

CHAPTER 1: Expectations - “Good” Men and Ideal Chinese Masculinity

“*There are three things which are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them.*”²⁷
-Mencius 4th century BCE (as cited in Li & Jankowiak, 2016, p. 189)

To a great extent, Chinese society is organized around the concept of family, where every individual is embedded in an extended network of hierarchical relationships based on blood and marriage (Ebrey, 1993). Filial piety²⁸ remains a central moral value, and for men, fatherhood has traditionally been the defining responsibility of achieving full virtuous manhood (Evans, 2008; Greenhalgh, 2012; 2015; Ikels, 2004; Louie, 2015). In this moral framework, men are expected to become *nanzi han*²⁹, a term used to describe a “real man,” who fulfills his duties to both family and society. Ancient Confucian teachings emphasized the duty to produce descendants, as the well-known quote above illustrates, and contemporary social and state structures continue to reinforce this obligation.

Singleness in this context is not only a social or demographic condition but a moral failure in the eyes of society. To remain unmarried and childless challenges the deeply held Confucian ideal that a man must achieve *junzi*,³⁰ or “virtuous personhood,” by fulfilling his responsibilities to family and future generations. Millennia later, the modern Chinese man continues to be held to these expectations. A mid-20th-century propaganda poster titled *Happy Family*, captures how these enduring messages persist (see Figure 15). The father hangs his hat as though returning from work, a symbolic act that affirms his role as the provider of his multigenerational family.

²⁷ 不孝有三無後為大 (bùxiào yǒusān wú hòu wéi dà) - literally “three unfilial behaviors: no descendants is the largest.”

²⁸ 孝 (xiào) - “filial piety,” a Confucian virtue emphasizing deep respect, obedience and care for one’s family, encompassing duties to provide for them, uphold family honor and ensure family legacy

²⁹ 男子汉 (nánzihàn) - literary “brave man”, but used to denote the idea of a “real man”

³⁰ 君子 (jūnzǐ) - “virtuous” personhood, also used to mean “gentleman”



Figure 15. Chinese propaganda poster titled “Happy Family”³¹ depicts a multigenerational household with a couple, three children, and two grandparents (presumably his parents). The father of the family hangs his hat as if returning from a day of work, suggesting his role as provider. Artist and date unknown. (circa 1950-70). <https://www.commonprogram.science/art41.html>

By framing singleness as a moral issue, this chapter examines the social expectations of “good” Chinese men and the qualities that constitute ideal masculinity, with particular attention to marriage. I argue that lifelong singleness remains largely unthinkable for most men in mainland China because it violates both social and moral codes. Singleness is thus deeply tied to questions of virtue, status, and the fulfillment of moral familial duty.

As Xuan Li & William Jankowiak (2014) observe, although masculinity in China has changed considerably over the last century, what remains is that its constructions are relational, and always shaped and correlated to femininity. The two categories are in a constant dance, shifting and redefining each other over time. Despite the immense political and social transformations of the past hundred years, contemporary ideals of what constitutes a “good” Chinese man remain deeply rooted in ancient moral traditions. What has changed are the ways these values are enacted, which now intersect with modern legal frameworks, economic pressures, and shifting social expectations.

I begin with David Gilmore’s (1990) theory of the “Three P’s” of manhood (providing, protecting, and procreating), before turning to classical Confucian ideals of masculinity, which position men

³¹ 幸福的家庭 (xìngfú de jiātíng) - literally “happiness of family”

in relation to the family. Both frameworks emphasize that manhood must be actively achieved through performance (see Butler, 1990), rather than assumed by birthright (see Rosaldo, 1974). I then examine earlier Chinese philosophical traditions of *wen* (learned or cultivated masculinity) and *wu* (martial or physical masculinity), which highlight the role of class in shaping expectations of manhood. Together, these theories provide the groundwork for understanding how male virtue is stratified and enacted in different social contexts.

To illustrate these dynamics, I draw on Chinese artwork, propaganda posters, ethnographic interviews, and social media discourse to better understand how these various theories overlap. Propaganda posters are especially rich because they provide great insight into state-sponsored ideology that depicts everyday life, while also being extremely legible to audiences of mixed literacy (Bislev, 2015; Landsberger, 2018). I then move on to present two contrasting case studies of Chinese masculinity across class lines. The first examines Jason, an unmarried university professor who does not yet consider himself to have achieved full manhood, but whose self-presentation aligns with the ideals of *wen* masculinity through his scholarly accomplishments, mentorships, and cultivation of social respect. The second focuses on Dong Zhimin, a working-class man who gained national attention on Chinese social media for embodying the hallmarks of *wu* masculinity through his physical labor, provision for his family, and public display of moral integrity, despite material hardship. Juxtaposing these two cases within the context of Confucian ideologies, the 3Ps, and *wen/wu* dynamics reveals how Chinese men navigate the social imperatives of marriage and what these negotiations disclose about broader cultural anxieties surrounding male singleness.

Three P's of Manhood

In the Chinese context, both virtue and manhood are achieved through action rather than inherited by birth. This understanding aligns with Michelle Rosaldo's (1974) discussion of the widespread belief that manhood must be taught and earned, while womanhood is assumed to develop naturally (p. 25). Rosaldo's argument builds on Sherry Ortner's (1974) classic essay, which frames men as belonging to the cultural and public world, while women, because of their biological role in reproduction and childcare, are associated with nature (p. 71-83). Within this worldview, girls are thought to mature into women organically, whereas boys must undergo training, endurance, and ritual to become men (Rosaldo, 1974, p. 26). Though Rosaldo and Ortner critique this gendered binary, their descriptions of this common ideology helps illustrate how manhood is constructed in Chinese society.

In this framework, masculinity is something that must be continually proven through trials of action. Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep famously describes the symbolic process of initiation as one in which a boy "dies" and is "reborn" as a man (1960 [125], as cited in Gilmore 1990, p. 124). This transformation is not achieved through a single moment of transition, but rather through a series of ongoing trials that test a man's moral and social worth (Fausto-Sterling, 1997; Gilmore, 1990; Gutmann, 1997). As La Fontaine (1986) notes, these tests of manhood are performed "very publicly" and "very critically" to ensure their social legitimacy (p. 164).

Building on this tradition, Gilmore (1990) identifies three near-universal expectations that men must fulfill to be recognized as masculine: providing, protecting, and procreating. These "Three

P's" of manhood are relational, meaning they gain meaning through interactions with others, especially women and family members. In China, these roles often converge within the institution of marriage, which serves as the primary arena where masculine virtue is performed and validated.

Similar to Connell (2005), Gilmore emphasizes that masculinity is precarious, requiring constant testing through "challenges and trials" (p. 57). While he acknowledges exceptions, Gilmore concludes that most societies evaluate men based on these three core roles. This theory has been widely critiqued (Anderson, 2009; Gutman, 1997; Pascoe, 2007), yet helpful for understanding contemporary Chinese debates. The moralized ideals of Chinese masculinity, often grounded in Confucian thought, map closely onto Gilmore's formulation, particularly the expectations that men provide for their families, protect social stability, and procreate to continue ancestral lineage. In the sections that follow, I explore how these expectations manifest in Chinese society and intersect with female identities to shape contemporary understandings of "good" masculinity.

Provider

Across cultures, manhood is often understood as something that must be demonstrated through acts of provision. In many societies, this begins with the ability to provide sustenance. While women also contribute to household subsistence, David Gilmore (1990) notes that men often assume responsibility for hunting, a task imbued with both physical and symbolic risk (p. 117). He argues that this division of labor allows men to test and publicly perform masculinity since "hunting involves not only danger but also risk—to both body and reputation—because hunting is a contest of wills in which there is always a winner and a loser" (p. 120). In the societies he studies, the transition to manhood is often marked by this shift from dependency to contribution. Among the !Kung of the Kalahari, a boy becomes a man when he is expected to "provide rather than consume" meat (p.168). Provision, therefore, is both material and moral in that it is a public demonstration of worth and reliability.



Figure 16. A propaganda poster depicts a Chinese family at an apple orchard where the man carries a large bag of apples that he presumably picked, positioning himself as a provider. The man's labor results in food for both his wife and child, as well as his in-laws, as the painting is titled "Returning to a Married Woman's Parents' Home." Artists: Feng Guozhu and Li Zemin (1983). <https://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1983-001>

In China, providership carries similar symbolic weight, but it is often expressed through labor and financial contribution rather than hunting. A propaganda poster from 1983 (see Figure 16) offers a clear visual example. Created during the time of the OCP, the image depicts a small family of three visiting an apple orchard. The father, carrying a heavy sack of freshly picked apples, embodies the role of provider. His wife, holding their child, smiles approvingly as the child holds an apple with one hand and reaches out to tenderly touch his father's face with the other. The title, *Returning to a Married Woman's Parents' Home*, reinforces the relational structure of

providership as the man's labor will nourish not only the nuclear family he created but his extended kinship network as well.

Provision, however, is not limited to food. Under contemporary capitalism, labor is exchanged for money, and masculine worth is often measured through financial stability. Gilmore (1990) observes that "manhood is measured at least partly in money, a man's only direct way of nourishing children. Manhood, then, as call to action, can be interpreted as a kind of moral compunction to provision kith and kin" (p. 44). Similarly, John Davis (1977) argues that performances of masculinity, such as providing, protecting and procreating, are deeply tied to economic resources because "feeding the family, looking after women, maintaining a following, can be done more easily when the family is not poor" (as cited in Gilmore 1990, p. 44).

