

## Rebel Men: Masculinity and Attitude in Postsocialist Chinese Literature

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Xueping Zhong

Tufts University, Medford, MA, USA  
Email: [xueping.zhong@tufts.edu](mailto:xueping.zhong@tufts.edu)

*Rebel Men: Masculinity and Attitude in Postsocialist Chinese Literature* does a good job capturing the social and gender contradictions manifested in the representations of (mostly) young male characters by four male writers, Zhu Wen, Feng Tang, Xu Zecheng and Han Han, respectively. By focusing on representations of young males' "rebellious attitude" and its manifested masculinity, this book offers a conceptually layered and contextually sound textual analysis, effectively foregrounding the question of what informs such an attitude and how to understand its seemingly varied expressions, all in conjunction with the rapid postsocialist transformations in contemporary China.

Echoing Jing Wang, the introduction begins by identifying the 1990s as "the age of Attitude" and goes on to highlight why it is important to also recognize that "the attitude on display is curiously gender-specific" (p. 2), namely male-oriented. The questions that most interest the author include "how and why are expressions of resistance connected to masculinity, and what are the implications of this connection?" (p. 5). By offering a brief but comprehensive discussion regarding the scope of existing studies on Chinese masculinity, especially its modern and contemporary manifestations, the introduction clearly presents the key issues that the book aims to explore. Hunt points out at the outset that, in choosing these four writers, her book studies the extent to which "male authors are deliberately exploring, questioning, and rebuilding manhood in contemporary China" (p. 5). In particular, this study chiefly concerns a "recurring figure" – "a man who turns his back on the mainstream and seeks his own oppositional space on the edges of society" while simultaneously he "remains complicit with, and even reinforces, heteronormative, patriarchal values" (p. 5). It is along this line of argument that the book proceeds to read the four male writers, from chapter two to chapter five respectively, and their representations of "rebellious male."

In chapter two on Zhu Wen, and by close reading of three of his short stories, Hunt examines the phenomenon of (marginalized) "men in crisis" – "superfluous men" – represented via such motifs as "boredom, uselessness, and circularity," and she explores the extent to which these motifs "provide us with an example of how pronouncements of crisis and attitude can lead, irresistibly, to the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity, even as it is depicted as being in mortal danger" (p. 35). In Feng Tang (chapter three) and focusing on his "Beijing Trilogy," the discussion highlights Feng's representations of seemingly disparate types of male figures including "celebratory narrative of the *liumang* [hooligan] ... grotesque teenage male body, and his adoration and emulation of local and international versions of *caizi* (talented scholars)" (p. 58), and argues that there is a shared common thread that weaves together these different strands manifesting what Hunt refers to as "phallic creativity." This argument allows another aspect of *Rebel Men* to come to the fore, namely, the book's thesis that the "rebel-man attitude" more often than not stems from the writing subject, namely the writer himself, who often shows up as a character in stories as someone who also dabbles at creative writing. Indeed, this common thread runs through most of the male writing under Hunt's examination, and in particular in Feng's case. Hunt highlights that, in Feng's seemingly rebellious phallic creativity, one finds a kind of male-body writing that caters mainly to a narcissistic play with a male ego essentially catering to the rise and arrival of the logic of capital.



Such a logic is in fact fully at work when it comes to Han Han (chapter five) in terms of his version of “commercialization of rebelliousness.” Recognizing that Han’s “cultural rebellion has been called into question due to his cultural entrepreneurship,” Hunt focuses mainly on how Han “deliberately explores experiences of postsocialist masculinity” and the extent to which “his rebellion replies upon, and is therefore curtailed by, his repeated return to a conservative understanding of gender” (p. 103). It is interesting to note, however, a blind spot on the part of Hunt, who downplays the political economy of Han’s “rebellion” as somehow less important than his conservative understanding of gender. One wonders if, had Han Han been less “conservative” in his understanding of gender, his version of rebellion would necessarily be more “progressive” in class terms. The lack of a clear class perspective may explain why, when it comes to reading Xu Zecheng (chapter four), the discussion of “floating men” feels less assured, especially in terms of the kind of “marginality” that Xu’s works tend to focus on. Indeed, compared with Zhu Wen, Feng Tang and Han Han, Xu Zecheng has often been recognized as one of the “*diceng*” literature writers known for their attention to migrant workers and migrant population “floating” – on the margins of the urban society and trying to make a living sometimes as small-time criminals – in big cities. In Xu’s writings, while the marginality of his male characters is in fact often shown to be both gendered and classed, the chapter in question feels a bit constrained by the need to highlight the gendered – maleness and its problematics – dimensions.

The book ends with a conclusion in which the author summarizes and highlights the “great paradox” (p. 125) in representations of seeming resistance of “certain hegemonic values of masculinity and in disavowing the idea of an innately ‘true’ experience of manhood” when “heterosexuality, virility, fraternity, and a man’s privileged position as agent are all vital parts of the texts” (p. 125). And “whether consciously or not, narratives of rebellion and doubts about certain elements of mainstream masculinity irresistibly become narratives about the rehabilitation, rather than the refutation, of the masculine” (p. 125). “It is for this reason,” the author concludes, “that the repeated cries of a ‘crisis of masculinity’ in postsocialist China rarely ring true” (p. 125). The conclusion could add a sharper point to this well-written and clearly discussed book by noting that the postsocialist pushback against women’s liberation in the context of the rise and coming to dominance of a petty-bourgeois anti-revolutionary ideology makes a progressive gender-equality male consciousness less likely to attract male intellectuals who are bent on claiming the postrevolutionary centre, whether through conformity or through performative rebelliousness.

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## Wang Bing’s Filmmaking of the China Dream: Narratives, Witnesses and Marginal Spaces

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Luke Robinson

University of Sussex, Brighton, UK  
Email: [luke.robinson@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:luke.robinson@sussex.ac.uk)

Wang Bing is arguably China’s pre-eminent non-fiction filmmaker. Since the release of his three-part epic *Tiexi Qu: West of the Tracks* in 2002, his work has featured regularly at festivals, in gallery spaces, and on television. Often positioned as a proponent of slow cinema due to the extended duration of his