

# 3

## CUTE IS THE NEW MANLY: PERFORMANCE OF CHINESE MASCULINITIES

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Abandon any negative desire and don't give any excuse to myself. Just do it.

What I disagree is a majority of words of overgeneralization in the extreme.

I'd love to make friends from a diversity of positions, which can broaden [sic] my horizon.

What's more, please help me for improving my English or any other problems from me, which is my pleasure.

This is a word-for-word quote from Victor's profile on Momo, which he wrote in English. The written profile appears to be sincere. It shows that Victor spent considerable time crafting it. It is not the longest I have ever seen on Momo, but it is definitely longer than most. More important, it was written in English, suggesting that Victor is *wenren* 文人 (an educated man). I asked Victor, "Your written profile is pretty long compared to others. Why did you do that?" He replied, "If I have to play, I have to play well. Some guys just write somethings very insincere. They meet [women] in person only for sex." I would not describe Victor as a playboy, but being thirty years old, good-looking, articulate, and currently in a dating relationship, he was by no means an innocent dating app user. He was not embarrassed at all to admit that he viewed Momo primarily as a hookup tool. Recalling his initial opinion of Momo before he installed it onto his phone, he said:

Momo was launched by positioning itself as *yuepao shenqi*. . . . Its promotional slogans were something about *yuepao shenqi*, “hot girls,” “quick and easy.” At that time, a flock of people said they’d like to try using the app. I did not know why women would use it, but I thought it may work, so I gave it a try.

In this quote, Victor interpreted Momo as a hookup tool. He also differentiated himself from women, who he suggested might not be excited by the promise of *yuepao shenqi* 约炮神器 (a magical tool for hookups; see chapter 1 for the term’s etymology). Having used Momo for more than three years, he developed a methodology for soliciting sex from women on dating apps:

After we have a couple of casual chats, when the moment is right, when we are acquainted with each other, then I can try to test the water. I would say, “Let me tell you a joke” or “Yesterday, I heard a joke.” A joke that is related to sex but not too vulgar. . . . Then you can see how the girl responds to sex-related topics.<sup>1</sup>

These three aspects of using dating apps—having a particular kind of self-presentation, holding a certain interpretation of dating apps, and devising an idiosyncratic belief and strategy for interacting with women—are not unique to Victor. In the previous chapter, I analyze the accounts given by straight female dating app users, illustrating half of the heterosexual dating app culture. In this chapter, I complete the picture by focusing on the experiences of straight male users. My analysis is founded on a Butlerian understanding of gender. Judith Butler (1999) argues that gender is not an innate attribute. Gender is “*a corporeal style, an ‘act’ . . . which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning*” (p. 177, emphasis in original). That is, there is nothing fixed or predetermined about one’s gender: what makes one a “man” is the repetitive citation of a set of acts that are culturally associated with masculinities—what Douglas Schrock and Michael Schwalbe (2009) refer to as “manhood acts.” There are no “men” if manhood acts are not carried out.

Ben Light (2013) argues that digitally networked media have reconfigured the production and reproduction of masculinities through digital affordances such as replicability, anonymity, and persistence. In this chapter, I explore how my straight male informants perform their

masculinities through dating apps. Cultures from different times and places hold a different ideal of masculinities. Acts that are deemed masculine in some cultural contexts, contributing to the performance of masculinity, may not always produce the same effect in another culture. To address this need for cultural specificity, I introduce an indigenous Chinese concept of masculinities—the *wen-wu* 文武 (literary-military) dyad (Louie, 2002). With this literature as the backdrop, I tell the stories of my straight male informants. In addition to their interpretations of dating apps, I examine their self-presentations on dating apps and their interactions with women. I argue that my informants' gender performances reproduce existing gender inequalities and are complicit in maintaining them.

## WESTERN MASCULINITY, CHINESE MASCULINITIES

Raewyn Connell's "hegemonic masculinity" (1987), an influential concept in the sociology of gender, describes the idealized forms of masculine behavior and appearance relative to the behavior and appearance of "women and subordinated masculinities" (p. 61). According to Connell, subordinated masculinities include gay, working-class, disabled, and Asian American. The most significant feature of hegemonic masculinity is heterosexuality. Behavioral manifestations of hegemonic masculinity have included positive practices, such as working hard and being a good father, and "toxic" conduct, such as physical violence against women and homophobia (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Psychologists have also been interested in the consequences of men endorsing male role norms, a concept closely related to masculinity ideology. One of the most updated typologies of these male norms includes avoidance of femininity, negativity toward sexual minorities, importance of sex, self-reliance, toughness, dominance, and restrictive emotionality (Levant, Hall, & Rankin, 2013).

