable career path and a way to discipline and ‘masculinize’ their boys.⁸²

The third point Nagel makes is that women (like men) are designated a symbolic role in nationalistic culture and collective action, a role that reflects a male-dominated definition of femininity and of women’s proper place in the nation. Women are symbolized as exalted mothers in many societies; women are the bearers of men’s honour and their bodies are politicized as a matter of national interest. Many scholars have written about how women and their bodies symbolize the spirit, honour, loyalty, national collectivity and purity that are to be guarded by men (Delaney 1995; Duara 1996, 2009; Yuval-Davis 1993; Messerschmidt 2010; McLelland 2012). A well-known mythical legend in China has it that the world (which according to ancient Chinese belief meant China) was created by a female God called *Nüwa* (女娲). Nevertheless, the Emperor was traditionally termed and believed to be ‘the Son of Heaven’ (*tianzi* 天子), destined to rule. The country is commonly called ‘*zuguo*’ (祖国) which recalls ancestral roots and refers more to a ‘fatherland’ than a ‘motherland’. Yet Nanchong people describe the iconic river which runs through the city, Jialing Jiang, as their ‘mother river’

⁸² See Stafford (1992, 1995) for similar situation in Taiwan. Parents sent their sons off to compulsory military service for the nation. The tension between familial and national duties was mitigated by the belief that military service provided chances for the sons to grow up and become stronger.

(*muqin he* 母亲河), which implies the natural resources and life that the river supplies to the land. These show the gendered nature of nationalism. But the connection between nationalism and masculinity is most significant in China through another kind of symbolic implication – the parallels between the patriarchal leader in a family and the nation. This parallel is ingrained in Confucian ideology and has been re-energized in contemporary China.

Patriarchal leadership and the modelling of political great men

In Chapter Five, a man who tried to pursue a married woman lost his temper when she kept praising her husband as a means to proclaim her happiness and to deflect any possibility for her to be unfaithful. The man stopped her from annoying him further by yelling, ‘I know! Your husband is even better than Xi Jinping!’ This was a revealing statement indicating a phenomenon which deserves closer examination: a great political leader, just like the father in a traditional Chinese family, serves as a model whose behaviour is emulated by his subordinates. The patriarchal ideal still holds in the country even though the ramifications of that ideal may change over time.

In China, what makes the metaphorical link between father/son and ruler/subjects prevalent is a political tradition that was structured around an order of hierarchy (Solomon 1971: 28; Harrison 2001: 172). The father’s authority rested upon each family member’s submission to his or her role, as with the relationship between the ruler and his subjects (Hamilton 1990: 94-95). Lucian Pye (1968) took the connection further by developing his ‘authority crisis’ theory. Using a psychoanalytic approach, Pye theorized that the Chinese family reinforced the entire traditional political structure by emphasizing filial piety, the absolute denial of the legitimacy of aggression, and a rigidly defined order of role relationships with the father bearing omnipotent power. The father-son relationship was especially troubling for men, and this defined some Chinese characteristics such as dependency, avoidance of conflict, the acceptance of an unambiguous authority, narcissism, an unshakable identification with the historical greatness of China, and the display of fearlessness and hostility when people had to prove their collective manliness. Pye used the story of Mao’s revolt against his father (Chapter Three in this thesis) to explain Mao’s political performance as an effort to personify himself as an authority father-figure greater than his own father (1968: 119-122).

Pye’s theory is highly controversial and is criticized for offering little empirical support.⁸³ His student, Richard Solomon (1971), further develops the theory by drawing on a large amount of data. One of the themes which he takes up is the ‘modelling’ behaviour of Chinese: the idea that people look to superiors for guidance and initiative. A more recent

⁸³ Mei (2013) provides a useful, insightful critique of Pye’s theory.

scholarly contribution, *The Exemplary Society* by sociologist Børge Bakken (2000), explores the modelling perspective in great detail and depth. Bakken draws on Confucianism to explain the importance and moral underpinnings of the exemplar culture in China. He provides numerous examples to show how ‘models and modelling are still very prevalent in China despite the wear and tear of modernization’ (2000: 181). The focus of Bakken is not top political leaders, rather he demonstrates how the grand narratives represented by different chosen models symbolize and reflect the norms that are encouraged by the leaders. The narratives become a form of social control which creates ‘formalistic conformity’. The emphasis is on performance (*zhong zai biao xian* 重在表现) (ibid: 419); that is, people are motivated to act out the prescribed moral conduct, to the extent that the acting-out could turn into superficial proclamations, or even lies. Another scholar, Donald Munro, offers a similar viewpoint in an earlier (1977) publication. Munro asserts that Mao was the one who had formulated the contemporary model theory, and he himself was explicitly treated as an exemplary man while Confucius used to be the chief model in imperial China (1977: 139-40). These perspectives fit with some of the observations I made on the subject of nationalism in Nanchong.

In fact, successive leadership teams after Mao have emphasized that they would avoid the frantic followership and ‘personal adoration’ (*geren chongbai* 个人崇拜) in the fashion of Mao. Li Cheng (2001) stipulates a diminishing role of strongman politics in China as ‘the growth of a personality cult, which is often essential for the birth of a Great Leader’ was halted by the fourth-generation Chinese leaders⁸⁴ (Li 2001: 235). I will use an example to show that the culture of adoring and emulating top national leaders did seem to have become more moderate after Deng passed on leadership to Jiang Zemin. During my time working on consumer research in China, I always heard the names of Chairman Mao, Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai cited as ‘aspirational figures’ in the 1980s and early 1990s⁸⁵. Such references gradually shifted away from national political heroes, towards ‘rich and able businessmen’ including Bill Gates, Li Ka-shing (李嘉诚, the richest man in Hong Kong and Asia) and China’s first batch of self-made billionaires. In the new millennium, I would hear names from mixed sectors such as those in the field of sports; people also mentioned ‘ordinary heroes’ who made special achievements in small ways. Mao and Deng maintained their revered positions, but I never heard anybody mentioning Jiang, Hu or Wen. We can therefore suggest that political leaders are no longer

⁸⁴ The fourth-generation Chinese leaders refers to those who came of age during the Cultural Revolution. They include Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao and also Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang.

⁸⁵ The list of aspirational figures is the same as reported by journalist Peter Hessler (2001). Hessler taught English in a township in Sichuan Province during the 1990s. When he asked his students to write about ‘their heroes’, eleven out of thirty-three students chose people in their families, three wrote Napoleon, and a total of fifteen picked Mao, Deng or Zhou (2001: 132-3); the new Party leader, Jiang Zemin was not mentioned.

overwhelming role models, even discursively. On the other hand, it may suggest that leaders including Jiang, Hu and Wen are not in the same class as Mao and Deng. My latest research in Nanchong, however, tells that Xi has become a new ‘big man’ at the grassroots level and people seem to accept the resurgence of strongman politics. The new leader expresses a more aggressive form of nationalism, and a new kind of masculinity which is in tune with the times. I use a string of ethnographic evidence to illustrate my points.

POPULAR RESPONSE TO NATIONALISM AND THE PATRIARCHAL NATIONAL LEADER

Everything starts with training young children

It was on the 8th of September, 2015 when I met up with Qiqi, a six-year-old boy, at his home when I revisited Nanchong after I left in November 2014. As usual, Qiqi’s mother, Han, prepared a wholesome lunch together with nanny Miao. Qiqi’s seven-year-old cousin, Junjun, was there too. We were just finishing the meal when the boy suddenly burst out with the slogan, ‘Down with Japanese militarism’ – with one hand holding a toy truck mimicking the act of crashing, and his other hand balled up in a fist punching the air. We all turned to him. He looked at us with an ambiguous smile, and continued with the rest of his ‘patriotic’ declaration: ‘Down with Japanese imperialism! They are thick-skinned, lower than pigs and dogs, more stupid than pigs, more despicable than dogs (*tamen lianpi hou, zhugou buru, bizhu haiben, bigou haijian* 他们脸皮厚, 猪狗不如, 比狗还贱)!’ I asked Qiqi what made him say this. He replied that teachers at the school told them the Diaoyu Islands belonged to China, but the ‘thick-skinned’ Japanese shamelessly refused to return it to us. ‘We have to use tanks and airplanes to crush them to death!’ His mother added matter-of-factly, ‘And you know, he watches so much of this on TV these days.’ Junjun, a much more composed and thoughtful child, asked me if I had watched the military parade (*yuebing* 阅兵, on 3rd September), commemorating the 70th anniversary of China’s victory in the War of Resistance against Japan. I answered that I did watch it on TV in Hong Kong before I came to Nanchong. Then, Junjun asked me to tell him about the colonial history of Hong Kong. This brought back memories of a lunch I had during my first visit, at the same place and with the same people.

Almost two years earlier, in my first days of fieldwork, I was invited by Han to have lunch with them. I first got to know the family through Miao, their nanny. Qiqi was a frequent visitor to my home, coming with Miao or by himself. Qiqi liked to watch cartoons on my TV or iPad and search for snacks in my house. His cousin, Junjun, lived about fifteen minutes’ walk away. He always had lunch at his cousin’s place because his school was nearby, and his parents were working far away. On that day when I went to Han’s for lunch, I brought two sachets of

miso soup which I had brought from Hong Kong. Han was always keen on making new dishes and inquired about cooking aids and products such as mayonnaise. When the lunch started, I showed them the sachets. Miao took out two bowls. I poured out the powder, added some water and said happily, 'This is it, you can try! This is authentic, from Japan!' Han, Miao and Qiqi tried it, but did not seem to enjoy the soup. I found Junjun physically withdrawing from the bowl. I wondered why and invited him to have a sip. He persisted in shaking his head with an abnormally unfriendly expression. Upon further encouragement, he whispered something to his auntie sitting next to him. I looked at Han in puzzlement. She said, again in an apathetic manner, 'Oh, he doesn't want it because it is from Japan.' I was even more puzzled, but then I suddenly got the point – a 'boycott' of things from Japan! I saw that Miao also seemed to be lost and then understand. I asked her if she also felt bad about Japanese people. Miao pressed her hand against her heart and said like a child, 'I am afraid of them (*wo papa* 我怕怕).... Japanese kill people!'

Back at the reunion dinner, I somehow found Qiqi's curse against Japanese people disturbing. I could not stop myself from imparting some advice, 'You can think that the Japanese are bad, but you have to be careful how you put it, especially if you are overseas.' Qiqi's sister (Vivian) was living in Germany, and they had been planning for a visit. Hearing my comment, Han seemed to be struck by something and got obviously concerned. She said it was right that she had to teach her son to be more cautious. She recollected that in the year 1976, a classmate of hers in their village school shouted 'Down with Mao' (*dadao Maozedong* 打倒毛泽东) immediately after the Cultural Revolution came to an end. The student was dismissed from school the very next day and was never accepted by any other school or within the community ever since. His insensitive statement marked him as an outcast, even though the statement appeared to be timely and even politically correct. In China, it is a taboo to criticize leaders, not to mention the supreme country leader, particularly in public. Personal views on sensitive topics such as people's revolts and religious freedom usually reflect only the collective and censored views. Chairman Mao, despite his flaws such as orchestrating the Cultural Revolution, is the father of Communist China whom nobody can condemn. All criticisms launched against Mao must be within the boundaries of what is officially publicized. Han, and actually I myself, know that there are more appropriate times to express nationalistic, xenophobic, or even racist ideas. Han, having little interest in political issues, was unaffected when her son and nephew discharged their rather xenophobic comments, until I suggested that such comments had to be avoided in public, especially overseas.

