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MASCULINITY AND VISUAL REPRESENTATION IN CHINESE CINEMA: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THEORIES AND CONTEXTUAL GAPS

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Abstract:

Contemporary Chinese cinema features contested male images, from national heroes to "feminized" idols (*niang pao* 娘炮), sparking intense social debate. Existing analytical frameworks, whether Western or indigenous Chinese, often fail to capture the dynamic interplay of power and visual performance in these representations. This article conducts a critical review of these theories, revealing significant gaps in cultural adaptability, visual analysis, and power critique. It argues for the necessity of a new, integrated framework to better understand the cultural anxieties surrounding modern Chinese masculinity, paving the way for more nuanced future research.

Keywords: Chinese Cinema, Masculinity Studies, Visual Analysis, Critical Theory, Representation，Cultural Studies

Introduction

In recent years, few topics have ignited as much public debate in China as the state of modern masculinity(Hu, 2018). The discourse has been fueled by the high visibility of so-called "feminized" male celebrities in popular media, often pejoratively labeled *niang pao* (娘 炮), or "sissy men" (Ye, 2019). This term, initially a colloquialism, has evolved into a key symbol of a perceived national "masculinity crisis," prompting official state media condemnation and even educational policy interventions aimed at cultivating a more robust and patriotic male ideal(Wu, 2021). This cultural anxiety creates a stark contrast between the government-endorsed image of the tough, self-sacrificing national hero and the soft, aesthetically-focused male idol celebrated in consumer culture(Hu et al., 2023).

This heated contestation over what it means to be a man in China unfolds most powerfully on screen. Cinema, as a primary medium of visual culture, does not merely reflect social values; it actively constructs, circulates, and legitimizes specific gender norms(Giannetti & Leach, 2005). Film provides a public space where ideals of masculinity are performed, negotiated, and challenged, shaping the collective

imagination and influencing individual identities. The visual representation of male characters—from their physical appearance and gestures to their emotional expressions and social interactions—becomes a critical site where broader societal struggles over tradition, modernity, Western influence, and national identity are played out.

Despite the social urgency and rich visual material, scholarly analysis of masculinity in Chinese cinema often struggles to keep pace. The field is caught between two dominant, yet ultimately inadequate, theoretical paradigms. On one hand, scholars have productively applied Western theories, most notably R.W. Connell's (Connell, 2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity, which provides a powerful framework for understanding gender as a system of power and hierarchy. On the other hand, there is a rich body of research that turns to indigenous Chinese philosophical concepts, such as *Yin-Yang* (阴阳) and *Wen-Wu* (文武), to explain the unique cultural roots of Chinese masculinities(Louie, 2002).

However, a critical gap emerges when these frameworks are applied to the fluid and complex visual texts of contemporary Chinese cinema. Western theories, developed in a different cultural context, can feel rigid and may overlook the specific nuances of Chinese social relations. Conversely, traditional Chinese concepts, while culturally resonant, are often too abstract to provide concrete tools for analyzing the visual and political dynamics of modern media. Consequently, we lack a theoretical apparatus that is simultaneously sensitive to cultural specificity, equipped for rigorous visual analysis, and attuned to the operations of power in a globalized, media-saturated environment.

This article conducts a critical review of these dominant theoretical frameworks. It argues that existing approaches, from both the West and China, reveal significant and interconnected gaps in three areas: cultural adaptability, visual-analytical specificity, and modern power critique. By systematically identifying these deficiencies, this paper asserts the urgent need for a new, integrated theoretical framework capable of navigating the complexities of masculinity in contemporary Chinese visual culture. To build this argument, the analysis engages with foundational theoretical texts by key scholars such as Connell and Louie, alongside relevant contemporary studies on Chinese cinema and gender from peer-reviewed academic journals and books.