The concept of "hegemonic masculinity," however, has been criticized.<sup>2</sup> The critique most relevant to my analysis is that the conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity is based on a Western ideal of masculinity. Connell later recognizes this limitation and suggests that attention be paid to the international geography of masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt,

2005).<sup>3</sup> In analyzing the performance of masculinity on dating apps in China, we must consider how the performative acts carried out locally through these apps reflect the regional cultural ideal of Chinese masculinities and generate dialogue through the global circulation of masculine images.

What does it mean to be masculine in the Chinese context? A common way of conceiving Chinese masculinity and femininity is to resort to the *yin-yang* 阴阳 dialectic, symbolizing the two opposite yet interdependent forces of nature contemplated in Daoism. However, building on both ancient texts and contemporary popular culture, Kam Louie (2002) proposes the *wen-wu* dyad to better understand Chinese masculinities. *Wen* refers to cultural attainment; *wu* represents physical prowess. He maintains that the *yin-yang* dialectic is less suited to masculinities because both *yin* and *yang* can be applied to men and women; *wen* and *wu* are more appropriate because they are indigenous concepts that exclusively apply to men in the Chinese culture. The archetypal figure of *wen* masculinity is Confucius, whereas *wu* masculinity is exemplified by a famous general from the late Eastern Han dynasty named Guan Yu. Louie elaborates:

*Wen* is generally understood to refer to those genteel, refined qualities that were associated with literary and artistic pursuits of the classical scholars. . . . *Wu* is . . . a concept which embodies the power of military strength but also the wisdom to know when and when not to deploy it. (p. 14)

*Wen* and *wu* are the qualities a Chinese man wants to have. However, they are anything but equal. In many Chinese historical periods, *wen* was considered superior to *wu*. In a sense, *wen* can be considered a “more elite masculine form” than *wu* (p. 18). Further, sexual dominance over women, often associated with the image of muscular men in the West, is a property of *wen* masculinity, not *wu* masculinity. Historically, it was considered socially acceptable for a *wenren*, a man with *wen* qualities, to seek out women and reject them if they were inconvenient. A *wu* hero, on the other hand, “must contain his sexual and romantic desires” (p. 19).

Cultural ideals evolve, and so do Chinese masculinities. China’s economic reform since the 1980s has reshaped the *wen* ideal. Some management theorists have been eager to incorporate the teachings of Confucius into business practices. As Louie (2015) notes, this gradual evolution has

rendered business something that a *wenren* can legitimately pursue. As a result, *wen* has been reconfigured to include economic success in addition to cultural attainment. Regardless of whether masculinity is *wen* or *wu*, it must be earned. Derek Hird (2016) investigates the interplay between masculinity and class. His main informants, white-collar Chinese men living in Beijing, framed and reinforced their gendered and class privileges through the language of freedom, choice, and equality. The pursuit of financial success as a performance of masculinity is also observed by Fengshu Liu (2019) among secondary school boys. These boys perceived financial success to be the prerequisite of the “three goods”—a good life, a good person, and most important, a good man.

Economic success, however, is not always attainable. This has been particularly true for rural-to-urban migrant men. Susanne Yuk-Ping Choi and Yinni Peng (2016) coined the term “respectable manhood” to describe the way Chinese men who negotiated the meaning of manhood when moving from rural villages to cities for work. Respectable manhood, they write, “resists the colonization of private life by money, and views money as being too often a source of evil and family ruin” (p. 118). Due to their low financial status and skills, these men rejected the definition of manhood as economic success or professionalism. Instead, they emphasized their contributions to domestic chores and childcare.

From children to adults, we can see the sweeping influence of financialization on *wen* masculinity in China. *Wen* masculinity evolved into a concept similar to what Raewyn Connell and Julian Wood (2005) call “transnational business masculinity.” However, there is a fundamental difference between the two. In exploring transnational business masculinity among Australian managers, Connell and Wood point out that self-doubt and insecurity engendered by the global economy had brought more challenges to managers performing their masculinity. In contrast, the financialization of *wen* masculinity in China suggests that today there is another way to achieve *wen* masculinity apart from being a genteel *wenren*. If the former is narrowing the potential to perform masculinity, the latter arguably opens up more potential.

This indigenous understanding of masculinity in the Chinese context—the idea of *wen-wu* masculinities—allows us to interpret the gender performance of Chinese men more accurately. For example, the

mastery of music and poetry that may not be commonly regarded as masculine in the West is indicative of *wen* masculinity. Keeping this in mind is important because some of the men's gender performance on dating apps, which I reveal next, may not appear to be masculine according to Western hegemonic masculinity.