The association between manhood and economic responsibility is further illustrated in the mid-twentieth-century propaganda image discussed earlier in this chapter (see Figure 15). Returning to that image, we see the man returning from work, hanging his hat and jacket up as his family gathers to greet him. The scene portrays him as the sole financial provider for six dependents, including three children, his wife, and two elderly parents. Material signs of success, such as a bicycle and a radio, two of the "four big items"³² that symbolized middle-class aspirations during the Cultural Revolution, signal that he fulfills his duty as a capable provider.

While economic structures and gender roles have evolved, the link between providership and moral manhood remains deeply ingrained in Chinese society. In contemporary China, a man's ability to provide continues to define his worth both as a husband and as a potential marriage partner (Keimig, 2021; Louie, 2016; Xiao, 2011). As discussed in later chapters, many men describe reaching adulthood only when they are able to earn and provide for others, echoing the !Kung notion of maturity as the shift from consuming to providing. For unmarried men, this expectation can become a burden. Their inability to perform providership, due to job insecurity, rising costs of living, or lack of access to single women, often renders them morally suspect or socially incomplete. Thus, providership is not merely an economic act but a key moral performance through which Chinese men negotiate their gendered and social legitimacy.

Protector

In many societies, including China, achieving manhood requires demonstrating the ability to protect. Protection can involve physical strength, courage, and mental resilience. Maureen Giovanni, who studies gender roles in the Mediterranean, observes that a man is defined by "strength, power, and cunning necessary to protect his woman" (1987, as cited in Gilmore 1990, p. 48). Gilmore expands this definition, arguing that protecting requires both taking risks and working hard to support one's family (p. 176). Courage is central to this concept as he notes that "a real man must be out-of-doors among men, facing others, and staring them down" (p. 51). Men may need to fight physically to defend their family, tribe, or community, but protection also extends to defending against nature, such as confronting wild animals, controlling fire, or building shelter (p. 120).

³² 四大件 (sì dà jiàn) - "Four Big Items," a term originally applied to the four symbols of material success in China from the 1950s until the 1970s, which included a sewing machine, a bicycle, a watch, and a radio.

Mental strength is equally important. Gilmore emphasizes that “real men” are bold and courageous, assert themselves in any challenge (p. 16), demonstrate moral courage (p. 44), and loyalty to family and social groups (p. 46). Protective acts require not only bravery but also restraint and strategic judgement (p. 46). A man must know when to act with force and when to control their impulses. Thus, both courage and wisdom contribute to being recognized as a man within many societies.

In China, these ideals of protection are visible in representations of military service. Military service is technically mandatory, though it is rarely enforced due to the large pool of eligible men and the high reliance on volunteer enlistment (People’s Republic of China, 2021). Service demonstrates both physical and mental strength and provides a clear example of the skills expected of men.

A propaganda poster from 1964 illustrates the expectations of man as protectors (see Figure 17). Created between the *Great Leap Forward* (1958 -1962) and the *Cultural Revolution* (1966 - 1976), during what is known as the *Rustication of Urban Youth* campaign (1962- 1965),³³ the image depicts a family sending their son to serve in the People’s Liberation Army (Seybolt, 1975). The family appears proud, smiling at the young man as a parade passes outside their window. The father hands the son a book, symbolizing the importance of mental as well as physical strength. Pinned to the father’s shirt are three military medals, suggesting he has also endured the demands of protecting his country. Because military service generally occurs between the ages of 18 and 22, the young man depicted is likely unmarried and is primarily protecting his natal family (as well as his country). The skills he will acquire are expected to be applied later to protect his own wife and children, linking protection directly to the responsibilities of married manhood.

³³ A precursor to the *Down to the Countryside Movement* (上山下乡运动) of 1968-1980



Figure 17. Propaganda poster depicting a family as they see their son off to the military. The painting is titled “Sending Off One’s Son to Join the Army.”³⁴ Artist: Chen Qiang 陈强. (1964). <https://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1964-011>

Procreator

The last of Gilmore’s (1990) Three P’s is that of procreation. Across societies, manhood is often measured by a man’s ability to sire children. Gilmore emphasizes that successful “procreation” extends beyond sexual activity. He argues that for young men, sexual experience can serve as a way to test their “competence,” but adulthood and full manhood are typically recognized through

³⁴ 送子参军 (sòng zǐ cānjūn) - literally “send child to military”

fathering children and continuing lineage (p. 41). In many societies, large families are seen as demonstrations of masculinity (p. 16). Historically, this was also true in China, where fathering multiple children was a way to establish one's manhood and ensure the continuation of the family line, a value deeply rooted in the importance of male heirs (Mann, 2011; Sommer, 2015; Zurndorfer, 2016).

In some societies, the priority of fathering children sometimes extended beyond a single marriage, or marriage at all. Gilmore offers the example of Trukese men, who father children outside of marriage to expand their social lineages (Marshall, 1979, as cited in Gilmore 1990, p. 74). Having multiple wives or partners could signal extraordinary social and reproductive capacity, demonstrating a man's ability to manage multiple burdensome social relationships simultaneously (Caughey 1970, as cited in Gilmore, 1990, p. 74). In China, similar practices historically reflected the imperative to produce male heirs, though modern legal frameworks prohibit concubinage and limit family size.

Before the OCP, large families were still a marker of manhood in China. A 1955 propaganda poster titled *Helping Mama Do Work* illustrates these expectations (see Figure 18). The image shows a mother washing clothes outdoors while her children perform gendered labor. Her eldest son carries water to her in the background, while the eldest daughter is seen indoors taking care of the two younger siblings. The father is absent, implying that his role is primarily to impregnate his wife and provide for the family economically rather than participate in daily child-rearing. This visual reinforces the idea that fatherhood and masculinity are linked to reproductive capability and the ability to sustain a family rather than hands-on childcare.



Figure 18. Propaganda poster depicting a mother and her four children. The father is absent, likely working outside the home while his wife cares for the children. The text reads “Helping Mama Do Work.”³⁵ Artist: Wei Yingzhou. (1955). <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e16-26>

As discussed above, masculinity is an ongoing performance that is reaffirmed through a series of actions that define manhood. These trials are often enacted in relation to women within a family network, often the wife. The ability to provide, protect, and procreate demonstrates a man’s social and moral status. While specific expressions of the Three P’s vary across cultures, they remain visible in Chinese society both historically, and today. I argue that this framework corresponds closely with Confucianism, which continues to shape expectations of Chinese men. In the next section, we will examine how ancient Confucian philosophies map onto Gilmore’s 3P’s and continue to inform masculine obligations in contemporary China.

Confucian Roles for Men

In China, prevailing ideas of what it is to be a good man are measured by how well one fulfills certain familial and social roles. Many of these roles are rooted in Confucian ideals articulated in *The Analects*,³⁶ which outlines the proper conduct within relationships that together sustain social harmony (Confucius, 2016 [500BCE]). One core tenet of a virtuous life is the practice of filial

³⁵ 帮妈妈做事 (Bāng māmā zuòshì) - literally “help mama do things”

³⁶ 论语 (Lúnyǔ) - “The Analects,” the most famous text of Confucius. Written around 500 BCE.

piety, often considered the basis of “human goodness.”³⁷ Filial piety refers to reverence for one’s family expressed through respect, obedience, and care for parents, elders, and ancestors (Ebrey, 1993; Higgins et al., 2013; Ikels, 2004). Confucius regarded the performance of filial rituals³⁸ as essential to being a good family member and therefore a virtuous person (Ebrey, 1993, p. 55).

Although Mao’s government sought to dismantle Confucian moral hierarchies during the *Cultural Revolution* (Ikels, 2024, p. 12), Confucianism has reemerged as a moral compass in contemporary Chinese society (De Bary, 2014; Hammond & Richey, 2015; Rošker, 2016). As a result, many ideas about what makes a “good man” today still draw from a moral framework written over two millennia ago.

Confucius (551–479 BCE) viewed society as a web of hierarchical relationships, each defined by reciprocity and obligation. These relationships were later formalized in the *Doctrine of the Mean*³⁹ as five key dynamics: (1) sovereigns and ministers, (2) parents and children, (3) husbands and wives, (4) elder siblings and young siblings, and (5) elder and younger friends (Keimig, 2021, p. 32). Three of these relationships are familial, emphasizing that moral cultivation begins with the natal family. Therefore, Chinese men’s virtue is largely assessed by how they enact filial piety throughout the life course, first as a good son, then as a good husband, and finally as a good father (Cao, 2021, p. 31).

Each of these relational roles corresponds to Gilmore’s (1990) three domains of manhood: provision, protection, and procreation. The following sections focus on the practices associated with the three life stages, beginning with the virtuous son. There, we will explore how the 3P’s express moral virtue and how they continue to shape expectations of good masculinity in China today.

The Virtuous Son

A man’s first opportunity to demonstrate virtue is through his conduct as a filial son. Much like the idea of “original sin” in Judeo-Christian traditions, in Confucian thought, “each person is born with ‘original debt’ to their parents for their ‘gift of life’” (Keimig, 2021, p. 38). A son repays this debt through a lifetime of moral behavior and service. This obligation is summarized in the *Classic of Filial Piety*, where Confucius said that “a filial son reveres them in daily life; he makes them happy while he nourishes them; he takes anxious care of them in sickness; he shows great sorrow over their death; and he sacrifices to them with solemnity” (Chai and Chai, 1965, as cited in Ikels, 2004, p. 3). Here we see a direct link to Gilmore’s framework of providership and protection through nourishment and emotional care.