There are different ways of engaging with nationalist ideas; the learning and internalization of how to engage with those ideas, to become 'like a man', start from a very young age. During the 'miso' episode, Qiqi was a five-year-old kindergartener; he did not seem

to understand what we were talking about at the time, and he showed disinterest. When we met for the reunion meal, he had finished primary one, and he would have been exposed to all kinds of publicity and education about Japan's 'shameful' deeds throughout that year. He behaved as if he could go to war and bomb the Japanese the next day to avenge his country. Junjun was eight months older. In the miso episode, a patriotic sentiment stimulated him to 'boycott' a Japanese product. In the reunion meal, he did not join Qiqi in his emotional display of warrior instinct. Instead, his reflectiveness prompted him to make inquests into another dark page of Chinese history: the colonization of Hong Kong by the British Empire. Miao called herself an uneducated peasant woman who knew nothing apart from making a living for herself and her family; she was happy to leave politics to the learned people and the country's leaders. Nonetheless, by representing Japanese as intruders worthy of fear, the nanny shared a national identity with her young master and indirectly approved of his wish to crush the enemy. Han cautioned her son to be careful with politics when somebody, that was I, raised the concern that patriotic charges had better be put diplomatically. It is doubtful that Han would let her son join the military even if he wanted to. However, she nurtured her son's nationalistic spirit in a different fashion. After that reunion lunch, she would take the two boys to a football class in the afternoon. She and her sister had enrolled their boys in a training course organized by their school 'to support Xi Jinping's call to develop football talents for the country... Everything starts with training young children (*cong wawa zhuaqi* 从娃娃抓起)⁸⁶.' Indeed, during my brief second trip to Nanchong, I heard from another woman that she took her twelve-year-old son to a football training course every weekend, also in response to the President's call to develop footballers for the nation. Both Han and this woman showed their pride that their sons passed the selection process. Apart from football training, the boys also attended private classes of other 'elite sports' such as roller-skating. These classes project status and subject students into imagining a social hierarchy, and in this case, also an imaginary nationalist project (Kipnis 2012a/ b).

The Chinese government has long viewed winning international games as a rite of passage into the top tier of world power.⁸⁷ Xi's love of football is well-known. He proclaimed his three main goals for China in a meeting with Korean officials in 2010: to qualify for the World Cup, to host the event and, finally, one day to win it. He demonstrated his gusto and skills in kicking a football on quite a few public occasions. He told David Beckham as they met

⁸⁶ The phrase '*cong wawa zhuaqi*' (*wawa* means small children) was first said by Deng Xiaoping, who spoke of the importance of education. This has since become a popular saying used in different contexts in China.

⁸⁷ For a full exploration of the significance of sports for Chinese nationalism, see Brownell 1995.

in the States in 2012 that he was Beckham's fan.⁸⁸ These remind people of the all-time favourite pictures of Mao and Deng swimming leisurely in the sea. People are inspired when they see their leaders engage in day-to-day activities just like ordinary people do. Xi's vigour and enthusiasm for football are probably symbolic of a more aggressive and competitive masculinity than that which is demonstrated through the leisurely swim of his predecessors. Football has been made a compulsory part of the national curriculum in China since 2015. One of Deng's speeches, in which he said, 'China's football education should start with children', has been mentioned by Xi in his own speeches.⁸⁹ In Nanchong, a number of schools are selected and offered special training programmes. Students like Qiqi and Junjun volunteer themselves to join the programme; henceforth they become part of the nationalistic training project.

Patriotism and its international encounters

Alvin (Chapter Three) is a teenage boy who loves foreign culture, so much so that he is criticized by classmates as 'a worshipper of the West and the foreign' (*chongyang meiwai* 崇洋媚外). He is keen on fashion and entertainment news, but is very aloof to social affairs and politics, so much so that his father worries he is too frivolous to be 'like a man', that he is short of 'an aggressive masculine heart' (*xiongxin* 雄心) and 'hot blood' (*rexue* 热血). Both Alvin and the other teenage boy, Yifan, whom I mentioned in the same chapter, told me how much they loathed the compulsory week-long military training (*junxun* 军训), which all secondary students have to attend during certain years at their school campus. The two boys described the training as nothing but tiring and formulaic. From what they said, they were disengaged with both the physical exercises and the militaristic teachings and slogans, which they found dogmatic, paternalistic and contrived. According to Yifan, the most memorable thing about the military training was the unisex uniform which they were distributed. The uniform was made of a material that was so lousy that Yifan said they could tear it with their bare hands. Girls had to wear clothes under the uniform because it was quite transparent; this made the heat more unbearable for them because the training took place in summer time. In a nutshell, martial training for these two boys sounded like nothing more than a routine event which they *had to* attend.

One day, I was eating with Alvin and his sister in a restaurant. Alvin was overjoyed with a VANS backpack and T-shirt that he had just bought. He adored American brands, while his sister preferred Korean fashion. They commented that Japanese pop culture and fashion had

⁸⁸ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/chinas-xi-jinping-loves-football-so-much-hes-put-it-on-the-national-curriculum-but-can-he-secure-the-10071110.html>; Xing 2014:225-232.

⁸⁹ <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1871444/chinas-soccer-mad-president-xi-jinpings-passion>.

been totally overtaken by Korean. I asked casually what they thought about Japan. There was a brief moment of silence. Then Alvin looked sternly at me and said, ‘one word, nauseating (*exin* 恶心)’. I was surprised. Alvin appeared to be the type who had a minimal passion for politics. I told him frankly that I did not expect this strong reaction from him. Alvin might have felt as though he was somewhat slighted. He added, ‘Well, I don’t study history much. But at least I know the criminal acts they did to Chinese people. No Chinese can forgive them.’ His sister found the discussion boring. She commented briefly and somewhat put the discussion to an end: ‘Do not all Chinese think the same in this respect?’ Alvin and I never talked about politics again until I revisited Nanchong a year later. I was sitting with his mother at their bakery shop when Alvin came. We chatted about different things and recent happenings, which led us to the military parade which had taken place a few days earlier. Alvin seemed to be earnest when he shared this with me: ‘Oh I want to tell you, I can’t believe it myself – when Xi Jinping and the troops exchanged their greetings, Xi called out aloud “Comrades you are working hard!” (*tongzhimen xinku le* 同志们辛苦了), and the troops turned to him and responded loudly “We serve the people!” (*wei renmin fuwu* 为人民服务)⁹⁰ – I could not hold back the tears in my eyes. I was so moved.... At that moment, I wanted to be a soldier.”

Alvin surprised himself because he had never been interested in political and military affairs. He always criticized China for its suffocating systems and conservative practices; he dreamt of living in a foreign country where he could have a taste of freedom and genuine modernity. Nevertheless, when his patriotic instinct was aroused, he felt for the nation and he wished he could be one of the soldiers. It is possible that the annual military training, no matter how cynically students talk about it, has an impact. The feverish propaganda about Japanese crimes definitely left a mark. Throughout my fieldwork in 2014, I saw massive publicity in preparation for the 70th anniversary of the victory over Japan. Various documentaries and tele-series were aired⁹¹, commercial venues put up banners celebrating the victory day, social media chats abounded. To use Billig’s term of ‘banal nationalism’ (1995), ‘nationhood was flagged’ everywhere; it is not easy to be unaffected by the daily productions of nationalism. Shou’s ten-year-old son (last chapter) asked me one day, ‘Do you know the most horrible thing I have ever

⁹⁰ A significant part of the parade was constituted by exchanges of greetings between President Xi, driven by a Red-Flag limousine, and different troops of armies and navies as they marched through the Tiananmen Square. The greetings, for every troop passing by, were these: ‘*Tongzhimen hao* 同志们好 (Comrades)!’, ‘*Shouzhang hao* 首长好 (Leader)!’, ‘*Tongzhimen xinku le* (Comrades you are working hard)!’, and ‘*Wei renmin fuwu* (We serve the people)!’ The slogan ‘We serve the people’ was created by Chairman Mao. The essence of the saying was that ‘everything that we do, we do it for the people’.

⁹¹ Song (2010) and Song and Hird (2014) provide useful cultural analyses of Chinese masculinities and nationalism as projected from movies and TV drama series. The authors observe a strong interaction between the discourse of masculinity in popular culture and the rise of nationalism in China since the early 1990s (2014: 11).

seen in my life so far?’ I asked him what it was. He said, ‘Have you heard of Japan’s Unit 731 experiments? They used live persons and rats as experiments...’ The boy covered his mouth with his hands when telling me the horrifying documentary reports that he had read, to indicate the unspeakable horror.

In Nanchong, I did not come across a single person who did not feel animosity towards Japan as a nation. The very gentle Latin dance teacher told me that should China start a war with Japan, ‘I will give what I have to the country’. This arose in response to my asking what he considered to be a real man. He mentioned being responsible for the family first, then for the nation. It is hard to tell how far people would go to demonstrate their patriotic will. Nonetheless, the spontaneous claims made by Alvin and the dance teacher speak of the potency of a nationalist discourse and popular emotions that have propagated in the city. Men, in particular, have been told since they were boys that a man has to be hot-blooded and aggressive at appropriate times. Once the conditions are right, such as when one is asked a question about masculinity, or when the media broadcast passionate patriotic messages, one’s nationalist sentiments can be moralistically unleashed. Defending the national interest through military means and even personal sacrifice has always been part of the ethos of responsibility imparted to men. Numerous national heroes who are recognized as ‘great men’ (*weiren* 伟人) in Chinese history have died for the country, fighting invaders or fulfilling their patriotic vision. Yue Fei, Wen Tianxiang and Qu Yuan may be the best-known examples.

I saw that people were vengeful mainly towards Japan, not the other ‘foreign invaders’ such as the British who launched the Opium Wars. I discussed this with a few interlocutors. They replied that the other countries had not inflicted as much physical and moral harm on Chinese people as did the Japanese. One of the most grievous crimes for Chinese people was the harm the Japanese troops did to Chinese women during wartime. The ‘bestial acts’ (*shouxing* 兽行) perpetrated by the Japanese and the pictures of victims can be found on different kinds of media with titles and texts that are intensely nationalistic (Song 2010). As Martin Huang (2006: 201-2) writes, many men would feel that their manhood is being questioned at times of bruised ‘nationhood’ and foreign ‘penetration’. Shame, hatred (of the enemies) and a wish to redeem oneself from historical humiliations are further provoked by exposure to international relationships at all levels and they strengthen the national identity (Callahan 2004). The following comment explains the intensity of the redemption that is desired:

Historically in China, the purity of the woman’s body has served both as metaphor and metonymy of the purity of the nation. Therefore, the bodies of Chinese women raped by foreign invaders – Mongol, Manchu or Japanese – were both symbol and part of the national body violated by these foreigners. (Duara 1996: 45-6)

It is likely that sentiments of nationalism in connection with China's humiliating past are shared by Chinese generally. It is also likely that a certain form of patriarchal patriotism may arise in the less cosmopolitan sectors of society, in much the same way as expressed by British and Americans in Brexit and the latest US presidential election. The state-led, patriotic nationalism in China may have much to offer to people who neither have the cultural capital to make it in cosmopolitan settings nor the money to make themselves equal to their fellow citizens in more developed, modern cities. This is a topic which is worthy of further investigation.

