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***Making National Heroes:
The Exemplarist Production
of Masculinities in
Contemporary China.***

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Jacqueline Zhenru Lin is Assistant Professor of anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. *Making National Heroes: The Exemplarist Production of Masculinities in Contemporary China* is her first book, based on a doctoral dissertation she defended at Cambridge in 2021. *Making National Heroes* relies on fieldwork conducted in several provinces of China (mainly Hunan) from 2013 to 2019. The author worked alongside activists aiming to honour dead or living soldiers of the National Army (*guojun* 國軍) who fought in the War of Resistance against Japan. This “redress movement,” as Lin calls it, was first born in the 1990s as a reaction against the symbolic and material marginalisation of these veterans, whose contribution to “China’s good war” (Mitter 2020) was erased due to their loyalty to the Kuomintang (KMT) during the Chinese Civil War. Its activists try to locate survivors and raise public awareness of their plight, repatriate their remains, perform commemorative rituals, and more generally rehabilitate the memory of these forgotten “national heroes.” When Lin studied the redress movement, it was undergoing both professionalisation (with an NGO, the Unicorn Foundation or UF, centralising most activities after 2011) and digitisation (the UF was particularly active on social media for fundraising, organising online events, etc.).

The first chapter of the book narrates efforts to repatriate the remains of KMT war dead from Burma, first carried out by individual activists in Yunnan, then taken up by Zhang Xiaobo and his UF. Chapter Two deals with “relative-seeking missions” to Taiwan organised by the UF for relatives of KMT veterans who fled to the island in 1949. Chapter Three provides a portrait of three figures of the redress movement, two men and one woman, and of the sexualised values of masculinity and femininity they embody. Chapter Four explores the complex position of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) veterans active in the UF, while Chapter Five demonstrates the central, yet marginalised, status of women in the redress movement. Lastly, Chapter Six questions gendered relations within the organisation.

As this outline suggests, Lin places the redress movement in a specific light: her main goal is to study the “craze for male heroism,” particularly the “exemplarist production of masculinities” (p. 3-4), not from the top-down, but from the bottom-up: KMT veterans are presented first and foremost as screens on which activists and ordinary citizens, male and female, project their norms, hopes, and fantasies of what a real man should be, more or less independently of what male role models the Party-state promotes.

The question is undoubtedly important, and illuminating for some parts of Lin’s inquiry – such as the gendered imagination of Taiwan–Mainland relations among online “patriots,” or the sexual virtues that activists want to see embodied by KMT veterans. However, one cannot shed the feeling that this angle is often artificially forced on material that would have yielded more insights had it been subjected to a more open set of questions. The reader is left wondering whether Chinese society was particularly thirsty for “male heroism” in the 2010s, as opposed to previous time periods, or whether the grassroots rehabilitation of KMT veterans, a highly singular group in political terms, should be a particularly good vantage point for observing the production of Chinese masculinities in general. The lens through which Lin chooses to look at her data sometimes obscures as much as it reveals. For instance, the book strangely neglects the importance of class imaginaries in the making of alternative (non-communist) “national heroes,” despite the fact that scathing criticism of CCP “country bumpkins,” as opposed to elegant KMT officers, is clearly connected to a broader glamorisation of the Republican Era as a lost, bourgeois, China.

This commitment to a single line of questioning probably has to do with the fact that *Making National Heroes* is a revised doctoral dissertation, an exercise in which young academics are encouraged to give tokens of loyalty to their subfield (here, feminist cultural anthropology), as well as with the collection this work is published in (*Transnational Asian Masculinities*). This also accounts for stylistic choices that make the book a difficult read overall, such as the marshalling of many references in support of relatively straightforward claims (do we really need a reference to “emerging post-structural feminist studies on masculinity” on page 84 to understand why socially marginalised PLA veterans would feel solidarity with mistreated KMT veterans?), or sometimes convoluted prose (the book “conceptualises the alliances among multiple hegemonic masculinities in institutional formations, which stabilise and reproduce patriarchal systems in different domains in contemporary China,” as stated on page 6). The best passages are usually the most concrete, where the author’s talent as an ethnographer is on full display. Lin offers striking passages about the awkward position of PLA veterans in the UF, the surreal mobilisation of a Taipei influencer in a relative-seeking mission in Taiwan, or rampant sexism and harassment within the UF – in a final chapter that has the additional merit of offering fascinating insights about the inner workings of the organisation and its social composition, albeit late in the outline of the book.