In *The Analects*, Confucius (2016 [500 BCE]) instructs:

“a youth, when at home, should be filial, and, abroad, respectful to his elders. He should be earnest and truthful. He should overflow in love to all, and cultivate the

³⁷ 仁 (*rén*, or sometimes romanized as “*jen*”) - “benevolence,” or basic human goodness (Ebrey, 1993, p. 55)

³⁸ 礼 (*rei*, or sometimes romanized as “*li*”) - “rituals” that function as expressions of gratitude.

³⁹ 中庸 (*zhōngyōng*) - “The Doctrine of Mean”, a portion of *The Analects*

friendship of the good. When he has time and opportunity, after the performance of these things, he should employ them in polite studies.” (Book I: p. 6)

Filial piety, then, is both a private moral practice and a public social duty performed through conduct that reflects one’s upbringing and family values.

During childhood, a son’s provisions are largely symbolic. He provides respect, obedience, and loyalty, which some scholars identified as the core expression of Confucian virtue (Ebrey, 1990; Ikels, 2004). As Confucius wrote, “Give your mother and father nothing to worry about beyond your physical well-being.”(Confucius, 2016 [500 BCE], as cited in Higgins et al., 2013, p. 35). Mencius (372-289 BCE), the most famous disciple of Confucius teachings, reinforced this idea, writing that “when one does not please one’s parents, one cannot be a man; when one is not obedient to one’s parents, one cannot be a son.” (Mencius, as cited in Higgins et al., 2013, p. 38). In this sense, manhood itself is contingent on filial behavior.

As the son matures, his responsibilities expand. He contributes to the family’s social mobility through education and career success. These acts both demonstrate providership and bring honor to his parents (Ebrey, 1990, p. 61). Much like the American ideal of “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps,” Confucius thought that equates family advancement with virtue achieved through diligence and discipline.

Later in life, a virtuous son's provisions become more tangible. A virtuous son supports his aging parents financially and physically (Keimig, 2004). Even after their deaths, his duty continues through ritual offerings that maintain ancestral honor and continuity (Ebrey, 1990; King & Stone, 2010; Spencer & Barrett, 1948; Watson, 1988). In short, providership is not a temporary obligation but a lifelong expectation for the filial son.

Protection is another central obligation. A good son protects his family both physically and socially. In childhood, he shields his family and siblings’ honor through respectful behavior (Keimig, 2021, p. 32). Confucius even instructs that a child must “go to great extremes to protect and defend his or her parent no matter how the parent treats the child” (as cited in Higgins et al., 2013, p. 38), reflecting the moral hierarchy that places parental authority above individual well-being.

This moral logic is visualized in propaganda art. A 1953 poster titled *Honor Elders, Cherish the Young, in Harmony and Unity*, depicts a man holding his child as his wife covers his elderly mother with a blanket Figure 19. The scene communicates that a son fulfills his virtue through both his own actions and those of his wife, whose caregiving extends his filial duty. As we will see in Chapter 3, because of this expectation of care, the chemistry between a mother-in-law (MIL) and her daughter-in-law (DIL) is an important part of partner selection for single men and their parents, but also one of the biggest fears single women hold about getting married, as we will see in Chapter 5.



Figure 19. Propaganda poster depicting a family taking care of an elderly mother. The man holds his child, while his wife wraps a blanket around the elderly woman. The text reads “Honor Elders, Cherish the Young, in Harmony and Unity.”⁴⁰ Artist Tao Mouji (1953). <https://chineseposters.net/themes/elderly>

Finally, the virtuous son must procreate to secure the family lineage. In order to enact this performance of masculinity, he must marry a woman from a well-regarded family (Sun, 2012; Wong, 2016). Without a wife, the man risks what Mencius considers “the greatest unfilial act,” which, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is “to have no posterity,” dishonoring both his parents and his ancestors (Ikels, 2004, p. 3). Producing children, especially sons, ensures the continuation of the family name and guarantees ancestral veneration after death (Gui, 2016, p. 1929). But again, all of this hinges on the man’s ability to find a wife.

⁴⁰ 尊敬長輩愛護晚輩和睦團結 (zūnjìng zhǎngbèi àihù wǎnbèi hé mù tuánjié) - literally “respect elders, love the younger generation, and live in harmony and unity”

For families without descendants, the absence of filial ritual care in the afterlife is deeply distressing. Manninen (2019) recounts a father lamenting that if his only son dies without marrying, “maybe the other graves will be swept, but not mine or my wife’s. It is a sign that indicates which of the deceased are valued and cared for” (p. 139). Here, moral worth and masculine virtue are inseparable from reproduction and care. The inability to marry and produce descendants threatens both a man’s status and his family’s honor, even within the spirit realm.

The Virtuous Husband

The second, and I argue the most important, relationship through which a man can demonstrate virtue is as a husband. While Confucius clearly emphasized filial piety as central to manhood, scholars debate which relationship best reflects this virtue in action. As noted earlier, Sinologists such as Charlotte Ikels (2004) and Patricia Ebrey (1990) identify the parent-child bond as the cornerstone of filial duty and social order. Yet, interpretations of the text vary, and are seemingly shaped by the disciplines of the scholars writing about them. I admit that I am likely also guilty of this prioritization of relationships, as my interest is in marriage, which centers on the relationships with the wife. Similarly, Chinese historian Susan L. Mann (2011), who focuses on gendered conduct, highlights spousal dynamics as the central relationship. Mann writes “the husband-wife relationship at the center of the human social order” and that “the way of the gentleman in its simplest element is found in the husband-wife relation” (p. 19). From this perspective, the virtuous husband is not simply one who fulfills moral duties, but one whose conduct actively sustains the moral fabric of the household, and by extension, society itself.

Interestingly, *The Analects* provides little instruction regarding a husband’s behavior towards his wife. While expectations of virtuous wives are clearly articulated in later Confucian texts, the duties of husbands remain largely implicit. Mencius, for instance, advised that marriage should be based on duty rather than “youthful passion,” emphasizing rational partnership over romantic attachment (Mann, 2011, p. 40). Yet this advice offers little about the day-to-day moral expectations of husbands, suggesting that male virtue was assumed rather than prescribed. The lack of textual guidance complicates efforts to link Confucian ethics directly to Gilmore’s framework of providership and protections, although some clues can be deduced about procreation. For insight into these traits, we must turn to historical and contemporary social expectations of “good men” instead.

Historically, a wife’s conduct was often viewed as a direct reflection of her husband’s virtue. During the Qing era, a virtuous husband maintained moral authority within his household. A woman “out of control” was believed to signal her husband’s failure to embody proper moral strength (Man, 2011, p. 73). This notion reinforced Confucian hierarchies where husbands were superior to their wives and thus responsible for regulating their behavior. The focus, however, remained on the husband’s ability to control rather than on cultivating mutual respect or companionship. This imbalance continues to shape the moral landscape of marriage today, especially as single men navigate shifting gender norms.

By contrast, wives received clear behavioral prescriptions. Fidelity to one’s husband was a central virtue for women, while male infidelity was tolerated so long as it was discreet (Louie, 2016, p. 29). Concubinage and keeping of mistresses functioned historically as a symbol of masculine

status and achievement (Gao, 2003; Xiao, 2011; Zurndorfer, 2016). As Bret Hinsch puts it, “male sexual fidelity to a wife was prized, but not obligatory” (2007, as cited in Louie, 2016, p. 16). This double standard reflected the patriarchal assumption that male virtue was not tied to sexual exclusivity but to his ability to maintain public order and fulfill his filial obligations (Mann, 2011, p. 91). In Confucian logic, a man’s reputation rested less on his romantic loyalty and more on his capacity to sustain the lineage and provide for his dependents.

The emphasis on procreation connects directly to Confucian ideas of filial piety. The continuation of the family line was not merely a personal desire but a moral obligation to one’s ancestors. Failure to produce an heir was viewed as the greatest act of unfilial conduct (Li & Jankowiak, 2014, p. 189). As such, a husband’s role as procreator was an essential test of virtue. Even when children were conceived outside of marriage, they could be integrated into the patrilineal line, reaffirming that a man’s primary moral duty was to his lineage rather than to his wife (Zurndorfer, 2016). My interviews with single men and women echo this enduring expectation. Many participants noted that after marriage, a couple was expected to conceive within the first year. If a pregnancy did not occur, parental anxiety would mount, signaling that a husband’s virtue, and his masculinity, was in question.

Likely due to the importance of continuing the family lineage, public opinion on male fidelity has varied throughout Chinese history. It wasn’t until the marriage laws of the PRC in the mid-20th century that monogamy and men’s sexual exclusivity to their wives were legally mandated (Davis, 2014; Zurndorfer, 2016). Even today, despite state discouragement, the practice of men maintaining extramarital relationships persists, especially among elite men. According to anthropologist Suowei Xiao (2011), having a “second wife” has once again become a status symbol among China’s wealthiest men, so long as they meet their filial obligations to their legal wives, children, and parents. As Xiao writes, these men “demonstrate their financial achievement to other men by acquiring ‘second wives’ whom they provide with apartments and other forms of remuneration” (p. 614). This illustrates that legality and moral standards are not always synonymous. A man can be seen as a symbolical virtuous husband by traditional metrics, while technically violating civic law.

Male virtue within marriage also depended heavily on providership. Roseann Lake (2018) notes that unmarried men in China today face tremendous pressure to own property and demonstrate financial stability before marriage (p. 15). This echoes Confucian ideals of responsibility and self-mastery, but within a capitalist framework. As one matchmaking participant in Gui’s (2016) study remarked, “if a single man doesn’t have his own property, it’s impossible for him to find someone” (p. 1940). Financial capability signals moral maturity and the ability to protect and provide. Such expectations shape contemporary dating, where economic readiness often substitutes for emotional or relational compatibility (see Chapters 3 and 5). For many single men, these material expectations become barriers to achieving marriage and by extension, recognition as virtuous adults.