Popular militarism can be moderated or enhanced by the country's leaders. Starting from Deng's reformist era, China has taken a low profile in international politics so as to concentrate on its modernization programmes. Xi, however, is seen as adopting a more assertive foreign policy (Lam 2015:191). One can argue that the time is just right for China to show its muscles on the world stage because of its economic power, but it must also reflect the ambition and the priorities set by the country leader. Some examples of Xi's aggressive moves are the development of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank headquartered in Beijing, and the 'New Silk Road Economic Belt' which is envisioned to benefit the Central Asian states. He has toughened up the country's stance on sovereign rights disputes in the South China Sea, and constructed an artificial island in that region for military purposes. On many occasions, Xi inculcates a nationalistic spirit by reminding the world of both China's past glories and humiliations. He has spoken about morality and patriotism to Party members, bureaucrats, businessmen, teachers, students, sportsmen, the military, Chinese nationals in the mainland and overseas. For example, he told a group of prominent writers and artists, 'Your writing must be patriotic'; and in a meeting with media chiefs in Beijing, he offered this advice: '[The media] must love the party, protect the party, and closely align themselves with the party leadership in thought, politics and action.'⁹²

The nationalism instilled by Xi can be called a kind of 'restoration nationalism' (Wang Gungwu 2002). It has a civilizational face which stresses moral order and the rediscovery of traditional values. It also emphasizes unity, national self-respect, and recovery of sovereignty. It calls for the absolute and omnipotent reception of the Communist leadership, which parallels the cultural expectation of a united family under an able and responsible patriarchal head. This is clear from the reactions of Nanchong people towards the Occupy Central Movement of Hong Kong.

⁹² <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/22/opinion/murong-xuecun-china-the-art-of-xi-jinping.html>;
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/28/absolute-loyalty-how-xi-jinping-is-bringing-chinas-media-to-heel>

Unity of one nation under a strong responsible leadership

Occupy Central was initially organized as an act of civil disobedience starting on 26 September 2014. Protestors asked for a genuine democratic package for electing the Chief Executive of Hong Kong in 2017. It soon developed into violent clashes which turned into a mass sit-in lasting more than two months. The Movement was universally condemned by the Chinese media. Hong Kong people were accused of being ungrateful, unfaithful, and unpatriotic to the motherland and their Chinese comrades. Except for a small minority of two or three persons, almost everyone who spoke to me about the protest repeated the official narratives built up by the media. Many of my informants expressed the view that the government could not soften its reaction to the quest for democracy and freedom in Hong Kong because it would set an example to people in Tibet and Xinjiang. The rhetoric of dependence on the country's leaders, in a patriarchal fashion, is strong. The nation is often associated with a big family that has to be kept intact. The country leaders are like parents who can protect its members; its members have a duty to keep the place harmonious. There also seems to be what Solomon (1971: 115) described as a fear of being 'cut off' from a powerful individual who provides guidance and security. The tailor I mentioned in a previous chapter told me,

Look at the USSR. They were so strong in the past. Now that they are broken up, if a World War Three was to happen tomorrow, Russia might not win. Similarly, if China was broken into pieces or for instance, if Guangdong Province became independent, it would become insignificant to the world, and it could be bullied (*qifu* 欺负) by other countries. But under China, nobody can bully Guangdong.

However, like anywhere else in the world, people's patriotic sentiments and their desire for unity are fraught with contradictory and personal motives. Many middle-aged informants revealed to me honestly that their patriotism was driven ultimately by personal interests. Ordinary people cannot afford to endure another period of turmoil and trauma (*shang buqi* 伤不起) which would undermine the peaceful and prosperous life that they now strive for. The talk of patriotism is so widespread that it can be invoked easily in different scenarios. For example, a woman had always wanted to buy an iPhone. She made various efforts to ask me and her friends who travelled overseas to buy one for her at a lower price. When these efforts failed, she ended up buying a phone from a local brand, and justified this by referring to a scandal circulating in the media at that time, that the American intelligence department was hacking private data through iPhone usage. Therefore 'it was right to boycott the American brand' – a patriotic statement helped to justify her second choice. Moreover, many people proclaimed patriotic views but at the same time were keen to emigrate from China. A number of my informants had sent their children to study overseas. Those parents and their children would say that they would

eventually come back and contribute to the country. But more often, they admitted that they would like to have the option to stay overseas ‘just in case’ (cf. Fong 2004, 2011). The social benefits offered by many foreign countries were always an attraction. Also, I was asked by a few women if I could help them find boyfriends or husbands in more developed Western countries. These examples, of course, do not mean that people are unpatriotic. What it reveals is a social reality that many people do want to quit their country. It shows the ambivalent nature of nationalism, and the fact that few people could make a resolute decision to put their loyalty to the nation above all other loyalties (Harrison 2001: 218). Some people I met did express their disapproval of the Communist leadership; they were displeased with either the local government or the Central government, or both. However, people would often bear no real malice towards the government. They generally share the mentality that there is nothing that ordinary people can do to make a change in such a controlled environment; one better accept things as they are as an ‘obedient citizen’ (*shunmin* 顺民). Nevertheless, people need intermittent reassurance that they can continue to trust the leadership. Xi Jinping’s anti-graft campaign seems to be successful in giving such assurance, as it presents Xi as an able and responsible social actor who ‘does good’ and a father-figure who empowers his people. I examine this further in the next section.

AN ABLE-RESPONSIBLE NATIONAL LEADER

I started fieldwork in Nanchong about a year after Xi Jinping was made the supreme leader of China. Earlier on during the fieldwork period, I had a sense that people had reservations towards Xi. His grand vision of ‘China’s Dream’⁹³ seemed to be too ambiguous and intangible to resonate with the populous. I very seldom heard people talk about it, perhaps even less than the previous slogan, ‘harmonious society’⁹⁴. Xi’s efforts to crack down on corruption, on the other hand, came up easily in daily conversations. Initially, the anti-graft campaign was viewed with caution and some cynicism. Like his predecessors, Xi might ‘just talk about it’ (*shuoshuo eryi* 说说而已). Besides, there were worries that the campaign had affected the economy and people’s livelihoods negatively. However, as the campaign gained momentum, admiration for Xi grew.

Xi’s anti-corruption move to eradicate both ‘the tigers and flies’ could be felt in Nanchong. In the course of fieldwork, I heard people grumbling about the downturn in the economy as a consequence of the campaign. Corruption, which includes the act of using *guanxi*

⁹³ The term *Zhongguo meng* 中国梦 has been translated as ‘Chinese Dream’, ‘China Dream’, or ‘China’s Dream’ by different authors in the academic and popular press. I use China’s Dream or China Dream in this thesis.

⁹⁴ This is the overarching slogan made by Hu Jintao, see Delury 2008 for details.

to exchange favours, is the way business has been done in China; it constitutes part of the infrastructure of the economy. Reciprocal undertakings are underpinned by emotional and ethical, not only monetary concerns (Yan 1996; Kipnis 1997). When the chains of benefit exchange are broken, it affects the livelihood of many related people. I will give an example to illustrate this. During the Moon Festival, the bakery couple had many unsold mooncakes because while customers in the past got cash or gift coupons to buy festive products such as mooncakes, this kind of purchase dropped off substantially because of the campaign. Poor business meant that the bakery couple had to tighten their budget. For example, they were very fond of the roasted rabbits sold by a local couple, but they would buy less in order to save money. The effect was felt equally by the rabbit hawkers who told me that at one point they could sell over forty rabbits in a day, but now they could not even sell twenty. Similarly, the newsstand man, Tian told me that he had stocked up on large quantities of red envelopes (*'hongbao' 红包*, which is used to present money and serve as a goodwill wish or cash incentive) during the Chinese New Year season, but ended up selling less than half of what he had the previous year. On 4th December 2012, Xi announced an 'eight-point rule' which put strict behavioural guidelines to officials. For example, the rules eliminated lavish gifts and reduced banquets and ceremonies. In Nanchong, during Chinese New Year, meals of all kinds within the civil service were restricted to a maximum of RMB30-50 per head, whereas the customary spending level could be RMB200-500. Numerous entrepreneurs, big and small, lamented that 'all businesses are difficult (*nanzuo 难做*) this year'. Many property projects were stopped because of a lack of funding or general mood of pessimism. This again had a chain effect on people such as those working in construction sites, property agencies, building material suppliers, etc., not to mention the big property developers.

Frustrations ran high when the economy was bad. People moaned openly that it was all because of the anti-corruption campaign. The most overt complaint I heard was from my restaurant operator informant. He and four other partners opened a restaurant with a capital sum of RMB700,000. Business was good initially but went down with the onslaught of the anti-corruption campaign. They had to seek additional partners to inject capital into the business. The operator let out his frustrations: 'We wouldn't have needed to look out for another partner had it not been for Xi Jinping!' Having said that, he comforted himself with a slogan from Mao: 'What we can do now is to persist. Persistence is victory (*jianchi jiushi shengli 坚持就是胜利*)'. A young woman who worked for the tourist office in Nanchong told me that they had to cancel a number of activities such as a 'Miss Nanchong Cultural Ambassador' competition. Funding was not a problem, but it was deemed diplomatically incorrect to hold the glamorous event which they had planned. Such comments were made strictly in private: it was not only that it was futile and politically insensitive to complain publicly, but while people's livelihoods were affected,

nobody could deny that to root out corruption should be good for China in the long run. Corrupt practices were everyday affairs in Nanchong. Every ordinary citizen (*laobaixing* 老百姓) could be a victim of it, but people in lower economic classes suffer the most. To take the one-child policy as an example, from what I gathered from numerous parents, the richer and the more influential parents were, the less likely they were to pay a fine for breaking the rule. Poorer parents with limited financial means usually ended up paying the full penalty because they had insufficient *guanxi* to make special arrangements.

In the early days, people wondered how long the anti-graft campaign could last. Hu and Wen had also declared that they would tackle corruption, but this dropped off the agenda because of intense opposition and deeply entrenched practices in all spheres of society. An old man told me during a social chat that China had never been as corrupt in its history, not even in the very corrupt Qing Dynasty. Xi had picked up a monumental job. The main obstacle perceived by many was that Xi had not gotten full support from the Army, which people said was the most corrupt bureaucracy in China. Gradually, as many ‘tigers’ including the former Central Military Commission vice-chairman, Xu Caihou, and former Security chief Zhou Yongkang, were arrested, people were convinced that Xi’s hard-line approach was not to be deterred. Zhou was in charge of Sichuan Province in the late 1990s. For a few months in 2014, a score of Sichuan leaders with links to Zhou were brought in for investigation. At times, I heard people express their complicated feelings as they followed events: ‘Big things are going to happen’ (*you dashi yao fasheng le* 有大事要发生啦)! The anti-graft campaign became even more real for Nanchong people when the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection sent a team of inspectors to the city in late October 2014. The team stayed in a busy old hotel and blocked out the small area for about a week with heavy security control. It was said that anybody who wanted to confess their corrupt deeds could report to the hotel. After three days, the team would start to call up people: ‘Whoever is called has to come’. This created fear on one hand, but also a kind of public ecstasy. Tian, who read a lot and who was always very cynical and analytical, commented on the campaign with some ambivalence, ‘Xi has the support of the masses because the masses are *not* the benefactors, but the *victims* of corruption. Xi got it right by standing on the people’s side.’ Tian was correct because I noticed that the very poor and uneducated found justice and felt empowered. I went to a village with the cleaning maid, Cai, whom I mentioned in Chapter Two. We were on a bus when the maid saw a neighbour. They started to talk about some scandals they had heard in the village office, and Cai yelled at one point that she would report the case if the officer did not deliver justice: ‘What do I have to be afraid of? Is it not Chairman Xi’s policy now to shoot the greedy and fight corruption (*datan, fanfu* 打贪反腐)?!’ In this way, Xi seemed to have become a benevolent leader who has empowered his followers with

ethical doctrines that one can hardly challenge. Yet, popular reactions are not without reservations, many people questioned the extensiveness and intensity of the campaign.