The selection of literature is purposive, focusing on works that have been influential in shaping the scholarly discourse. Through a comparative and critical synthesis of these sources, the argument proceeds in three stages. First, the paper examines key Western masculinity theories, assessing their analytical power and limitations when applied to the Chinese context. Second, it turns to indigenous Chinese concepts, critiquing their abstraction and inadequacy in analyzing modern visual media. Finally, the article synthesizes these critiques to map the precise theoretical gaps and propose the necessary characteristics of a future, more effective analytical framework.

The Global and the Local: Critiquing Dominant Frameworks for Masculinity in Chinese Cinema

To understand masculinity in Chinese cinema, one must first engage with the theoretical frameworks that have shaped global gender studies. For decades, Western theories have

provided the primary analytical language for examining gender and power. While these models offer powerful tools, their application in non-Western contexts, particularly in the highly specific visual culture of Chinese film, reveals significant limitations. This section will first outline the contributions of key Western theories, primarily hegemonic masculinity, and then critically assess their cultural and methodological shortcomings when applied to Chinese visual texts.

The Western Lens: The Promises and Perils of Power Analysis

The scholarly study of masculinity underwent a profound shift in the latter half of the 20th century. Early approaches were dominated by sex role theory, which posited that masculinity was a relatively static set of traits, attitudes, and behaviors that men were socialized to embody(Sattel, 1978). This model viewed masculinity as a monolithic and normative category, often reducing it to a list of attributes like aggression, ambition, and rationality, in direct opposition to a corresponding list of feminine traits(Morawski, 1985). While descriptive, this approach was widely criticized for its rigidity, its failure to account for cultural diversity, and its inability to analyze the power dynamics inherent in gender relations(Kimmel, 1987).

The most significant departure from this model came with the work of R.W. Connell. In her seminal book *Masculinities* (2005), Connell argued against a singular conception of masculinity, proposing instead a model of multiple masculinities existing in a hierarchical relationship. Central to her theory is the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which she defines as the culturally dominant and idealized form of manhood that legitimizes patriarchy and subordinates other forms of masculinity as well as femininity. It is not the most common form of masculinity, but rather the one that holds the most social authority and sets the standard against which other men are measured.

This framework is built upon a relational structure of power. Alongside the hegemonic form, Connell identified subordinate masculinities (e.g., homosexual masculinities, which are oppressed), complicit masculinities (men who do not fit the hegemonic ideal but benefit from the patriarchal system), and marginalized masculinities (men who are unable to access hegemonic power due to class or race) (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This approach was revolutionary. It shifted the focus from static roles to dynamic power relations, recognizing that masculinity is not a personal trait but a social practice embedded in institutions and historical processes (Gardiner, 2004).

The analytical power of this framework can be seen when applied to the heroic archetypes of Maoist-era Chinese cinema (1949-1976). In films from this period, the ideal man was the revolutionary soldier or the self-sacrificing worker. These characters—stoic, physically powerful, emotionally restrained, and utterly devoted to the collective and the state—were perfect embodiments of a state-sponsored hegemonic masculinity. Their individual desires were subsumed by national duty, and their bodies were portrayed as instruments of labor and revolution, not pleasure. Using Connell's lens, we can see that this cinematic ideal served to subordinate other potential

masculinities—such as that of the "bourgeois" intellectual or the apolitical individual—positioning them as ideologically suspect and less masculine.

Further enriching this understanding of gender as practice is Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Butler argues that gender is not a stable identity but rather a series of stylized, repetitive acts—a performance. This is not to say gender is a choice, but rather that it is a compulsory performance regulated by societal norms(Butler, 2002). This concept pushes beyond Connell's structural model to emphasize the moment-to-moment "doing" of gender. It offers a powerful tool for film analysis, allowing us to see how a character's walk, speech, and gestures are not merely personal quirks but are citational acts that produce and reproduce notions of masculinity on screen.

