



林思齊東西學術交流研究所  
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Paper Number: 66  
August 2007

**Fear or Fearless:  
Martial Arts Films and Dutch-Chinese Masculinities**

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**Fear or Fearless:  
Martial Arts Films and Dutch-Chinese Masculinities**

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**Abstract**

Starting from Bruce Lee in the 1960s, Chinese martial arts films have been gaining increasing importance in Hollywood. Amidst global fascination and the prevalence of male heroes in martial arts films, it is surprising to note that only a few studies engage the genre with issues of Chinese masculinity, and none by investigating how the audience makes sense or use of what they are seeing. Taking martial arts films as the research site, I want to study how Chinese men negotiate their masculinity in a context where their masculinity is marginal, that is, in a diasporic context. The findings of this research attest to the marginalization and subordination of diasporic Chinese men by the two dominant and interlocking discourses in the West, namely that only certain white male characteristics would be considered masculine, that certain Chinese male characteristics would be considered neutered or even effeminate. The male informants of this study, however, are never entirely marginalized, victimized and oppressed; they are able to construct alternative, different versions of masculinities, by privileging what they can do with their ‘small bodies’, by downplaying the sexual and romantic dimensions of masculinity, and by emphasizing the importance of control and discipline. These Chinese men are garnering creative resources not necessarily by going into ‘indigenous’ sources of historical or literary Chinese culture, as suggested by theorists on Chinese masculinity. Instead, contemporary transnational popular culture, in this case, Chinese martial arts films open up possibilities for them to articulate and construct different masculine ideals.

**Where are the Chinese men?**

Starting from Bruce Lee in the 1960s, Chinese martial arts films have been gaining increasing importance in Hollywood. Apart from a number of Chinese stars (Jackie Chan, Jet Li) reaching Hollywood stardom, American as well as European cinemas have been opening their doors to increasing number of international martial arts blockbusters including *Fearless*,

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank the David C. Lam Institute for East-West Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University, for supporting this research project. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Conference: Etmaal voor de communicatie wetenschappen 2007, Antwerp, 8-9 February. The author also wants to thank the reviewer for the useful suggestions.

*Hero* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Amidst such global fascination and the prevalence of male heroes in martial arts films, it is surprising to note that only a few studies engage the genre with issues of Chinese masculinity, and none by investigating how the audience makes sense or use of what they are seeing. Taking martial arts films as the research site, I want to study how Chinese men negotiate their masculinity in a context where their masculinity is marginal, that is, in a diasporic context. I want to explore how they gather resources from this genre to deal with their everyday struggles with the hegemonic white masculinity of the society they live in. Before I explain in greater details the background to this research question, let me situate this inquiry in the lacuna defined by the broader contours of Chinese gender studies and, particularly, studies on Chinese masculinity.

For a long time following the emergence of feminism as a fundamental organizing principle for social movement and academic knowledge, gender studies had been almost synonymous to women studies. Chinese gender studies showed a similar pattern. As pointed out by Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (2002) as well as Kam Louie (2002), a tendency to focus on women and concepts of femininity has persisted in Chinese gender studies (see, for instance, Chow 1991; Evans 1997; Herfhammer 2007) while men and concepts of masculinity were and still are severely understudied. Both Brownell and Wasserstrom's innovative reader *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities* which devoted half of its contributions to studies on masculinity, and Louie's groundbreaking work *Theorizing Chinese Masculinity* were published as recent as 2002.

This time lapse is remarkable, considering that men became the object of academic gaze in the course of the 1980s, when the term 'new sociology of masculinity' was introduced as a new paradigm to study the hegemonic power relations among men and women (Carrigan, Connell and Lee 1985). By the turn towards the 1990s, western academia witnessed a 'surge of interest in the study of men and masculinity' when 'on both sides of the Atlantic men are starting to respond to the challenges of feminism' (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994: 1). While this surge of interest covered a variety of masculine practices in Europe, America and Africa, men's studies has been largely ignoring Asian masculinities,

whether in Asia itself or among diasporic members in the world (Chan 2001; Louie 2003). The *Journal of Men's Studies*, for instance, published only two articles – one on Asian gay men and their bodies (Drummond 2005), the other on Shanghai men and housework distribution (Da 2004), both situated in Australia – among all the issues circulated during the last five years.<sup>2</sup>

### **Confucius, Guan Yu and the Fragile Scholar**

The past decade saw a limited number of studies responding to this deficiency, resulting in two major trajectories of research on Chinese masculinity. The first trajectory of research investigates Chinese masculinity in the context of China or Chinese culture, invariably by delving into historical records, Chinese literary classics and generally older Chinese texts (Louie 2002; Huang 2006; Song 2004; Yi 2007).<sup>3</sup> In their attempt to mobilize an 'indigenous' approach to understand Chinese manhood, they construct or reconstruct versions of Chinese masculinity which claim their legitimacy and authenticity simultaneously from the 'past' and from its perceived segregation and therefore difference from the West. As summarized in the back cover notes to Yi Zhongtian's Chinese book *China's Men and Women* (2007), 'The difference of Chinese culture from Western culture shows itself in the unique gender relations and history of the Chinese people.'<sup>4</sup> Kam Louie and Louise Edwards frame this notion of difference even more assertively into a question of theoretical urgency: 'we need to conceptualize Chinese masculinities differently from those of the West.' (1994: 135)

The most typical and influential examples of this approach are the two book-length treatises *Theorizing Chinese masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Louie 2002) and *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture* (Song 2004). Generally

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Asian masculinities are not the only underrepresented areas in men's studies. Despite its ambitious title, Tim Edwards' new book *Cultures of Masculinities* (2006) is only concerned with masculinities in English-speaking cultures.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive overview of historical and literary studies on Chinese masculinity, see Huang 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Original text, in Chinese, is translated by the author.