## DATING APPS AS THE STAGE FOR MASCULINITY

Researchers of media studies, cultural studies, and public health have examined different phases in the use of dating apps. Colin Fitzpatrick and Jeremy Birnholtz (2018) identify three phases of interaction in the use of Grindr—profile creating and viewing, chatting online, and meeting in person. The first phase is analytically distinct from the second and third phases because it does not involve interactions with a person. The second and third phases differ only in terms of where the interactions take place. My analysis of the narratives given by my straight male dating app users suggests a pre-interactive phase—how men interpret dating apps. Users' interpretations indeed influence how they create their profiles and how they interact with others on the apps. Writing this new phase into my analysis, I categorize my informants' performance of masculinity according to the following phases—interpretation, self-presentation, and interaction.

## INTERPRETING DATING APPS: SEX, LOVE, AND WORK

In the previous chapter, I show that my straight female informants had four ways to interpret dating apps—as a laboratory for sexual experiments, a springboard to romance and marriage, a third place between home and the workplace, and a gateway to new worlds. What sort of interpretations did my straight male informants have of dating apps? Three dominant interpretations emerged. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive: a single user can hold all of them. First, similar to their female counterparts, male informants used dating apps such as Momo and Tantan to seek casual sex. However, there was a significant difference in how they interpreted “seeking sex.” For my female informants, seeking sex on dating apps allowed them to develop their sexual agency and their thoughts

on love and sex. My male informants, however, often framed sex seeking on dating apps as “physiological”:

The reason I downloaded [Tantan] was to hook up. I just finished high school and was very bored. I was stuck at home, got nothing much to do, so I downloaded it. . . . I do not know about others, but for my current situation, it is the kind of physiological dependence. Everybody has this thought, at least for a man. He uses the app because of his need.

These are the words of Xiaoli, age nineteen, a college student. His use of phrases such as “physiological dependence” and “everybody has this thought” not only legitimates his own use of Tantan for hookups by linking his behavior to a biological mechanism and social norm but also is reminiscent of Abraham Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs. Young men at his age regard hookups as a fulfillment of their physiological need—the lowest level on the hierarchy—whereas my female informants viewed hookups as a journey of self-actualization—a need at the highest level. Victor, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, compared sex with fast food:

If I am at home, I can only eat home-made food. But if I dine out, I can eat anything. I don’t mind there is a new *cha chaan teng* or coffee shop.<sup>4</sup> If I like it, I will dine there. It’s like a shopping mall. I am holding a shopping mall in my phone.

Victor’s narrative analogizes hookups with the fast-food culture that is grounded in convenience and choice. This is a sharp contrast to the deeply personal reflections on hookup experiences discussed by my female informants.

Another difference in the way my straight male and female informants interpreted dating apps was how they viewed the search for a romantic partner or a spouse. My single female informants, such as Jessica and Nancy who were in their late twenties, were worried that they would be called *shengnü* 剩女 (leftover women). To them, dating apps were a springboard to eliminating this potential stigma. For my male informants of a similar age, their use of dating apps for romance did not take such a serious tone. For example, Jiazhi was twenty-eight years old when we met. He had received his undergraduate degree in Japan and worked as an office executive at a Japanese company in Guangzhou. He was single and planned to marry at around the age of thirty-five. He logged onto Tantan

several times a day, but he said, “It is better to get married after the career, social experiences, and personal relationships are more mature.” Dylan, age twenty-nine, an electronic developer and entrepreneur, although sensing some pressure from his family to get married, was capable of ignoring it. He said:

If I do not have a career, I have no intention of dating. (*Researcher: Is there any pressure from your family?*) I should say that there is pressure, but I am not stressed because I am relatively strong. Not only am I the only one who has gone to a college in my family; I am the only one who has done so in my entire extended family. . . . It has almost one hundred people and I am the only one who finished the college. So I often dominate the conversation.

Jiazhi’s prioritization of his career and Dylan’s undergraduate degree gave them the leverage to eschew the pressure from their families to marry, even though both were approaching thirty. This suggests an unpleasant irony: for a woman, a career and a college degree are liabilities, placing her at the risk of being *shengnü*. It is little wonder that my straight female informants viewed dating apps as more important to their romantic lives.

The third difference between my straight male and female informants was the novel finding among my male informants that they associated dating apps with business. Dylan, whom I just introduced, for example, came to Guangzhou at the beginning of 2016 to launch a business. He said he wanted to meet business partners on Momo and Tantan. When I asked him if he connected with men on these apps, he responded that he mainly connected with women: “I look at their profiles, see if they run their own businesses or are in the process of starting up businesses. I add those who show a sense of entrepreneurialism, talk to them, learn from them.” Thus, Dylan framed his reaching out to women on dating apps as business-related. He eventually found a female business partner on Tantan to sell red wine with.