Protection, the third pillar of Gilmore’s framework, also extends into Confucian notions of care. Although ancient texts rarely discuss how husbands should protect their wives, Confucian values of responsibility imply a duty to safeguard their family. Historically, this protection meant physical control by keeping women cloistered from public life and male strangers (Mann, 2011, p. 37). In

modern contexts, protection has come to include financial security and increasing emotional care. Many single women I interviewed emphasized the importance of empathy, patience, and emotional intelligence in a potential husband. One of my participants explained her expectations in this way:

[A good man] should be the tree and give you the protection. He should be more stable. I mean, in the mind, also in the body. He is expected to provide some emotional support for the woman because sometimes women are more vulnerable.

The affective qualities of this quote reflect what Li & Jankowiak (2014) describe as the “decline of the chauvinistic model of Chinese masculinity.” Lang (2014) traces this transformation back to the “New Man” movement of the 1920s, when Chinese men were encouraged to adopt gentler and more emotionally expressive masculinities. The rise of these expectations marks a shift from hierarchical obligation to relational virtue.

Although Confucian texts do not provide a detailed manual for husbands, centuries of interpretation and adaptation have produced a living moral framework for understanding male virtue in marriage. This framework continues to evolve, balancing filial duty with modern expectations of equality, emotional partnership, and self-cultivation. Yet, the persistent link between marriage and moral worth means that single men remain under pressure to prove their virtue through financial success, reproductive capacities, and emotional stability. In this sense, the “virtuous husband” remains a moral standard against which all men are measured, especially those who are unmarried. In the following section, I will examine how these masculine ideals extend beyond the spousal relationship to the children that they share, highlighting the intergenerational dimension of how the performance of good men lays the groundwork for a harmonious society.

The Virtuous Father

As discussed above, one of the final and most essential filial duties in a boy’s transition into full virtuous manhood is the act of procreation. Siring children not only ensures the continuation of the patrilineal line but also honors his parents and ancestors by securing what Louie (2016) calls “(potential) family glory” (p. 189). Fatherhood also enables a man’s wife to fulfill her own gendered duty of a virtuous woman by bearing children (Ebrey, 1993; Zhao, 1999 [100CE]). Although the conditions under which men fulfill their fatherly duties have changed with state policy and economic reform, the moral principles underlying Chinese fatherhood remain founded in Confucian thought.

Traditionally, Chinese parental roles followed a strict gendered division of labor. Mothers nurtured children’s emotional and moral development, while fathers provided material stability and financial security (Gui, 2016, p. 1925-1926). Within this structure, fathers adopted what Janowiak & Li (2014) describe as an “aloof, instrumental stance” toward their children, embodying discipline, authority, and stoic moral leadership (p. 7). This model of the father as a distant yet authoritative leader of the family reflected both Confucian ideals of patriarchal hierarchy and socialist visions of male productivity.

The One-Child Policy (1979-2015) significantly altered family relations, especially in how fathers interacted with their progeny. Anthropologist Vanessa Fong’s (2014; also see Li, 2020; Liu, 2021)

documents how fathers grew more emotionally involved with their only children as the survival and success of the entire lineage rested on a single heir. The “only hope”⁴¹ child embodied not just the future of the family but the moral project of the nation, turning fatherhood into a site of intensified emotional and moral investment.

Even after the end of the OCP (in 2015), it remains unclear whether policy reform allowing larger families will shift parenting practices. Regardless of the number of children, the father’s duty to provide remains central to his moral worth. In contemporary China, providership extends beyond ensuring basic survival to include investments in education and future success. Fong (2004) argues that parents view educational achievement as both a moral duty and a strategic investment into their own security as “parents saw academic achievement as the main route to wealth, prestige, and power for their children” (p. 90). Providing for one’s child allows a man to fulfill his filial obligation to past generations while elevating the family’s future status, thereby reinforcing the intergenerational moral economy of masculine virtue.

The expansion of private tutoring and afterschool programs reflects these evolving expectations of providership. During my time as an English teacher in Beijing in 2013, I observed how deeply fathers internalized this obligation to their children. Many of my adult students were parents who took English classes themselves to support their children's education. One businessman attended my lunchtime lessons so he could help his only daughter with her English homework, thereby improving her chances of entering a prestigious high school. He studied while eating his lunch in the lobby, reviewing vocabulary lists before class. His quiet determination to improve himself for his daughter’s sake reflected an emerging form of paternal virtue that merges economic productivity with educational involvement and moral responsibility.

Beyond providing materially and intellectually, a virtuous Chinese father must also protect his children. Much like a virtuous husband protects his wife, a “good” father ensures physical safety, access to healthcare, and a stable home environment for his family. Many of the fathers and elderly men I encountered during fieldwork emphasized health and security as central concerns. Mr. Liu, a man in his late sixties whom I met at a marriage market in Wuhan, expressed deep anxiety about his unmarried nephew’s future. His own son was already married, but his nephew’s orphaned status, he worried, made him less desirable to potential brides because it signaled a lack of protection. He lacked parents who could help care for a future wife and children after childbirth. Mr. Liu explained that after a woman gives birth, her in-laws, especially her MIL, play a vital role in caring for the new mother and in fact. Without these intergenerational supports, a man risks losing both wife and child in a vulnerable time. In his view, the moral responsibility to protect the family extended beyond the individual man to his natal kin.

This intergenerational concern echoes Confucius' teachings that “Parents are anxious lest their children should be sick.” (Confucius, 2016 [500BCE], Book II, Chapter 6). Confucian scholar Kathleen Higgins and her team (2013) similarly note that a parent’s moral responsibility does not end when a child reaches adulthood (p. 35). The ongoing act of worrying itself becomes a form of moral engagement and expression of enduring virtue. Mr. Liu’s care for his nephew takes on a Confucian parental concern, illustrating how paternal responsibility operates across generations, and in this case, through parallel bloodlines, binding men in an enduring cycle of moral obligation.

⁴¹ Play on the term “only child”, the title of Fong’s book (2004)

A 1954 propaganda poster titled *Chairman Mao Gave Us a Happy Life* vividly captures the ideals of the virtuous Chinese father as he demonstrates all three of Gilmore's Ps (see Figure 20). The image depicts a family of five gathered around a table for a meal, with the father seated at the center of the frame. He wears the hat of a worker (similar to the hat that the man in Figure 15), signaling his role as the primary laborer and provider. His three children symbolize his success as a procreator, while his wife serves a meal prepared from state-provided rations earned through his labor unit. Material markers of modernity, a clock and a radio (two of the "Four Big Items"), suggest the family's rising social status. The toys and books on the shelf also convey the father's ability to provide for his children's emotional and educational well-being. Above them all, a portrait of Chairman Mao looms, looking directly at the viewer. The presence of the image within an image reinforces the idea that the father's virtue derives not only from his personal effort but also from his alignment with the nation's collective father figure (see Hung, 2010; Louie, 2016). The poster's messaging equates filial piety with political loyalty, depicting virtuous fatherhood as both a private and public moral enterprise.



Figure 20. Chinese propaganda poster depicting an ideal Chinese family. Three happy children sit with their father at a dining table as their mother, his wife, serves them a meal. All eyes are on the father, while he points to the

portrait of Mao that looms about them.. The caption reads “Chairman Mao gave us a happy life.”⁴² Artist: Xin Liliang. (1954). <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e16-269>

Ultimately, the role of fatherhood is never complete. Each generation of men inherits the responsibility to provide for, protect, and perpetuate the family line. In doing so, they reaffirm a moral order in which masculine virtue is demonstrated through ongoing acts of filial care across generations. A man’s success as a father thus becomes a measure of his moral worth as a son, and hinges on his marriage to a woman. Lifelong singleness remains largely unthinking in this context, as it disrupts the moral continuum linking filial piety, masculine virtue, and the reproduction of the lineage. To remain unmarried is not only to forgo social status but to violate deeply held moral codes that define what it means to live a virtuous life.

Confucian Roles for Women (, the lack thereof)

It is important to note the relative absence of explicit rules for women in *The Analects*. This omission reflects the text’s focus on defining male morality and governance rather than outlining female conduct (Ebrey, 1993).⁴³ Later Confucian-inspired texts, such as *Nijie*,⁴⁴ attributed to Ban Zhao around 100 CE, fill this gap by specifying moral expectations for women. Written more than six centuries after *The Analects*, these works codify a gendered moral order derived from Confucian principles.

During this later period, scholars compiled existing ideas into a list known as the “Three Obediences and Four Virtues”⁴⁵ which outlines a woman’s moral obligation in relation to men as seen below (Gao, 2003, p. 116):

The “Three Obediences” required women to
1. Obey their fathers before marriage
2. Obey their husbands after marriage
3. Obey their eldest son after their husbands die
The “Four Virtues” required women to perform
(Sexual) Morality
Proper speech
Modest manner
Diligent work

Together, these expectations place women in a subordinate position to men throughout their lives, requiring them to defer to the authority of whichever men hold familial or social power at a given time. This framework effectively reduces women to “accessories and possessions” of the men in their lives (Wu, 2020, p. 183). In this moral hierarchy, female virtue was defined relationally, constructed through obedience to male virtue rather than through autonomous moral development.