considered the first comprehensive analysis of Chinese masculinity, Louie's book puts forward the *wen-wu* dyad as the fundamental structure of Chinese masculinity. *Wen*, according to Louie's analysis, is the paradigm of literary achievement, cultural skills and all the attributes that belong to the realm of the mind. *Wu*, on the other hand, operates in the realm of the physical, manifesting itself in martial valor and martial skills. The two poles of *wen* and *wu* are ideally in harmony rather than necessarily competing, although historically, Louie argues, *wen* has always been more valued in elitist discourse on Chinese masculinity. After tracing the dyad to Confucius (the Sage, the Teacher, the Businessman, and the icon of *wen*) and to Guan Yu (the God of War, the icon of *wu*), Louie extends his analytic model to more recent cultural representations including working class heroes in post-Mao fiction and internationally popular male Chinese film stars.

Corresponding to Louie's indigenous understanding of Chinese masculinity, Geng Song offers in *The Fragile Scholar* a 'post-colonial reading of Chinese masculinity' (2004: 8-9). As if to affirm *wen*'s primacy over *wu*, as alleged by Louie, Song argues that *caize*, the fragile scholar, was constructed by the literary elite in pre-modern China to privilege their version of masculinity above other competing versions, for instance, the Confucian gentleman (*junzi*). He singles out in Chinese literary history two figures – Qu Yuan, the poet of the *Song of Chu*, and Student Zhang in the *Story of the West Wing* – as archetypes of scholarly masculinity characterized by a delicate body and literary acumen. Song continues to argue that Chinese masculinity, in embracing an effeminate male, distinguishes itself from the dominant Western conception of masculinity which predicates on a rigid gender and sexuality division. In his words, 'I argue that the conceptual binaries of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual, which are central to the Western gender discourses and the signifying system as a whole, were largely absent in pre-modern China.' (Song 2004: 1)

Despite of – and because of – their theoretical ambition to understand Chinese manhood the Chinese way, to break away from hegemonic Western paradigms of masculinity that 'would only prove that Chinese men are "not quite real men"' (Louie 2002: 9), this trajectory of studies remain firmly in the sinocentric tradition, which has been interrogated by

critics questioning who has the authority to claim ‘Chineseness’ (for instance Ang 2001; Chow 2000; Chun 1996; de Kloet 2007), or in this case ‘Chinese masculinity’. In their insistence on the specificities of Chinese masculinity, this line of ‘indigenous’ studies privilege historical and literary sources, which, notwithstanding the empirical insights they yield, reiterate and reify China and traditional Chinese culture as the definitive centre of Chineseness.

At the same time, this trajectory of studies tends to present Chinese masculinity in a manner highly susceptible to problems of essentialization, self-exoticization and homogenization. Both Louie and Song, for instance, seem to assume the *wen-wu* and the *caizi* masculinity can be generally applicable to all Chinese men, while their analyses are primarily grounded in pre-modern sources. Such general applicability is part and parcel of their eagerness to draw a clear and stable dividing line between Chinese and Western understanding of masculinity. One of the ways to achieve this clear and stable division is to delineate Chinese masculinity as a ‘collection of “interior”, self-defining qualities’ (Patten 2003: 192). The question put forward by Kwai-Cheung Lo, primarily to Louie but by extension to other scholars using the indigenous approach, is fundamental. Lo asks: ‘What is the significance of generalizing or systematizing Chinese men at this moment while many poststructuralist-inflected academic studies have been striving to analyze Western culture non-systematically?’ (2006: 497)

### **Hegemonic masculinity and the orientaling gaze**

The second trajectory of studies on Chinese masculinity also engages with hegemonic white masculinity but in a different way. Instead of seeking to construct a different version of Chinese masculinity alongside the Western one, these studies locate Chinese men right in the space of hegemonic Western masculinity, both geographically and culturally. More specifically, they take diasporic Chinese men as the focus of investigation, whose research field is located predominantly in North America and Australia, and to a much lesser extent in Britain. Without contesting, at least not explicitly, the sinocentric tendency in the indigenous

approach of understanding Chinese manhood, these studies are primarily concerned with diasporic Chinese men's struggles with what they are expected to behave as a man in and by the Western cultural context they live in. Researchers are particularly interested in how Chinese men negotiate their masculine identity through two sets of interlocking, dominant discourses.

First, they have to live with certain 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 1995) in a white Western society, which, as Erving Goffman argues, will compel any men other than what he calls 'the unblushing male' to perceive themselves, at least momentarily, as unworthy, incomplete and inferior (Goffman 1963). In Michael S. Kimmel's words, 'within the dominant culture, the masculinity that defines white, middle class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standard for other men, against which other men are measured and, more often than not, found wanting (1994: 124-5).' Second, they have to live with certain orientalizing constructions of Chinese masculinities, which, in both academic and popular discourses, are always neutered or feminized (Chin et al 1975; Cheung 1998; Eng 2001; Fung 1998; Low 2003; Louie 2003; Luke 1997). Quoting Canadian psychologist Philippe Rushton, Richard Fung points out the dominant Western construction of the hypersexed black man and the undersexed Asian man who is 'defined by a striking absence down there' (1998: 171). Allan Luke describes diasporic men in the West as 'something Other, something more feminine in the normative eye of Western sexuality: slender and relatively hairless bodies, differently textured and colored skin and straight hair' (1997: 32).

