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Corruption, Masculinity, and *Jianghu* Ideology in the PRC

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Recently, an entrepreneur I had met at a local gym invited me to visit a hot spring in a small city outside Chengdu. He was closely connected to some officials from the city where the hot spring was located, and they had offered to pay for our hotel, meals, and hot spring entrance fees. When these officials later went to Chengdu, the entrepreneur, Mr. Zhao, would in turn cover all of their expenses. While he ultimately “paid” for this trip by treating his government friends when they visited Chengdu, this reciprocal arrangement allowed him to demonstrate his degree of connectedness to powerful people and the strength of his *guanxi* (關係), about which he boasted frequently.

Although at dinner the previous evening Mr. Zhao’s car had displayed the license plates of an ordinary citizen, when we set off on our trip, his Audi A4 sported government license plates that exempted him from paying highway tolls and allowed him to disregard whatever traffic regulations he deemed inconvenient, which, from my experience in the backseat, felt like all of them. In addition to his government plates, he displayed a permit in his car window that allowed him to use a police horn and loudspeaker, which he used repeatedly when driving through streets crowded with bicyclists, pedicabs, and peddlers, barking at them to clear the way.

Mr. Zhao, however, had no official connection to the government or Communist Party. He was an entrepreneur who frequently undertook government construction projects and who was rumored by many to be connected with one or more local criminal organizations (*heishehui* 黑社會). State agents had bestowed these privileges on Mr. Zhao as a sign of their close ties with him. Like many entrepreneurs, he had earned his perks through countless evenings lavishly entertaining state officials in upscale restaurants, karaoke clubs, and foot massage parlors and on trips to Macao.

Among other new rich I encountered in my research, these elite privileges also included the granting of other police and even military perks.¹ One entrepreneur I knew who was well connected to a high official in the city's Public Security Bureau had an official police identification and a licensed gun, even though he distributed Chinese wines for a living and had never spent a day in the police academy or a police station. Beyond being indicative of the privatization of state power, this entrepreneurial appropriation of state privileges suggests a convergence in the lifestyles and increasing integration of China's economic and political elites.

Jianghu (江湖) Ideology and Brotherhoods in China

The patron-client relationship between state officials and entrepreneurs in China and the importance of social capital that includes ties to the government has been well documented by scholars (Smart 1993; Pieke 1995; Buckley 1999; Wank 1996; 1999). China's economic reforms notwithstanding, state agents still control access to capital, business licenses, and land. Furthermore, in many industries strong ties to the state offer one a competitive advantage. Well-connected entrepreneurs are more likely to win government contracts and obtain tax breaks and regulatory flexibility, and they are the first to learn about shifts in policy. As David Wank (1999) has argued, they also rely on the state both for protection from other predatory state agents and for leverage should any business disputes arise. Wank characterizes the relationship between state officials and businessmen as "symbiotic clientelism": entrepreneurs obtain protection and many benefits that enhance their business success, while state agents both generate revenue for local government agencies and obtain illicit income through bribes or kickbacks that often dwarfs their official salaries (Wank 1999, 11). By distributing favors, privileges, contracts, and protection, officials are able to build their own networks of entrepreneurs to accomplish various goals, from personal enrichment to state-driven aims of economic development.

In this chapter, I argue that viewing these networks not simply as transactional patron-client networks, but as gendered social formations, brings several other key features into view. First, entrepreneurs, state enterprise managers, and government officials alike increasingly aspire to a similar masculine "boss" ideal: they aim to become dispensers of favors and opportunities, people who can command the assistance of other powerful individuals with just a phone call. Participation in these networks as both patron and client is fundamental to post-Mao ideologies of masculinity. Secondly, as I will examine in detail below, these networks draw upon the rhetoric, structure, and ideologies of China's

1. This chapter is based on ethnographic research conducted with a group of wealthy entrepreneurs in the city of Chengdu, China from 2002 to 2006 and supplemented by follow-up visits in 2008, 2010, and 2013.

tradition of sworn brotherhoods. Built on ideologies of male solidarity, these gendered networks not only constitute a key component of business but also comprise the “elementary structures” of corruption and organized crime in China. Although some of these networks are based on ties of kinship and native-place, the bulk of the relationships that compose these networks are forged and maintained through ritualized leisure—experiences of shared pleasure in venues that cater to the desires and enjoyment of elite men. Primarily, these venues include karaoke clubs, saunas, nightclubs, foot massage parlors, and high-end restaurants and teahouses.