People worried that the heavy-handed approach would discourage government officials from doing their work. Some jeered at ‘all the capable officials who are now in prison or at risk of being purged.’ Others were concerned that the campaign could only cure the symptoms but not the roots of the problem such as the legal system itself. Others discussed in private that Xi was using the anti-graft campaign to clean up his opponents in the Party. Despite these controversies and contradicting feelings, it was overwhelmingly agreed that something had to be done to eradicate corruption, a malignant symptom which is associated with the privileged class and which everyone understands to be unjust and wrong. The more controversies people raise about the campaign, the more complicated does the issue present itself, and consequently, the more convincing it becomes ‘to try a heavy dose of medicine’ (*xia zhongyao* 下重药) to treat the complex problem. Xi emerges as a decisive, tactful, dauntless and moralistic leader with a strong will to resolve a severe outstanding problem in China – all these qualify him as a leader who cares about the ‘ordinary folks’ (*lao baixing*) and who is bold and just in his leadership.

A retraditionalizer

I mentioned earlier Nagel’s point that nationalists tend to be ‘retraditionalizers’ who reinvent the tight connection between masculinity and nationalism. I also discussed signs that Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao took a more liberal route to governance (Li 2001; Zhao 2016). However, Xi appears to have intensified a traditionalizing effort and reactivated a set of dogmatic ideologies. This can be summed up in his vision of the China Dream, which according to Xi, refers to ‘the great resurgence of the Chinese nation’ (*shixian zhonghuaminzhu de weida fuxing* 实现中华民族伟大复兴). More than his immediate predecessors, Xi has taken an interest in ‘thought education’ (*sixiang gongzuo* 思想工作), a term that was popular during the Cultural Revolution. He frequently offers advice on the cultivation of one’s moral qualities and society’s moral order by referring to traditional Confucian virtues. Xi has made it clear that he is not keen on Western, so-called ‘universal values’.

Many China observers have noted that Xi has the ambition to compare his achievements with those of Mao⁹⁵. One of the strategies which Xi has borrowed from Mao, with apparent success, was his ability to draw an affinity with his people by displaying his ‘*wen*’ talents. Mao was renowned as a gifted philosopher, poet and calligrapher as much as a warrior fighter and military strategist. In his famous poem *Qin Yuan Chun. Snow* (沁园春.雪), he depicted himself as

⁹⁵ For example, see Gao 2015; Lam 2015; Zhao 2016.

a ‘truly great man’ who could express both military and literary charms. Kam (2002: 15), citing evidence from Chinese history as well as famous works of literature, argues that the ‘supreme leaders are consistently promoted as holding both *wen* and *wu* in their masculine identity’; this explains Mao’s supremacy over Liu Shaoqi the administrator (*wen*) and Zhu De the general (*wu*). Xi’s *wen* ability is displayed by drawing on anecdotes from all kinds of literature, Chinese and foreign, to exemplify his grand narratives. Numerous examples can be found in a collection of Xi’s quotes and sayings edited by An Dong (2015). It seems to be effortless for Xi to cite from all sources, old and contemporary, with classical or new interpretations. He also excels in his ability to use day-to-day examples from the vernacular folk culture. He won particular appeal when he defended China’s position in this way in front of the international media. For example, during a visit to Russia in 2013, he gave this response when asked whether socialism with Chinese characteristics was good for his country: ‘Whether a pair of shoes fits, only the feet can tell; whether a country’s development path is suitable, only people in that country have the right to say.’⁹⁶ I heard my interlocutors praise Xi’s performance on those international occasions. He was said to strike the right balance, being ‘neither humble nor proud’ (*bubei bukang* 不卑不亢).

Mao defined masculinity in his time as a revolutionary hero, a man who rescued people from suffering and despotic traditions, and one who ‘created a new world (*kaitian pidi* 开天辟地)’ (Jiang and Ashley 2000: 29). In the pursuit of modernity, the Chinese Communist Party promoted images of strong ‘steel-like’ men (which had the effect of masculinizing women during Mao’s time); masculine strength was placed at the centre of national strength and modernization (Zhong 2000). At the same time, Mao also developed a new kind of relationship between the country leader and his political subjects. He made himself a ‘comrade’ to his countrymen rather than a stern Confucian father. This is a point expounded by Steinmuller (2015) with ethnographic data from his field site in Hubei Province. For the first time in history, the country leader was addressed by his professional title and common name, Chairman Mao, and even intimately as ‘Old Man Mao’ (*Mao Laohan*’r) by Enshi people. Mao condemned the ideology of filial piety and rituals which dominated the father/son order in the past. Terms such as propriety, obedience, protection and rituals were replaced by the ‘language of love’ (e.g. *aiguo*) and more emotional attachments between the Party, leaders and its people. Steinmuller noted a shift towards greater ‘sentimentalization’ in political image work, which may be witnessed in the current political regime – a topic I discuss in the last section of the chapter.

⁹⁶ <http://news.china.com/xjpsf/11138018/20130324/17743563.html>

Uncle Xi and loving husband

This section revisits my earlier comment that great political leaders in China are seen to embody the ideal qualities of masculinity, the expressions of which are emulated and therefore become a model of hegemonic masculinity. On a fundamental level, it should be no exaggeration to say that top political leaders embody power, authority, and wealth. In China, the leaders who win politically are considered to possess both the *wen* and *wu* qualities of a great man. In addition, however, an ideal masculine model has to adapt to wider societal processes in order to maintain its relevancy for people. Throughout the thesis, I emphasize the point that in contemporary China, male dominance in the sense of commanding patriarchal authority and power is discarded as feudalistic and impertinent. Men are expected to be responsible fathers, sons, and husbands. Moreover, a modern man has to be a loving and affectionate husband. The notion of a loving husband may be contradictory to the omnipotent image of the national leader, who is accepted as the patriarchal head who commands the regime. There are signs that political leaders in Communist China have started to sentimentalize their tough image. I argue that President Xi has managed to build a new image in political leadership which agrees with the modern discourse of masculinity in contemporary times. His wife is indispensable in the construction of this new masculine image of the national leader.

During the time of my fieldwork, Xi came to be known by the media and people in China as '*Xi dada* 习大大'. *Dada* is a common term in many provinces in northern China, used to address the brother or close male relative of one's father. (The character *da* also means 'big', or 'senior'.) Calling the country's top leader *dada* is unprecedented, and may be compared perhaps only with '*Wen yeye* 温爷爷', the title of the former premier. This shows the intimate relationship people perceive they have with their leader, much like somebody belonging to the same family. Xi's wife becomes '*Peng mama* 彭麻麻': together, they are Uncle Xi and Auntie Peng. As a leader, Xi is perceived to be close and warm to people, and he has won widespread support. An interlocutor who made frequent business visits to Xinjiang told me how amazed she was to find a picture of Xi Jinping displayed prominently in all the houses she visited, together with a piece of *hada* (哈达).⁹⁷ The most dramatic manifestation of Xi the private man, however, is his public interactions with his wife, Peng Liyuan.

All the top PRC leaders since Mao have kept their wives out of the public eye. It was on rare occasions that the wives of Mao, Deng, Jiang and Hu would be seen to accompany their husbands at formal political meetings. Many documentaries have recorded that Mao made a

⁹⁷ Hada is a textile which is commonly used by Mongolians and Tibetans in social ceremonies, offered as a gift to respected guests. Note that in Steinmuller (2015)'s study in Enshi, fieldwork of which was conducted before Xi's time, pictures or posters of Mao were put in the house altars of families.

strict agreement (*yuefa sanzhang* 约法三章) with Jiang Qing after they lived together that she could not participate in any formal political occasions because Mao and his wife had not formally divorced (Wu and Cheng 2009: 18-19). The wives of Deng, Jiang and Hu appeared in public but always in the capacity of the traditional quiet wife behind the great man rather than an aspiring woman in the modern era. This long tradition has been turned almost upside down by the new national iconic couple, Xi and Peng.

It is known that Xi was not an unchallenged successor to Hu Jintao. Political observers proposed a variety of reasons for Xi's success in the competition, one of which was that he had gained wider support from the Army partly because of his wife (Wu 2012: 295). Peng was more famous than Xi when they married, a famous singer working for the Song and Dance Troupe of the People's Liberation Army, and the first singer in China who obtained a Master's degree in vocal performance. More than other wives of the top leaders in China, Peng gave interviews in public and spoke freely about her family life. As she said in an interview before Xi became the Party leader:

I am so lucky. Jinping is a very nice person. He is a humble man in front of everyone, he is very strict with himself, he has a career mind, he can 'chew bitterness'. Some of his classmates have gone overseas, made good money and become millionaires. He had opportunities to go, but he has chosen to stay and work as the people's servant (*renmin gongpu* 人民公仆). Therefore, I not only love him, but I also admire him. (Wu and Cheng 2009: 128)

In November 2014, the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Conference) took place in Beijing. Xi and Peng were seen as the perfect hosts of this international event. A few artists composed a song called 'Xidada loves Pengmama' (*Xidada aizhe Pengmama* 习大大爱着彭麻麻). The music video, which featured thirty-three pictures of the couple, was a big hit on social media⁹⁸, and the song continued to be adapted by numerous professional and amateur singers. This was very unusual because by Chinese tradition, the love relationships of leaders are a taboo topic for public discussion until perhaps after the leader's death. While it is very easy for Chinese people to say that they 'love the country', it is awkward to verbalize that they 'love their wives'. The revolutionary and sentimentalized nature of the song is reflected in the lyrics:

Men have to learn from *Xidada*
Women have to learn from *Pengmama*
Go and love like them

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<http://baike.baidu.com/item/%E4%B9%A0%E5%A4%A7%E5%A4%A7%E7%88%B1%E7%9D%80%E5%BD%AD%E9%BA%BB%E9%BA%BB/16182847?fr=aladdin>

Only people with love can win the world (*tianxia*)

Chinese people, especially females, are obsessed with the First Lady. She is a professional soprano, a fashion icon, and a presentable First Lady on the world stage, which China has never had. Peng's presentable appearance and her choice of home-grown, domestic fashion brands appeal to cosmopolitan women and inspire national pride. 'Style watchers immediately anointed her the "Michelle Obama" of China' (Yu 2014: 74). People on social media were thrilled when they saw postings of a picture which showed Putin offering a coat to the First Lady, with Xi looking on cautiously. The thrill came from the acknowledgement that Peng could charm anyone in the world, even Putin, the 'Iron Man'. The First Lady was Xi's second wife, but this information was never discussed. People would instead say that Peng had married Xi at a time when her name was larger than Xi: in Chinese, 'bright eyes see the hero' (*huiyan shi yingxiong* 慧眼识英雄). She then gave up her career for her husband. In this way, Xi achieved the status of an exemplary male. The wifely image of the First Lady, as both a talented and charming woman behind her man, sets a model for women in the nation to emulate.

