

# CONSTRUCTING CONSUMERIST MASCULINITIES: MEN'S LIFESTYLE MAGAZINES IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA<sup>1</sup>

Tracy K. Lee

*The Australian National University*

Email: tracy.lee@anu.edu.au

In the cultural landscape of contemporary China, the rise of men's magazines in recent years is an interesting and significant phenomenon, which has, however, received little scholarly attention as yet.<sup>2</sup> This study seeks to map out changes in male

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<sup>2</sup> In Chinese scholarship, a handful of master's theses exploring this topic have emerged in recent years. Wang Jiameng's "Nanxing shishang qikan jingying yanjiu" (Study on the Management of Men's Fashion Magazines) (Master's thesis, Wuhan University, 2005) examines the current operational systems of men's magazines, in particular, the management pattern of China's largest magazine publishing company, *Trend*, as a successful model from the perspectives of human resources, advertisements and market promotions. Wang Peng's "Jiedu Zhongguo neidi shishang nankan" (Reading Men's Lifestyle Magazines in Mainland China) (Master's thesis, Shandong University, 2006) analyzes the construction of men's images in the magazines and the kind of lifestyle that is promoted by the magazines. Gao Yuan's "Nüxing shijiao xia de Zhongguo nanxing zazhi" (Men's Magazines in China from a Feminist Point of View) (Master's thesis, Liaoning University, 2006) explores the subject matter from a woman's stance. Bi Qiumin's "Lun Zhongguo bentu nanxing shishang zazhi jingying duice-yi *Dadushi.nanshi wei ge'an*" (Management Strategies of Local Men's Fashion Magazines in China: A Case Study on *The Metropolis*) (Master's thesis, Sichuan University, 2006) finds that insufficient audience study, an advertisement-oriented release strategy and lack of brand expansion and promotion are the major management problems for *Metropolis*. Wang Ling's "Shilun woguo nanxing shishang zazhi shengcun kongjian ji fazhang chulu" (A Preliminary Analysis on the Current and Future Development of Men's Lifestyle Magazines in China) (Master's thesis, Hebei University, 2006) looks into the contents of three local magazines: *Shishang Xiansheng*, *Nanren Zhuang* and *Mangazine*. The author discusses the frustrations faced by the local magazines, and suggests three ways to solve the problems: brand establishment, promotion strategies and circulation. These dissertations, however, are far from sophisticated in terms of methodology and depth of analysis.

subjectivities in contemporary China by reading men's magazines as "both representative site and mobilizing force of crucial cultural shifts in masculinity."<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I will briefly discuss the market situation of the men's magazines in China, and will then focus on the three types of masculinities constructed and promoted by this consumerist form of popular culture. The critical readings of masculinities in the magazines will be followed by a quantitative study of male images in advertisements found in these magazines. It is expected that, by employing both critical and empirical methods, the study will shed light on the interpretation of gender and its interactions with mass media and popular culture in a time when China is rapidly merging into global capitalism.

In North America and some European countries, magazines specifically targeting men have existed since at least World War II.<sup>4</sup> Recent years have seen a burgeoning research interest in this genre of popular culture, especially in light of the study of masculinities.<sup>5</sup> In fact, three types of magazines came under the rubric "men's magazines" in the West, as summarized by Tim Edwards:

...there are three sorts of men's magazines, the first is a list of fully style-conscious and self-conscious general interest magazines aimed directly and overtly at a male readership including *GQ*, *Esquire*, *Arena*, *For Him Magazine (FHM)*, *Loaded* and *Maxim*; the second, a series of supposedly

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Particularly absent are discussions from a theoretically-informed perspective. Apart from these dissertations, there are also some journal articles and newspaper articles on the emergence of the men's lifestyle magazines market in China in recent years, most of which have been mentioned in this study.