Susan Mann has pointed out that male, sex-segregated, homosocial networks have been at the heart of many late imperial and modern Chinese institutions, from scholarly academies and the civil service exam to secret societies and bandit groups (Mann 2000, 1602). In the reform era, as Maoist political cosmology and collectivist ethics have lost their salience in people’s interpersonal relationships, gendered notions of interpersonal morality and authority, rooted in the discourses of kinship and *renqing* (人情, human feelings and relationships), have increasingly served to legitimate everyday forms of power and ethics in China. Among the entrepreneurs with whom I worked in China, business relationships were often couched in a rhetoric of male solidarity, brotherhood, paternalism, mutual aid, and *yiqi* (義氣, honor or a sense of obligation in personal relationships). One template for these relationships is the hierarchical and gendered idiom of brotherhood. Patrons and well-connected bosses are often referred to as “big brothers” (大哥), and their status depends on fulfilling paternalist obligations and providing for the well-being of the other members of their networks. Associates and underlings are usually referred to as “iron brothers” (鐵哥們兒) or simply “brothers” (兄弟). They are expected to put their fictive brotherly relationships above all other commitments, sharing their success and using positions of power to the advantage of other members of their network. While these relationships generally lack the strong bond and weighty obligations that characterized actual sworn brotherhoods (Jordan 1985), they serve a similar purpose in providing a certain degree of security and stability in an environment of considerable competitiveness and distrust. By invoking the framework of brotherhood, businessmen are able to draw upon an ideology that minimizes conflict and competition, provides a ready-made set of moral obligations, and offers a framework for dispute resolution (*ibid*).

Given the strong rhetoric of brotherhood and loyalty among these groups of men, another template for these relationships is *jianghu* (江湖) culture, of which sworn brotherhoods were an integral part. *Jianghu* is a term that is difficult to capture in English. In its most limited sense it refers to the knight-errant culture depicted in the classic fourteenth-century Chinese novels *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三國演義) and *The Water Margin* (水滸傳). The peach orchard scene at the beginning of *Three Kingdoms* in which the three main characters pledge their loyalty to one another was widely imitated by underground brotherhoods (幫會

banghui) in Qing China. To this day, many criminal sworn brotherhoods in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the PRC base their initiations on the “peach garden pledge” (桃園結義) from this novel. Guan Yu (關羽), the deified main character from *Three Kingdoms*, is also worshipped by many of these groups as the embodiment of the code of brotherhood and “honor and righteousness in personal relationships” (義氣). But more broadly, *jianghu* connotes a social and moral space different from the normative world of family, law, and the state in which a concern with honor (義氣) outweighs all other concerns and trumps state law.²

For those marginalized by mainstream social norms and values, which (ideally) placed law-abiding scholar-officials at the top, *jianghu* mythology and ideology offered an alternative framework for generating self-worth and formulating durable, binding relationships outside the traditional kinship system. Relationships in the *jianghu* world often took the form of voluntary (or what is sometimes called “fictive”) kinship, with the sworn brotherhood being the most prevalent form.³ Sociologically, the *jianghu* world was (and still is in many Chinese communities around the world) composed of the diverse groups of people who “live by their wits, skill, and, sometimes, brutality,” including gangsters, hucksters, prostitutes, and other assorted minor criminals (Boretz 2011, 33). Sworn brotherhoods offered men who were at the fringes of Chinese society, and often far from kin, a modicum of protection and mutual support. Thus, brotherhoods, such as the Tiandihui (天地會), which first appeared in the mid-Qing, tended to mostly attract men from marginal social positions (Ownby 1996). Many were so-called “bare sticks” (光棍, *guanggun*) who lacked families of their own (Billingsley 1988). Yet, in the contemporary PRC, we find a proliferation of *jianghu* forms and ideology among virtually all social classes. As I will argue below, this can be attributed to the inherent insecurity of the official and business worlds, despite the high status of both of these professional domains.