CONCLUSION

I started the chapter by recalling an anecdote in which a national leader instructed his army officials to act like real men to serve the country and its people. Xi's performance as the national leader substantiates what it means to be a real man. He appeals to a mix of Confucian values and Maoist and Communist discipline to heighten a sense of Chinese consciousness and nationhood. Internationally, he appears as a confident and aggressive defender of China's national interests. Internally, he has centralized all powers and authorities (more so than Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao), and he gives top-down commands like an autocratic leader. The construction of his image as a real man in the twenty-first century is assisted by his wife, herself an aspirational national icon amongst Chinese women. Despite doubts about Xi's heavy-handed anti-corruption campaign and his return to traditional ideologies, nobody would doubt that Xi has shown himself to be an able and responsible country leader. 'Strongman politics' are accepted as a reality. The informant who told me about the adored status enjoyed by Xi in Xinjiang summed up the political battle between Xi and Bo Xilai by citing the idiom: The one who wins becomes the emperor; the one who loses is called the bandit (*chengze weiwang, baize weikou* 成则为王，败则为寇). That is, the winner – whether he is a superior person or not (the saying rarely refers to a female) – writes the history textbooks and rules; he who wins deserves deference. In the name of patriotism and with a wish to see a strong and prosperous China, it seems that people can readily accept the leadership of a strongman as long as they are convinced that their interests are protected rather than violated or put at risk.

Patriotic proclamations are inspired by a plurality of factors, and complex feelings are involved. In Nanchong, I witnessed the display of a warrior attitude which seemed to be a collective show of masculine prowess. The humiliation which Chinese people experienced in their first encounters with foreign powers, especially Japan, has stayed in people's memories. These living memories can be easily provoked and exhibited as righteous, patriotic ire. The militant disposition, however, is tempered by a variety of other sentiments and aspirations. People can never be uniform in their views of such weighty issues as going to war. Some may genuinely support a war, or even be willing to make personal sacrifices for a lofty national cause, but others may show emotions and verbal commitments that are directed by the grand narratives of nationalism. As Bakken concludes in his study, the tradition of learning from models gives rise to overtly proper behaviour, but overt compliance by no means implies private acceptance (2000: 415).

I mention that Mao, in his famous *Report on the peasant movement in Hunan* (1927), pledged to overthrow the domination of four systems of authority: the state, the clan, the supernatural, and for women also the authority of men. It is certainly not the aim of this chapter to assess how far the vision of Mao was fulfilled, but the expressions of political will and nationalist sentiments in Nanchong suggest that the state system of authority, and the masculine domination attached to the system, have survived.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF THE THESIS ARGUMENT AND MAIN RESULTS

The central point which I have developed throughout the thesis is that in Nanchong, there exists a vision of ideal masculinity which is defined largely by a man's *ability* – crucially including his ability to earn money – and by the moral code of *responsibility*. This notion of masculinity is hegemonic because those men who can better meet the standard command – and are assumed by ordinary people to command – a privileged and dominant position over other men and women. It is hegemonic also because the popular consent which, to a great extent, surrounds the standard makes this form of masculinity natural, ordinary, and coercive for the majority of men. I call this hegemonic ideal, which I have identified from the ground up through daily conversations and observations in the city of Nanchong, the 'able-responsible man'. The notion of the able-responsible man is recognizable, not least because people routinely pass judgements on boys and men, in public and in private, by using terms related both to ability (such as *nengli*, *benshi*) and to responsibility (such as *zeren*, *dandang*). Men also reflect in everyday conversation on their own ability and on the fulfilment of responsibilities, usually in the context of discussing their work and family life. To put it simply, a 'real man' is considered to be one who is able to make good money and who takes responsibility for his family, his society, and ultimately his nation (*guojia*). This masculine ideal is underpinned by reputation and honour. A man's honour is not his own private affair, but affects the reputation of his family and even the whole community. These values are shared socially and internalised by men, the majority of whom feel compelled to strive towards this ideal. Some men may not, in fact, be convinced that these values offer a true definition of a real man. Nevertheless, they are aware of the collective ideal, which becomes something which Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* refers to as 'common sense'. Gramsci notes that many elements in popular common sense 'contribute to people's subordination by making situations of inequality and oppression appear to them natural and unchangeable' (Forgacs [ed.] 2000: 421).

Hegemonic masculinity, however, is not an unchanging phenomenon in any society. Changes in how the 'real Chinese man' is defined and what makes a man 'like a man' are initiated by shifts in the political, social and cultural spheres. In Chapter One I presented some historical changes to masculinities in China since the Confucian period. Just to briefly note again changes in more recent times, many writers have recorded the emasculation and impotence felt by Chinese men in the post-Mao period, especially during the 1980s. The causes of this feeling of emasculation are many: the residual effects of imperialism, deprivation of

men's virility by the state during the Mao era, the empowerment of women, the loss of men's traditional breadwinner role, and an abrupt exposure to the modern world as well as the perception that China had fallen seriously behind the West. The 1990s was a period when, it is said, Chinese men reasserted their masculine identity and confidence by getting rich and becoming enterprising individuals, at least in theory. Chinese men were generally seen to be 'recovering their potency domestically and in the world political/economic arena' (Brownell 2000: 230). A considerable body of scholarship has shown that masculinity at that time was enacted via ostentatious signs of material accomplishment, including the exploitation of women in the sexual economy. Businessmen are anxious to 'step out of China' (*zou chuqu* 走出去) and make a global presence. In a sequel to his highly influential theory of Chinese *wen/wu* masculinity (2002), Louie (2015) observes that 'the reconstruction of *wen* as monetary power rather than scholastic learning had already begun in the nineteenth century, and was made explicit by the beginning of the twentieth century. This process has intensified in the last few years, so much so that the business consultant has become the new sage' (2015: 11). I concur with this view found in the existing literature, but argue that by the turn of the twenty-first century we cannot ignore an aspect of ethical manliness in the terrain of masculinity. Both the government and the public have made a push for moral discourse with implications for masculinity. The discourse has emerged against the background of a string of events and emerging social problems such as the growing rift between rich and poor, diminishing faith in socialism and the Communist Party, the health scare created by irresponsible traders and food manufacturers, an escalating divorce rate and concern over the abandonment of duty to the elderly, and a societal concern for the decline in morality. The dominance of money as a signifier of successful manhood is matched by an ethical call for responsibility beyond the mere pursuit of wealth.

Drawing evidence from a wide range of participant-observation data, I show how the notion of the able-responsible man permeates people's everyday lives in Nanchong. The trajectories of men included in this thesis show a wide array of responses to hegemonic masculinity. I begin with the experience of teenage boys who are the only sons in their families (Chapter Three). After that, I turn to young men in search of wives (Chapter Four), and then to married men (Chapters Five and Six). The boys and men in these four chapters all belong to ordinary working class or marginal middle-class families. In one way or another, they all seem to fall short of some crucial qualities which are expected of able-responsible men: boys who underachieve in their studies and cause parents to worry that they will fail in performing a man's duties in the future; an unwelcome potential son-in-law whose 'three NOs qualifications' are not up to standard; a disorientated man who thinks he deserves the privileged status of 'patriarch' as he assumes the provider's role in the relationship; a 'subordinate' man who

hesitates to commit formally to an uxorilocal marriage; married men who disappoint their wives by being non-entrepreneurial, idle, unromantic, and uninvolved; and husbands who engage in domestic violence. Nevertheless, we also see the boys and men performing their manhood (or early manhood) admirably in a variety of ways. The two teenage boys in Chapter Three were more self-aware and positively agentive than their parents might comprehend. They defied the conventional expectation that a boy needs to be tough (not androgynous) and competitive at school; they invented new paths for themselves by negotiating with their parents, who were sometimes responsible for creating chaos in their children's lives. All the adult men I came across were filial sons and loving fathers in their own way, and they tried to be as responsible as they could be towards their families. I argue, however, that it is easier for men to adjust to changes in performing their roles as sons and fathers than as husbands – specifically because the latter entails an ideological change (in gender power), whereas the former does not. Men are sometimes conscious that they do not live up to the cultural masculine ideal, and they employ a variety of strategies in negotiating their manhood or counteracting the demands thrust upon them. Amongst the strategies used, some indulge women's desire for love and care (even occasionally), while others withdraw themselves from intimate involvement.

I contribute to the literature by providing fine-grained empirical evidence to show the complexity and messiness of everyday life and gender relationships in one particular fieldwork setting. The ethnographic cases demonstrate that hegemonic masculinities are negotiable and contestable. Those men who manage to negotiate masculine expectations and maintain their masculine pride are usually the ones who obtain support from their intimate partners. Women, as all these chapters show, play a significant role in constructing and reinforcing the model of the able-responsible man. Apart from kin and intimate relationships, the ethnographic accounts cover homosocial relationships (Chapters Three and Six). Friendship allows boys and men to enact and to enjoy their male identities. Social and kin relations, as emotionally rewarding as they can be, can also be harmfully hierarchical. I draw attention to a case (Chapter Six) which suggests that marginalization by close kin members is more hurtful for the disadvantaged people than being belittled by friends.

The thesis takes into account the intersection between gender and class. Men who have accumulated little economic and cultural capital, and who come from poor rural families or a migrant labour background have greater difficulties in the marriage market (Chapter Four). Men who have not achieved financial success are obliged to work harder (Chapters Two and Five). Bachelors and men of uxorilocal marriages can be further marginalized and emasculated (Chapter Six). Boys who grow up in families with fewer economic means meet bigger challenges to dislodge from an everyman form of masculinity (Chapter Three). I argue that male domination, or the overall privileges which men enjoy over women, must be evaluated in

conjunction with class difference. I shall return in a moment to the subject of women and gender power.

I suggest that the idea of hegemonic masculinity is cultivated in Nanchong, and probably in China as a whole, by a practice of emulating exemplary norms (Chapter Seven). Average men are encouraged to follow the standards of conduct embodied by ‘models’ which are established by the state and supported by different social institutions (Bakken 2000). I contend that political leaders are the ultimate hegemonic models in China. Arguably, not all political leaders can become a strong model of masculinity, but Xi Jinping may be considered one such model. Continuing the ‘retraditionalizing’ route of Hu Jintao, who lauded the Confucian concept of harmony, Xi has been keen to revitalize China’s glorious civilization by promoting the China Dream. He has broken new ground in political leadership by undertaking a public performance of being an affectionate husband, an image which is of course facilitated by his famous wife Peng Liyuan. Even if Xi’s doctrinaire preaching can be viewed with cynicism, his image as a strongman in possession of centralized power, authority, and unquestionable wealth is enviable. And for the first time in recent Chinese history, the ruler and his wife appear as a respectable, loving conjugal pair before the global and local media. The sentimentalized husband-and-wife relationship displayed by top political leaders is a novelty in China, and it definitely carries a Westernized and transnational image.

The influence of transnational forces is manifested in various cases in the dissertation. The teenage boy, Alvin (Chapter Three), indulges himself with Western-style icons which he draws from English language, Hollywood movies, global fashion brands and singers, and even ‘modern’ practices such as opening a door for ladies and using a knife and fork with skill. For him, the ultimate experience at his current lifestage is to study abroad. These are aspirations common to many young people and their parents rather than Alvin alone. Many men complain that their girlfriends or wives (Chapters Four and Five) expect romantic gestures that are shown on Western or Korean movies and drama series. Moreover, social media circulate ‘new men’ images of global stars such as David Beckham who appear as loving husbands and fathers. The transnational influence complicates and adds a new dimension to the ideal male model. As should be clear in the preceding chapters, the Able-Responsible Man has strong expressions of both local and global characteristics. To borrow the words of Song and Hird (2014: 256), I have essentially examined ‘how a hybridized discourse of masculinity negotiates between imagined “tradition” and “globality” in today’s China’.