Clement, age twenty-eight, shared with me another business-related use of dating apps that I was surprised by. He had gotten to know a couple of female sex workers through these apps. They sometimes acted as his “cover” during “corporate entertainment” that included nightclubs and prostitution.<sup>5</sup> The following was his elaboration:



You can only get to know girls in this profession through apps. . . . During my last project as a financial consultant, my clients arranged a nightclub event. Sex services are usually paid for in advance by clients. If I have to pick a woman, I prefer someone I am familiar with instead of a random woman from the club. . . . When she [one of his female sex worker connections] was there, the client thought I had a regular playmate so did not assign me a random woman.

It is highly doubtful that Clement was seeking this sort of arrangement when he began using dating apps. As an interview setting can be a scenario in which male informants seek to perform their masculinity, Clement's narrative could have been a performance of masculinity for me as a researcher (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2003; see appendix for a more detailed reflection). However, out of the potentially unlimited ways of framing his own experience, he chose to frame his use of apps as an occupational convenience. This suggests that "business" occupied a significant position in his dating app use.

These interpretations of dating apps as related to business illustrate the interpretive flexibility of technology users (Pinch & Bijker, 1987). When Momo was launched in 2011, its marketing materials highlighted its use for developing sexual relationships with strangers (T. Liu, 2016; as Victor described). Although Momo's cofounder Tang Yan made a public statement in 2014 where he acknowledged that some Momo users used the app for business (Y. Tang, 2014), the app's design has never catered to business users. Tantan has largely followed the interface of Tinder. No official claims have ever been made that it was designed for business. So using Momo and Tantan for business demonstrates users' agency.

## CREATING PROFILES: GENTLE, INNOCENT, AND FINANCIALLY SUCCESSFUL

Dating apps afford visibility. When strangers meet on dating apps, their initial impressions are built entirely on their profiles (Ward, 2017). Shaka McGlotten (2013) refers to the crafting of a profile and the effort going into making the best photograph—"good grooming practices, trips to the gym, and carefully selected and rehearsed readymade examples of who you 'really' are" (p. 128)—as image labor. Yet Chris Haywood's (2018) recent research on young British men's use of Tinder found that these

young men often denied that they spent effort on their photographs. Haywood calls this “effortless achievement”—a rhetorical tactic the young men used to protect themselves from potential failure. Using this tactic, the young men explained their failure to attract women on Tinder by their poor choice of photographs, not their lack of ability to attract women. “The threat to their masculinity is,” he summarizes, “deflected through an effortless achievement” (p. 152).

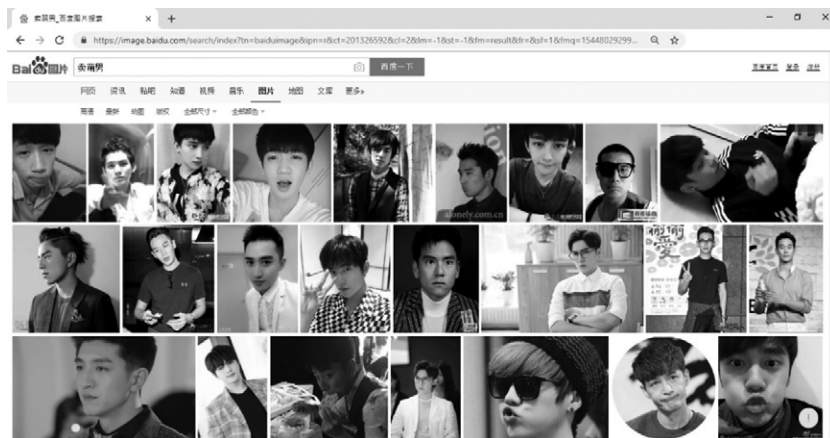
I did not hear the rhetoric of “effortless achievement” from my male informants. Instead, most of them freely told me about their image labor and the ways they picked photographs they believed would impress female dating app users. Photographs convey one’s “sexual capital,” which Adam Green (2014) defines as “the degree of power an individual . . . holds within a sexual field on the basis of collective assessments of attractiveness and sex appeal” (p. 48). Spaces such as bars, fitness facilities, public bathrooms, and dating apps have unique configurations of members and thus constitute different sexual fields. Via members’ ratings of each other and via sexual socialization, a standard of desirability gradually emerges within a sexual field. Individuals possess what Green describes as “currencies of sexual capital,” and these currencies are evaluated against the standard of desirability in a given sexual field.