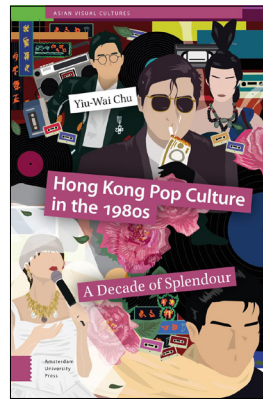
The state, however, is eerily absent. Although Lin duly notes that the bottom-up “redress movement” does not happen in a vacuum, but in a complex interaction with the authorities, she offers little information on the changing official treatment of former KMT soldiers and state-NGO relations, both of which evolved rapidly during her fieldwork, which coincided with the consolidation of Xi Jinping’s

rule. In some way, this can be construed as a book about the danger faced by an authoritarian regime born of civil war in trying to rehabilitate some of its former enemies: some of the activists seized this opportunity to outdo the Party-state in this process, sometimes expressing a surprisingly outspoken dislike for the CCP. Paradoxically, though, Lin's focus on masculinity leads her to downplay the most explicitly political implications of her subject (which, however, she does address in a stimulating article published in *Memory Studies* in 2021). This could be deliberate: tackling such a question head-on may be unwise for a Chinese scholar in the current context. Still, one cannot help but regret that an obviously gifted researcher should publish a book often best read against the grain.

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Hong Kong Pop Culture in the 1980s: A Decade of Splendour.

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"We'll always have Hong Kong." With these words, borrowed from Bono Lee (2008), himself paraphrasing Humphrey Bogart's famous line in *Casablanca*, Yiu-Wai Chu begins and ends his new study of Hong Kong popular culture a few years after his history of Cantopop (2017), this time focusing on the "golden decade" of the 1980s. With *Hong Kong Pop Culture in the 1980s: A Decade of Splendour*, Inaugural Professor and Director of Hong Kong Studies Programme at The University of Hong Kong Yiu-Wai Chu continues his systematic analysis of the rise and fall of Hong Kong pop culture. Chu's new book can be read as a nostalgic testament to the 1980s pop culture he experienced as a child – "culturally speaking, the 1980s was the Hong Kong I will always have" (p. 273). However, Chu wisely cautions against unilaterally declaring the "death of Hong Kong," a pronouncement made numerous times since the 1997 handover. Refuting Richard Hughes' now-classic truism "borrowed time, borrowed place" (1968), conveniently used to define Hong Kong's particular geopolitical position, Chu quotes renowned writer Kai-cheung Dung to remind us that "we belong to the space-time that is ours. Nobody lends it to us and we don't borrow it from anybody" (p. 12). Hong Kong is thus never dead to its own people.

Since the 1970s, Hong Kong identity has been closely linked to the production and consumption of popular culture in Cantonese, with the 1980s representing its apex, when "Hong Kong people came to take pride in their cultural identities" (p. 28). This decisive decade, positioned between the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984, which set the conditions for the transfer of Hong Kong to Chinese control in 1997, and the repression of the Tiananmen movement in 1989, forms the core of Chu's book. It is both a personal love letter to Hong Kong popular culture and a deep dive into the formation of a unique Hong Kong identity in the 1980s, which is essential for understanding contemporary Hong Kong. Voluntarily conflating "pop" and "popular" culture, Chu divides his book into six chapters, each focusing on a specific medium