Obviously, Nanchong, where I carried out my fieldwork, has its own particularities, and these help shape local ideas and practices of masculinity (Chapters One and Two). It is a peri-urban city where urbanization initiatives have taken root only in the last decade or so. A large

proportion of its population are registered as rural citizens, even though many of them have left their lands, becoming migrant workers and subsequently moved to the city. Many people, especially those over the age of forty, have only primary or junior-middle school education. Much of the population, both male and female alike, are petty proprietors who rely on their own hard work to progress in life. People constantly discuss new opportunities to make money and exchange favours to engage one another in a wide variety of joint investment projects, such as opening a boutique shop, developing an online retail business, breeding chickens, or subcontracting pieces of work from construction projects. Men, especially those who have not amassed much wealth, are expected to spend their time productively at work rather than relaxing. Otherwise, they would be considered lazy and irresponsible towards the family. And yet, whilst I am describing a particular place, the idea of the able-responsible man is one that shares features with images of ideal masculinity in many other locations worldwide. The next section re-examines the able-responsible man in a comparative perspective, a topic which I have covered in the Introduction and briefly in various other chapters. After this section, I will reflect on my ethnographic experience in developing the notion of the able-responsible man, and discuss reflexively how the ethnographer's personal characteristics might affect the masculine model that I have discussed in the dissertation. In the final part of the Conclusion, I will elucidate the contemporary status of female power and gender relationships through the lens of hegemonic masculinity.

THE 'ABLE-RESPONSIBLE MAN' IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Social scientists often include in their studies of men and masculinities an assessment of the influences of biological factors, and conclude with the argument that the whole enterprise of searching for a biological basis of male behaviour is misguided (Edley and Weterrell 1995: 6). Numerous studies attest to the fact that there are multiple ways of behaving and being perceived as a 'man' in any single location – not to mention geographically diverse regions; and many scholars have proven the point that masculinities and femininities are socially constructed, and historically changeable. In this regard, Gilmore's (1990) universalizing approach may come across as totally untenable. Some of the conclusions which the anthropologist draws in his cross-cultural study are rigid and clearly anti-feminist. For example, Gilmore asserts that 'real manhood' is generous, selfless, and fearless, and is 'a test', as if womanhood is natural and easy. This aligns, in some respects, with Sherry Ortner's (1972) well-known hypothesis that women are universally devalued and subordinated because of the pervasive cultural view that 'female is to male as nature is to culture'.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to critically re-examine Gilmore's arguments. However, I do not totally deny the value of Gilmore's project, which provides some interesting insights that are empirically grounded. For example, he states that many societies espouse 'a doctrine of a manhood-of-achievement', and that men are as nurturing as women which counteract the stereotypical impression that men are egoistic, uncaring, and even toxic (1990: 220-230). Gilmore makes a valid point that despite men's general control over women, men do not always benefit from their dominant position but can also be made prisoners of gender. I refer to Gilmore's study because the imposing masculine ideal and the lived experiences of men which I observed in Nanchong to some extent echo Gilmore's representations. The same can be said about the findings of many other studies of men. I give four examples below to illustrate this point.

In a study in Peru, Fuller (2003: 143) argues that 'for Peruvian men, to work means to have dignity, to be capable, and to be responsible: the three qualities characterizing manhood'. In Turkey, 'most men defined their masculinities within the public domain: being successful at work, earning money – being the breadwinner and the head of the household – as well as having prestige in the eyes of their friends' (Boratav et al. 2014: 314). The hegemonic notion of the 'salaryman' in Japan emphasizes male success in the work domain, which feeds into their breadwinner role and a male-dominated culture (Hidaka 2010). In Kerala, South India, a dominant masculinity amongst young men is represented through competence in accumulating cash wealth, the maturity in using resources wisely, and the ability to move forward by marrying and taking a place within the community (Osella and Osella 2006: 77-98). The manhood-of-achievement and the provider-male represented in these studies appear to be common archetypes, just as in Nanchong. However, significant differences are embedded in the details of what appear on the surface to be the same. We can prove this point by delving into the four studies outlined above.

In Peru, Fuller explains that the bodily dimension is critically important in constituting manliness. Strength is the source of vigour and of courage, which enables a man to protect his family and command respect from other men. A man's strength emanates from his hard, muscular body and his capacity to attract women (2003: 138-142). Hidaka (2010) provides a rich monograph which explains the emergence of the 'salaryman', or 'corporate warrior' in Japan after the Second World War – a historical background which is unique and critically important for our understanding of Japanese men. Just as in Peru, sport is a site where male supremacy is produced, and physical training for boys at school has genuine significance. However, in contrast to the concern of Peruvians with bodily strength and sexual attraction, Japanese people emphasize the ability of sport activities as an inculcator of morality and mental strength, which include values of competition, endurance, collective obedience, and

responsibility. Hidaka also describes the many ways men enjoy privileges at work, in the family, and in social entertainment, but eventually they have to pay a price for enjoying the patriarchal dividend. Osella and Osella (2000; 2006) stress the Gulf migrants' fulfilment of mature masculinity by controlling their lavish consumption and performing as a wise patron for their dependents and clients. The focus of Boratav et al. (2014) is to unpack the dilemma faced by married men who try to retain male authority while taking tentative steps toward inclusive egalitarianism in the domestic sphere. It can be seen that despite the overall demand to act 'like a man' by doing well financially and giving to one's dependents, the actual enactment and performance of this provider-masculinity are multifarious and different in their details across cultures – even if we limit the discussion to heterosexual men. In the following paragraphs, I attempt to distil some features of the able-responsible man. These features would not be unique or exclusive to Chinese men, but they are critically important in shaping the expressions of hegemonic masculinity in Nanchong and must be given particular attention.

First of all, the notion of the able-responsible man is actively constructed by the state in China. It may be the case that all modern nation states are involved in regulating the behaviour of their populations. In China, however, the state has famously gone to huge lengths to transform personhood and private life, including gender relations. The one-child policy and the overall governance of the population are concrete examples which show how the Party has mediated individual lives through ideological education as well as state policies (Milwertz 1997; Greenhalgh 2009; Santos 2016). The promotion of Confucian doctrines since the 1990s has reinstated traditional virtues such as filial piety and other familial values (Davis and Harrell 1993; Whyte 2003; Evans 2008). The post-Mao amendments of the Marriage Law (1981, 2001, 2011) have recast marriage and elderly support in terms of responsibility (Zavoretti 2016: 1201). By leaving the basic structures of the family system solidly in place, 'the government could continue to work through kinship and household structures to deploy its new technologies' (Mann 2011: 188). The economic reforms which Deng introduced to 'untie' individuals from collectivism (Yan 2008) invoke individual abilities and civic duties. The Party makes use of an official discourse of responsibility to channel people's behaviours towards a moral framework which vitalises individual civil obligation, for purposes such as to compensate for the lack of public services for elderly care (Wang 2004). Ku (2003) reminds us that Mao first raised the importance of responsibility (*zeren*) and urged his comrades to serve the people selflessly. 'The Party tried to create a morally upright "new man" and transform social relations in "new China".' (2003: 146). The state influence in constructing the able-responsible man is exemplified through the modelling effect of the country's top leader. The hegemonic masculinity is also valorised through the national education system, which celebrates academic excellence and rewards high performers in the job market (Kipnis 2011a; 2012b). Even though both boys and girls are

expected to succeed at school, the stakes are much higher for boys. Bret Hinsch (2013: 8) describes an ‘intense symbiotic relationship’ between Chinese elite men and the state in that historically, only men were admitted to official service and government posts, which grant them wealth and power, and display the ideal manhood. The state helped these men cultivate an aura of successful masculinity in return for their aid in controlling a fractious society.

Second, the Chinese hegemonic model is distinctive for the weight it places on filial duties, and the complex kin relationships that entail as a result. As the four studies I cited earlier show, filial duties can be basic to the male breadwinner role in many societies, and kin relationships in different cultural sites are undoubtedly crucial in various respects. I show in this dissertation (particularly Chapters Four to Six) that despite the growing autonomy of the conjugal pair (Yan 2003, 2009b) and delayed reciprocation in the cycle of *yang* (Stafford 2000a), kin relatedness is enhanced in contemporary Nanchong (Whyte 2003; Donner and Santos 2016; Yan 2016). In relation to this point, I discuss the need to examine the oft-forgotten status of the eldest patriarch, who is the grandfather or father-in-law in a family, and the relationships amongst male affines and agnates. This may not be critically important in certain societies where frequent direct contact between a couple and their in-laws is not the norm. Even in China, traditionally the son-in-law was not expected to have to meet up with his in-laws after the wife ‘married into the family’. However, I argue that in twenty-first century China, the likelihood of a father- and son-in-law interacting with each other is increasing due to a trend towards multi-generations residing under one roof, and for the elderly to offer help to their children. In Chapter Six, I point to the emerging conflicts between the married man and his father- and brother-in-law. The father-in-law is an absent figure in the literature of Chinese kinship as the focus has been overwhelmingly on women and the mother-in-law. My data shows that it is relatively more difficult for the older patriarchal heads than for the younger generation to forfeit their authority and adapt to the changing dynamics in families. That being said, some elderly men who have appeared in the ethnography for various chapters have respectfully adapted to their emerging roles and positions in the new family living arrangements. In some families, the grandfather can become an intimate role model for his grandson (Chapter Three); in others, the elder male family members can become a caring father-in-law for the daughter-in-law (Chapter Five). With changes to the family system and gender authority occurring across all parts of the world, the position and experience of the elderly patriarch should prove to be a promising area of future comparative research.

Another noteworthy point about the able-responsible man is that it entails a sense of duty to the nation, which circles back to the first point I made. Song and Hird (2014: 256) aptly describe nationalism as a defining feature of ‘Chinese’ masculinity and ‘a key element of the performance of ideal manhood in the official discourse’. The state indirectly cultivates the trope

of militarized masculinity by publicizing the humiliations China suffered during the war, especially against Japan (Chapter Seven). Patriotism provides a fertile ground for zealous citizenship for both men and women in Nanchong. I often heard from interlocutors that a real man should be responsible to the family, society, and the nation. If asked what was meant by responsibilities to society and the nation, people always gave ambiguous answers, such as having to contribute to the development of the country, to be a 'useful person', not engaging in any illegal or anti-social behaviours, and so on. In reality, I found men to be conscientious in performing their family duties, whereas claims of responsibility to society and nation are cast as rhetorical remarks which seem to lack substantive meaning or conscious commitment. Nonetheless, the claims are strong, and they match the growing trend towards nationalism in China.