This sociological framework provides an indispensable vocabulary for analyzing gender as a structured system of inequality and power relations. Its analytical value lies in offering scholars the tools to critically deconstruct cultural representations of masculinity, moving beyond essentialist or biological explanations. Specifically, it enables researchers to interpret the figure of the stoic, authoritative male protagonist not as a natural or universal "male role," but as a carefully constructed performance of hegemonic masculinity that serves to legitimize and reinforce existing hierarchies of gender and power within a particular social and historical context.

Moreover, this framework sheds light on the ways in which alternative masculinities are marginalized or subordinated within dominant narratives. Characters such as the effeminate scholar, the emotionally expressive artist, or the working-class laborer are not merely side figures by accident; rather, their consistent positioning as secondary, deviant, or "lesser" men reveals broader ideological processes at work. By exposing how masculinity operates as a field of contested performances and social negotiations, this framework allows scholars to analyze not only which male images are privileged, but also why and how they are positioned in ways that maintain and reproduce specific forms of social order. In doing so, it highlights the role of cultural production—particularly film and media—in shaping and sustaining gendered power dynamics across different social strata.

However, the peril of this Western lens emerges when it is uncritically applied to non-Western cultural products like Chinese cinema. A primary challenge is the issue of cultural mismatch. Connell's theory was developed largely from research in Western, industrialized societies, and it presupposes a particular structure of patriarchy and capitalist class relations. While China is undeniably patriarchal, its historical and social logic differs from that of the West. The ideal of manhood in modern Europe, for instance, was deeply tied to the rise of the bourgeois nation-state and specific notions of rationality and control(Mosse, 1996). In contrast, Chinese ideals have been shaped by millennia of Confucian ethics, the scholar-official (*junzi* 君子) archetype, and a different conception of family and state relations(Hird, 2017). Simply mapping the categories of hegemonic, subordinate, and complicit masculinity onto Chinese characters risks overlooking these deep-seated cultural distinctions and may lead to a distorted reading of their social significance(Louie, 2014).

A second, and for this paper more critical, limitation is the framework's visual analytical deficit. Connell's theory is fundamentally sociological; it explains social

structures and power dynamics superbly. However, it does not provide an inherent methodology for analyzing how these dynamics are constructed through the specific language of cinema. It can identify a character as representing hegemonic masculinity, but it does not explain how camera angles, lighting, editing, and costume choices work together to produce the visual effect of hegemony. The analysis of masculinity on screen is more complex than a simple reversal of Laura Mulvey's (1975) foundational theory of the "male gaze." While Mulvey coded the female body as a passive object for an active male viewer, male characters are often both the drivers of the narrative (active subjects) and visually spectacularized bodies themselves (potential objects of desire), particularly in action genres(Baker, 2016). A robust theory for cinematic masculinity must therefore account for this duality, explaining how visual techniques navigate this tension. Without such tools, the analysis remains stuck at the level of sociology or philosophy, failing to engage with the very medium it seeks to understand. Film studies has long established that cinematic techniques are not neutral windows onto reality but are instead powerful tools that shape viewer perception and actively create meaning (Giannetti & Leach, 1999).

For instance, Laura Mulvey's influential theory of the "male gaze" provided a specific visual framework for understanding how female characters are coded for erotic objectification(Mulvey, 2013). While her theory has been debated and revised, its strength lies in its direct engagement with cinematic language. A similar level of visual specificity is required to understand masculinity. How does a low-angle shot empower a male hero? How does soft lighting on a male pop idol's face signify a "softer" or subordinate masculinity? How do rapid editing and visceral sound design in an action sequence construct a particular kind of physical, "hard" masculinity (Baker, 2016)? Hegemonic masculinity theory, on its own, does not offer answers to these crucial visual questions.

Therefore, while the Western lens provides an essential language of power, its application to Chinese cinema faces the dual challenge of potential cultural insensitivity and a lack of built-in tools for visual analysis. It explains the "what" of power relations but falls short on the "how" of their cultural and cinematic construction. This naturally leads to the question: can indigenous Chinese concepts fill these gaps?