<sup>3</sup> Bethan Benwell, *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> In Britain, men's magazine originated in the rise of *Playboy*, which was launched in 1953. In the USA, *Esquire* and *GQ*, which were launched in the 1930s, have a relatively extended longevity. Men's interest magazines including titles for motoring, hobbies and pornography generally have a far longer history. See *ibid* and Bill Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth and Leisure-Style in Modern America* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> See Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 1996); Tim Edwards, *Men in the Mirror: Men's Fashion, Masculinity and Consumer Society* (London: Cassell, 1997); Peter Jackson, Nick Stevenson and Kate Brookes, *Making Sense of Men's Magazines* (London: Polity, 2001); Bethan Benwell, *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines*; Ben Crewe, *Representing Men: Cultural Production and Producers in the Men's Magazine Market* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003); Ross Horsley, "Men's Lifestyle Magazines and the Construction of Male Identity" (PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2005), Joshua Edward Olsberg, "Maxim-sizing Profit: New Men's Magazines and the Rise of Consumer Masculinity," (Master's thesis, University of Texas at Arlington, 2006), etc.

more specific periodicals with a more open readership that carry regular features concerning men's style and fashion including *Attitude*, *i-D*, *The Face*, *The Clothes Show Magazine*, *XL* and *Men's Health*; and the third, a gargantuan group of men's interest magazines which covertly target men as their primary readership including car, computing, photographic, sport and technical titles.<sup>6</sup>

In the current study, by "men's lifestyle magazines," I mainly refer to the first group of magazines. The discussion therefore does not include the financial, automobile, real estate, military, computer, and sports magazines that are also targeted at male readers and are read mostly by men.

Although men's lifestyle magazines have a long history in Western countries, they have emerged in China only in the last decade. Since the first men's lifestyle magazine appeared on the market in 1997, there has been a proliferation of titles. The period from 2002 to 2004 witnessed a particularly rapid development of the market, with eight men's magazines launched within two years.<sup>7</sup> Currently, it is estimated that there are about 20 monthly men's titles in China, with the three major titles *Nanren zhuang* (*FHM*), *Shishang jiankang* (*Men's Health*) and *Shishang xiansheng* (*Esquire*) occupying an overwhelming 84.51% of the market.<sup>8</sup> According to a survey of the magazine market in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, an overall increase of 47.02% occurred in the sales of men's magazines during the period from March 2005 to March 2006.<sup>9</sup> This challenged the stereotyped gender association of magazines with women.

### **Some Features of Men's Magazines in China**

Compared with the majority of magazines in China, which have traditionally functioned as propaganda and educational tools for the party-state, the crop of titles under

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<sup>6</sup> Tim Edwards, *Men in the Mirror*, p.72.

<sup>7</sup> Bi Qiumin, "Lun Zhongguo bentu nanxing shishang zazhi jingying duice-yi *Dadushi.nanshi* wei ge'an," p.1 and Wang Peng, "Jiedu Zhongguo neidi shishang nankan," p.3.

<sup>8</sup> Li Jinyue, "Nanxing zazhi chengwei qikan xiaofei heima" (Men's Magazines: A Black Horse in the Chinese Magazine Market), *Zhonghua dushubao* (July 19, 2006), p.20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

discussion can be categorized as “new” magazines in the market. They are distinguished in several regards: firstly they are relatively expensive; the prices are normally over RMB¥20 and therefore they are categorized as “*gao mayang*” (high-priced) magazines in the market. Generally speaking, they are not affordable by people with average incomes in Chinese cities, and their circulation is therefore limited<sup>10</sup>. It is clear that the magazines target affluent, professional or managerial bachelors in their late twenties to early forties in the emerging social group of the “new rich”, with little or no family burden. As commented by a journalist, the magazines are “a gratification for the rich and a temptation for the poor”<sup>11</sup>. It is therefore interesting and significant to study the representation and imagination of the lifestyle of the new rich and the promotion of consumerist culture in these magazines.