⁴² 毛主席给我们的幸福生活 (Máo zhǔxí gěi wǒmen de xìngfú shēnghuó) - “Chairman Mao gave us a happy life”

⁴³ It is also worth mentioning that this text presumes a male audience, thus was written as a directive for male behavior

⁴⁴ 女戒 (*Nijie*) - “Lessons for Women”. Written by Ban Zhao in 100 CE

⁴⁵ 三从四德 (*sān cóng sì dé*) - “Three Obediences and Four Virtues”

As a result, men's moral cultivation indirectly shaped women's morality, since a woman's righteousness was measured by her compliance with male authority. As I will discuss in later chapters, I argue that this dynamic has shifted in contemporary China, where women increasingly define their own moral and social worth. This shift complicates the Confucian moral order and reshapes how men understand their own virtue in relation to women, especially within the context of marriage and singleness.

Wen and *Wu* Masculinities

The specific practices through which men pursue idealized forms of Chinese masculinity, as they are outlined by filial piety, vary according to one's social status. This was evident even in the time of Confucius. While Confucian texts articulate the foundational relationships underpinning Chinese social structure, they did not define how men are to enact their roles of providership, protection, and procreation across class divisions. The specific actions for an emperor versus a peasant, though rooted in similar morals, would differ in their practical executions. Today, as in antiquity, socioeconomic stratification compels men to perform manhood through class-contingent strategies.

As the leading scholar on contemporary Chinese masculinity, Kam Louie (2002), identifies the two "indigenous" models of masculinity that predate Confucius *wen* (文) and *wu* (武). He defines the first as those refined and intellectual qualities associated with literary artists and scholarly pursuits (p. 14). This form of masculinity was often embodied by the elite literati, typified by men who wrote poetry together as a sign of refinement and moral cultivation (ibid). Louie (2016) emphasizes that men across social strata aspired to these characteristics. The ideal *wen* man, he explains, is one whose masculinity is marked by a "reflective and scholarly life posture" (p. 17).

During the dynastic period, *wen* masculinity was cultivated through preparation for the imperial civil service exam, a test which determined a man's eligibility to serve as a government official based on merit, a key step toward official status and upward social mobility. This system institutionalized the link between education, morality, and manhood, tying intellectual refinement to Confucian virtue. In contemporary China, the examination pathway persists in new forms. Scoring high on the *gaokao*⁴⁶, entering a "985"⁴⁷ university, and subsequently securing employment in a well-paying and well-respected profession function as modern equivalents to the *wen* trajectory (Louie, 2015, p. 132). In a global context, Chinese *wen* masculinity is said to be the equivalent of "transnational business masculinity" (Connell & Wood, 2005, as cited in Chan, 2021, p. 57). Yet, as Louie and others note (See Chan, 2021; Li & Janowiak, 2014), the cultivation of *wen* masculinity still depends heavily on access to financial resources.

In the contemporary context of my fieldwork, *wen* masculinity continues to structure men's sense of self-worth and their perceived marriageability. For example, the father described in the section above on "The Virtuous Father" used his financial resources to enroll his daughter in private English classes and even took lessons himself. His actions demonstrate a class-contingent performance of masculinity, where providership involves not only economic support but also the

⁴⁶ 高考 (gāokǎo) - Chinese SAT/ACT

⁴⁷ 985 (九八五 jiǔbāwǔ) is the phrase for the top tier Chinese universities - the equivalent to the American Ivy League system

cultivation of educational capital. In this case, *wen* attributes of learning, refinement, and moral cultivation extend beyond the self and become embodied through one's progeny. Notably the father's efforts center on his daughter, suggesting that *wen* ideals have begun to transcend gender boundaries and become attainable for both sons and daughters (more on this in Chapter 5). Regardless of gender, *wen* remains deeply linked to class privilege and social mobility.

If *wen* masculinity requires financial and educational privilege, *wu* masculinity represents a more accessible, action-oriented ideal. Louie (2016) describes *wu* as the "default" form of masculinity, achievable by most men, in contrast to *wen*, which requires material resources and cultural capital (p. 187). Li & Jankowiak (2014) summarize *wu* as emphasizing physical strength, courage, and the willingness to take decisive action when necessary. Louie (2002) elaborates that *wu* encompasses the virtues of martial power, bravery, and the wisdom to know when and when not to fight (p. 14). In traditional Chinese thought, the true strength of *wu* lay not in violence itself, but in moral restraint and the protection of others, a principle consistent with Confucian ideals of virtue and harmony.

A visual representation of the *wen/wu* dialect can be seen in the Qing dynasty painting *Civil Official and Thunder God of the Celestial Palace* (see Figure 21). The painting depicts a civil official, dressed in ornate robes, holding a calm posture, representing the intellectual restraint of *wen*. His pale skin and composed demeanor reflect indoor scholarly labor and self-discipline. The Thunder God to his right, by contrast, embodies *wu* through his muscular build, dynamic stance, and readiness for action. His darker skin and tighter garments suggest outdoor, physical exertion. Together, these figures illustrate how *wen* and *wu* complement each other as dual foundations of idealized Chinese masculinity.



Figure 21. Qing dynasty painting titled *Civil Official and Thunder God of the Celestial Palace*, depicting a divine civil official and thunder god in military regalia. The official represents the wen masculine ideal, while the god represents wu manhood. Artist and date unknown. <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/42735>

This depiction of *wu* masculinity echoes Gilmore's (1990) account of *hombria* in southern Spain, where masculinity is defined by courage, loyalty, and moral restraint (p. 44-46). Similar to *wu*, *hombria* is accessible across classes, yet most clearly visible among working-class men whose masculinity is measured through labor, courage and protection. Gilmore notes that someone with *hombria* is said to "have a lot of balls" (p. 46). Both *wu* and *hombria* frameworks reveal how moral virtue is tied to physical endurance and social responsibility. As Li & Jankowiak (2014) argue, *wu*

masculinity, like *wen*, involves the ability to control one's impulses and act appropriately in context (p. 5).

The expectation of emotional restraint, as expressed, differs between *wen* and *wu* models of masculinity. This contrast is visible in how men handle public conflict. In a longitudinal study conducted between 1981 and 1987, Jankowiak observed the behavioral responses of individuals involved in bicycle accidents to see how their background affected the outcome of the interaction. Of one hundred documented incidents, not one college-educated man “responded with rage” (1993 as cited in Li & Jankowiak, 2014, p. 7). He concluded that, for these men, who likely identify with *wen* values, the “inability to control one's emotions” would result in “loss of face,”⁴⁸ which therefore incentivized de-escalation over confrontation (p. 7).

In contrast, men without higher education, therefore more likely to identify with *wu* values, tended to react with aggression and engage in more combative behavior. These divergent responses reflect class-contingent masculine ideals. For *wen*-oriented men, restraint is a moral and social virtue tied to education and refinement. For *wu*-oriented men, assertiveness or physical reaction can serve as a legitimate means of preserving dignity and demonstrating strength.

Another significant difference between *wen* and *wu* masculinity lies in their relative treatment of women. In the classical Confucian society, both models were embedded in patriarchal hierarchies that positioned women as subordinate, yet they prescribed distinct modes of male conduct (Louie, 2002; 2015). Louie (2015) notes that while both models were expected to contain their sexual and romantic desires, their attitudes towards women diverged. The *wen* men were “meant to be served by women,” reflecting the refined privilege of the literati, whereas the *wu* man was “explicitly misogynist[ic],” expressing a more aggressive and exclusionary form of dominance (p. 132).

These differences partly stem from *wen*'s association with civility and social grace, compared to *wu*'s association with physicality and ruggedness. As later chapters show, these class-based hierarchies persist in contemporary China, where higher-class men are held to standards of sophistication while working-class men are often stigmatized as vulgar or unrefined (See Chapter 2). Such distinctions continue to shape perceptions of moral worth and romantic desirability in the Chinese marriage economy.

Despite their interdependence, *masculinity* has historically been regarded as superior to *wu*. Chan (2021) notes that “*wen* was considered superior to *wu*” in Chinese antiquity (p. 56). This hierarchy reflected broader structures of class and gender power, where elite men not only occupied positions of social authority but also enjoyed greater access to women. Similar dynamics persist in the present. As class status continues to determine masculine expression, men who display *wen*-coded qualities of education, refinement, and economic success, are seen as more desirable partners (see Song, 2010).

Xiao (2011) observes that in today's market-oriented China, “businessmen and entrepreneurs have come to represent a new male ideal,” one that aligns with *wen*'s association with cultivation and success (p. 611). When men fail to meet these economic and social expectations, their lack of status is interpreted as a lack of virility, producing what Xiao calls a “masculinity crisis” (ibid). In

⁴⁸ 丢面子 (diū miànzi) - literally “to lose face” - denoting public humiliation or loss of respect

this way, *wen*'s symbolic dominance continues to define the hierarchy of manhood and structure access to marriage.

These distinctions between *wen* and *wu* masculinity are crucial for understanding the experiences of unmarried men in contemporary China. Class-based performances of manhood shape both how men see themselves as well as how they are perceived by women and their families. Men who embody *wen* ideals through education or professional success often remain desirable, while those who rely on *wu* attributes of physical labor, loyalty, and endurance, are increasingly devalued in a hypergamous marriage economy.

As will be discussed in Chapter 5, women's growing access to education and financial independence has allowed them to adopt traditionally *wen*-coded traits. However, this transformation does not necessarily lead to gender equality. Rather, as Louie (2015) argues, the revival of Confucian values, fueled by globalization, the influence of returning Chinese diaspora, and the spread of digital culture, has reinforced gendered hierarchies and revived expectations of male providership and female deference (p. 136). Within this framework, both *wen* and *wu* men continue to define their worth through their ability to provide protection and procreate, even as structural conditions make these ideals increasingly difficult to achieve.

