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Changes in Chinese Manhood Ideals as Western and Confucian Ideals Intersected

For much of Chinese history, Confucianism acted as a moral guidebook for most Chinese people, especially Chinese men. While Daoist ideas of *yin* and *yang* often dominate scholars' views of Chinese gender, ideas such as *wen* and *wu* as well as Confucian *junzi*-hood may more accurately depict Chinese masculine ideals. In his book *Theorising Chinese Masculinity*, Kam Louie bases much of Chinese masculinity on the dyad of *wen* and *wu*, instead of the Daoist idea of *yin* and *yang* which is the more common lens to look at Chinese sexuality and gender with. *Yang* represents dark and masculine traits such as courage, roughness, aggressiveness, and athleticism while *yin* represents light and feminine traits such as tenderness, dependence, peace, and affectionateness. Unlike *wen-wu*, *yin-yang* theory allows fluidity between men and women because the statements about *yin-yang* can be applied to women.¹ To address Chinese masculinity on its own, you must look at Chinese men through the lens of *wen* and *wu*. While both *wen* and *wu* have numerous definitions, "*Wen* is generally understood to refer to those genteel, refined qualities that were associated with literary and artistic pursuits of the classical scholars..." and *wu* is "a concept which embodies the power of military strength but also the wisdom to know when and when not to deploy it."² *Wen-wu* is not solely a Confucian ideal, however, Confucius is considered the god of *wen*, and many early Confucian masculine ideals are built on *wen-wu* or ideas similar to *wen-wu*. The Confucian *Analects* even discuss *wen-wu* ideals with the phrase, "There is no man who does not have something of the way of *wen* and *wu*

¹ Kam Hung Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*, paperback re-issue, digitally printed version ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009), 10.

² Ibid, 14.

in him,” again emphasizing the importance of masculine and feminine balance.³ Throughout Chinese history, the ideal man has always included *wen* and *wu* in different ratios. In pre-Imperial and Imperial China, Confucius was considered the god of *wen* with the Confucian manhood ideal focusing on *junzi*, an “exemplary person” who is “well-versed in *wen*.”⁴ As the West began to have more influence on China during the Republican era, the West feminized China and its men so China began to adopt traditional Western hegemonic masculinity ideals. Moving the ideal ratio from more *wen* to more *wu*.⁵ Mao’s anti-scholar and anti-Confucian rhetoric during the Cultural Revolution further changed the ideal man from scholar to work-soldier-peasant furthering this change from *wen* to *wu*. During the post-Mao era, China faced periods of economic instability where hegemonic ideals dominate the workplace, and scholars begin to re-invented Confucianism, *wen*, and *junzi*-hood to better suit businessmen in a capitalist society.

In Imperial China, the Confucian ideal of manhood, *junzi-hood*, was heavily influenced by *yin-yang*. Even classical Chinese medicine was not based around Western concepts of binary biological sex, but instead based on the belief that “every individual contained elements of both female and male gender, as represented by the symbols of yin and yang.”⁶ Li Zhuying describes the relationship between *junzi*-hood, *yin-yang*, and *wen-wu* as: “The Confucian interpretation of *yin-yang* as a theoretical footstone constructs *Junzi-hood* in relation to the *wen-wu* paradigm.”⁷

³ Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. D. C. Lau (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 156, quoted in Kam Hung Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009), 11.

⁴ David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 182-192 quoted in Louie, *Theorising Chinese*, 11; Bojun Yang, *Lunyu Yizhu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), 68 quoted in Louie, *Theorising Chinese*, 11.

⁵ Zhuying Li, "Smashing of the four old ways: Transformations of gender construction from Confucian China to Maoist China," in *Gender Hierarchy of Masculinity and Femininity during the Chinese Cultural Revolution: Revolutionary Opera Films* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 31, digital file.

⁶ Tiantian Zheng, "Chapter 1: A Cultural History of Same-Sex Desire in China," in *Tongzhi Living: Men Attracted to Men in Postsocialist China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 34.