What kinds of photographs did my informants use to enhance their sexual capital on dating apps? Performing Western hegemonic masculinity would require demonstrations of bodily strength through displaying postworkout images or images of muscular bodies (Hakim, 2018; Miller, 2015a). None of my straight male informants did this. Instead, three alternative types of profile photographs were common among my informants.

The first type was images of animals. My male informants said that some women found their profiles more attractive based on a shared love of animals. For example, Eric, age thirty-one, expected women to perceive his keeping pets as an indicator of his gentleness. Similarly, Clement displayed an image of his cat as his main photograph, with his own photographs visible only after clicking to access his profile. He explained, “It is strategic. Pets may help to attract women.” John, age thirty-six, never used his own photographs on Tantan. Instead, he displayed a cartoon drawing of several cats. The use of animal photographs should not

be seen as an isolated incident. In Western popular culture, the photographic subgenre of “guys and animals” emerged in 2010. On Instagram, one can search for #tinderguyswithcuteanimals or #hotguysandbabyanimals. The 2019 Australian Firefighters Calendar, featuring typically muscular firefighters and adorable animals, has also captured attention from the worldwide tabloid news media and social media.

Closely related to these heartwarming photographs is a second type of photograph that my informants called *maimengzhao* 卖萌照. *Zhao* is a photograph. In the Chinese digital context, *maimeng* (selling sprouts) means “acting cute.” The people in the photographs position themselves to hint at their innocence, for example, by doing a V-sign or touching their cheek with their hand. Such photographs are usually brightened, with a smoothing effect applied to the skin. Photographs of this kind, heavily influenced by Korean pop culture, appear both online and offline in China (figures 3.1 and 3.2), defining what is “good-looking” for a man. This type of self-presentation resembles the ritualization of subordination identified by Erving Goffman (1976) in women’s pictures in magazines. However, the ritualization I am referring to here is particularly performed by younger men. In his profile photograph on Tantan, Nathan, age twenty-five, covered his mouth with his fingers. He said he imitated



**Figure 3.1**

Results of a search for *maimeng nan* 卖萌男 (cute-acting men) on Baidu, a major Chinese search engine. (Screenshot taken by the author on December 14, 2018)



**Figure 3.2**

A billboard advertisement in a Guangzhou metro station. The skin of the male celebrity appears to have been lightened and smoothed using editing software. (Photograph taken by the author on July 31, 2017)

the typical gesture of Korean pop stars. The main photograph displayed by Xiaolong, age twenty, was similar. When I asked why he chose this particular photograph, Xiaolong's reply was straightforward: "I only post pictures that I think are especially good-looking."

Displaying photographs of one's lovely pets or *maimengzhao* would hardly be considered masculine in the Western hegemonic ideal. In these genres of photographs, men show their childlike, innocent side and rarely demonstrate their physical strength. These images can even be regarded as an appropriation of the Chinese "cuteness" culture among urban female youth (Z. Qiu, 2013). However, if we treat these photographs as a demonstration of gentleness and refinement, these self-presentations are examples of performing *wen* masculinity.

The third type of profile photograph flaunts one's financial success. Older men tend to include one or two photographs that subtly hint at their financial status. Fung, age thirty-six, owned a coffee shop. Although he did not explicitly say he was the owner of the shop on his profile, he displayed photographs of the place and wrote "Drop by our coffee

shop any time” in the text of his profile. Dylan, who said he used Momo and Tantan to look for business partners, put up three photographs of himself—in a business suit, at a boat party, and on a nice balcony of a building that could be mistaken for his apartment. He said, “I want to let people see my life, my business. . . . (*Researcher: Is that balcony in your house?*) No, I do not own a house. That photograph was taken on a hotel balcony.” In this example, Dylan carried out his “image labor.” The difference between his labor and what McGlotten describes is that instead of going to the gym to buff up, he photographed himself in a hotel room, creating an impression that he owns a luxury home.

This type of self-presentation, together with the business-related interpretation of dating apps I discussed previously, reflects the financialization of *wen* masculinity in recent decades. As Louie (2015) notes, China’s recent rise as a global economic powerhouse and the marketization of Chinese society have recently recast *wen* masculinity as financial success. Therefore, interpreting dating apps as a platform related to work or to highlight one’s financial status with photographs are some ways my informants performed their *wen* masculinity. In fact, none of my straight male informants, regardless of their background, focused on presenting their *wu* masculinity.