Although *wen* and *wu* are often described as oppositional, they are best understood as complementary, interdependent qualities. Much like the yin-yang relationship, the ideal Chinese man is expected to embody both in a dynamic balance. As Li & Jankowiak (2016) note, "Chinese masculinities are now constructed with an increasing appreciation of a new synthesis that embraces a blend of *wen* and *wu*, with the context-appropriate display of confidence, assertiveness, coolness, gentility, and warmth" (p. 188).

In their ideal forms, restraint, self-disciplines and situational awareness remain central to both models of masculinity, even if they manifest differently in daily life (Li & Janowiak, 2014, p. 5). This interdependence continues to inform how men negotiate moral identity and masculine legitimacy in a rapidly changing society. The following case studies illustrate how men from diverse backgrounds draw upon both *wen* and *wu* values to construct virtue and meaning in the face of singleness.

Good Wen: A Virtuous Son – Jason

During my interviews, most of the men I spoke with made comments that reflected core values associated with proper Confucian manhood that included roles of provider, protector, and procreator. Among them, Jason stood out as someone who most clearly embodied all of the key traits of contemporary Chinese *wen* masculinity. I met Jason in Wuhan. A professor in the social sciences at a prestigious university, he was still single at 33, yet held all the hallmarks of Confucian ideals of a good and virtuous man. He agreed to be interviewed about his relationship to his singleness at his office midweek after he finished teaching a class on Chinese migration and labor. Because Jason was the most successful singleton over 30 I had spoken with, I was unsurprised that he was also the least anxious about his marital status. That said, he was not entirely confident, and his ambivalence was evident throughout our conversation.

When we first began discussing his relationship with his singleness, he said:

I'm not a very postmodern guy. I'm still influenced by Chinese family values and I understand others' choices if they choose to not marry. I understand that, it can be nice to be single. You're free to go wherever, you eat whatever you want. But if your parents die, that'll be really disappointing for them. And it'll be shameful for them to die without their children getting married because that's their responsibility as parents to find partners for their children - And like they died an incomplete life because your life is incomplete. So I am looking forward to marriage - I don't want to be too selfish.

There are a number of markers in the above quote that signal Jason's *wen* status. First, his self-description as a "not very postmodern guy" is particularly telling. The term "postmodern", especially when used reflexively, demonstrates a high-level of academic literacy, unlikely to be used in everyday discourse. Because the conversation took place between social scientists,⁴⁹ Jason likely assumed that I would understand that he was referencing qualities of subjectivity, positionality, and reflexivity that all arose from 1970s and 1980s Euro-American philosophy. Postmodernists distance themselves from grand narratives of sameness, and focus more on the details of the individual, their histories, and their unique sets of circumstances. By acknowledging that not everyone chooses to marry, a postmodern idea rooted in individualism, and the appeal of such choices, including freedoms of choice in food and travel, he is demonstrating his *wen* masculinity, by critically analyzing the cost/benefit of such postmodern values and evaluating the competing social narratives.

Jason's *wen* status becomes more pronounced when he goes on to also signal his familiarity with classical Chinese philosophical principles. His specific mention of not wanting "to be too selfish" echoes the Confucian notions of a self not as an individual unit but as a smaller part of a larger network of relationships that is constructed through interpersonal relationships and loyalties to others (Higgins et al., 2013, p. 42). In this view, the self is not autonomous but defined by its relation to others. For Jason, remaining unmarried would not only be a failure to fulfill certain personal duties, but would also fail his parents in their duty "to find partners for their children" in order for either of their lives to be "complete." This incompleteness directly mirrors the Confucian belief that "men were not ritually or socially complete without wives" (Ebrely, 1990, p. 49).

His mention of "disappointing" his parents suggests a familiarity with the hallmarks of filial piety and seems to be the main motivation for his desire to marry. Unlike the postmodern reasoning for marriage as a personal decision, oftentimes rooted in emotional or romantic fulfillment, Jason sees marriage as a moral obligation that honors his parents and ancestors in order to maintain social harmony. This tension between postmodern and Confucian ideas in the context of marriage was evident in many of my interviews, but Jason's was the most intellectually articulate of the men I interviewed. In so few words, he encapsulated the cultural zeitgeist. His balance of reflexive critique of progressive ideas and conservative deference to his superiors marks him as not just a "good man" by Confucian terms, but as an elite of *wen* masculinity.

⁴⁹ The interview took place as a conversation between Jason, his colleague, my research assistant, and myself in Jason's office at his university.

Another noteworthy aspect of Jason's interview was that while he expressed an intention to marry one day, he felt no urgency to find a wife. This set him apart from most of the unmarried men in their 30s I had met, many of whom were panicked about their single status. Although he acknowledged that 33 is "not a young age" in China, Jason explained that he was thoughtfully considering his approach to marriage and seemed to be intentional and respectful in his actions. Aware that many women his age were ready to settle down, and as such, "dating casually" was no longer appropriate. It was unclear whether this comment was meant to signal his progressiveness to his audience of feminist interlocutors (myself and his colleague) through a sensitivity to women's needs and desires, or more traditional *wen* values related to the ability to repress his implied desire to "date casually" further evidences his *wen* masculinity as it aligns with the *wen* practice of restraint and "ability to suppress sexual urges" (Louie, 2016, p. 18). but his answers came across as deeply pragmatic. His desire to show consideration for his future wife signaled an effort to present himself as a virtuous husband, and, by extension, a good man through the framework of Confucian ideals.

Jason made it clear he was not being flippant in his approach to marriage. He emphasized that, given his age, love or attraction alone wouldn't be enough to begin a relationship. If he were to date, it would have to be with marriage in mind. That meant other factors, beyond lust, would need to align: he'd need to own a home, his partner would need to come from a background acceptable to his family, and both sets of parents would need to approve. The selfless way he framed his intentions reflected the hallmarks of a virtuous Chinese son.

Jason's selflessness in his desire to marry was underpinned by his association with achieving manhood. At one point in the interview, we discussed how he defined manhood and what markers denoted the shift. For him, "When you get married, especially when you have children, you become a man. At that time, you will know what responsibility really means." Unsurprisingly, Jason's ideas of manhood were rooted in a relationality to two of the most essential roles that a man must fulfill to become a virtuous man: husband and father.

At one point during our conversation, Jason's interview began to sound more like a civics lecture. He expressed concern about China's future if more and more people choose not to marry. He worried about the well-being of the next generation and who would care for the elderly in a society with declining marriage and birth rates. "Family is the most important mechanism for society," he explained, "if we mess with family, society will become unstable." Much like his earlier comment about marriage being a filial obligation, this follow-up gave me the impression that, for Jason, marriage was also about civic duty. Jason's sense of societal obligation was not unlike Confucius' virtue of *li* (filial rituals of respect), which emphasizes adherence to established norms as a means of preserving harmony within the community (Confucius, 2016 [500BCE]). In this light, he seemed to view prolonged singleness as a potential disruption to social order and thus felt personally responsible for contributing to societal stability through marriage.

Because Jason himself had not been actively seeking a partner, his friends, who likely shared the same sense of civic responsibility he described, had taken it upon themselves to set him up on blind dates. He mentioned they were concerned about his "emotional status," assuming he must be lonely. When I asked if he related to that feeling, he neither confirmed nor denied it. Instead,

he said, “When you’re sick, it’s nice to have somebody around to take care of you.” Though not a direct admission of loneliness, this comment revealed both his expectations of a future wife as a caregiver and a possible anxiety about aging alone without family support. The social pressure from his friends reasserts that, without children to carry on the family name and fulfill filial duties of caring for elders, he risks being seen as unvirtuous and disrupting the harmony of both the familial and larger social order.

Despite his awareness of these pressures and a clear desire for companionship in the future, Jason admitted that dating currently felt too stressful, which made the whole process unappealing. Still, he admitted to being on two dating apps and noted that the competition was intense: “Everyone is 985.” As someone from a respectable family, with a PhD from a top university, and now teaching at a high-ranking institution himself, I was surprised to hear him express insecurity.⁵⁰ Many would consider Jason to be a *diamond bachelor*,⁵¹ a highly eligible man with significant social capital, but it was clear he harbored doubts about his standing.

The conflicting emotions surfaced again when we began discussing how Jason might fare in the dating market if he put in more effort: “If I really wanted to find somebody, I think that I could,” he said with a smirk. Just moments after voicing concern about the competition, he now seemed confident in his ability to attract a partner. Jason’s simultaneous expression of confidence and doubt encapsulates the emotional contradictions faced by many of China’s singletons—the push and pull between personal desire, societal pressure, self-assurance, and ambivalence. If someone like Jason, holding what many would consider a winning hand in the marriage game, still questions his chances, one can only imagine the anxieties of those holding a weaker hand.

Jason’s interview revealed both an adherence to Confucian values as well as an embodiment of contemporary masculine ideals. Li and Janowiak’s (2014) study on shifts in Chinese gender ideologies identified several traits commonly associated with men: “serious, ambitious, stubborn, deceitful, independent, and powerful” (p. 9). While Jason did not display deceit during our interview, all other qualities were readily apparent. His seriousness emerged through his tone and the way he answered questions directly, without any playful banter. His ambition and social power were reflected in his position as a professor at a high-ranking university. His independence and stubbornness were evident in his decision to remain single despite familial and social pressures to marry. Because deceit is often subjective and best assessed through repeated interactions over time, our limited correspondence made it difficult to evaluate this particular trait.