Most of the studies on diasporic Chinese men choose to understand their negotiation with hegemonic masculinities by investigating their 'lived experience' in a Western society (Chen 1999; Cheng 1999a and b; Chua and Fujiro 1999; Drummonds 2005; Hibbins 2003; Ip 1993; Khoo 2003). Anthony Chen (1999), for instance, interviews Chinese American men and concludes that they achieve their masculinity in the face of negative stereotyping through four main gender strategies: compensation, deflection, denial and repudiation. C. Cheng, for instance, in his two studies published in 1999, investigates the Western stereotyping of Asian



men as asexual nerd and how far it is internalized among Asian men themselves. Turning to Australia, Ray Hibbins (2003) similarly conducts interviews to tap the lived experience of Chinese male migrants and locate different markers of masculinity from Western males. Murray Drummonds adopts a life historical perspective to inquire how Asian gay men struggle 'to fit in' (2005: 299) the gay culture, the Australian heterosexual culture and the Asian masculinized culture.

Other studies on diasporic Chinese men scrutinize the issue through the prism of representation, mostly in recent or contemporary cultural products. Focusing on Western gay pornography featuring Asian actors, Richard Fung (1998) examines how Asian bodies are represented as asexual, denied or incapable of sexual pleasure. In his provocatively titled book *Racial Castration*, David Eng travels through literature, drama and film to explore how the West refuses to see 'at the site of the Asian male body a penis that *is* there to see' (2001: 2). Jachinson Chan (2001) traces the images of Chinese men in American popular culture, from Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee, leading to the false choice imposed onto Asian American men: either they emulate the American notion of masculinity, or they are not a real man. Tseen Khoo (2003) takes diasporic Chinese writings to see how they extend and challenge existing representations of Asian masculinities in Australia and Canada.

### **Martial arts films and possibilities of negotiation**

In this sense, the current study is an extension of the studies on Chinese men living in a diasporic context where their masculinity is being marginalized. It shares their focus on diasporic men's struggle with hegemonic masculinity and likewise chooses to study contemporary cultural productions rather than historical, literary texts confined and defined sinocentrically. Instead of looking at representational issues, however, I am interested in how contemporary cultural products provide diasporic Chinese men with possibilities to negotiate their masculinity in a white cultural context, to articulate and construct alternative versions of masculinity, to deal with their everyday struggles.

In the locality where I am currently based, the Netherlands, I have observed the popularity of a particular transnational popular cultural product among young Chinese men – martial arts films<sup>5</sup> originated from Hong Kong and recently also from mainland China. Apart from fervently watching martial arts films, some of them even join classes to master the Chinese fighting techniques. In 2004, *Fighting Fish*, billed as the first Dutch martial arts film, was released nationally; the film project was initiated, co-produced and starred by a native-born Chinese<sup>6</sup>.

Among studies on martial arts films, some would draw connections, explicitly or implicitly, to inquiries of masculinity (Berry 2006; Lo 2005; Dessor 2005; Ku 2005; Morris 2005; Chan 2005) while fewer would situate (part of) their studies in Chinese diaspora (Chan 2001; Hunt 2003; Ma 2005). Invariably, these studies adopt a text-oriented approach, while audience experiences of martial arts film are yet to be explored. As Laikwan Pang urges, ‘masculinity is bound to be received in multiple ways according to reception contexts and dynamics’ (2005: 6). In adopting a reception approach, this paper underlines the importance of contextuality, agency and therefore flexibility in identification processes, which concern not only the past, but equally the present and future. As Paul Gilroy (1990/1) aptly remarks, for the diasporic subject it is no longer ‘where you’re from’ but ‘where you’re at.’ In Stuart Hall’s words, ‘Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*.’ (1994: 395, italics his) In this infinite war – or, if one likes, play –

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<sup>5</sup> For this investigation, I have chosen to mobilize a somewhat loose and therefore inclusive term ‘martial arts film’ (*wudapiao*). While distinctions could have been made between, for instance, ‘kung fu’ (fighting with fists and legs) and ‘*wuxia*’ (fighting with swords) films, a more generic term should provide the informants more space to articulate what they experience in what they themselves define as a martial arts film.

<sup>6</sup> *Fighting Fish* was directed by Jamel Aattache, who wrote the script together with the project initiator Kim Ho Kim. Kim and Aattache were school mates in Rotterdam and shared common interest in film-making. Before *Fighting Fish*, they already collaborated in several short film projects. While this investigation is primarily concerned with martial arts films and the young Chinese, it is worth pointing out possible connections between the genre and other ethnic youths. The Dutch-born Aattache, for instance, has Algerian background and the other two non-Chinese friends, as observed later in the article, invited to join the focus groups have Moroccan and Surinamese background.

of positions, Hall explains how popular culture serves as an important symbolic toolbox, providing imaginaries with which one can (dis-)identify. Identities are constituted not outside but within representation, hence, cinema serves ‘not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak.’ (Hall 1994: 402) Following this line of thinking, this research takes martial arts films as one of the symbolic reservoirs through which young Dutch-Chinese constitute themselves, and in particular their masculinities.