The final point to establish concerns the physical dimension in defining an ideal man. Naturally, a healthy, strong and fit body easily makes a man more attractive. I introduced the vernacular term, 'tall-rich-handsome' (*gao-fu-shuai*), which describes an ideal husband in Chapter Four. Boys who are tall and stout are always a pride to their parents. There is an emergent trend of working out at gyms and one can also hear jokes from both men and women alluding to the importance of the sexual ability of men. Once, a mother told me seriously that she had to force her son to eat meat because 'if he goes on with his vegetarian diet, I'm afraid he will become a monk one day!' Despite all of this, I argue that for people in Nanchong, the physical dimension is of relatively lesser significance than the other two crucial factors in defining masculinity, namely financial ability and an ethical sense of responsibility. Hegemonic masculinity in many societies is assumed to be linked with physical prowess and hardness, the importance of sporting ability, the display of male flesh, or simply sexual virility or machismo (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998: 248; Horrocks 1995: 18-19; Gutmann 1996; Connell 2000; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2002: 86; Swaine 2005). As far as I can witness in Nanchong, these are relevant manly attributes, but they don't play a strong part in defining the able-responsible man. Let me explain this by reconsidering the observations which I made above. The term 'tall-rich-handsome' is often used to ridicule people's unrealistic expectations of an ideal man; in reality, women do not choose their spouse on the basis of a man's appearance. All parents want their boys to grow tall and stout, but granted a healthy body, scholarly achievement matters much more than physical strength and toughness. Shou, the girlfriend of hawker Lu (Chapter Six), stopped sending her son to taekwondo training out of concern that he was becoming too brawny and fierce. In Nanchong, I did not note a strong expectation for men to master any kind of sport. For many men (and women), working out at the gym made a statement about class and provided an additional venue for social networking and 'entertainment', the purpose of body training was

secondary⁹⁹. The trickiest and yet the most salient topic is sexual virility. Due to limited empirical material which I have gathered in this respect from my study, I can highlight only a few observations here. Let me begin my brief analysis by drawing on Mellström's (2003) study of Malaysian Chinese men.

Mellström notes that in comparison to the 'sexual bravado' culture of southern Europe, the Chinese men he met in Malaysia seem to be more reserved in talking about sex; even in sharing their womanising experiences, they focus on 'other things' which helps them show off amongst men – their ability to afford such pleasures and to buy endearments of a beautiful woman (2003: 83-87). This can describe a certain aspect of how people, both men and women, speak about prostitution in Nanchong. Men discussed prostitution with me as a social phenomenon, not as a personal experience. However, quite a few male and female informants revealed their sexual appetite and behaviours with me on some private occasions. I did not go into this topic deeply, especially with men, for I sensed that some of them would expect a conversation exchange of each other's personal experience. A man in his mid-thirties, for example, said this to me while we were chatting in a tea house: 'I'm only curious, how do single women of your age satisfy their sexual need?' With the information I got, I found that sex is regarded a legitimate pleasure that people can seek quite freely as long as they have not committed to a single partner. Once a commitment is made (before or after marrying), it is not honourable for one to have sex with multiple partners. If a man boasts of his sexual encounters with different women, as put by Mellström, the pride is enacted by his ability to afford, more than his sexual bravado. Sometimes, a man's pride is associated with his ability to decline sex offers, which prompted me to think of writings by Martin Huang (2006) and Vitiello (2011), who decoded from literary writings such as the *Water Margins* the tendency for some well-known 'heroes' to withdraw themselves from the temptation of sex. It also appears to me that in daily conversations, a man's potency is articulated in a way to prove that one is 'not impotent (*buxing* or 'cannot do it')', rather than to prove one's virility to have sex with many women or the like. Interestingly, a number of informants told me in private how a woman (or the woman herself) can perform very well sexually, which causes a man 'to feel like dying or celestial' (*yusi yuxian* 欲死欲仙). Women's lust and virility, rather than men's, came across as something new. (Here, I emphasize that the women concerned in my ethnography are *not* prostitutes or those who exchange sex for money.) Ironically, I might describe sexual adventurousness as a feature of the new femininity had I to write on contemporary Chinese women, but I would hesitate to describe masculinity as such in this study. It does not mean that the physicality of

⁹⁹ I make this comment through my own observation as an active member in the gym, and through conversations with coaches and sales executives working there.

Chinese men has not changed over time, or that Chinese men do not put emphasis on their bodily strength, appearance, or virility; my point is that sexual bravado remains a conservative domain.

I have thus far summarized the able-responsible man as a form of hegemonic masculinity in present-day Nanchong. It shares some similarities with the dominant male model that is manifest in other parts of the world. I believe that there are alternative ways of being a man, and other ruling ideas of hegemonic masculinities which are not revealed in my study. I have reflected on my research and asked whether an ethnographer of a different personal profile and temperament would end up finding something very different from the able-responsible man. This is a topic which I seek to explore in greater detail, and I proceed to address the question by using a vignette.

ALTERNATIVE HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY(IES) AND SELF-REFLEXIVITY

Tian, the newsstand man, was the only interlocutor who declined to answer when I asked him, one evening at his counter, what ‘a real man’ meant for him. He hesitated to reply, saying that there could never be an answer to this kind of question. Perhaps he even suspected I was trying to challenge him for beating his wife. At that point, a younger-looking man came to buy cigarettes. Tian said in a dismissive manner, ‘Ask him (*wenta* 问他)!’ The man, who was a stranger to both of us, was curious and looked at me. I was embarrassed but had to turn to him and explain that I was discussing some general things with Tian. I asked the young man the question which Tian had refused to answer. The young man thought for only a few seconds, before replying: ‘Of course, a man must be responsible to his parents, his family, and society!’ He took his cigarettes and walked away. Tian and I looked at each other, both astounded. Tian seemed to feel I was assured by this simple and direct answer, and immediately refuted what we had heard: ‘This is common vernacular talk (*dabaihua* 大白话)¹⁰⁰! Men say this because they are poisoned by the government, and coerced (*bichulai* 逼出来) by women. The government always asks us to be responsible. Women just want to be the chiefs with their heads up (*taitou zuozhu* 抬头做主). But in the end, what they want is to have the men to make money for them. I don’t agree with this kind of responsibility!’

Tian’s response disturbed me. Did his remark disprove the notion that the able-responsible man represented a real form of ideal masculinity? Was it just *dabaihua* which was formulaic and lacked real meaning and therefore should be taken lightly? I had considered that when ability and responsibility were verbalized so easily as required virtues of men, they might

¹⁰⁰ *Dabaihua* refers to something said that is very commonplace, and often not very meaningful.

not provide the answer to my inquiry into the meanings of masculinity in China. However, interpreted differently, Tian's remark could provide further proof that the able-responsible man (especially the element of responsibility in this context) was indeed a hegemonic ideal. Tian was cynical about the notion. Nevertheless, his response pointed to a few critical facts about the able-responsible man. Tian did not deny the prevalence of the idea of responsibility, but he referred to this as a form of cultural coercion, which alludes to the idea of hegemony. He also pointedly offered the reason why the able-responsible man became a hegemonic ideal: it is promoted by the government, which always works in China; and pushed by women, who constitute the other half of the population and whose views, therefore, are critical. Tian used the term *bichulai*, which means that the ideal has become a reality, or what Gramsci terms 'common sense'. Tian's comment infers that those men who link real manhood to responsibilities for the family and society are knowingly pretentious, helplessly complicit, or virtually stupid. At its best, the claim to be responsible is an act, not a genuine feature of these men. But indirectly, it says that responsibility is a hegemonic ideal for men. It is likely that many other men would think similarly as Tian and would deny the common interpretation of what defines a 'real man'. The existence of a cynical attitude to such ideas contains in itself the potential of change or expressions of what Connell calls 'protest masculinity' (1995).

I do not have sufficient information to interpret what a real man would be in Tian's mind, nor can I substantiate another form of hegemonic masculinity in Nanchong apart from the able-responsible man. To do this, we would need another study and possibly a different research approach, maybe even a different researcher. This leads me to a series of reflexive questions: to what extent is the discovery of the notion of the able-responsible man influenced by my own perspective – the ethnographer's self? Would the result be different had an anthropologist with a totally different biography researched the same topic? Suppose I was a man or a much younger woman, might I get very different insights from the ones I obtained? Or, to ask Callaway's question, 'Can there be ungendered texts?' (1992: 30). In the Introduction, I mentioned the possible influence that a researcher's personal background can have on the process of inquiry. Anthropologists have shared different views and experiences on this subject. Herzfeld admitted that 'I have chosen to focus on the poetics of manhood because I had far fuller access to male than to female society during my fieldwork' (1985: 48). James Gregory might argue that Herzfeld's view was another case of 'rationalization' – accepting the traditional view of the inaccessibility of women's worlds to male ethnographers (1984: 316). To take the point further, let us review another male anthropologist's self-reflexivity on his work:

In this work gender is not only important as an analytical category and empirical reality but also as a determining factor of the character of the fieldwork. It inevitably creates partiality, a partial story, and a story from a man's point of view.

That is inescapable. I am a man; I was brought up as a man, I look like a man, etc. ... I am interested in my family, football, bowling and spending time with friends. I think I am rather mainstream. In the fieldwork I've done, I have found it helpful. So, with the help of biology and my gendered life experience I narrate my story from that particular background. (Mellström 2003: 47)

Mellström's monograph concentrates on his encounters with men; women hardly appear in the work. Ghannam (2013: 20-25) and Guttman (1997), on the hand, acknowledge that their gender identities shape their research experience and approach to masculinity, but they emphasize the possibilities for them to also participate in the social world of the opposite sex. Guttman in particular argues for the engagement of female interlocutors as central and invaluable to any ethnography of men, and he shows how he does that. Very importantly, both authors also maintain that their age, marital status and parenthood were helpful. In light of my own fieldwork, I share the perspective that the gendered self of the ethnographer has some bearing on the way he or she communicates with people in the field, and how far he or she can go in investigating certain topics, a point which Gregory (1984) also mentioned. But to see the researcher as only a man or a woman is to simply ignore the other identity markers which, when intersected with gender, make the real difference for an ethnographer in the field. I have profited from my personal characteristics, personality included, in carrying out my research because my mature age and 'halfie' (Abu-Lughod 1991) identity helped me reach out to interlocutors of wildly different profiles. In addition to Gutmann's comments, I would nuance that it is not only beneficial for researchers to speak to women in the study of men, but that the way we engage with our male and female informants also matters. I have found it most rewarding to get to know a man or a woman first, and then to gain the trust to be introduced to his or her family members and friends. From my experience, the initial contact always remained as the core informant who would share the most with me, but immersion in his or her family and social circles opened up many more layers of the person's life, and helped me appraise and contextualize what I heard from the informant. Amongst my close informants, the proportion of men and women as an initial contact and who stayed as the core source of information was about the same. I suppose it is generally more challenging for a female ethnographer to build a relationship with a male contact in the first place, and to be introduced to his circles of family and friends. It is doubly challenging for a female ethnographer to gain the trust of the women who are intimately related to a man. I went through a period of suspicion from the wives and girlfriend of my three key male informants: hawker Lu, newsstand Tian, and bakery Sun. But once the hurdles were overcome, the rewards were enormous (Chapters Three and Six). I have also found that men and women presented a different self to me when we were alone or in a group, both sides of which must be gauged to gain meaningful insights.

The above conveys the importance of understanding masculinity by connecting with both men and women, and ideally from men's wider circles of related others. An ethnographer's personal characteristics and his or her positionality in the field affect his or her access to different types of informants and information. I offer another vignette to give a closer examination of this point.