Jason’s sense of ambivalence in his security likely reflects the distorted ideals of contemporary Chinese masculinity, where *wen*-masculinity is overly-represented in Chinese public discourse. This is likely due to *wen*-ness being “endorsed as the ultimate ideal” (Louie, 2016, p. 187). Wealthy, learned men are seen everywhere in the media, from celebrity culture to historic dramas. However, this form of masculinity is actually only achievable by a small subset of the population, due to its association with wealth. In contrast, *wu* masculinity, reserved for lower classes and associated with physical labor, resilience, and moral strength, receives far less reverence and

⁵⁰ Jason later explained that one of the apps he used was specific to Wuhan and caters to high-achieving individuals, which made his intimidation understandable. All the men he was competing with were within his league and have similar accomplishments.

⁵¹ 钻石王老五 (*zuànshí wáng lǎo wǔ*) - “Diamond Bachelor,” a single man over 30 who is of high social class

adoration in the public imagination, despite being the more accessible form of manhood available to the majority of Chinese men. This mismatch between representation and everyday realities shifts the expectations of all men within the Chinese marriage economy, creating a sense of inadequacy for all single men.

Good Wu: A Devoted Father - Dong Zhimin

While public discourse privileges *wen* masculinity, examples of *wu*-ness are not completely absent. One such case is that of *Dong Zhimin*, a middle aged working class man from *Jiangsu*, China. Although *Jiangsu* province is typically known for economic development, Mr. Dong and his family live in conditions of severe poverty (see Figure 22). His story gained national attention on the Chinese social media platform, *Douyin*⁵², where he is affectionately known as *The Eight Child Father*,⁵³ for his display of exemplary Chinese fatherhood under challenging material conditions and the (seeming) absence of spousal support. Mr. Dong's viral fame rested on his ability to embody Confucian virtue through a contemporary version of *wu* masculinity characterized by his commitment to procreation, providership, and protection in his roles as a father and a son. His display of virtuous qualities is lauded because it offers rural working-class Chinese men an example of how to embody *wu* masculinity despite significant limitations.

⁵² 抖音 (dǒuyīn) - Chinese TikTok

⁵³ 八孩爸 (*bā hái bà*) - literally "Eight Child Father"



Figure 22. Screenshot of one of Mr. Dong's videos showing the conditions that he and his children are living in. Note the lack of furniture, dirt flooring, and rubbish. QQ News. (2023) <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20230412A08G4700>

Dong's case stands out particularly in the realm of procreation. Confucius emphasized the need to have sons, and by that metric, Mr. Dong over-achieved by having seven. Although his large family technically violates China's family planning policies, his story was celebrated rather than condemned.⁵⁴ Public reception of his family dynamic highlights a well-known double standard in Chinese society, where women who overstep the policy are seen as immoral, thus bad parents, while fathers are often celebrated for their virility and familial devotion. Both qualities are understood as virtuous by traditional conventions. Mr. Dong's ability to proliferate his paternal legacy clearly aligns with long-standing Confucian values, satisfying both his one, living-parent as well as his ancestors in the afterlife as a virtuous son, but also to future descendants as a good father.

⁵⁴ Tye, M. (2022 Feb 23) Laowhy86 [username]. Chained Woman in China = The True Story. *Youtube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68-GpzGS7ac>

Further proof of Dong's filial piety was emphasized on his now-defunct *Douyin* profile (see Figure 23), where he identifies himself as a family caretaker.⁵⁵ His bio reads: "I am the father of eight children, with an 84-year-old mother, and a disabled single brother" (see Figure 24).⁵⁶ Such framing reveals his self-conception as a relational identity determined by his role in the three key Confucian relationships: father, son, and brother. Each role he mentions implies his superior role and thus responsibility for them. His children depend on him materially and emotionally. His widowed mother relies on him for care in her old age. Lastly, his disabled sibling, regardless of birth order, is automatically subordinate to him due to his condition. Through this brief profile, *Dong* implicitly affirms his obligations to protect and provide for at least ten individuals who are hierarchically inferior.

⁵⁵ Reason for the disappearance of his profile to be discussed in Chapter 2.

⁵⁶ Sir Movie [username]. (2023 April 12). From a happy father of eight children to being sentenced to nine years in prison, he made her live in hell for 24 years. Don't do it again. QQ News. <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20230412A08G4700>

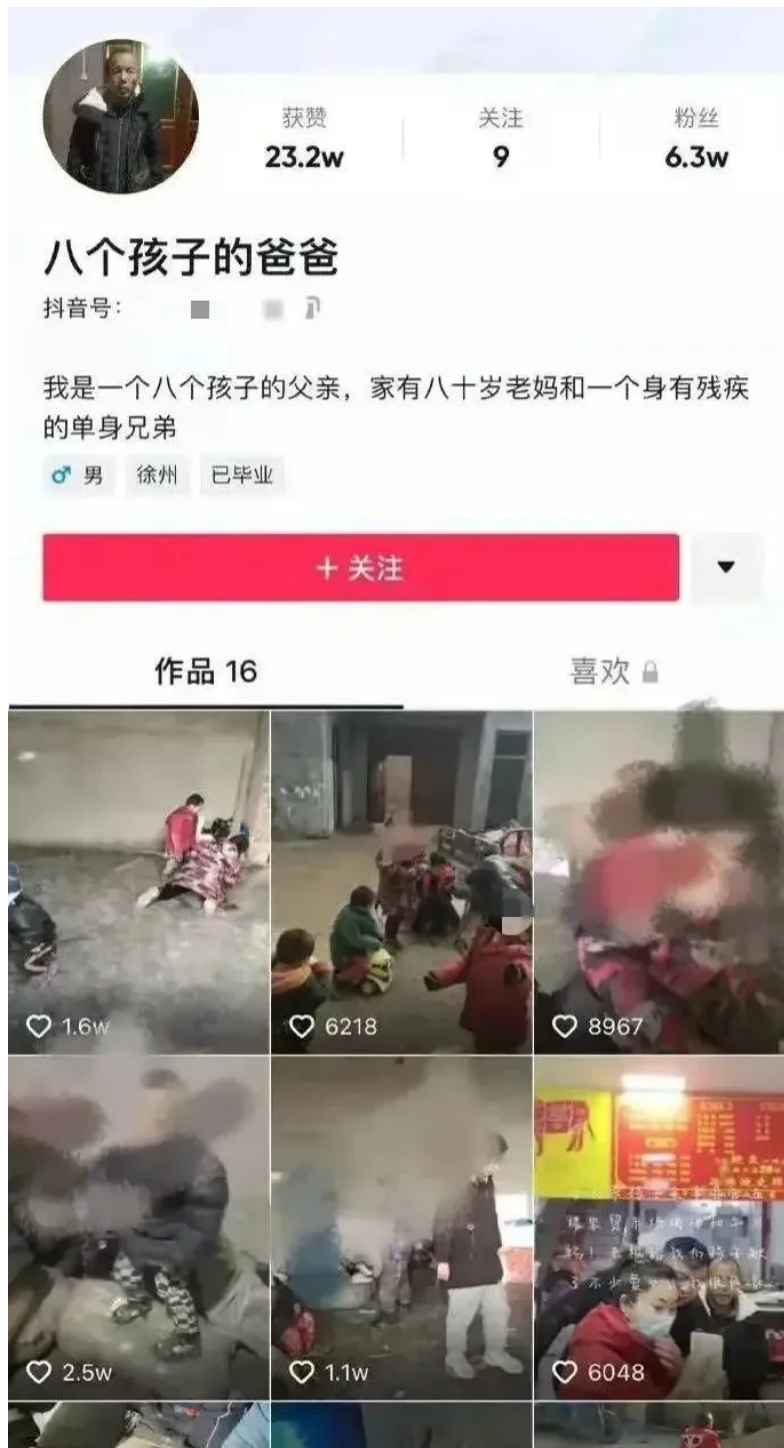


Figure 23. Screenshot of Mr. Dong’s Douyin page. His username is “father of 8 children”. He has 63,000 followers. The profile bio reads: “I am the father of eight children, with an 84-year-old mother and a disabled single brother.” All of the videos were of his active children. *Sir Movie* (2023). <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20230412A08G4700>



Figure 24. Family photo of Dong Zhimin and six of his eight children and his elderly mother (center) in their modest home. All the family members wear winter coats despite being indoors due to his home's poor insulation. <https://club.6parkbbs.com/finance/index.php?app=forum&act=threadview&tid=14578082>

The providership Mr. Dong exhibits is evidenced in his daily efforts to secure food for his family members despite his limited resources. In one widely circulated video, he is seen preparing a large batch of shrimp noodles in his modest kitchen. He stirs the oversized pot with a large metal spoon, bent at the neck, which appears as though it might snap off at any moment. He attributes its warped shape to overuse. The aged utensil becomes a visual metaphor for his own endurance as a provider. Through this symbolism, Mr. Dong not only embodies the *wu* masculine traits of labor and resilience but also the filial responsibilities to provide as both father and son.

The self-narrative of being a dutiful father is further reinforced when Mr. Dong is asked about his relationship to cooking. The father of eight responds:

I usually like to cook. But It doesn't matter if you like cooking or not. What's the point in talking about taste? What matters is that the children can eat it. My biggest wish is to raise my children slowly - "He raises a person to become a talented person."⁵⁷ This is my biggest wish.

His joy for cooking is overshadowed by his sense of duty to provide sustenance for his family. He uses the *chengyu* (idiom),⁵⁸ "To raise a talent," which emphasizes his long-term hope for his children to achieve upward mobility. This idiom aligns with Confucian values of upholding familial honor and the moral imperative to raise virtuous heirs.

⁵⁷ 养大成才 (yǎng dà chéngcái) - an idiom that literally translates to "to raise a talent"

⁵⁸ 成语 (chéngyǔ) - "idiom", typically composed of four characters, that often originates from classical literature and conveys a concise, metaphorical meaning of cultural and historical wisdom.

