

East Asian Men

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Editors

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Masculinity, Sexuality and Desire

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*In support of
LGBTQI communities in East Asia*

Foreword

Experimental Masculinities, Narrative Empathy and Cosmopolitan Genders Across the Globe

All around the world, men are experimenting with their masculinities. And here in this fresh and exhilarating study we have a welcome, lively and inspiring new collection of essays on East Asian Masculinities that makes clear a few more of the multiplicities of ways in which men are doing this. Here, with a focus on China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, we find *experimental masculinities* are busy at work. And this book can be seen ultimately as a mature product of the growing concern about “men” and gender as topics of research and study that have been developing over the past century. This development of what is now often called “critical masculinity studies” can be seen to go back a very long way.

Briefly, four waves can be suggested. First, there was a very long wave of latency and slow gestation that started at least back in the late nineteenth century, when travellers, anthropologists, emerging psychologists and others started to question the nature of gender (and sexuality) and demonstrate the cultural variability of what it is to be a man or woman in different countries. (We think of the celebrated works of Mead, Malinowski, Freud and the rest.) Out of this gradually emerged the writings on the male sex role that, by the early 1970s, had started to become quite widely

discussed. This was indeed the time when my own nascent interest in the problem of masculinity developed. As a very young “gay” “man” (and both words were indeed problems for me), I wondered more and more about the links between what it means to be a man and have sex and fall in love with “men”; it made me start questioning my own masculinity and what it meant. I encountered trans people in the gay movement, read about men’s consciousness raising in the early 1970s (through a book *Unbecoming Men*, 1972) and went to a Kinsey Institute Summer Conference in the summer of 1976, where I recall a male beauty cat walk being organized by men’s activist Wayne Farrell (1975) in which all the men had to take off their shirts and walk in a male fashion parade while the women at the conference watched on and jeered! A little later I ran a short course with my colleagues, Ian Craib and Leonore Davidoff, on “masculinity” (Craib 1987; Plummer 1988). By the mid 1980s, a flurry of exciting books had appeared: enough to establish the contours of what was to become “Men’s Studies”. Back then the main focus was largely on the “male role” in Anglo Saxon countries (Brannon and David 1976; Hearn et al. 2012). But it was clearly also starting to build a critical approach.

A decade or so later on saw the arrival of a third wave that heralded a major Western publishing boom of “masculinity studies” and was exemplified in new journals, books galore, courses and compendiums and collections. Its summit was probably the publication of Hearn, Connell and Kimmel’s *Sage Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities* (2004), and its editors were probably the world’s most prominent scholars of masculinity at the turn of the millennium. The galvanizing key ideas came from Connell’s notion of hegemonic sexuality (developed between 1984–1987) (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005); and, to a lesser extent, the arrival and development of queer theory, which deeply problematized all sexual and gender categories, as well as any binary system of thinking. Critical studies on men and masculinities started to develop as an interdisciplinary field of inquiry, and flourished in association with feminist and LGBTQ studies.

Growing out of all this has been a lively awareness of the globalization of masculinities. Indeed, by the early 1990s, Michael Kimmel was editing a series of books on “Global Masculinities” (published by Zed Books). We were entering a period of international awareness for a new

millennium, an era of global and transnational critical gender studies. And so, over the past decade or so, we have seen a flow of new studies with titles like *African Masculinities*, *Islamic and Muslim Masculinities*, *Men and Masculinity in Contemporary Japan*, *Theorising Chinese Masculinities*, *Asian Masculinities*, *East Asian Masculinities*, *Masculindians*, and *Mexican Masculinities*. Some scholars, recently Jeff Hearn (2015), have also detected the existence of global trans-patriarchies at work: global men in corporations, social movements, academia, and digital communications, working across many institutions in the global system. All in all, we are starting to make large strides in understanding the global complexity of masculinities. And *East Asian Men: Masculinity, Sexuality and Desire* makes a wonderful addition to this new worldwide critical discourse.