While some of the networks I encountered in my research were organized, underground (criminal) brotherhoods with a well-defined hierarchy and a clearly delineated membership, commonly known as 黑社會 *heishehui* (literally, “black society”), many others more loosely mimicked the forms, terms of address, and ideology of China’s tradition of sworn brotherhoods. In Republican China (1912–49) sworn brotherhoods were frequently intertwined with the state to help with the policing and governance of particular unruly populations,

2. For an extended discussion of the meanings and significance of *jianghu* in China and Taiwan, see Boretz (2011, 29–40).

3. Following the work of many anthropologists, I avoid labeling these relationships “fictive,” which implicitly contrasts them with “real” blood-based kinship. As countless ethnographies have demonstrated, the obligations and emotions attached to kinship relationships have little to do with a narrow Western conception of biological relatedness. Thus I use the term “voluntary” to emphasize that these relationships were entered into by choice, but by no means should this imply that the emotional weight and obligation attached to them was any less “real.”

a relationship that, as I discuss elsewhere (Osburg 2013, Chapter 3) is not altogether different from their role today. This was particularly the case in Sichuan, where members of *Paoge* (袍哥) permeated state and civil institutions in the late Qing and Republican periods (McIsaac 2000; Zhou and Shao 1993, 563–72). Even during the Maoist years, Elizabeth Perry and Nara Dillon document how worker rebels in Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution employed “masculine metaphors of brotherhood to construct their new rebel community” (2002, 270). Drawing as much on this brotherhood tradition as on Hong Kong gangster movies in developing their ethos, formal underground brotherhoods (黑社會) exert an increasing influence over local state organs in China, play a key role in real estate development, and control much of China’s vast “underground” economy.

The early days of China’s market reforms created a morally grey and socially marginalized space that resonated with the *jianghu* world. Avron Boretz (2011) suggests an affinity between the *jianghu* values and the emerging world of business:

[M]any narratives of and about China’s 1980s craze of leaping into the sea (下海 *xiahai*) make use of similar tropes and allusions. Around this time, *xiahai* became a popular term among Chinese intellectuals and party officials who were “taking the plunge” into the newly opened world of private business. Those who cast off into the stormy seas of capitalism were giving up the security and prestige of an official career . . . But the decision to engage in entrepreneurial activity was regarded by many, especially intellectuals, who traditionally defined their calling as pure and above the desire for profit, as inherently self-debasing . . . For them, “leaping into the sea” would have implied many of the same moral and personal dilemmas that “embarking on the dark path” has long had for working-class men and women in Taiwan. (Boretz 2011, 57)

Not surprisingly, then, given this climate of risk, uncertainty, and moral greyness, many businessmen and government officials draw on *jianghu* notions of obligation and brotherhood to establish relationships of trust with one another and to justify their participation in what are often illegal activities. While the stigma surrounding profit-making of the 1980s has withered away and the legal status of capitalist activities in the PRC is safely enshrined in law, business, especially more lucrative fields, remains a high-risk, high-reward field in which participation in many morally grey activities (such as bribery) is still essential. Entrepreneurs and businesspeople are still heavily reliant on official connections for access to resources, opportunities, and protection. Their official patrons too depend on informal alliances with those outside officialdom for the bulk of their “grey” income. The brotherhood tradition provided a ready-made template for these alliances, despite its lofty ideals not always finding realization in the cut-throat world of Chinese capitalism.

In his influential examination of Chinese masculinity, Kam Louie (2002) argues that the *wen* 文 (scholarly)/*wu* 武 (martial) dichotomy has undergirded

Chinese masculinity throughout its various historical permutations. While Confucians traditionally disparaged commerce and profit-seeking, Louie argues that increasingly Confucius is being reinterpreted as a philosopher of business management (2002, 55). *Wen* masculinity, Louie argues, is also being reconfigured and reimagined to incorporate the successful businessman. Yet, despite the ever-increasing hegemony of commerce in the PRC, given the rough and tumble reputation of the business world, a certain “rough and ready” *wu* masculinity still persists in many industries. In particular, it can be found outside the office environment in the raucous evenings of banqueting, drinking, singing, and (sometimes) sex consumption that still accompany many business deals.⁴ Nor are these two configurations of masculinity mutually exclusive: the sophisticated, white-collar business manager by day may very well be a hard-drinking, loyal-to-the-end *gemenr* (哥們兒) by night.