Chinese Concepts: Cultural Roots and Modern Challenges

While Western theories provide a language of power, they lack deep cultural resonance in the Chinese context. To find this cultural grounding, the analysis must turn to indigenous concepts like *Yin-Yang*（阴 阳） and *Wen-Wu*（文 武）, which have historically defined ideal manhood. Scholars have productively explored these frameworks to provide a culturally specific perspective. However, they also present their own set of challenges. While these concepts are indispensable for understanding the historical and philosophical underpinnings of Chinese masculinities, they also present their own set of challenges when applied to the analysis of modern visual culture, particularly in their abstraction and limited capacity for contemporary power critique.

The twin concepts of *Wen* (the civil, literary, or scholarly) and *Wu* (the martial, physical, or militant) have long served as the two pillars of ideal Chinese masculinity(Louie, 2002). *Wen* masculinity valorizes intellect, refinement, and moral cultivation, embodied by the scholar-official. *Wu* masculinity, conversely, celebrates physical prowess, courage, and martial skill, embodied by the warrior. The ultimate ideal, or *wen wu shuang quan (文武双全)*, is a man who harmoniously balances both attributes(Song, 2004). This duality is vividly represented throughout Chinese film history. Early Republican cinema, for example, often featured the "fragile scholar" archetype, a figure embodying *wen* values who struggles to navigate a chaotic modern world. Conversely, the rise of the *wuxia* (martial arts) genre, especially in Hong Kong cinema, placed the *wu* hero at the center—a character whose physical prowess and moral code became the primary drivers of the narrative. These archetypes provide a clear cultural shorthand for understanding character. Similarly, the ancient philosophy of *Yin-Yang* was adapted to gender relations, creating a cosmic justification for a social hierarchy where the masculine *Yang* (associated with strength, light, and authority) was positioned as superior to the feminine *Yin* (associated with softness, darkness, and submission)(Graham, 1988). This binary deeply influenced gender roles, associating men with public life and physical labor and women with the domestic sphere.

These frameworks offer invaluable cultural context. They help explain the enduring appeal of the scholarly hero or the martial warrior in Chinese films. However, their limitations become apparent when they are moved from the realm of philosophy to the practice of cinematic analysis. The first major challenge is their high level of abstraction. Concepts like *Wen-Wu, Yin and Yang* are broad philosophical ideals, not concrete analytical tools. As noted in critiques of the *Wen-Wu* model, the framework is often too vague to differentiate the complex and overlapping behaviors seen on screen(Song, 2010). How, for example, does one measure the precise ratio of *wen* to *wu* in a character's performance? How does a specific camera movement or lighting choice translate into the abstract quality of *yang*? Unlike the male gaze, which points to specific spectatorial and cinematic techniques, these indigenous concepts lack a built-in methodology for fine-grained visual analysis. They describe a cultural ideal but do not provide the tools to deconstruct how that ideal is visually produced, negotiated, or subverted in a filmic text.

The second and more profound limitation is their inadequate capacity for modern power analysis. The *Yin-Yang* binary, for instance, can explain traditional patriarchal structures but is ill-equipped to analyze the complex power dynamics of a globalized, capitalist China. It does not offer a vocabulary to critique how consumerism, for example, produces and promotes "soft" or "flower-like men" (*hua yang nan zi 花样男子*) as commercially viable idols (Louie, 2014), nor can it adequately explain the disciplinary power of the modern state as it attempts to regulate and "correct" these non-traditional masculinities. These are not forces of ancient philosophy but of contemporary political economy and media culture.

This limitation becomes particularly acute when analyzing the representation of men from specific regions, most notably Shanghai. Shanghai holds a unique place in the Chinese imagination as a historical crossroads between East and West, a center of

colonial influence, and the cradle of Chinese capitalism and consumer culture(Li, 1998). This environment fostered a distinct urban masculinity, often depicted in cinema as more refined, intellectual, and perhaps less "traditionally" masculine than its stoic, northern counterpart. In later years, the image of the Shanghai man often became associated with domesticity and a "softer" sensibility, making the city a symbolic site where rigid, monolithic ideals of manhood were first visually and narratively challenged (Geng, 2010). Any robust theory must be able to account for such crucial regional and cultural specificities.