The discussions to be found here are wide-ranging and come from a new group of scholars exploring new fields. Here we find a wide range of men: migrant workers, professional men, military men, men in cyberspace, the young, gay and transgendered. Together, they show how men face traditional masculinity and evolve new modes of handling it. Thus you will find here the stories of single migrant workers in China (discussed by Xiaodong Lin), the corporate “salaryman” in Japan (discussed by Romit Dasgupta), young professional men in Taiwan (Bo-Wei Chen and Mairtin Mac an Ghail), the story of young Chinese men and TV dating in China (discussed by Chao Yang); the contrasting experiences of gay men from mainland China and local Hong Kong (Yiu Tung Suen and Miu Yin Wong), and the men in the military in Taiwan (Ying-Chao Kao). All live on the edge of hegemonic masculinity; all highlight new forms, patterns of adjustment, resistance and change. Many indicate the development of a possibly progressive gender consciousness. In Japan, for example, since 2008 there has been the arrival of the much celebrated “herbivore” masculinities, where a rejection of aggression has become the norm (discussed by Justin Charlebois). In Korea, we hear the stories of women consuming the bodies of the K-pop boy dance bands (Chuyun Oh). In China, Hongwei Bao discusses negotiations around a “same sex wedding in Beijing” in which de-Westernisation and internationalisation of queer theory and activism in a transnational context are discussed; while Siyang Cao discusses the role of *diaosi* (losers). And in Taiwan we find the formation of a new gender consciousness (discussed by Herng-Dar Bih).

The stories told in the book come from a wide range of sources and engagements. Here are interviews and field work, of course; but also we find an array of media. Here we have film (the *Flying Swords of Dragon Gate* and *M. Butterfly*); TV sitcoms (*Diaosi Nanshi* and *Wanwan Meixiangdao*); videos (*K-Pop Dance*) and advertising (the beers *Singha* and *Chang*). All the discussions background the centrality of a strong version of patriarchal men—“hegemonic masculinity” as has been conceptualized these past thirty years)—in order to foreground the emerging struggles over experimental masculinities that distance or play with it in some way. In this sense the book is part of an ongoing global refashioning of what it means to be a man in the 21st century. As Siripai and Haywood argue in their examination of alcohol advertising, there may be a new global branding of the Asian man that is starting to create a new, if postmodern, hegemony.

In each of these accounts, a different strand of masculinity emerges and a new story of emerging experimental masculinities told. The book displays a differing array of desires and sensibilities of men across the world. And as I read these accounts I become more and more aware of the importance of what might be called *the politics of narrative empathy*. Here are some important new stories of experimental masculinities around the world to stir our imaginative empathies. They allow us, indeed encourage us, to grasp the complexities and dilemmas of modern global men's stories. At the heart of the politics of this kind of qualitative story telling research lies empathy—the ability to “climb into the skin” of another person and see the world from their point of view as deeply as we can. And this is crucial. For, as I have argued elsewhere:

This takes us to the heart of what makes us human. Listening to the stories of others and engaging in dialogues with them is both a key indicator of our humanity and a key strategy for politics. It means an ingrained habit of grasping and appreciating the differences of others (including enemies)... Empathy is the foundation of social care, part of a “circuit” of human cruelty and kindness, connected to a deliberative democratic reasoning, and linked to a developmental theory for social justice..... As societies move forward they accelerate their empathic potentials. And it comes with two close companions: dialogue and compassion. Together they help in our

humanization and civilizing. Stories are the key sources of this empathy as we get glimpses of other worlds and start trying to live with them in various ways. (Plummer, 2015: 15–16)

Ultimately, *East Asian Men* is a book full of significant global storytelling, nudging us towards an emerging *Cosmopolitanism Genders*. By this I mean that we are starting to develop a global ability to live across positive differences as we seek a “universal concern and respect for legitimate difference” (Appiah, 2006) and develop a “decent world culture” and “a world moral community” (Nussbaum, 2006). It will help lead us, personally, to cultivating multiple empathies for diverse forms of gender. It will help lead us, interpersonally, to cultivating plural dialogues across differing visions of what it means to be gendered and the multiple forms this takes—multiple masculinities, multiple femininities, and multiple “trans worlds”. It will help lead us, sociologically, to an understanding of how institutions, structures, actions and cultures can facilitate and cultivate this living together of diverse genders. And politically and ethically, it will mean demanding a search for common grounds that enable us to live “good, caring, just, and flourishing lives for all” around our gender diversity. This exciting book reveals a little more of the diversities, changes and experiments going on in the world today, and encourages a growing empathy and cosmopolitanism in these dark times. It sends out more stories of hope, helping us to sense how, in these myriad, everyday, but global, struggles, we just might be nudging towards a better gender order.

Ken Plummer
Wivenhoe, January 2016

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