Inclusion of popular culture and its reception as a site to investigate the experience of Chinese diaspora in the West, I will also argue, is not only useful but necessary. While lamenting Asian American studies’ historical reliance on materially based analyses, David Eng (2001) draws the distinction between the material and symbolic aspects of life. While the two aspects are intricately intertwined, the distinction is relevant in laying bare certain contradictions and tensions in diasporic life. As diasporic Chinese continue to be perceived to function, in material terms, smoothly and unproblematically (such as in areas of education, employment, entrepreneurship), their symbolic position in the white socio-cultural hierarchy remain by and large marked by invisibility and ambivalence. In the case of Chinese men, even if they share similar material characteristics as their Western peers, they are, for instance, seldom similarly active participants of pub, sport and beach cultures, the dominant construction sites of Western versions of masculinity (e.g. Connell 1987; Edgar 1997; Luke 1997) while they may be preoccupied with their own cultural pursuits such as watching martial arts films. Popular culture, the realm of the symbolic, and in the current case martial arts films, should be a prime site to explore how Chinese men live their lives as men in a symbolic order that seems to continue putting their manhood under duress.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In this connection, I also want to point out briefly two important possibilities of inquiry on Chinese masculinity, which I have to leave out given the scope of the current study. First, this paper does not investigate the experience of Chinese men vis-à-vis the Chinese community or other Chinese men; its primary concern stays with their experience in and with Western society. Second, this study does not attempt to locate and include homosexual Chinese men as a separate analytic category, although some of its findings may apply to

### **Interview, focus group, participant observation**

Data for this research was collected with a multi-method design. First, I have conducted 20 face-to-face interviews with Chinese who were mostly born, otherwise grew up, in different parts of the Netherlands. Aged between 18 and 34, most of the informants (14) were recruited from a survey I undertook earlier while the rest (6), all self-proclaimed fans of martial arts films, were recruited through my personal network. One of them was the initiator, co-producer and main actor of *Fighting Fish*. In terms of gender, half of the informants were female, and the male half included the 6 fans. Female informants were included as their perceptions of Chinese men would inevitably impact on how Chinese men see themselves. The in-depth interviews took the form of semi-structured, guided conversation between the researcher and the informants. Dutch and/or Chinese were used depending entirely on the choice of the informants.

Second, the same six martial arts films fans were asked to invite friends and organize groups to view and discuss on four film fragments, one chosen by the fans, three others prepared by the researcher. They include fragments from three martial arts films *Fearless*, *Fighting Fish* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, portraying respectively a Chinese male protagonist fighting white opponents, having a first encounter with a white woman, and teaching a young Chinese pupil. While these three fragments were selected to probe into the Chinese experience of living in a Western world, the self-selected fragment was intended for any themes the informants might find relevant. Inclusion of the focus group methodology is to explore possible themes transpired from the interviews, while particular attention is paid to the social dimensions of the Chinese masculinity construction through martial arts films. Deployment of pre-existing groups, rather than purpose-constructed groups, is believed to be effective in tapping into group life and understanding group meanings, processes and norms as in their everyday group practices. Altogether five group discussions were held, while one

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both homosexual and heterosexual Chinese men. Considering that gay identifications may have different impact on how Chinese men live their lives in a Western context, I would suggest any inquiry on homosexual Chinese men and their experience with hegemonic masculinities deserves a study of its own.

informant declined claiming too busy. It is noteworthy that none of the informants invited white friends to join, while the only two non-Chinese group members, participating in two groups, are with Moroccan and Surinamese background. Furthermore, none of the informants invited female friends to join. All the interviews and group discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim when they were conducted in Dutch, translated into Dutch when conducted in Chinese. The transcripts were subsequently coded and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis program MaxQDA, which is particularly helpful in organizing, evaluating and interpreting qualitative data in a more systematic manner.

Third, I have joined two martial arts classes in two Dutch cities, run respectively by a Dutch man with Italian background and a Chinese man migrated from Nanjing some 20 years ago. Insights gained from this exercise of participant observation are to thicken analyses carried out on data collected by the first and second methods. Although data collection of this research is guided by objectives of triangulation, given the essentially random nature of informant recruitment, group formation and participant observation, any findings from the analyses are to throw light on the everyday life experience of the Chinese diaspora in the Netherlands, without claiming to be representative or conclusive.

### **Body and movement**

As pointed out by researchers in Western masculinity, central variants of such masculinity are centered on pub, sport and beach cultures (e.g. Connell 1987; Edgar 1997; Luke 1997). The Dutch context shares the first two and would include arguably a DIY culture, all of which constitute a cultural context where, similar to other Western societies, physical prowess is being celebrated as the quintessential masculine and a 'real man' should have a body big, strong and muscular enough to consume alcohol, build houses and excel in sports. Dutch drinking venues, sports clubs or DIY shops seldom spot Chinese men. Physical absence, however, does not imply cultural immunity. That Chinese men do not partake in such Dutch male cultures does not mean they do not subscribe to the hegemonic versions of such masculinities. Male informants in this research generally take body as a significant

marker of their experience and representation in the Dutch society, commenting on the smaller, shorter and more slender build of Chinese male bodies in negative terms – either they admit such body builds are inferior or they know they would be considered inferior in the Dutch society. Very often they feel intimidated and ‘susceptible to being bullied’<sup>8</sup>, as Way put it. Some of the male informants admitted bullying incidents; for instance, Justin:

I was really small. I was the smallest of the class. I must admit I am still not really big. It is such an intimidated feeling, right? Because, well, all my classmates were bigger than me. And there was a group of classmates who bullied me, I would say, because I was Chinese. But I have learned to live with it.

In addition to specific bullying incidents, male informants generally recount during their interviews how their bodily experiences and perceptions affect the way they are treated in the Dutch society. Terence recalls playing football with his Dutch classmates when he was young:

We Chinese would very seldom play in the front. Usually we would stand at the back, in a corner. I was simply passing the ball to my fellow players. I was not as big as the others. I didn’t have as much as strength as the others. My condition was not as good as the others. That’s why the Chinese always got the minor role.

And sometimes their smaller bodies would be associated with weaker personalities. The Chinese men I talk to tend to conflate the negative perceptions of their bodies with the stereotypical gaze the Dutch society casts on them, compelling them to feel wanting. Kim Ho, the initiator of the film *Fighting Fish*, also a professional actor, complains how difficult it is for him to get a serious role.

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<sup>8</sup> All the quotations are translated by the author from transcripts in Dutch.