Recognizing these limitations, Chinese scholar Fang Gang (2009) introduced a more dynamic framework centered on the concepts of *Gang* (刚, rigidity/firmness) and *Rou* (柔, softness/gentleness). Departing from a strict binary, Fang proposed that masculinities are better understood as a spectrum of practices. He developed a cross-axis model that maps personality tendencies (*Gang* to *Rou*) against social relationship tendencies (hegemonic to subordinate), allowing for a more fluid and less prescriptive analysis, as shown in figure1.(Fang, 2009) This was a significant theoretical advancement, as its focus on "practice" makes it inherently more compatible with analyzing performance and behavior.

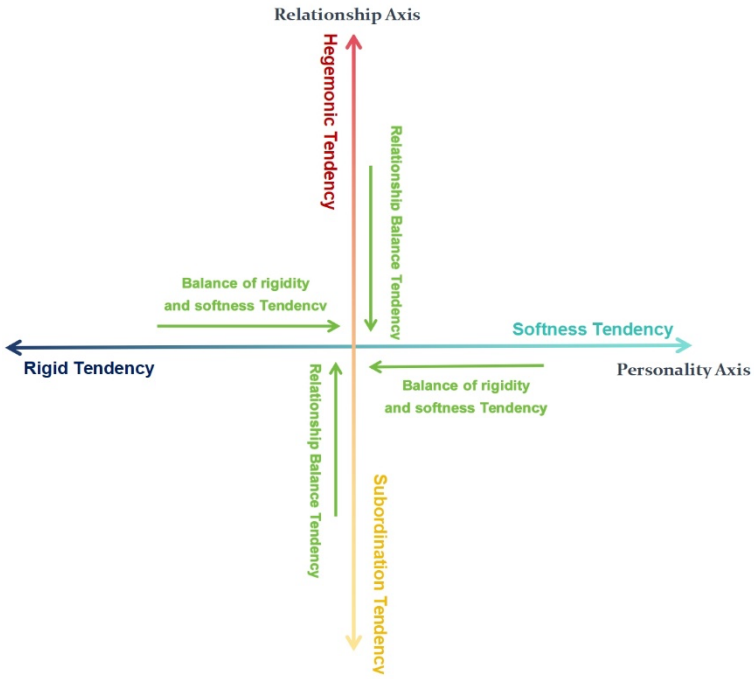

Figure 1:A Cross-Axis Model for Analyzing Masculinities Practices

Note. Translated and adapted by the author from Fang Gang's model in *Nan Gong Guan* (2009).

Fang Gang's *Gang-Rou* theory offers a powerful tool for describing the *how* of masculine performance, capturing the nuanced spectrum of behaviors from rugged toughness to gentle sensitivity. However, even this sophisticated model faces challenges in fully explaining the *why* behind the social valuation of these performances. While it incorporates a relational axis, its core strength remains in analyzing the texture of individual practice. It does not fully replace the systemic, institutional critique of power

that is central to Connell's framework. For example, *Gang-Rou* can effectively describe a character's "soft" (*rou*) performance, but Connell's theory is better equipped to explain why that performance is labeled "subordinate" and becomes the target of social and political anxiety within a broader patriarchal field.

Ultimately, both Western and indigenous frameworks leave critical gaps. Western theory provides a robust language for power but lacks cultural and visual specificity. Indigenous concepts offer deep cultural roots but are often too abstract and lack the tools for modern power and media critique. A truly effective analytical approach cannot simply choose one over the other. It must forge a synthesis, building a bridge between the structural analysis of power and the culturally specific analysis of visual performance.