#### INTERACTING ON AND BEYOND DATING APPS: MAXIMIZATION OF OPPORTUNITIES

Moving to the third phase of dating app use—interaction with female users—I noticed three areas my informants worked on to maximize their dating or hookup opportunities. The first area was the initial contact strategy. Dating apps afford access to a large pool of potential partners that a user is otherwise unlikely to meet. However, this can create the problem of choice overload for some users.<sup>6</sup> My male informants developed their own contact strategy to manage the vast number of choices. The two initial contact strategies most often used by my informants were *taking-all* and *filtering*. Taking-all is like casting a net to catch fish and is used by those who do not find having an abundance of options suffocating. On Tantan, which functions like Tinder, some of my informants swiped right on nearly every woman they saw on the app and waited for a

mutual match. Starting with such a large number of right swipes guaranteed at least a handful of matches. On Momo, where mutual liking is not a prerequisite for conversation, this strategy manifested as users sending a “Hi” to almost every woman encountered on the app.

Users can also regulate choice overload by using the filtering function to reduce the number of potential partners (L. S. Chan, 2018a). Many informants, like Clement, set an age range to exclude women who were older than they were. Some used location as a filtering tool. Roy, age twenty-one, told me that whenever he visited a bar with his male friends, he checked out Momo to see if there were any girls nearby he was interested in. “If I am there and she is also there, the chance [of her coming over to my table] is pretty high.” He estimated that his success rate was around 70 percent when he reached out to women who were nearby. Therefore, location and distance provided a heuristic for Roy to determine whom he would send a message to. In this way, the affordance of proximity was also crucial to those soliciting hookups. Fred, age twenty-five, was very concerned about the distance between him and the women he wanted to have sex with. He explained:

I log on to the app, set a center, and search outward. If a woman is more than four kilometers away, I won’t contact her, no matter how attractive she is. . . . Sometimes I say, “We are so close, you should come over.” Women who believe in fate tend to agree to visit.

The second area concerns the order of messaging. After users narrow down the number of potential partners, they may start a conversation with other users. Dating convention in the West gives more control to men, who are expected to lead the courtship process (Bailey, 1988). More than half of my informants followed this cultural script mandating that men make the first contact with women. Some of the informants said that being proactive gave them an advantage. Eric remarked that women preferred proactive men to passive men. Anthony, age twenty-eight, perceiving women as more reserved, told me with confidence: “If you don’t contact her first to give her a good impression of yourself, a conversation may never happen.”

The third and final area in which my informants sought to maximize their dating or hookup opportunities was the categorization of women. Before I elaborate on this issue, I would like to reflect on my role as a male

researcher in this project. I have pointed out that, in the introductory chapter, narratives I gathered from my informants were coconstructed. By coconstructed, I mean that what my informants had told me, to a large extent, depended on how I interacted with them. In the reflexive account of his research of male pornography viewers, Florian Vörös (2015) describes himself being in hegemonic complicity. That is, he had to bracket out his feminist judgment during the interviews in order to make his male informants comfortable in sharing their pleasures and fantasies around pornography with him. Looking back, I realize that in my research I also engaged in hegemonic complicity; whenever my male informants described practices that I deemed sexist, I held my tongue.

My informants assessed the probability of developing a successful relationship with each woman and focused their time and energy only on promising candidates. This helped them avoid choice overload. For example, in his worldview, Victor put women into four groups: soulmates, sex partners, work partners, and “miscellaneous.” The last group was women who had the potential to become soulmates. He did not think that soulmates and work partners existed on dating apps, but he often encountered sex partners and “miscellaneous” women on Momo. Because “miscellaneous” women could become soulmates, according to his system, he added these women to his WeChat, where he maintained contact with his everyday friends. He engaged in more personal disclosures with this group of women. However, the women he considered sex partners remained only on Momo. About this group of women, he said, “It’s not necessary to talk too much; the face-to-face meeting is just for sex.” Because two different interactive styles applied to these two groups of women, segregating them into two platforms—WeChat and Momo—helped Victor manage his communication.

Fred’s classification was more complicated. He used a two-step classification scheme to categorize the women he met on Momo. The first step was to assign attractiveness. He said women who were extremely beautiful were out of his league, so he would not waste time talking to them. He approached only the remaining women, soliciting their WeChat contacts. He described transfer of these women from Momo to WeChat as “the centralized management of the back palace.” In imperial China, the back palace was where the emperor’s concubines lived. The second step



of his classification scheme took place on WeChat, where he assigned a label to each of the women. He explained, “The letter B means that I have met them face-to-face before. The letter F is given to those I have not yet met. The letter Z basically denotes those whom I do not want to meet.” To avoid mistaking the women he met on Momo for the women he met on everyday social occasions, he assigned the letter A to the latter group. Based on the category a woman was in, his contact frequency changed. He worked harder on group F than group B because trust between him and the women in group F had not yet been developed.