Secondly, copyright cooperation with foreign companies constitutes a defining characteristic of these titles<sup>12</sup>. Men’s magazines in China can be roughly divided into two groups in terms of ownership: the mainland editions of world-wide famous titles, such as *Esquire* and *FHM*, and local publications, such as *Mangazine*, *Meili xiansheng*. *Elle*, a female magazine from France, became the first foreign magazine published in China in 1988. Since then, numerous foreign-invested publications have hit the streets, including local editions of foreign magazine titles published by local companies that license the content, for example, *Vogue*, *National Geographic Traveller*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Newsweek*, *Parenting*, *Marie Claire*, *Fortune*, *Esquire*, *FHM* etc. According to Chinese

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<sup>10</sup> Despite their self-claims of a broad reach, circulation is relatively low even for the best of the bunch, usually around 20,000-30,000 copies for each issue. See Raymond Zhou, “What Men Want,” *China Daily* (April 4, 2007), p.18.

<sup>11</sup> Zhou Chunling, “Shishang zazhi: manzu furen, youhuo qiongren” (Lifestyle Magazines: A Gratification for the Rich and Temptation for the Poor), *Jingli ribao* (Aug 18, 2002), p. A1.

<sup>12</sup> The cooperation relationship of journal and magazine publishing houses between China and the West has a history of more than twenty years and has been carried out mainly in three ways: (1) Joint venture co-publishing. Foreign investors are allowed to own up to 49 per cent stakes in the joint venture publishing companies. For example, in 1980, the International Data Group (IDG) from the U.S. set up a Sino-U.S. joint venture, the China Computer World Publishing Company, with a 49 percent share. This was the first foreign involvement in China’s media market in the post-Mao era. (2) Translation of articles in foreign journals or magazines into Chinese. This mainly applies to scientific and technological articles. (3) Two-way copyright cooperation. This kind of cooperation runs in bidirectional ways, i.e. the Chinese journals can utilize the articles and pictures from their Western partners while at the same time, the Western journals can also use the contents of their Chinese partners. See also Kevin Latham, *Pop Culture China!: Media, Arts, and Lifestyle* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO), p.147.

laws, foreign publishers are not allowed to publish directly in China. Those who want to enter the Chinese market must find a local partner first and then bring out their new magazines under the partner's license. Investment from the Chinese partner should not be lower than 51 percent in these forms of "copyright cooperation" so that the Chinese side is guaranteed to take the leading role. The copyright cooperation relationship cannot exceed five years but is renewable. The cooperation is of great benefit to the domestic publishing industry as the influx of world-famous magazines not only adds variety to the domestic periodical market, but also brings in timely first-hand information and rich advertising resources. Most of the lifestyle titles under discussion are published in this way. Examples are *Shishang xiansheng* (collaborating with *Esquire* in the UK), *Nanren zhuang* (co-op with *FHM* in the UK), *Fengdu* (co-op with *Maxim* in the US), *Zhongguo wenyijia* (co-op with *Men's Uno* in Taiwan), *Shishang junzi* (co-op with *Menbox* in Taiwan). The copyright cooperation has generated large-scale capital operations for the newly-born Chinese publications. At the same time, the magazines are inevitably regarded with suspicion by the state as embodiments of Western culture and values. In recent years the Chinese state has tightened its control over the influx of foreign media in order to lessen the social impact of imported pop culture and to protect the local media industry. The General Administration of Press and Publications announced a new rule in 2005 which withheld the approval of new foreign magazines in China except for science and technology titles. With implementation of the new policy, *Rolling Stone* became the first magazine that was forced to shut down after the publication of only one issue. The policy is also believed to be part of an effort to repair the "cultural trade deficit."

### **Categories of Men's Lifestyle Magazines**

Chang Xiaowu has divided current men's titles in the Chinese market into four sub-categories, namely, gentlemen magazines, "beer culture" magazines, alternative sexuality magazines and magazines that cannot be included in the previous three groups.<sup>13</sup> The gentleman magazines include *Shishang xiangsheng*, *Dadao*, *Mingshi*, *Mangazine*,

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<sup>13</sup> Chang Xiaowu, "Woguo nanxing shishang qikan shichang saomiao" (A survey of the market of men's lifestyle magazines in our country), *Bianji xuekan*, No.1, 2001, pp.57-61.

