

## Book Review

Sociology

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Susanne Yuk-Ping Choi and Yinni Peng

*Masculine Compromise: Migration, Family, and Gender in China*

Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016, \$29.95 pbk (ISBN: 9780520288287), 200 pp.

**Reviewed by:** Xiaodong Lin, *University of York, UK*

*Masculine Compromise* makes a prominent contribution to the existing literature of men and rural–urban migration in China, with a primary focus on the migrant men’s family lives and personal relationships. Deploying an ethnographic approach with life-story interviews, Choi and Peng document the complex (re)construction of the migrant men’s masculinities in relation to how they negotiate different gender roles, as partners, fathers and sons. In particular, the authors focus on the impact of migration on Chinese patriarchy and how the migrant men negotiate their masculinities in response to the discourse of the crisis of masculinity. Equally of importance, they also develop a critical discussion on how the men reconcile traditional gender norms in light of migration and being urban working class. One of the many strengths of the book is its detailed and rich data. This includes 266 migrants’ life stories in South China, comprising interviews of 192 migrant men and 74 migrant women in three major cities, during the period of 2012 to 2015. I appreciate Choi and Peng’s active engagement with theoretical issues, such as the local and global, as well as tradition and modernity in the discussion. The conceptualization of ‘masculine compromise’ serves well as a feminist framework. It captures the tension and negotiation of masculine ideals articulated through the men’s life stories, intersecting with a wider context of structural inequalities in relation to class and gender.

The book includes six empirical chapters. Choi and Peng are excellent story tellers. The chapters captivate readers’ curiosities, while providing insightful sociological viewpoints that underpin the migrants’ narratives. In so doing, the life stories become sociologically meaningful, culturally reflexive, historically relevant and politically significant. Chapter 2 provides a ‘thick’ description of the working life of migrant workers in China, engaging issues, such as rural–urban divisions, the impact of economic modernization and the state’s policy of controlling the floating population in post-socialist China. Through telling the stories of the young migrant men’s private lives, Chapter 3 offers a critical interpretation on how the migrant men make sense of love and romantic relationships, with great attention to their social economic marginality. Chapter 4 highlights the continuities of as well as the changes to traditional gender norms in marriage. The tensions between the couples highlight the material struggles they experienced. Thus, such challenges create opportunity and space for the migrant couples to negotiate their gender

relations. This includes strategically differentiating 'big' and 'small' decisions. In so doing, the migrant men maintain their patrilineal gender power. Choi and Peng identify different patterns in the migrant men's experience in doing housework and child care tasks in Chapter 5. Through the construction of 'respectable manhood', the men were able to rationalize their shifting gender practices, such as taking on domestic labour and child care responsibilities.

Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 are of particular relevance to a critical discussion on family relations. Choi and Peng further capture the relational aspects of the men's subjectivities through an engagement with the masculine ideals as fathers and sons. Chapter 6, for example, addresses the under-researched field of modern fatherhood. The men's responses to being an absent father are meaningful and sometimes moving. The complexities of emotional feeling demonstrate the unease that the migrant men were facing and their strategies of becoming a good father. Further to their discussion on gendered responsibilities, Choi and Peng address in Chapter 7 the strategies the men deployed to fulfil their filial responsibilities, such as taking care of their ageing left-behind parents. The intergenerational support from the men's parents on child care appears particularly as a Chinese characteristic. It illustrates how intergenerational intimacy and solidarity are lived out in response to material constraints.

The stories presented in *Masculine Compromise* are compelling. While having given the men voices, the analysis deploys a feminist standpoint by highlighting the underlying gender structure. The book captures the power of patriarchy and the notion of masculine ideals through unfolding the patrilineal and patrilocal practices in the migrant men's everyday lives. Choi and Peng show a great deal of reflexivity in demonstrating their awareness about being female researchers studying migrant men. These include the strategies they deploy, such as including five male interviewers in order to minimize the gender effect. It would be good to see more reflection on the authors' position as female sociologists from Hong Kong and how this impacted on the choice and the analysis of the data. The book will be of great interest to a wide interdisciplinary audience, particularly in the field of Sociology of Gender, Social and Cultural Anthropology and Human Geography. I believe postgraduate students will find it particularly useful. The book provides excellent examples of doing ethnography and engaging western theoretical concepts in a Chinese context.