Preface

One day in the summer of 2008, I was having a family dinner with relatives in Shenyang. A few days later, I would be leaving for Shanghai for my undergraduate studies. It was going to be the first time I ever visited southern China, which felt like a completely strange place to me. At the table, my aunts and uncles were keen to tell me about the distinctiveness of the Shanghai young men that I would encounter:

‘They’re short.’
‘Shanghai men have a gentle and mild temperament.’
‘They’re very niang’.
‘Shanghai men are very shrewd and selfish.’
‘You know Shanghai men buy only one spring onion when they do grocery shopping?’
‘It’s said that Shanghai men are dominated by their wives, and they are very considerate and caring to women.’
‘I heard Shanghai men are responsible for cooking in their families.’
‘Yeah, they do most of the housework.’

Most of these characteristics sounded alien to me and to most of my relatives. In Shenyang – a typical north-eastern Chinese city – men are usually the opposite of these descriptions. They are relatively tall, assertive, rugged, macho, generous and careless, and they would certainly buy a bunch of spring onions. As far back as I can remember, I have been very familiar with everyday scenes in which my father talks and laughs very loudly with his ‘bros’, young men swear at friends to display their familiarity and intimacy, and crowds of men stripped to the waist swallow cold noodles at messy outdoor stalls during the summer. My relatives thus tended to relay these differences in a joking tone and found many of these behaviours hilarious. Somehow, the topic ended up with my aunt telling me: “You should find a Shanghai boyfriend. You’ll be looked after very well.”
Probably because of this experience, Shanghai men did leave me with a first impression that they were not masculine enough. Their soft accent sounded very unmacho compared with that of north-eastern men. Moreover, the fact that I was taller than many local Shanghai men made me feel slightly awkward. After all, a man’s height seems to be an essential part of appropriate masculinity in Shenyang. Such unspoken curiosity and doubt have accompanied me for a long while, but I had little idea about how to understand these differences until I was introduced to the notion of ‘gender’ during an undergraduate module. I could clearly recall the excitement and perhaps a sense of relief when I learned how ways of being a man or woman are socially constructed and culturally located. I started to rethink my relatives’ depictions of Shanghai men and some of my own judgements, especially whether there is a fixed standard for the ‘right’ type of Chinese man or woman.

Driven by my growing enthusiasm for knowing more about gender, I decided to apply for a taught MA programme in Media and Cultural Studies in the UK. The one-year experience enabled me to become more acquainted with feminist perspectives, and it began to dawn on me how easy it is for us to make assumptions about normative gender identities. Beyond my personal experience, since 2010, China has been growing increasingly anxious about the masculinity of its young men. Images of ‘feminized’, ‘delicate’ and ‘flower-like’ young men proliferate across the media, appearing on TV programmes, in men’s magazines and on cinema screens. At the same time, the label of diaosi (losers) has started to gain wide acceptance among young men on the internet. Moreover, on many occasions I have heard older men of my father’s generation complaining that current young men lack responsibility and motivation at work. Similar disapproval of young people in general is also widespread online; among the comments, one famous post jokingly states that the post-70s are workaholics, the post-80s never work overtime, and the post-90s refuse to work. As a commentary in the well-known magazine New Weekly claims: ‘Chinese men still exist as a gender, but have lost their masculine features. They are vanishing not physically, but spiritually’ (Pan, 2011: 39). This proliferating discourse of declining masculinity has sparked heated public debates, and has been summarized as a ‘crisis of masculinity’.

While I was preparing my PhD application in 2013, another news item captured my attention. It was about a boys’ summer campaign that aimed to ‘save boys’ and create ‘real little men’. Educational experts and counsellors raised various familial and social reasons for Chinese boys’ poor performance in schools, convincing parents of
these little emperors that their only son’s image urgently needed to be revamped. I immediately felt a sense of sympathy for these boys who were forced to conform to a dominant discourse of ideal boyhood. For a moment, this feeling made me think of some male relatives and acquaintances, who seemed, from a young woman’s point of view, to have a hard time living up to the masculine ideal that weighs on them. However, I felt that the frustration and uneasiness confronting men and boys are seldom discussed and researched in feminist and gender studies. It was at this time that I made the decision to explore the silence behind this alleged crisis of masculinity. In particular, I was interested in Chinese men of my generation who have been exposed to dramatic social transformations since the 1980s and the concomitant increasing restructuring of everyday life. I wondered if any of my peers were experiencing a crisis of decreasing masculinity or a sense of disappointing the older generation, as claimed in the media.

This book has therefore arisen from my curiosity about Chinese young men and, indeed, doubt and uncertainty about the loss of Chinese manhood. I did not anticipate that I would soon adjust my research objectives. As I read more widely during the first year of training, my attention gradually moved to ‘ordinary’ young men accepted by mainstream gender culture in urban China. More specifically, the seemingly ‘unproblematic’, stable and consistent aspects of Chinese masculinities became my central focus. Nonetheless, my interests in the media’s spectacular depiction of these two types of ‘unqualified’ men gave rise to my attention to the male body. It gradually became clear to me that there is no crisis of masculinity, but rather an emerging diversity in possible ways of being a Chinese man. The widespread sentiments that worry about the loss of manhood are one of the signifiers of the rapid socioeconomic and cultural transformations that have followed in the wake of China’s globalizing modernity. Many young men actively respond to these situations through everyday negotiation of masculinity as described in the following pages.

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