Synthesizing the Gaps and Charting a New Course

The preceding analysis of Western and indigenous Chinese masculinity theories reveals that neither framework, on its own, is sufficient for a comprehensive analysis of male images in contemporary Chinese cinema. Each possesses distinct strengths but also critical weaknesses. The key to advancing the field lies not in choosing one paradigm over the other, but in identifying the precise gaps that emerge when they are applied to modern visual texts. This synthesis reveals a tripartite deficit—a combined failure in cultural adaptability, visual-analytical specificity, and modern power critique.

A Tripartite Deficit: Culture, Visuality, and Power

First, a significant cultural gap persists. Western frameworks, particularly Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, offer a powerful and universally relevant language for discussing power and social hierarchy (Connell, 2005). However, as a model developed primarily from Euro-American contexts, its categories can feel imposed when applied to a Chinese social fabric woven with different threads. Ideals such as the Confucian *junzi* (gentleman-scholar) or the intricate balance of *wen* (civil) and *wu* (martial) qualities do not map neatly onto the Western hegemonic ideal, which is historically tied to bourgeois and nationalist values(Hird, 2017; Mosse, 1996). Applying the Western lens without significant adaptation risks flattening these cultural nuances and misinterpreting the specific anxieties that fuel China's "masculinity crisis" (Louie, 2014).

Second, and perhaps most critically for a field focused on cinema, is the deficit in visual-analytical specificity. A theory of masculinity for film studies must be able to engage directly with the *language of film*. It needs to explain not just *that* a character embodies a certain type of masculinity, but *how* this identity is constructed visually through camerawork, lighting, costume, and performance. Connell's sociological framework, for all its structural power, lacks a specific toolkit for this kind of visual deconstruction. Conversely, indigenous concepts like *Yin-Yang* are so philosophically abstract that connecting them to concrete cinematic techniques—like a jump cut or a close-up—is methodologically difficult. They describe a state of being, not a process of visual construction(Song, 2010). The field lacks a dedicated framework, akin to

Mulvey's (1975) early work on the gaze, that can systematically link the visual representation of male bodies to their social meaning.

Finally, there is a clear deficit in the analysis of modern power. Traditional Chinese concepts, rooted in ancient philosophy and dynastic social orders, are not equipped to critique the forms of power that regulate gender in the 21st century. They cannot adequately account for the disciplinary force of state media campaigns against *niang pao* or the market logic of consumer capitalism that simultaneously produces and profits from "feminized" male idols(Yang, 2010). While Western critical theory is much stronger here, its focus on class and patriarchy can sometimes overshadow the unique role of the authoritarian state in shaping gender norms in China. Even Fang Gang's (2009) more modern *Gang-Rou* model, which adeptly analyzes individual practice, does not fully supplant the need for a framework that can critique power at a systemic, institutional level—a domain where Connell's work still excels. The challenge is to analyze power not just as a historical patriarchal structure, but as a dynamic interplay of state control, market forces, and global cultural flows.

The Call for an Integrated Framework

These three interconnected gaps—in culture, visuality, and power—demonstrate the clear need for a new analytical approach. A critical review of the existing literature should not end in a simple critique; it must point the way forward. The future of masculinity studies in the context of Chinese cinema requires the development of a synthesized framework that can bridge these divides. The framework must be deeply embedded in cultural contexts. It should move beyond the simplistic binary of "West versus East" by fostering a two-way dialogue. Western theoretical tools for analyzing power can be employed to critically examine Chinese cultural traditions, while Chinese cultural concepts can, in turn, offer important refinements to Western theories. Such a model should be able to address the global structures of patriarchy while also capturing the specific historical and social dynamics unique to China.

Second, the framework must be inherently and systematically attuned to the visual nature of cinema. It cannot rely solely on textual or narrative analysis, but must be specifically designed with the formal properties of film in mind. This requires developing a set of analytical concepts that directly engage with the unique language of cinema, including elements such as framing, composition, lighting, color palettes, sound design, editing rhythms, and performance styles. The framework's vocabulary must enable researchers to move beyond plot and character development to interrogate how meaning is constructed through the smallest visual and auditory details. In particular, it should offer tools to critically examine how masculinity is visually encoded — how it is rendered powerful, vulnerable, dominant, or passive through on-screen aesthetics. This attention to the sensual and affective dimensions of cinematic representation is essential for understanding how gendered identities are not just narrated, but performed and embodied in ways that elicit emotional and ideological responses from audiences.