### REPRODUCING GENDER INEQUALITY

Up to this point, I have described how my male informants performed their masculinity on dating apps. I have introduced the notion of Chinese masculinities, particularly the *wen* component, and argued that it provides a more accurate lens to analyze men’s gender performance in the Chinese context. Some men performed their masculinity through the use of animal photographs and *maimengzhao*. I have also discussed the financialization of *wen* masculinity.

Given these variations in masculinities, can we say that Chinese masculinities have reproduced gender inequality in China? This is an empirical question because some versions of masculinities—reluctantly or willingly—are more open to equality with women. For instance, Choi and Peng’s (2016) research shows that Chinese rural-to-urban migrant men partially forfeited their dominance by compromising on their marital power and division of labor within the household. Michael Messner, Max Greenberg, and Tal Peretz (2015) document the experiences of three generations of men, the majority of whom are straight, who actively participated in the women’s movement in the United States. In 2018, the world also witnessed male celebrities, mainly in Western countries, voicing their support for the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment and violence. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) put it, “the conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity should explicitly acknowledge the possibility of democratizing gender relations, of abolishing power differentials, not just of reproducing hierarchy” (p. 853).



Given the plurality of masculinities, Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) remind us to focus on how “manhood acts” create inequality. Manhood acts enable men to “distinguish themselves from females/women and thus establish their eligibility for gender-based privilege” (p. 287). For instance, some manhood acts involve occupational norms, such as working long hours, enduring pain, and celebrating extreme rationality. These actions discourage women from participating in certain occupations (Cohn, 1987; Cooper, 2000; Curry, 1993).

The narratives of my male informants revealed how they sustained their gender-based privilege. First, informants like Dylan, who used dating apps for business and curated images of financial success on their profiles, were reasserting the age-old stereotypical relationship between masculinity and work: men should focus on their careers, should be ambitious, and should be the breadwinners for their families. My informants also encountered women who used dating apps for business purposes. However, when they talked about these women, they expressed disdain. According to my informants, there were three kinds of women who actively used dating apps for business-related purposes. The first were saleswomen who usually promoted financial products and gym training sessions. These women were often very upfront about their business purposes. My informants said they had no objection to the presence of these women on dating apps as long as they did not keep sending promotional messages to them. The second kind comprised sex workers. My informants said these women usually left their profiles blank. As these women’s accounts often garnered complaints and were banned, they invited male users to connect via WeChat as soon as possible. My informants described these women as annoying because they often sent pornographic photographs to them. The third type of women were bar promoters, notoriously known as *jiutuo* 酒托 (alcohol support). My informants despised them the most because they pretended to be ordinary female users and lured male users to visit expensive nightclubs or bars. However, my informants said they had ways to identify *jiutuo*. Bob, age thirty-seven, said, “If she has opened her account within the last month and initiates a conversation with you, then asks you to add her WeChat, she is likely to be problematic—whether *jiutuo* or a trickster.” Fred agreed and added that *jiutuo* were always extremely particular about

where to meet. “If you suggest another place, she will lose interest in you immediately.”

My informants clearly differentiated “good” business on dating apps, mainly conducted by men, and “bad” business, solely carried out by women. One could argue that because *jiutuo* make a profit by cheating and sex workers cause annoyance, their businesses should not be allowed on dating apps and it should be legitimate for men to criticize them. However, this argument ignores the gendered labor market and the massive migrant flow in China, which already disproportionately favor men and have left fewer chances for women to pursue otherwise socially respectable and sustainable careers (C. C. Fan, 2003; Gaetano, 2015). Some women work as sex workers or *jiutuo* because they cannot find other jobs that can sustain their life living in a city. Therefore, when men make the distinction between “good” and “bad” businesses on dating apps, they are claiming their second round of gender-based privilege, after their first round of privilege in the labor market.

Second, researchers have found that some men in college collectively objectify women to mutually affirm each other’s manhood (Bird, 1996; Martin & Hummer, 1989).<sup>7</sup> Haywood (2018) reports that his young British male informants gather in groups to look at Tinder and evaluate the women showing up on the app. Although none of my straight male informants told me they did this, Victor and Fred’s quantifying attractiveness epitomizes the objectification of women. Assigning grades to women based on their attractiveness is not uncommon. Part of the huge entertainment industry has been dedicated to publicly ranking women. However, with the help of communication technologies, the level of objectification has intensified and become more personal. Victor used WeChat to maintain relationships with “soulmates,” while retaining his sex partners on Momo. Fred used WeChat basically for “bookkeeping.” In his narrative, he even used the phrase “the back palace” to describe the women he met on Momo, as if they were his personal concubines. His grading of women based on their attractiveness and his sole pursuit of women’s bodies for sex are typical of the “seduction community” in the United Kingdom or the “pickup community” in the United States (O’Neill, 2018). These communities consist predominantly of men who wish to learn how to gain women’s trust and, thereby, sexual access. To

some degree, this “toxic” aspect of masculinity is implicitly encouraged in the Chinese cultural ideal of *wen* masculinity. I mentioned that *wenren* have often been associated with sex and, according to traditional Confucian beliefs, women are men’s property. When the design of dating app packages everyone as a profile, women become generic products to be catalogued by male dating app users like Fred and Victor. This outcome results not directly from the design of the dating apps but from the men’s predatory interpretation of the dating apps.