Well they think Chinese are always quiet, they never get angry, they are always friendly and they are always busy with their own things, their own culture and they never venture out of their culture. The image they have is often, yes, very stereotypical, also a bit insulting. You know, the take-away Chinese or people who work in a Chinese grocery store... [In the television drama I am auditioning for] I will play a criminal. That is fun, you know what? At least that is more interesting than playing again someone working in a grocery store or take-away restaurant.

Although relatively free from the burden of the smaller male body, female informants, like their male counterparts, seem to have internalized the hegemonic demands of white masculinity.

Chinese men are small.... That is always the case. My father is incidentally somewhat taller. But if you look around.... Here in the Netherlands all the men are incredibly big, I am used to it... Dutch men are 1.80, 1.85 meters tall. [Lyling]

Like Tom Cruise, Keanu Reeves, they are simply more masculine than a lot of Chinese actors. [Anya]

And the following remark by Cli sounds like a typical articulation by Westerners on the difficulty in recognizing Chinese people: 'I think they [Chinese men] look all the same.' Talking about her image of attractive men, Yuk-lin immediately said 'he must be a bit tall, indeed, well at least 1.80 perhaps.'

Such marginalization is hardly surprising given the context of living in a white-dominated society, where Chinese men are not only physically smaller, but also represented to be less masculine because of their more slender bodies (Cheng 1999a and b; Luke 1997). While being dominated by the physical and perceived superiority of fellow white Dutch men, the male informants of this study, however, seem to be articulating and constructing a

different variant of physical masculinity when they are talking about martial arts films: being agile and swift. In particular, male viewers tend to shift from the body itself to how martial arts heroes use his body. In fact, they would often claim that the muscular, big bodies of Western men actually put them in a disadvantageous position as far as martial arts (films) are concerned. Si-wai, when comparing Bruce Lee with his Western opponents, says: 'Bruce Lee is more slender. Those Westerners, if they are muscular, appear as if they are really fat.' By privileging agility and swiftness, and hence downplaying bigger build and sheer strength, as desirable qualities of martial arts, they are subverting the hierarchy of what a male body should be and do. At the same time, their subversion, that smaller is better, precisely predicated on the (perceived) biases about their bodies – a mechanism not unlike what Viet Thanh Nguyen (2000) locates in his study on more recent Chinese American literature, which seeks to dismantle stereotypes of Chinese people precisely by predicating on the biases about their bodies. The tactic of subversion is therefore at the same time an act of reification. Terence's remarks are typical:

I find [Western action stars] too big to watch. I believe people who are so tall and big are not suitable for martial arts... If they are fighting, they are making very clumsy movements. I think the very fact that they have large body builds makes their movements less beautiful to see.... Those who are smaller are nicer because they are small and move very quickly. It is more beautiful to see if someone is swift.

During focus group discussions on martial arts films, informants and the friends they invited generally employ the same tactic of subversion and subscribe to the superiority of smaller Chinese bodies in terms of agility and swiftness. Those groups which consisted entirely of Chinese members tend to establish quickly their group norms on what a Chinese body can achieve in martial arts and reinforce their norms with further agreement and examples extracted from their viewing experience. They are also eager to use the social occasion to articulate the superiority of Chinese fighting bodies over the Western ones, sometimes to the



extent of ridiculing the latter. For instance, while talking about *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, a group member makes a comment that the male protagonist looks like a man, which sparks off the following conversation:

Chie-yong: I think Chinese men are generally more feminine than Western men. Men in the West are real men. Simply – how do you call that?

Patrick: Tough hairy guests.

(Everybody laughs.)

Chie-yong: Yes, just like the hairy Neanderthal men, let's say. And the women in the West are also often men, you know.

(Everybody laughs.)

[focus group 2]

Such internalization of Chinese men being more feminine underlines the power of hegemonic masculinity as well as of the emascinating construction of Chinese men in a Western context. At the same time, it is remarkable how they are discursively turning this disempowering perception into a ridicule, by pinpointing and twisting hirsuteness, conventionally considered to be a feature of Western men and masculinity, into something inferior and primitive. Furthermore, while Chinese men would be perceived more feminine under Western gaze, their discussion also demonstrates how Chinese men reverses the fortunes, rather obliquely, by masculinizing Western women.

If all-Chinese groups are eager not only to establish their norms but also to reinforce their agreement on the superiority of Chinese male bodies, discussions by groups consisting of non-Chinese members often lead to an interrogation of norms, particularly between Chinese and non-Chinese group members. The following discussion between Chi Lung and Fahid on martial arts and Chinese bodies is exemplary:

Chi Lung: Martial arts are more designed for Chinese. You have to have that kind of bodies. Others, like non-Chinese, can do it and they may reach a very high technical level through hard training. But they don't have the content. That's what the Chinese –

Fahid: What sort of content then?

Chi Lung: Simply what martial arts means. There is a difference between doing the technique and being the technique, let's say.[...]

Fahid: But then it is not about the body, right? That your body can do it better? I can't imagine that a non-Chinese is too stupid to master the content.

Chi Lung: No no, it becomes complicated – just imagine a Chinese does martial arts and a non-Chinese does it. They are both technically good, but the Chinese would do it more beautifully.

Fahid: Ok, but that is not the content.

Chi Lung: If you go further, if you really look at the very very high level.

Andrew: I think it's got to do with the muscles. These other people have simply other kinds of muscles.

[focus group 3]

As in the rest of the discussion, Fahid, a young man with Moroccan background, would often assume a challenging, almost provocative role, responding to what Chi Lung or Andrew would call 'Chinese' with questions and follow-up questions and co-producing a context where Chi Lung and Andrew would assume an explanatory, if not defensive, role. Such a contestation of cultural positions is indicative of how obliged the Chinese may feel to defend or explain themselves in the larger social context.