⁷ Li, "Smashing of the four," 27.

While all slightly different concepts, *junzi*-hood, *yin-yang*, and *wen-wu* all emphasize a well-rounded man with both feminine and masculine characteristics. Despite this balance, Confucius still believed in a gender hierarchy and wrote:

The sky is honor, the earth is shame. Therefore, *qian* as *yang* and the sky, *kun* as *yin* and the earth. *Yang* has been placed in a higher position and *yin* has been placed in a lower position; this is a nature principle which has been established by the cosmos.⁸

By putting *yang* above *yin*, Confucian, with his cultural power, created the expectation of a male-dominated society. Also, much like Confucius believed that *yang* is superior to *yin*, an extract from the *Analects* shows that Confucius also believed that *wen* was superior to *wu*, furthering the hierarchy of gendered traits.⁹ However, this does not go to say that Confucius believed in hegemonic masculinity like Western culture did/does. Despite Confucianism being a patriarchal ideology, Confucius still believed that the balance of feminine and masculine traits constituted the ideal manhood.¹⁰ In the *Analects*, Confucius wrote about two traits, *zhi* and *wen*, that when perfectly balanced, equated to *junzi* which was the ideal Chinese manhood.¹¹ For most of China's Imperial era, Confucian scholars (those who practiced *wen*) were in the highest social class and were the dominant power in society.¹² *Scholars took Wen examinations* and it was the only way to participate in ancient Chinese politics.¹³ *Wen* emphasizes culture and education with things like literature, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and math.¹⁴ Charioteering and archery are also considered elements of *wu*, further showing Confucius' belief in the balance of *wen* and *wu*. *Zhi* is agreed to mean "the basic or innate substance which makes up a man."¹⁵ *Zhi*

⁸ Confucius. *Yi Zhuan*, quoted in Cheng Yi, *shi yi*, (Heifei: Huangshang Publishing, 2012), 1, translated by Zhuying Li (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 26, quoted in Li, "Smashing of the four," 26.

⁹ Louie, *Theorising Chinese*, 17.

¹⁰ Li, "Smashing of the four," 27.

¹¹ Louie, *Theorising Chinese*, 44.

¹² Li, "Smashing of the four," 28.

¹³ Ibid, 28.

¹⁴ Louie, *Theorising Chinese*, 45.

¹⁵ Ibid, 44.

is something all men are born with, but only some men have the right amount of *zhi*, and “through the process of education and enculturation using *wen*, a man with the right amount of the *zhi* substance will turn into a genteel *junzi*.”¹⁶ It is because of this that *junzi*-hood only applies to men.¹⁷ *Junzi* is often compared to *xiaoren*, who is an inferior man.¹⁸ Women were also considered to be *xiaoren*, furthering Confucius’s gender hierarchy.¹⁹ The difference between *junzi* and *xiaoren* was stated by Confucian when he said “the *junzi* understands the importance of morality (*yi*) and the *xiaoren* understands the importance of profitability (*li*).”²⁰ While Confucianism’s religiosity is up for debate, the emphasis on morality and the role Confucianism takes as moral guidance for men during Imperial China is different than religiosity between genders in the West. It has been found that women in the West are often more religious than men because women are more concerned with morality and how it applies to raising children.²¹ This further emphasizes the balance of feminine and masculine, especially in relation to Western religion and gender expectations. As China became more Westernized, the balance shifted and changed from an emphasis on *wen* to an emphasis on *wu*.

During Republican China, the West’s influence on China and its masculine ideals start to become more clear. Many experts agree that the 1920s mark the beginning of China’s desire to modernize which came with the translation of Western knowledge and the adoption of hegemonic masculinity.²² After China’s defeat in the two Opium Wars, there was a desire for a strong national identity.²³ Tiantian Zheng argues that “Constructions of gender and sexuality

¹⁶ Ibid, 44.