*Metropolis* and the *Outlook Magazine*. These magazines construct an image of a bourgeois lifestyle by focusing on food, housing, entertainment, shopping, travel, health, financial management, etc. They aim at providing the social elites with advice on leisure life and on “uplifting” the taste and quality of their life.<sup>14</sup> In an interview, Wang Feng, the editor of *Shishang xiansheng*, described the magazine’s goal as a “harmonious” balance between the material and spiritual wealth, echoing the official discourse of “to grab with both hands, with both hands tough.”<sup>15</sup>

By contrast, the “beer culture” magazines slant toward a hedonistic lifestyle, with wine, sports and sex as their common themes. These magazines reveal a raft of blatant front cover images of scantily clad young women and headlining of articles concerning sex or women. The representative magazine of this group and the one that enjoys the largest proportion of sales in the market in China is *Nanren zhuang*. In an interview, its editor, Shouma, said that their readers are “fully confident” in life. They buy what they like, without concern for the price of the products. They care very little about the future and enjoy the present. They are keen on fashionable and new technological products. Comparatively speaking, they are more open-minded and are more ready to accept a Western lifestyle. This group of men, which has been called “post-yuppies” by Shouma, are reminiscent of metrosexual men in the West.<sup>16</sup>

The “gentleman magazines” and “beer culture magazines” in China demonstrate discernable influence from the “new man” and “new lad” types in Western magazines. According to Rosalind Gill, the types of “new man” and “new lad” “represent perhaps the two dominant and most pervasive constructions of masculinity circulating in Britain over the past decade and are frequently represented as products of particular chronological moments, with ‘new man’ representing the zeitgeist of the 1980s and ‘new lad’ the 1990s.”<sup>17</sup> The terminology ‘new man’ is temporally related to the launch of the first

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Wang Feng (Jan 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Ma Xuefen, “Zuo yiben you guannian de nanxing zazhi: fang *Shishang xiansheng* zhubian Wang Feng” (To run a men’s magazine with new ideas: interview with Wang Feng, chief editor of *Shishang xiansheng*), *Zhongguo tushu shangbao* (Nov. 25, 2005), p.17.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Shouma (Jan 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Rosalind Gill, “Power and the Production of Subjects: A Genealogy of the New Man and New Lad,” in Bethan Benwell, *Masculinity and Men’s Lifestyle Magazines*, p.37.

men's style magazine, *Arena*, in 1986 while 'new lad' in relation to the launch of *loaded* in 1994. These two images of masculinity are summarized by Gill as follows:

The "new man" is generally characterized as sensitive, emotionally aware, respectful of women, and egalitarian in outlook-and, in some accounts, *as narcissistic and highly invested in his physical appearance*. He is likely to be gay as straight. By contrast, "new lad" is depicted *as hedonistic*, post (of not anti) feminist, and pre-eminently concerned with beer, football and 'shagging' women. His outlook on life could be characterized as anti-aspirational and owes a lot to a particular classed articulation of masculinity (emphases mine).<sup>18</sup>

Tim Edwards further points out that, to relate these notions of masculinity with class and paid work, the new man was the archetype of an aspiring yuppie, while work is curiously considered to be either unimportant, absent or simply invisible in the world of the New Lad.<sup>19</sup>

Alternative sexuality magazines implicitly or explicitly target a gay readership. They demonstrate a growing visibility of homosexual expressions in Chinese media and popular culture. With a relative loosening of restrictions on the representation of homosexuality in recent years, gay websites, bars and activities are now blossoming in the mainland. Examples of magazines targeting a gay readership are *Shishang junzi* (*MenBox*), *Meili xiansheng* (*Men's Style*), *Jianti fengshang*, and *Shijue zhinan* (*Visual Man*). Among them, *Shishang junzi*, a magazine launched in July 2003 under copyright cooperation between Modern Civilizations Pictorial in the mainland and *MenBox* magazine in Taiwan, is the most established and well-known. With the slogan "caring for men every day," it claims to be the most avant-garde men's magazine in China. Men's bodies are depicted as sexual objects in these magazines.

According to Chang, two Chinese men's magazines fall into the fourth category that cannot fit into the other prescribed categories. They are *Zhongguo wenyijia* (*Men's Uno*) and *Shishang jiankang* (*Men's Health*). The two magazines focus on fashion and sports and health respectively.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Tim Edwards, "Sex, Booze and Fags: Masculinity, Style and Men's Magazines," in Bethan Benwell, *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines*, p.132.