It is also of interest to note how the two martial arts classes I observed seem to be gathering male pupils who would not have the taller, bigger body build, usually associated with Dutch white men. In the martial arts school run by the Chinese master, there are, in addition to a large number of Chinese pupils, many others with visibly ethnic backgrounds

and smaller builds, definitely not ‘the unblushing male’ in the Dutch society, while the few white men practicing are also far from muscular or macho-looking. Similarly, although the other martial arts school is more oriented to a white clientele, the white male pupils appear what would generally be described as nerdy or skinny. ‘Some macho guys would come here and try out. But after a few lessons, they would disappear,’ Pat, a veteran white martial arts pupil, himself tall but slenderly built, tells me. It seems that the subverted hierarchy of normative masculine body, that smaller is better, that agility and swiftness is far more essential than bigger stature and sheer strength, is forming its boundaries of exclusion and inclusion in the martial arts space.

### **Sex, romance and control**

Besides physical prowess, a closely connected component of dominant Western masculinities is sexual conquest (Hibbins 2003). Under this paradigm, Chinese men living in Western societies would often be perceived as sexless or effeminate (Louie 2003; Fung 1998; Luke 1997). In an article written in Dutch and published in a Dutch-Chinese bilingual newspaper, Patrick Chan invited ‘white women’ readers to think of first, two white men they find very attractive, second, two dark-skinned men they find very attractive, and finally two very attractive Chinese. ‘The answer to the last question is very difficult, isn’t it?’ asked Chan rhetorically (2006).<sup>9</sup> While none of the female informants offer any remarks on the sexual and romantic aspects of Chinese men, one could assume either they do not associate Chinese men with sexual or romantic activities, or they do not consider them significant markers of Chinese masculinities. Rather tellingly, Sueh Ying responded to the subplot of *Fighting Fish*, which involves a romantic affair between a Chinese man and a blonde Dutch woman, with the following observation: ‘Usually it’s the other way round, that is Chinese girls with Dutch boy friends.’ Among male informants, particularly those who have watched *Fighting Fish*, there are clear articulations that underline the marginalization of Chinese men in terms of erotic and romantic desirability in the Western context. For instance, Alex:

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<sup>9</sup> Original text, in Dutch, is translated by the author.

[*Fighting Fish*] is interesting because it shows something you don't expect, right? A Chinese man and a blonde woman getting involved. You don't see that in any other films, right? You often see a white guy gets, eh, an Asian woman, but not the other way round.

Si-wai is equally surprised but less enthusiastic:

In that film there is a romance between a Chinese man and a Dutch woman. I think the audience won't believe the two fit each other. Their taste is somewhat more Western.

When imagining the possibility of a Dutch television featuring a Chinese man, Terence shares the same doubt over Chinese men's desirability in the Dutch society:

I don't think they would do that. I don't think the image is right. A group of Western girls will never gather around a Chinese man. That is impossible.

According to Kim Ho, the scriptwriter of *Fighting Fish*, the inclusion of a romantic subplot between a Chinese man and a Dutch woman was deliberate. His explanation, however, puts the burden more on Chinese than on Dutch culture:

Well, when I was growing up, you know, in those days this kind of thing, let's say, was less accepted in the Chinese culture. It was some time ago, though. I know it's more accepted now. But I grew up in the time when it was less accepted. I found it interesting for the story.

Despite Kim Ho's intentions, this particular inter-racial romance remains highly contrived, unrealistic, if not downright ridiculous in the eyes of most of the informants. In fact, while

screening the fragment of the first encounter between the male and female protagonists, all the focus groups break up in laughter. The subsequent discussions generally offer similar disbelief as voiced by the individual informants. Furthermore, driven by the group dynamic, informants of the all-Chinese groups tend to become increasingly cynical and harsh regarding the romantic subplot, as if they were trying to outdo one another in terms of criticism. All the discussions invoke the bodily aspect to explain for the failure of the romance to convince.

David: No no.... Chantal Jansen [the female protagonist] looks like a girl who would fall for smart guys with lots of muscles.

Justin: Someone like her elder brother [in the film].

David: Yes, she looks like that, she looks like she wants to have that kind of boy friend. And not someone who looks just a bit tough and also small... Yeah, in the film she looks like: I am not looking for such boys, I am looking for someone who is muscular, taller than me.

Justin: Two heads taller.

David: Well, not two heads, but just like her brother, you know. Someone like that. She has that kind of look. You can see from her fashion style. She really doesn't look like she would go for someone who is a bit Asian. You can see from her fashion style what kind of people she would go for.

Max: Perhaps because she is a lot bigger.

[focus group 5]

As mentioned earlier, the groups with non-Chinese members tend to have more contestation of views, which would compel the Chinese informants to explain, defend and articulate their experience of manhood in the Dutch society more explicitly. In any case, it is evident that the Chinese men here generally reiterate their lack of desirability in the host society. For instance, focus group 3 discusses the romantic subplot of *Fighting Fish* this way:

Chi Lung: I have the feeling that Chinese men wouldn't date a Dutch woman that easily. I think most Chinese men think they are not good enough. They regard themselves somewhat inferior to a Dutch man. In general, that is.

Fahid: Is it really true?

Chi Lung: Yes, I think so. They still feel like a foreigner, not Dutch enough. Perhaps not so conscious, but still they wouldn't, I think, go for a Dutch woman that quickly.

Fahid: So what he does is actually not –

Chi Lung: Yes, I think so.