¹⁷ Ibid, 45.

¹⁸ Ibid, 45.

¹⁹ Ibid, 47.

²⁰ Yang, *Lunyu Yizhu*, 78 quoted in Louie, *Theorising Chinese*, 45.

²¹ Leslie J. Francis, "The Psychology of Gender Differences in Religion: A Review of Empirical Research," *Religion* 27, no. 1 (January 1997): 83, <https://doi.org/10.1006/reli.1996.0066>.

²² Li, "Smashing of the four," 32; Zheng, "Chapter 1: A Cultural," 39.

²³ Li, "Smashing of the four," 32.

were inextricably connected to the construction of a nation.”²⁴ The imperial ideas of the balance of feminine and masculine traits did not line up with newfound Western ideals. Chinese Nationalists began to question Confucian masculinity, and many intellectuals believed the best way to strengthen the nation was to adopt hegemonic masculinity and show traits of strength and domination.²⁵ Western hegemonic masculinity is not only about “maleness” but also it’s a “symbol of power, domination, legitimacy and privilege,” all traits that align with strengthening a nation.²⁶ Around this time, Chinese Nationalists began to advocate for *wu* traits such as violence and physical and military power.²⁷ This goal of aggression aligns with male, Western social experiences which say that drive and aggressiveness are ideal traits.²⁸ This relates to the idea that hegemonic masculinity deals with physical characteristics like physical strength, sex appeal, and “macho behaviors” whereas *Junzi*-hood deals with metaphysical concepts such as peace, care, love, intelligence, and morality.²⁹ In Western society, many researchers say women are more religious because of religion’s connection to metaphysical concepts. On the other hand, men are less religious because the “legitimation of the male ethos in our culture is secular rather than religious because steely neutrality rather than emotion surrender (love) serves its purpose better.”³⁰ With the purpose of the male ethos being: drive, aggressiveness, and conflict. Once China’s national identity became built on physical strength and domination, Confucian ideas of morality and conflict resolution that were associated with both *wen* and *wu* no longer served the male ethos and Western masculinity ideals did.

²⁴ Zheng, "Chapter 1: A Cultural," 39-40.

²⁵ Li, "Smashing of the four," 32; Zheng, "Chapter 1: A Cultural," 40.

²⁶ Li, "Smashing of the four," 31.

²⁷ Ibid, 32.

²⁸ Francis, "The Psychology," 82.

²⁹ Li, "Smashing of the four," 31.

³⁰ Hans Mol, *The Faith of Australians* (Sydney, Australia: George Allen and Unwin, 1985 quoted in Francis, "The Psychology," 82.

During the Cultural Revolution, “Confucianism was identified as an old ideology, old culture, old custom and old manner,” and the anti-Confucianism during the Cultural Revolution was based on the fact that Confucianism did not apply to the working class and thus could not be a role model for Chinese men.³¹ Confucius’ status as a *wen* god and icon did not align with Mao Zedong’s New China as Confucius represented a feudal and classist China. Confucius also represents ancient Chinese philosophy and morals, the exact ways of living Mao wanted to uproot. Mao disliked intellectuals, likely because their education and “desire for knowledge” threatened the Cultural Revolution’s success.³² Despite this, Mao himself stated that he wanted to be remembered as a teacher, though this statement may have been entirely strategic, using the long-held respect for teachers to win over supporters.³³

Wen no longer had a place in Chinese society due to the inability to fit intellectuals into a “class schema,” and Chinese propaganda created new male role models.³⁴ The ideal man became one of a worker-soldier-peasant and people like Daqing worker Wang Jinxi, Dazhai peasant Chen Yonggui, and soldier Lei Feng. While these ideals lean towards *wu*, Louie argues that the worker-soldier-peasant icons “did not share the passions or ambitions which characterize the traditional *wen* or *wu* gods,” and that “the new ideal did not advocate excelling in either *wen* or *wu*, which requires a certain degree of self-control and control over others.”³⁵ The only commonality between *wen-wu* and these new worker-soldier-peasant ideals was the expectation of a lack of sexual desires and women.³⁶ However, *wen* was not completely lost as Mao himself stated he wanted to be remembered as a teacher, and the view that “being a teacher is a legitimate

³¹ Ibid, 32-33.