## Advertisements and Masculinities

I have so far summarized the three types of masculinities constructed by men's lifestyle magazines in today's China. Due to limitations of space, the following pages will focus on the former two types only and will use *Shishang xiansheng* and *Nanren zhuang* as examples.<sup>20</sup> To illustrate the difference between the "gentlemen" and "beer culture" magazines and the degree that they are influenced by Western magazines, I have undertaken an analysis of the advertisements in *Shishang xiangsheng* and *Nanren zhuang*. These advertisements are selected from 12 issues of *Shishang xiangsheng* (April, June, August, October, December 2004; February, April, June, August, October, December 2005, and February 2006), and 12 issues of *Nanren zhuang* (June, August, October, December 2004, February, April 2005, February, April, June, August, October, December 2007). All full-page, half-page and one-third page advertisements have been content-analyzed, with 803 advertisements in total. Out of the 803 advertisements displayed in the two selected magazines in my sample, 625 advertisements are from *Shishang xiangsheng* while 178 are from *Nanren zhuang*.

### *Coding of Variables*

(1) *Products* being sold. 10 product categories are initially included. *Formal dressings* are considered to be items such as suits, ties, shirts and leather shoes while *informal dressings* include items like t-shirt, shorts and sport shoes. *Accessories* include watches, sunglasses, pens, bags and wallets. The *beverage and wine* category include products for beer, hard liquor and any alcoholic drinks. The *automobile* advertisements are for cars, trucks and motorcycles. *Technical products* are seen as anything electronic, including cameras, PC, TV, automatic toothbrushes and shavers, refrigerator, etc. *Travel* are advertisements for tour sites and airlines. *Sports and Leisure* category include

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<sup>20</sup> The emergency of gay magazines and the increasing visibility of gay culture in contemporary China is another fascinating topic that deserve a lengthy treatment elsewhere. In this paper the examination of masculinity is confined to heterosexual, adult males only.

products for sporting, e.g, golf court. *Toiletries* is defined by perfumes, hair and face products. The *other* category include items that could not be grouped into the above prescribed categories.

(2) *Gender* of the models depicted in the advertisements. Coded as not applicable, male, female and both male and female characters and indeterminate.

(3) *Race* of the models depicted in the advertisements. Coded as black, white, Asian, not applicable, indeterminate and mixed.

(4) *Brand* of the products in the advertisements. Coded as local (mainland China only), international, Asian (including Hong Kong and Taiwan) and joint venture.

### *Discussions*

**Table 1: Product categories of advertisements in  
*Shishang xiansheng* and *Nanren zhuang***

<b>Product categories</b>	<b>Shishang xiansheng</b>	<b>Nanren zhuang</b>
Formal fashion	19.4	3.9
Informal fashion	25.1	12.9
Accessories	20.5	18.5
Beverages and wines	5.0	5.6
Automotive	6.7	18.0
Technical	10.7	18.0
Travel	1.6	0
Sports and leisure	1.0	1.1
Body enhancing products	6.2	14.6
Other	3.8	7.3
Total	100	100

Table 1 shows that advertisements on informal fashion occupy 25% of all the advertisements in *Shishang xiangsheng* while accessories and formal dressing advertisements each occupy about 20%. The advertisements are consistent with the style of the contents because models in suits are also most commonly seen in the fashion section of *Shishang xiangsheng*. This table also indicates that advertisements on fashion, including both formal and informal dressing, occupy 40% of all the advertisements on

*Shishang xiansheng*. As for *Nanren zhuang*, advertisements on accessories (18.5%), automotive (18%) and technical products (18%) have the highest percentage.

Comparatively speaking, the percentage of advertisements on automotives and technical products in *Shishang xiansheng* are only 6.7% and 10.7% respectively, while dressing (both formal and informal) occupy about 17% of all the advertisements.