Andrew: I think the only reason why that girl likes him is that he has saved her [in the film], not because he looks good. I have such a feeling that [I don't attract Dutch women] not because I look bad, but because I am Chinese. Dutch people, not necessarily white people – Dutch people are not interested in Chinese. When I was in France, I noticed the difference. My appeal was much better there. The barrier was smaller.

Fahid: I think it depends on both sides... There are enough Dutch people who go out with Moroccans and enough Dutch people who go out with Chinese. So, to me, it really depends on both sides.

Andrew: Look, blacks and Moroccans, they are still better than Chinese. Chinese have less masculinity. And these women desire masculinity.

If the inter-racial romance in *Fighting Fish* foregrounds the Chinese men's experience of being (perceived as) less a man and less desirable, martial arts films provide them with raw materials to negotiate with the hegemonic ideals and subvert the hierarchy to their empowerment. Referring to martial arts films, male informants of this study tend to admire the hero for acts that are not only non-sexual or non-romantic, but possibly require the hero to be(come) non-sexual and non-romantic. Some of the qualities cited are fighting for one's brothers and country. Above all, the most celebrated quality, however, is: he is in control. Andrew's observation is telling:

In the West, a hero can do anything he wants. He can simply kill people. Eastern films are mostly not like that. Bruce Lee, Jet Li and Jackie Chan, they never really kiss a girl or have sex in their films.... In those Western films, you see Jean Claude van Damme, and he has sex with woman in every film. That is not allowed in Eastern martial arts.

Similarly, focus groups, whether all-Chinese or not, agree favorably on the element of control in martial arts heroes. Group 5's discussion on a fragment of *Fearless* is illustrative:

David: What I want to say is that fragment shows us that Chinese martial arts are not only with hands, but also with weapons. It's very broad.

Justin: Yes, you must master everything before you become a master.... Weapons, feet and more.

Max: You see a lot here. You see principles. You must make use of your weaknesses. And that's why I find the director very good. In such a scene, I see his spear and I see that his spear is longer than mine, how am I supposed to beat him?

Justin: In the end it doesn't really matter any more.

Max: Yes, so first he stands closer and then pulls his spear. And he's doing the same with the other opponents.

Justin: The entire fight is under his control. With all parties.

David: And he is not making only bodily movements, but also mental. He has to think what is the best approach.

Max: He has his emotions under his control, his opponents not.

### **Hardworking, perseverance, and restraint**

Michael Kimmel puts forward the hegemonic definition of manhood as 'a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power' (1996). The male informants of this study, however, generally choose to compliment the martial arts heroes precisely for not using the

power they are supposed to possess. Notions of control and discipline appear to be significant markers of what a Chinese man is or should be. Instead of indulging with himself, body or mind, he should pride himself in hardworking, perseverance and restraint. Besides refraining themselves from killing impulses, the informants of this research, both male and female, invariably refer to an important control martial arts heroes have over their bodies, namely they work hard to achieve their level of fighting techniques. Thomas, for instance, explains in a typical manner why he finds the fighting scenes in Chinese martial arts films so special:

The way of fighting is very refreshing. The filming is very difficult and for every fighting scene they have to create something new... [the fighting scenes] are very intensive, very realistic and they do their best to make it good.... Of course I find [the male characters] very cool. They offer everything to make it good. Actors in Europe won't easily do something like that.

Yan:

[The Western action heroes] always have a gun. They always use weapons in fighting scenes. That is the difference. When the bullets are finished, then they will use their hands.

Alex:

Jackie Chan has developed his own style because of the stunts he does. Isn't that incredible? He has broken all the bones in his body to be able to do certain stunts. I find that very interesting.



This notion of working hard over one's body is often conflated with the notion of authenticity, namely the Chinese martial arts stars have learned their fighting skills and do their own stunts. For instance, a female informant Cli says:

[Jet Li] always makes very beautiful fighting scenes because he knows that he can do it. He is not using wires or whatever. He does everything real.

The meaning they attach to the fighting men's control and discipline of their body and bodily impulses sometimes crosses over to their own practices, by learning martial arts themselves. Among the female informants, half of them proclaim to have training experiences, while all but one of the male informants have been pupils of martial arts at least at some point of their lives. Kim Ho, like most other informants, alluding to a wish to be able to do the same, started learning martial arts after watching many films:

So they can do all these different things in the air and you think 'Wow!', you know, and you think 'I also want to do that!' I think that's how it started.

Very often, the male informants would point to the hard work, the perseverance it requires during the training. Terence:

I didn't continue training for too long. Perhaps I didn't have much perseverance... When I was taking my lessons, it was obviously much more difficult than I thought. We had to repeat every movement, time after the other... Maybe I didn't have the necessary drive.

During one of the martial arts classes I attended, the Dutch-Italian master would gather his pupils around him to give them a short lecture on 'concentration' and 'hard work'. 'Imagine how easily one can spend five to six hours a day in front of a computer. If you spend the

same amount of time on practicing martial arts, you would soon become a master yourself,' he said. In the same vein, the other martial arts class devoted half of its two hours on practicing basic movements. A Chinese pupil, also a member of the Dutch national martial arts team, told me specifically that it took an American professor one full year to command those movements.

In addition to the need to work hard, some of the male informants, particularly those who have been training for some length of time, also stress the importance of being restrained. Andrew summarizes the wisdom of martial arts in one sentence: 'I fight until I have learned how I should fight.'