³² Jiping Zuo, “Political Religion: The Case of the Cultural Revolution in China,” *Sociological Analysis* 52, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 107, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3710718>.

³³ Louie, *Theorising Chinese*, 50.

³⁴ Louie, *Theorising Chinese*, 48-49.

³⁵ Ibid, 49.

³⁶ Ibid, 49.

and worthy profession” meant that *wen* ideals weren’t lost.³⁷ Instead, scholars began to expand the role of a *junzi* to better fit socialist ideals. *Junzi* was argued to be someone who loved the people, a trait that should be emulated by a socialist society.³⁸ These ideas gained momentum, and at one point, Communist leaders supported the revival of Confucian values and even organized a celebration of the 2440th anniversary of Confucius’ death.³⁹ Throughout the Cultural Revolution, there were mixed emotions about Confucianism. We can see this in the anti-Confucius campaigns and resurgences of interest in Confucianism happening at the same time.⁴⁰ There was propaganda that depicted Confucius as weak and lacking *wu*.⁴¹ With the expectation of participating in manual labor, Confucius’ statement in the *Analects* that explicitly states that *junzi* should not participate in productive labor went against everything Mao wanted for China.⁴² Confucius believed that *wu* included choosing how to use physical strength, and he felt that productive labor was an unworthy use of *wu*.⁴³ Due to the emphasis on manual labor and the expectation that everyone was to participate in manual labor during the Cultural Revolution, it is unsurprising that Confucius, the god of *wen* and who represented old Chinese intellect, was so heavily criticized during Mao’s rule.

In the 1980s, there was a resurgence of *wen* masculinity due to Confucius’ status as the paragon of teachers. Much like there was a crisis of faith in the U.S. at the time, many scholars agree that there was also a crisis of faith in China.⁴⁴ The disillusionment of the Cultural Revolution left a “moral vacuum” that left much to be desired.⁴⁵ However, in the U.S., the moral

³⁷ Ibid, 50

³⁸ Ibid, 50.

³⁹ Ibid, 50.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 50.

⁴¹ Ibid, 51.

⁴² Ibid, 51.

⁴³ Ibid, 51.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 52.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 52.

compass found in religion applied only to women who are typically more religious than men.⁴⁶ In China, it was proposed that Confucian moral education could fill the “moral vacuum” the Cultural Revolution had left.⁴⁷ Eventually, “Confucius as *wen* god was used again to justify the privileged position of scholars and intellectuals as indispensable elements of the social fabric.”⁴⁸ It was argued that science and technology, the key to the four modernizations, could only be provided via education, once again uplifting *wen* ideals.⁴⁹ Despite this, hegemonic masculinity still appeared in Chinese society. Women were often laid-off before men because of the expectation of men being the primary financial provider.⁵⁰ As China privatized its economy, mass unemployment occurred leaving many begging their old employers for jobs. During these mass layoffs, gender and class consciousness conflicted with each other. Yang argues that “class is deeply gendered and that gender provides a way of articulating and naturalizing differences.”⁵¹ Much like Western masculine ideals, Chinese masculine ideals included life-tenured employment so, it was emasculating for men to be laid-off.⁵² Laid-off men would go back to their employers begging for any kind of work and were often given “backyard auxiliary-service work” instead of a frontline production job which was considered more masculine.⁵³ The frontline production jobs used more physical labor and thus aligned with the *wu* characteristics more favored under Mao. Men were essentially asked to “be a man” by enduring the embarrassment of performing women’s work, a term often heard in Western culture.⁵⁴ For some families, the man’s salary was not enough to survive. If this were the case, the man would go and beg for his wife’s

⁴⁶ Francis, “The Psychology,” 83.