As products of copyright cooperation with Western media, the two magazines under study demonstrate obvious influence by the above-mentioned “new man” and “new lad” masculine modes in contemporary Western culture. *Shishang xiansheng* is a shadow of the “new man” type. As Rosalind Gill points out, the defining characteristic of the “new man” is that he is “narcissistic and highly invested in his physical appearance.” Furthermore, the new man is an aspiring guy, he will devote to his careers or professions. These features can be easily detested from the above analysis of advertisement types in *Shishang xiansheng*. They help construct the images and lifestyle of executives and professionals in their thirties and forties in the newly formed social group of middle class.

*Nanren zhuang*, by contrast, is very similar to the “new lad” magazines, giving expression to the “individualistic, hedonistic and pleasure-seeking attitude.”<sup>21</sup> The advertisements obviously show more interest in the pursuit of material pleasure. The readers of the magazine are mostly young professionals and children from rich families who would like to spend money on accessories, automotives and technical products like computers and mobile phones.

**Table 2: Gender depicted in the advertisements in  
*Shishang Xiansheng* and *Nanren Zhuang* (%)**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Shishang xiansheng</b>	<b>Nanren zhuang</b>
Female	4.3	10.7
Male	56.1	45.5
both	8.8	7.3
Not applicable	30.8	36.5
Total	100	100

<sup>21</sup> Rosalind Gill, “Power and the Production of Subjects: A Genealogy of the New Man and New Lad,” p.47.

Table 2 shows that advertisements with female models in *Nanren zhuang* are 10.7%, which is more than double of those in *Shishang xiansheng*. Advertisements with female models in men’s magazines are more likely to make use of heterosexual desire to sell their products. These advertisements are consistent with the overall style of *Nanren zhuang*, which features sexy women on the cover. In fact, the magazine has a high emphasis on textual and visual attention on women and sex. For example, a section called *Youwu* (rare things) are full of pictures of women in sexist clothes and the “sex confidential” column interviews women about their sexual life, such as attitudes towards sex and expectations from sexual partners.

**Table 3: Brand of products**  
*Shishang xiansheng and Nanren zhuang (%)*

Brands	Shishang xiansheng	Nanren zhuang
Local	6.1	12.4
Foreign	81.6	80.9
Joint Venture	3.2	3.4
Asian	9.1	3.4
Total	100	100

It is shown in the table that over 80% of the advertisements in both *Shishang xiansheng* and *Nanren zhuang* are of foreign brands. On the one hand, these international companies are in a better position financially than their local competitors to advertise on the high-prize magazines targeting the middle-class readership. The rate for a full page advertisement is at least over US\$20,000, depending on the position of the advertisements.<sup>22</sup> It is much more expensive than “traditional” magazines. On the other hand, the statistics are consistent with the cult of Western lifestyle in these magazines.

<sup>22</sup> Advertisement rates are from the media kit of *Shishang xiansheng* from Trends Company.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Massculinity(ies) in the contemporary society must be examined as a set of competing constructions, instead of a fixed, monolithic, unchanging “Chinese masculinity”. Sociologists have suggested that masculinity is ever changing and is mainly a hybrid discourse in the postcolonial world. In most societies the hegemonic masculine discourse has been taken over by a “hybrid bloc” that “unites various and diverse practices in order to construct the best possible strategy for the reproduction of patriarchy.”<sup>23</sup> Ever since the early 1980s, China’s gradual integration into capitalist globalization has inevitably brought forth cultural pluralism, which questions and furthermore erodes the modernist notions of Chineseness, including that of Chinese masculinity. The current study represents an interdisciplinary attempt to analyse the hybridity and pluralism of contemporary Chinese masculinities in the era of globalization.

The significance of the categorization and comparison of the magazines lie in the co-existence of competing discourses on masculinities and the emergence of new types of masculinities in contemporary Chinese society, promoted by consumerism. They are obviously influenced by the “new man” and “new lad” types in contemporary Western bourgeois culture, and demonstrate the diversity of masculinity in contemporary China.

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<sup>23</sup> Demetrakis Z. Demetriou, “Connell’s Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique.” *Theory and Society* 30 (2001), p.337.