Their admiration of hard work, perseverance and restraint is occasionally attributed to their Chinese background ('something Chinese', 'we are always hardworking'), similar to the Chinese men in Hibbins' Australian study (2003) who also explain the importance they attach to hard work and education in terms of Chineseness. However, some of the informants would also frame it with more fashionable terminology in contemporary Western popular culture: earning 'respect'. In short, when recounting their experience with martial arts heroes and training, the male informants of this study tend to agree that the ability to gain control over one's body and bodily impulses is a desirable quality of being a man. Inadvertently, they are, if only momentarily, questioning the bigger, taller Western male bodies which are considered to be more capable in fulfilling certain bodily impulses, such as drinking and sex. More importantly, they are constructing a set of masculine ideals quite distinct from what discourses of hegemonic masculinity would privilege, namely a celebration of sheer bodily strength and the expression of bodily impulses.

### **Who are the Chinese men?**

In their excellent introduction to the studies on (Chinese) femininities and (Chinese) masculinities, Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom notes the importance of research that show 'how men can also be marginalized, victimized, and oppressed by hierarchical gender systems that legitimate power only in certain categories of men' (2002: 10). The

findings of this research attest to the marginalization and subordination of diasporic Chinese men by the two dominant and interlocking discourses in the West, namely that only certain white male characteristics would be considered masculine, that certain Chinese male characteristics would be considered neutered or even effeminate. On the one hand, the experience recuperated in this study generally agrees with the experience of other Chinese men negotiating with hegemonic masculinities in other Western societies (for instance, Cheng 1999a and b; Chen 1999; Fung 1999; Hibbins 2003). On the other hand, the male informants of this study are never entirely marginalized, victimized and oppressed; they are able to construct alternative, different versions of masculinities, by privileging what they can do with their 'small bodies', by downplaying the sexual and romantic dimensions of masculinity, and by emphasizing the importance of control and discipline. By and large, they are not confined by the false choice imposed on them by hegemonic masculinity: either they try to attain the dominant white versions of masculinity or accept the fact that they are not really men (Jachinson Chan 2001). Rather, these Chinese men demonstrate a complex process whereby their bodies, or the perception of which, are constituted by dominant discourses and yet provide the very markers to distinguish their own versions of masculinity.

Indeed, the study testifies to the Dutch-Chinese men's resistance to modeling their manhood after the dominant versions. However, they are garnering creative resources not necessarily by going into 'indigenous' sources of historical or literary Chinese culture, as suggested by theorists on Chinese masculinity such as Louie Kam or Song Geng. Instead, contemporary transnational popular culture, in this case, Chinese martial arts films open up possibilities for them to articulate and construct different masculine ideals, which predicate and contest on the bodily, quite apart from the *wen-wu* dyad or the *caizi* paradigm. I would also like to take it further by arguing that the experience of these diasporic men is not only illustrative of Chinese men's experience in the West, but also indispensable in understanding Chinese masculinity at least in two ways.

First of all, by including the diasporic constructions of masculinity, our understanding of Chinese masculinity will be more challenged, destabilized and disengaged

from the sinocentric shackles that define what Chinese masculinity is, or at least where it should be studied. In other words, the experience of diasporic Chinese has the potentials to trouble any monolithic conceptualization of Chinese masculinity, to multiply it into Chinese masculinities, to make any claim of ‘a true Chinese man’ more problematic. If one of the reminders from current theories on masculinity is to be sensitive to structures that may privilege certain categories of men, theorization that conflates Chinese masculinity with ‘indigenous’ sources is to privilege Chinese men in the cultural centre over Chinese men on the cultural margins, or, in other words, to privilege certain conceptualization of Chinese masculinity into another form of hegemonic masculinity among the Chinese themselves.

Secondly, in this globalizing time where Chinese in China itself are exposed to increasing flow of Western cultural products, Chinese men there are subjected increasingly to struggles with Western hegemonic masculinity, not unlike those experienced by fellow Chinese in diaspora. Joining current debates on the so-called ‘crisis of Chinese men’ in Mainland Chinese intellectual circles, Yi urges for the construction of ‘a real man “with Chinese characteristics”’ to counter popular worship of ‘foreign stars’ (2007: 38), hinting therefore at confrontation with hegemonic masculinity propagated by global popular culture. In this sense, the diasporic experience of manhood is not only challenging sinocentric theorizations of Chinese masculinity; it may well be more central to our understanding of how Chinese men in China feel about themselves as a man. The diasporic men’s negotiation about their body perceived too small, their desirability being questioned, their manhood under duress, and their use of popular culture to subvert the hegemonic masculine ideals and the orientaling gaze, as transpired in this study, may be part and parcel of the everyday experience of many Chinese men not living physically in the West. I would therefore urge for more studies that would take popular culture and its reception as prime site to understand Chinese men and their masculinity, whether in China itself or elsewhere. While historical and literary texts are valuable sources to configure a possible historical and cultural context, popular culture should unpack, to repeat Stuart Hall’s words, the ‘symbolic toolbox’ and yield insights to Chinese men’s experience of themselves in the contemporary, globalizing

world. To summarize, the diasporic narrative is to contest not only what the ‘masculinity’ is about in theories of Chinese masculinity, but also the epithet ‘Chinese’ which tends to be defined geographically by the mainland and culturally by historical, literary texts in current theorizations.

Before concluding, it must be pointed out that amidst all the negotiation and construction of alternative masculinities, there are also articulations among the informants that their versions may in turn become hegemonic themselves. A number of informants, both male and female, have expressed their anxiety that Chinese men will always be seen as ‘doing martial arts’, ‘hard working’ and ‘restrained’, some of the markers that precisely help them usurp the social order privileging white males. In that sense, it is important to conclude this paper with two inter-connected remarks. First, the experience drawn from individual informants is to shed light on their collective identity as a Chinese man living in the Dutch context and should never become a homogenizing, blanket understanding of all diasporic Chinese men. Second, as urged by Simon Patten, it is imperative to view Chinese masculinities indeed ‘as a set of relationships... rather than as a collection of “interior”, self-defining equalities’ (2003: 192).

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