Finally, the framework must possess a heightened sensitivity to contemporary

configurations of power. It must be capable of analyzing the complex interplay between state institutions, market dynamics, and the rapidly evolving sphere of digital media culture. Today, the circulation of images, particularly those related to gender and national identity, is shaped not only by traditional cinematic industries but also by online platforms, social media algorithms, and globalized cultural flows. A robust framework must account for how these forces converge to produce and regulate particular masculine images, explaining why certain representations become flashpoints for public anxiety, moral debates, and state intervention. Moreover, it must establish a clear connection between the micro-politics of on-screen portrayals — the ways individuals are visually and narratively constructed — and the macro-politics of national governance, ideological dissemination, and mechanisms of social control. Only by bridging these scales can scholars fully grasp the stakes involved in the visual construction of masculinity in contemporary Chinese cinema and media.

Developing such a comprehensive model lies beyond the immediate scope of this review. However, by outlining these key requirements, this article aims to lay essential groundwork for future research. It highlights the urgent need for a theoretical framework that not only bridges Western and Chinese critical traditions but also responds to contemporary socio-cultural complexities. The next crucial step is to design a multi-layered methodology that systematically integrates textual analysis with detailed examination of audiovisual style, while remaining firmly grounded in a critical understanding of China's distinctive historical, political, and cultural conditions. Such an approach would move scholarship beyond surface-level description and provide the analytical tools necessary for a deeper, more critical engagement with the constructions of masculinity in Chinese cinema.

Conclusion

This critical review began by observing the heightened cultural anxiety surrounding the visual representation of manhood in contemporary China. Through detailed analysis, it has become evident that the dominant theoretical lenses currently available—whether rooted in established Western paradigms or in traditional Chinese concepts—are insufficient to fully capture the intricacies of this phenomenon. By critically navigating the promises and limitations of these frameworks, this paper has revealed a persistent disconnect between social theory, cultural context, and cinematic form. This gap has produced a notable analytical void, leaving scholars without the necessary conceptual tools to explain how contested masculine figures, such as the heroic soldier or the "feminized" idol, are constructed and why they hold such significant cultural weight.

The primary contribution of this article, therefore, is not to propose a definitive new theory, but rather to systematically chart the contours of this theoretical absence. It identifies a tripartite deficit in the existing scholarship, drawing attention to shortcomings in cultural adaptability, visual-analytical method, and the critique of contemporary power relations. In mapping these gaps, this review functions as both a critique and a call to action. It underscores the dangers of applying universalist theories without sufficient attention to local contexts and simultaneously highlights the

limitations of relying exclusively on historical or traditional philosophies to interpret modern media phenomena. The case study of masculinity in Chinese cinema presented here thus carries broader implications, serving as a caution against theoretical insularity and encouraging a more integrated and dynamic approach to cross-cultural gender and media studies.

Moving forward, the scholarly community must take concrete steps beyond critique toward constructive theoretical innovation. Future research needs to develop a multi-layered methodology that combines textual analysis with a close reading of audiovisual style, all while maintaining a critical sensitivity to China's evolving socio-political realities. This methodology must also remain flexible enough to account for rapid changes in media production and consumption, particularly in the age of digital platforms and global cultural flows. Ultimately, the goal is to foster a more rigorous analytical practice capable of linking screen aesthetics to deeper currents of social anxiety, political regulation, and cultural identity formation. Only through such an approach can we move beyond surface-level debates and initiate a more profound and sustained conversation about the shifting meanings of manhood in 21st-century China, both in cinematic representation and in broader social discourse.

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