⁴⁷ Louie, *Theorising Chinese*, 52.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 52.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 52.

⁵⁰ Jie Yang, “The Crisis of Masculinity: Class, Gender, and Kindly Power in Post-Mao China,” *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 3 (July 14, 2010): 554, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2010.01272.x>.

⁵¹ Ibid, 552.

⁵² Ibid, 553.

⁵³ Ibid, 554.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 554.

reemployment.⁵⁵ The act of begging shows emotion and vulnerability and was emasculating for Chinese men, much like emotion and vulnerability are emasculating for Western men.⁵⁶ However, because the man was begging for his wife's reemployment, he is instead acting as his wife's protector and a family provider which re-emasculated him.⁵⁷ Looking at mass unemployment during the early 2000s, we can see the influence of hegemonic masculinity that was adopted by China during the Republican era.

However, we also see the resurgence of *wen* and Confucianism after Mao's rule. As China industrialized and modernized, Confucius' ideas surrounding morality (*yi*) and profitability (*li*) and their relationship grew in importance.⁵⁸ Despite many scholars believing that Confucius had always put morality above profitability, many businessmen viewed Confucius' morals as supporting production and profit.⁵⁹ In 1989, Kuang Yaming, the director of the Chinese Confucius Foundation, published a paper stating that Confucius did not stress morality above profit, but instead believed in "'the Great Commonwealth,' in which morality and profit were in harmony and in unity."⁶⁰ The need for moral guidance led many to adopt and re-interpret Confucius' *junzi*-hood to one made for a modern, capitalist world. By adapting Confucianism into a "humane leadership style suitable for the twentieth century," businessmen can indulge in numerous business dealings while still being able to feel morally superior.⁶¹ Louie calls these men the new *junzi*, a man who can be both economically successful and morally superior.⁶²

As China had more Western influence, they adopted hegemonic masculinity ideals as a way to appear stronger after losing the Opium Wars and being seen as effeminate by the West.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 555.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 555.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 555.

⁵⁸ Louie, *Theorising Chinese*, 54.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 54.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 55.

⁶¹ Ibid, 56.

⁶² Ibid, 56.

Despite this, many Confucian ideals and ideas persisted through anti-Confucian messages. Imperial Chinese masculinity allowed the flexibility of masculine and feminine because of ideals of balance between *yin* and *yang*, *wen* and *wu*, and even Confucian *junzi*. When the West began to influence China, China lost a lot of the ideals surrounding the balance of masculine and feminine. Hegemonic masculinity ideals were adopted and Mao's emphasis on the worker-soldier-peasant ideal did not fit in *wen* or *wu* ideals. During the post-Mao era, hegemonic masculinity ideals dominated the workplace and how men dealt with layoffs. Today, *junzi* has been transformed into something that better fits modern-day China.

Similar to Western gender studies, much of the research done on Confucianism and gender focuses on women and feminism, and there tends to be a lack of research on men and masculinity. In the wake of the feminist movement, men often feel left behind, and society must know what they're missing and how to support them so we can have the best fathers, husbands, sons, and friends. While Confucius' belief surrounding the inferiority of women leaves much to be desired, and Confucius' ideas surrounding *yin* and *yang*, *wen* and *wu*, and *junzi*, undeniably created a harmful hierarchy of gender and class, they emphasized metaphysical traits of morality, care, and love. Something that Western hegemonic masculinity does not do. The Christian church can often be emasculating to American men due to women being thought of as more religious. There was a crisis of faith in America after the Vietnam War that the church was unable to do anything about. Around the same time, China was also facing a faith crisis due to the disillusioning experiences of the Cultural Revolution.⁶³ In China, the idolization of Confucius and the re-invented version of *junzi*-hood provided a moral compass to men, something the Christian church has not been able to give American men.

⁶³ Ibid, 52.

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