In Chapter Two, I mentioned a middle-aged man named Huang, who was related to triad societies when he was younger. By the time I met him in the neighbourhood, he was single, twice divorced, and living with his nineteen-year-old son. He made a reasonably good living operating as a small independent loan-shark while he searched for new business opportunities. I never asked him directly how he would describe 'a real man' or the like. However, I can safely deduce that he would not disagree with conceptualizing the able-responsible man as a form of hegemonic masculinity to which he also feels compelled to conform. I say this with a few observations. First of all, Huang always tried to impress on me that he was financially sound even though he was not engaged in any business at that time. As noted in Chapter One, men in Nanchong like to display cash wealth as a sign of their potency. One night, while I was chatting around the hawker store, Huang came and dragged me to a nearby ATM machine to withdraw RMB3,000. He said that he was quite drunk and was afraid of pressing the wrong numbers. Then, he urged me to go to a karaoke bar with him, which I had to refuse with some force. When I returned to the hawker store, Shou with whom I had been chatting asked me what happened and told me I should be very careful with Huang, who looked like a 'bad, promiscuous (*hense* 很色) man'. After that incident, Huang and I never got in touch again.

I suppose that had I behaved differently towards Huang, I might have been able to enter his social world and gain insights like those provided by Osburg (2013, 2016) and even Boretz (2011). But does this mean that I lost opportunities to learn about masculinities, and might I have found a contradicting representation of hegemonic masculinity? I consider both assumptions to be invalid. Instead of being exposed to the carousing and networking culture of men and the gangster circle corresponding to the studies of Osburg and Boretz, I had the opportunity to view another side of Huang. And this other side of Huang made me believe that he was also complicit in the notion of the able-responsible man.

Soon after becoming casual acquaintances and before the 'ATM incident', Huang invited me to his home where I met his son. Huang ended up quarrelling with the son who refused to go out with him for a dinner appointment. The father complained that the son did not try to find a job, nor did he do any housework in their spacious duplex apartment, leaving all the chores to Huang. He asked his son if he was not ashamed that his father had to cook for him. I met Huang's mother and siblings that evening, and observed how Huang became a mild,

humble and loving son when he was with his old widowed mother, who complained to me that she was still taking care of her younger son and daughter. The younger son suffered small-pox when he was a child; he remained a bachelor with low self-esteem and lived with his mother. I saw that he did not say a single word throughout the dinner. Huang did not require his mother's physical help any longer, but he still worried her. I do not need to give more details here to make the point that Huang is very similar in many ways to the other men I met in Nanchong, but he is also very different. He told me about the problems with his previous wife, who he said was lustful in asking for too much sex, which did not interest him because the wife had become an unattractive, fat woman. He revealed to me his anxieties over losing his businesses and the honour of being a 'big brother' in his social circle – all of which signified his ability 'as a man' in the past. Huang might have exaggerated or misguided me in some of the things he said, but I had confirmed through another source that he was an ex-gang member. On the other hand, I saw Huang performing the role as a responsible father (at least on a surface level), and apparently a humble and filial son, and a generous brother (as indicated by his mother and sister on that dinner occasion). Therefore, I have reasons to believe that the notion of the able-responsible man works across men of exceedingly different backgrounds and personalities. There was a possibility that I might end up identifying another dominant form of masculinity if I was a person of a different profile and temperament, but it is impossible to say whether that would deviate very far from the able-responsible man.

Throughout the thesis, I have framed the able-responsible man as a type of hegemonic masculinity. It is noteworthy that even though many scholars, including anthropologists, have drawn on Connell's concept in their studies of men, not many have directly framed the masculinit(ies) which they represent as hegemonic masculinit(ies). Ghannam (2013: 7), for instance, declares that her work 'both builds on and departs from the common notion of "hegemonic masculinity"' because of a number of shortcomings surrounding the concept: its vague, ambiguous, and elusive nature; the static typologies which are not able to account for the changing embodiment of manhood and the shifting norms; its lack of explanatory power for dynamic and fluid relationships. Apart from Ghannam's critiques, I contend that another reservation for using the term *hegemonic masculinity* directly is that the original concept and the way that it has been used entails a hypermasculine imaginary position of men, which is heterosexual and oppressive, and substantially negative. 'Hegemonic masculinity is thus united by its ugliness and negativity and by its opposition to feminine and subordinate masculinities' (Demetriou 2001: 347). Besides, Connell (1987: 185-187) broadly characterises femininity as compliant and sexually receptive (what she calls 'emphasized femininity') while most men benefit from the subordination of women. Even though Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) try to reformulate these and other points as they review the theory, the concept of hegemonic

masculinity has been ‘mostly used to analyse how patriarchy is maintained, safeguarded and upheld by men’ (Johansson and Ottemo 2015: 204). I hope that by empirically identifying the able-responsible man and drawing some similarities between men across different regions, we can see the possibility of a more positive, or less toxic configuration of hegemonic masculinity. I insist that the able-responsible man is an idealized construction of masculinity, but it is hegemonic at the same time because it coerces men to perform according to certain standards which become ‘common sense’; and the dimension of financial ability marginalizes and denigrates many men who are in a disadvantaged class.

The reader may ask at this point how women are located in a gender order that is structured by a collective ideal of the able-responsible man. As should be clear from all preceding chapters, I have benefited a lot from my encounters with women in understanding men and masculinities. All the chapters feature women prominently, and they prove the point that masculinities and femininities are constructed and reinterpreted in relation to one another. In the remainder of this conclusion, I will offer some thoughts on femininity and gender power relations in relation to masculinities I observed in the field.

FEMININITY VIS-À-VIS MASCULINITY

I opened this thesis by recording a friendly debate about femininity between a young man and woman. The woman’s emphasis on ‘independence’ (*duli*) troubled her boyfriend. Throughout my fieldwork, I heard numerous women, mostly those under the age of forty-five, expressing the sense of a newly invented self. Women could be heard talking assertively about their rights and pleasure at being a woman, and voicing ideas of independence, self-entitlement, and self-determination – the feminist discourses that are popular within European and Anglo-American contexts (Budgeon 2013: 320-321). Just to give a few examples, many women would say that they preferred to work because it meant exposure and sociality for them; modern women should not be tied down to domestic duties only. Work gave women financial independence, meaning that they could pamper themselves by using their own hard-earned money; and bringing a second income would grant them equal positions in the family. Nanchong women place much attention on their appearance. Beauty, they said, was an exclusive right for women; ‘there are no ugly women, only lazy women’. They also revel in their liberated status relative to Japanese women, who were assumed to suffer inferiority to men in very traditional manners.

The phenomenon of the able-responsible man reflects women’s power because it represents an ideal which is made real partly by women. I said earlier that the state plays an important role in constructing the masculine model, but the model gains ground only if women

generally support and enforce it. A man who is able and responsible works for the benefit of his girlfriend, wife, mother and mother-in-law. Women fertilize the idea of the able-responsible man through direct compliments (to those who are able-responsible), complaints (to those who are not), and comparisons (between men). Under these circumstances, it may seem that women can win it all in gender relations. This is, however, not the case.

It is true that women in Nanchong enjoy a high level of egalitarianism at home. It is very common for men to share housework such as cleaning and cooking, as I describe in several chapters. Men who are rich seldom get involved in housework, but neither do their wives because these families would have full-time domestic helpers. Fathers also spend time with their children and can be seen performing duties which were conventionally considered female tasks, such as changing baby diapers. Big household decisions which involve money are always made jointly by the couple. Who controls the finance is usually a matter of agreement between the couple. The division of labour is still gendered even though it has become much more fluid than in the past, and it does not seem to be a notable source of family disputes. The practice of egalitarianism, however, is less real in many other areas.

Women in general make less money than men. Due to various factors, men occupy most senior positions. Many people told me that because of the need to entertain (*yingchou*) in the work environment, women usually find it hard to fit in. Married women may be constrained by their husbands from business entertainment. Many women also expressed that they were not particularly interested in rising in the corporate hierarchy because it was tiring, they were not so ambitious and they would prefer to enjoy life and spend more time with their families and friends. There is also a concern that it is hard for women who are too successful at work to find a husband. All in all, people come up with many different reasons, some voluntary and some involuntary, to explain why women end up with lower positions at work. These reflect a combination of factors including structural inequalities, persistent views of traditional gender roles, and a third-wave feminist perspective that women in the modern age have the confidence and capacity to choose whatever they want to achieve in life. I almost never heard anyone remark that the ability of women is inherently weaker than that of men.

The able-responsible masculinity model does not necessarily benefit women in practice because the values are negotiable, and men can resist the expectations placed upon them. I have given examples of ‘counter-hegemonic’ behaviours such as chauvinism (Chapter Four), emotional withdrawal (Chapters Five and Six), and domestic violence (Chapter Six). I have also shared the observation that men are apparently more accommodating to women’s demands before marriage but are less so after marrying. Domestic violence seems to have been condemned only in the last two decades or so, but wife-beating is still not uncommon. Even

though the acts of violence can sometimes be caused by wives, women are usually the victims in the end because of men's physical advantage. Moreover, from what I heard in Nanchong, there were far more cases of 'irresponsible' adultery and infidelity on the men's part than on the women's. Prostitution, which caters to male customers, is a well-accepted and prominent business in Nanchong, but it is highly unusual for women to resort to commercial sex. Men are also more likely to be addicted to high-stakes gambling. I witnessed a number of cases whereby the husbands accumulated heavy debts and caused tragic results to the families, whereas the same was less common amongst women. There is a growing trend for women to file divorce cases nowadays, although the general impression is that divorced women have a harder time finding a new spouse than divorced men. I witnessed two cases of divorce triggered by a wife's infertility and failure to bear a son. Overall, sons are still preferred to daughters, and the wife still tends to be blamed more than the husband when a son is not born. Finally, even though many men share household chores with their wives, women are still held accountable for domestic duties, just as men are expected to be ultimately responsible for making money.

The point I want to stress is that the able-responsible man is a hegemonic form of masculinity which regulates thoughts and expectations on men; but it acts like a vision, an aspiration, a collective ideal, rather than an agreement with any binding consequence. It gives ample room for negotiations in which both men and women are active participants. Human agency is possible even for marginalized men like the hawker Lu (Chapter Six), who gives, takes and makes compromises by joining his girlfriend's family. The couple is in constant negotiation and contestation in their daily lives. Many men acknowledge the legitimacy of gender equality and female empowerment, though they have yet to develop ways to cope with the new relationships and scenarios in everyday life. Women, on the other hand, are less insistent on the standard of the able-responsible man than they might appear on the surface. As Heye, the woman who persisted in her relationship with a man of 'three NOs' said humbly, her 'qualifications' were no better than his (Chapter Four). Gender power and relations are so complex and its interpretations can be so subjective that I hesitate to draw any conclusion with respect to gender equality in China, even in the context where the able-responsible man is in full play. I may have appeared to be more sympathetic to men in the thesis, only because more sympathies have been given to women in the scholarly literature as well as popular discourse.

Chen Hui, the mother of the teenage boy Yifan whom I mentioned (Chapter Three), always bemoaned to me how difficult it was for her to find a suitable spouse after divorce. I told her I liked the way she described the kind of man she was looking for, which she said was very simple and basic:

In the end, a woman just needs a man who can protect her (*baohu ni* 保护你), cares for her (*zaihu ni* 在乎你), feels for her (*teng ni* 疼你), and on whom she can depend (*keyi yikao* 可以依靠).

I'm not upset if you're poor; I'm upset only if you're poor without ability. I'm not upset if you're gangster-like; I'm upset only if you're gangster-like in an unqualified manner (*Wo bupa ni qiong, jiupa ni qiongde meiyou nengli; wo bupa ni fei, ziupa ni feide meiyou shuiping* 我不怕你穷，就怕你穷的没有能力; 我不怕你匪，就怕你匪的没有水平).

For Chen, these may be very basic and easy requirements, but for a man, they may be imposing and hegemonic, and substantially difficult.

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