What about the lovely photographs of cats or the cute-acting portraits men use on dating apps? The latter type of photograph may be considered as a performance of “metrosexuality” (Simpson, 1999), the metropolitan lifestyle where straight men pay meticulous attention to their hair, skin, bodies, and fashion—activities traditionally associated with femininity. Do these acts also contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality? Probably not—at least not directly. However, these visual forms are similar to Tristan Bridges’s (2014) discussion of “hybrid masculinities.” Hybrid masculinity accounts for how urban, heterosexual, white men incorporate “gay aesthetics” to create an alternative form of masculinity that is distinct from the “tough” and “toxic” kind of hegemonic masculinity. Bridges argues that although such incorporation indicated straight men’s acceptance of homosexuality, they still maintained their associated heterosexual privilege. He writes, “by casually framing being gay only as fun and exciting, this practice allows these straight men to ignore the persistence of extreme sexual inequality and the hardships that actual gay men face every day” (p. 79). The softening of masculinity using animal photographs and *maimengzhao*, one that appropriates the “cuteness” conventionally performed by women in East Asia (Abidin, 2016; Z. Qiu, 2013), represents an expansion of the styles that men can choose from. However, they are one-way, reinforcing the gender-based privilege men enjoy without disrupting the existing gender hierarchy.

## CONCLUSION

As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) write, “a regional hegemonic masculinity . . . provides a cultural framework that may be materialized in daily practices and interactions” (p. 850). In this chapter, informed by

this idea of regional masculinities, I have drawn on Louie's theorization of Chinese masculinities. Chinese masculinities comprise *wen* masculinity, which emphasizes cultural attainment and sociability with women, and *wu* masculinity, which involves physical strength and sexual abstinence. *Wen* masculinity has recently undergone an economic transformation, increasingly associated with financial success. The regional understanding of Chinese masculinities provides a more culturally sensitive framework for analyzing gender performances of my straight male informants on dating apps. I have also considered how the self-presentations of my informants fit into the global circulation of "good-looking" images from Korean pop culture.

I have identified three phases of app use in which men perform their gender and have discussed how these performances reproduce gender inequality. First, my informants interpreted dating apps not only as a platform to fulfill their physiological needs but also as a platform to develop their business. Their approval of "good" business and critique of "bad" business often carried out by women ignored the gendered labor market that acts unfavorably against women in the first place. Second, on their profiles, some of the men presented their gentleness by posting animal photographs. Others demonstrated their cuteness or hinted at their financial success. Such performances may not be considered masculine in Western hegemonic masculinity. However, within the framework of Chinese *wen* masculinity, men who post animal photographs, such as Clement and John, and those who display *maimengzhao*, like Xiaolong, are no less masculine than users who highlight their muscular or athletic bodies. Finally, the informants devised different strategies to handle the vast number of potential partners they met on dating apps. Some connected with all women, while others were more selective. My description of Victor's and Fred's classification schemes demonstrated an intensified version of the objectification of women. For these reasons, I have warned against regarding a softening of masculinity as progress in gender equality.

My analysis in this chapter, together with chapter 2, suggests that contrary to what cyberfeminism has envisioned (see chapter 1), the space of dating apps is not completely liberating for women. If there is room for feminist resistance in networked sexual publics, there is also the threat of

redomination. Dating apps concomitantly allow men to maintain their power and fail to fulfill the feminist hope for more equal gender relations. It seems to me that if men cannot learn to conceive of gender dynamics beyond a zero-sum game, they will see the empowerment of women as a threat and women's gains inevitably as their losses. In other words, if men cannot learn to share power, the global and regional uprisings over the women's rights movement and the emergence of new technologies will continue to touch a nerve.

In the next two chapters, I turn to a related set of questions: In what ways are dating apps related to current queer politics? What do gay and lesbian dating apps mean to their users? And how does the use of dating apps create a more livable space for them?



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# The Politics of Dating Apps

## Gender, Sexuality, and Emergent Publics in Urban China

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