Later in the same video, the father of eight expresses his ability to offer protection to his brood when his children receive new winter coats. While the jackets are reportedly donated by sympathetic viewers,⁵⁹ Dong's presentation of them in his video signals his responsibility to shield his children from the harsh winters in their unheated cement home. The means by which the clothing was sourced is irrelevant to the ends, which allowed the struggling father to protect his children's health and bodily well-being.

However, Mr. Dong's framing of himself as a woeful man who is in need of celebration is not completely genuine. The cinematic elements of the videos signal a contrived appeal of sentimentality.⁶⁰ The editorial techniques of slow-motion video and melancholic soundtrack suggest a strategic use of suffering as a form of social capital. Whether or not Mr. Dong consciously sought donations, the maudlin tones embedded in these videos undoubtedly contributed to the support that the family received. By 2022, his account amassed over 63,000 followers and resulted in gifts of food, clothing, and household goods.⁶¹ Whether or not this is understood as a clever scam for resources is up for debate. It can also be read as a modification of providership, whereby Mr. Dong's economic precarity does not exclude him from paternal virtue, but reframes it within community support.

Dong's later revelations about his wife reinforced his image as a virtuous man. Initially mistaken as a single father due to his nebulous comments (see Figure 25),⁶² Dong later admitted that he was married, calling his wife the "hero of the family" and "the biggest contributor."⁶³ He justified his earlier ambiguity about his marital status and her absence from his videos by citing her mental illness, which he originally deemed inappropriate to display publicly (more on this in Chapter 2). Although part of his fame stemmed from his perception as a single father, the announcement of having a sick wife made his perseverance even more admirable. Public reaction largely supported his decision to conceal this detail, interpreting it as an act of respect and devotion. Many praised him as "an example of a good man' who would not abandon his wife and children."⁶⁴ Dong's acknowledgment of his wife's contributions, combined with his visible caretaking, reinforced his image as a protector devoted to his family, aligning him further with Confucian ideals and enhancing his viral popularity.

⁵⁹ (Tye, 2022)

⁶⁰ Communist [Username]. (2023, July 17). Dong Zhimin, Father of 8 [Video]. *Bilibili*. <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1th4y117yu/>

⁶¹ (Tye, 2022)

⁶² Moran, M. (2024 May 6). Single dad-of-eight stole hearts in viral TikTok video - but then fan peeked in shed. *Mirror*. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/single-dad-eight-stole-hearts-32746298>

⁶³ (Sir Movie, 2023)

⁶⁴ 一纸心事 [Username]. (2022, January 31). The case of the father of eight children in Fengxian County, Xuzhou: Don't tie down someone else's future in the name of "love". *Baidu*. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1723460858288493611&wfr=spider&for=pc>



Figure 25. Screenshots from an interview with Dong Zhimin as he holds his youngest child. The subtitles read: “34 years old and not married” (left frame) and “others look down on us” (right frame). These comments come from an interview where Mr. Dong is describing the history of his family, vaguely implying that he is not married, while also leaving the identity of the mother of his children ambiguous. *QQ News*. (2023) <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20230412A08G4700>

The father of eight’s social media presence complicates traditional understandings of *wu* masculinity. While his tanned skin, coarse hands, and deeply lined face suggest a life of manual labor, aligning with conventional markers of *wu* strength and stoicism, his ability to build a digital following reflects a literacy, though technological, that is more likely to be associated with *wen* manhood. As mentioned above, the lines between *wen* and *wu* masculinities are blurred, and it’s important to contain aspects of both, especially within the context of family. Contemporary Chinese men are expected to possess *wu* physicality of strength and stoicism while having the *wen* sophistication of emotionally intelligent and digitally competent.

In one viral video, Dong makes several candid comments regarding the hardships he faces that may at first seem at odds with the Confucian ideals of self-restraint and endurance, but airing his grievances in this manner is itself a modern form of *wu* masculinity.⁶⁵ Jie Yang’s (2010) research has shown that public expressions of adversity can be accepted for of masculine emotional labor, particularly among working-class Chinese men. Yang connected the practice to the Mao-era

⁶⁵ (Communist, 2023)

tradition of “speaking bitterness”,⁶⁶ suggesting that verbalizing one’s struggles serves both a cathartic and social function among the working class (p. 552). Thus, Mr. Dong’s openness about his financial burden without embarrassment or shame becomes a performative act of both his *wu* masculinity and his modernity.

Finally, Dong’s interactions with his children, particularly his seven sons, offers a modern interpretation of his role as protector. He does not conform solely to the traditional model of a financially supportive disciplinarian expected of Chinese fathers, but instead embodies an engaged, and emotionally expressive version of fatherhood (Louie, 2016, p. 189-190). This new affectionate approach is evident in a video where Mr. Dong gently touches his son’s face as they exchange a warm gaze.⁶⁷ Li & Jankowiak (2014) suggest that such shifts in fathering style arose during the reduction of family sizes under the One Child Policy, prompting parents to become more emotionally invested in their children. In this light, emotional sensitivity and attunement are not a rejection of traditional Confucian frameworks of fatherhood but rather a reflection of how these ideals have adapted to new social structures. Although Dong’s large family defies contemporary state laws, his display of gentle parenting aligns with the evolving norm of fatherhood, which he performs for his virtual audience.

When comparing Mr. Dong’s expression of masculinity to Li and Janowiak’s (2014) seven traits, as we did with Jason, an even fuller picture of manhood emerges. Like Jason, Dong displays seriousness in his tone and demeanor. His interviews lack humor and often carry a “woe is me” sentiment that helps him elicit sympathy and resources from his online viewership. In this regard, he also demonstrates ambition through his use of digital literacy to secure material support for his family. His independence is clear in his role as a caretaker for not ten, but eleven people, including his wife, whose existence was later revealed. Dong shows both physical and emotional strength by managing the needs of a large household while maintaining a calm and gentle presence, suggesting self-control and resilience (power). His stubbornness differs from Jason’s defiance and instead takes the form of quiet perseverance. Unlike Jason, Dong exhibits a degree of deceit, although it appears to have been circumstantial. His attempt to conceal his wife's existence, which was difficult to hide given the number of children, was ultimately forgiven by the public, who interpreted his action as protective rather than deceptive.

In short, Dong Zhimin's rise to fame illustrates how working-class Chinese men can embody Confucian values even without access to elite forms of cultural capital. By blending *wu* values of physical labor and resilience with *wen* qualities of emotional restraint and digital literacy, the Father-of-eight displays forms of providership, protection, and procreation through his social media presence that is not grounded in wealth or education, but in filial piety, endurance, and care. Despite all his hardships, he is able to stay positive. When asked if he worries about the future, Mr. Dong replies, “No, not worried. Can’t you see that I’m in a very good mood? Children have their very own blessings” (0:00:30).⁶⁸ He suggests that his burdens are also his joy. This sentiment explains why so many of his followers resonate with his contemporary reimagining of what it means to be a good man in China today.

⁶⁶ 诉苦 (*suku*) - "speaking bitterness" was a Maoist ideological ritual through which peasants and workers were encouraged to narrate their poverty, powerlessness, and exploitation in society before 1949 (Yang, 2010, p. 553)

⁶⁷ (Communist, 2023)

⁶⁸ (Communist, 2023)

“Good Man” Conclusion

This dissertation argues that the surplus of men in China frames masculinity as a moral crisis where the thirty-five million men who are unlikely to marry risk never achieving full-fledged manhood or being considered “good men”. If we understand masculinity as a performance, then the first step is to understand what the expectation of good masculinity is in order to understand the line between virtuous and dishonorable. This chapter asked: What are the social expectations of a “good” Chinese man? What qualities define ideal manhood? And how do these ideals relate to marriage?

Although Confucius’ (2016 [500 BCE]) *The Analects* was written more than 2500 years ago, it continues to shape ideals of Chinese masculinity. Within the Confucian worldview, virtuous manhood depends on fulfilling one’s duties within the relationships of parent-son, husband-wife, and father-child. While many scholars identify the parent-child relationship as central to moral development, I argue that a man’s spousal relationship is the foundation upon which the other two are built. Within this framework, virtuous masculinity is performed through the “Three Ps” of providership, protection, and procreation (Gilmore, 1990).

To visualize these ideals, I examined propaganda posters that promote model masculinity in its ideal form, and then compared those models with two contemporary case studies: Jason, an urban middle-aged academic, and Dong Zhimin, a rural working-class father. Both men are unmarried (or are perceived as such), yet both are celebrated as “good men.” Their stories reveal how men at opposite ends of the class hierarchy perform moral virtue in distinct but overlapping ways.

The comparison between Jason and Mr. Dong reveals how class determines access to the moral and material resources needed to perform acceptable masculinity. Men with wealth and education are better positioned to achieve virtuous status through *wen*-like qualities such as refinement and self-cultivation. Working-class men must rely on *wu* traits of strength, endurance, and sacrifice. As Kam Louie (2016) argues, Chinese masculinity depends on the interplay of *wen and wu*, and the degree to which men can embody both depends on their relative social position.

The next chapter takes up this question by examining what happens when men fail to perform socially acceptable masculinity. It explores how unmarried and economically marginalized men are represented in Chinese media and public discourse to better understand how they became stigmatized as moral failures or social villains. Before turning to women’s roles in shaping the contemporary marriage economy, we must first understand how men who cannot marry experience shame, exclusion, and the erosion of moral identity. This sets the stage for analyzing how gender, class and state ideology continue to define who gets to count as a “good man “ in China today, but also raises the question of whether or not upholding these values is actually serving men?