Entertaining (應酬) and Cultivating Business Networks

One of the primary sites for studying the formation of business networks is entertaining and leisure interactions that take place at banquets, in KTVs, *xijiao-fang* (洗腳房, foot massage parlors), saunas, and teahouses. My research subjects spent most nights and many afternoons in these venues cultivating business ties or maintaining existing ones. Rather than viewing these interactions as part of a “supposedly universal psychology of male bonding” (Kipnis 2001, 92n16), as they are often understood in the West, a starting point of my analysis is that masculinity is not a universal essence or biological impulse, but a culturally and historically variable construction that requires constant maintenance through performance. In making this claim, I am not simply arguing for either the reemergence or the stubborn persistence of a cultural pattern that mechanistically reproduces itself. In the reform era, gendered *guanxi* networks have proliferated in particular political domains and industries, while they have declined in others. Moreover, they are not simply constituted out of the fabric of “traditional” social relations—such as kinship and native-place ties—but are increasingly forged between business associates in the new spaces of leisure in China’s urban centers. In these contexts, actors performatively invoke cultural notions of brotherhood or *yiqi*—sometimes sincerely, and at other times in highly calculated, instrumental ways. Sometimes these practices generate their intended performative effects; at other times they fail.

4. Historically, *wu* masculinity was associated with sexual abstinence or control of sexual desire, whereas *wen* masculinity was often confirmed and validated through sexual relations with women. In the popular imagination in the PRC today, the new rich businessman and the corrupt government official are both associated with sexual overindulgence. While, on the one hand, their abundant sexual relationships serve to confirm their high status, on the other, they are also cited as evidence of their moral degeneration.

The nightly carousing in nightclubs with business partners, mistresses, and paid hostesses that dominates the afterwork lives of most businessmen in China is not simply the result of a suppressed masculinity finally finding release after the prohibitions of socialism; nor is it simply what men, by nature, are programmed to do. Rather, by drinking, singing, and being flattered by female companions in nightclubs, men are both creating and enacting a particular version of masculinity that is associated with being a man of status and wealth in post-Mao China. They are at the same time seeking to forge homosocial ties crucial to their career success and financial futures. Business entertaining is understood by its participants as a (not always successful) attempt to inject forms of value that are resistant to commodification into business relationships, to transform relationships of cold calculation into kin-like relationships embedded in moral economies of sentiment and obligation. This transformation is realized through the incommensurable, shared experiences of intimacy, vulnerability, and transgression that this entertaining enables (but does not always achieve). The entrepreneurs I worked with hoped that if they paid for an evening on the town their client or official patron would walk away not simply feeling “indebted” to the host for his lavish expenditure but also with an embodied memory of shared pleasure and a latent sense of fondness, or *ganqing* (感情), for their host. In his description of how banquets transform relationships in China, Andrew Kipnis (2001, 88) states, “Psychologically, *ganqing* [sentiment] may be described as a sentimental memory of indebtedness and shared experience. The more exceptional the memory created the better.” In other words, anyone can offer a bribe or a kickback, so only those who can generate more durable ties rooted in *ganqing* rather than just financial interest have an advantage. *Yingchou* (應酬, business entertaining) should thus be understood as an attempt to embed market relationships into gendered social relationships.⁵

As James Farrer and Sun Zhongxing (2003, 14) note in their analysis of discourses surrounding extramarital sexuality in reform-era Shanghai, feelings and sentiment (*ganqing*) have increasingly served as a counter-discourse to money in post-Mao China and have taken on a very positive moral connotation. In this context, my informant friends frequently framed their business transactions and patron-client relationships as “helping friends” (幫助朋友) or as rooted in “feelings” (感情) for others. To appear to be overly calculating and greedy and focused on a short-term transaction rather than the relationship itself was to risk being accused of having a “poor peasant nature” (小貧農的劣質性). Such behavior was viewed as a sign of both desperation and untrustworthiness and likely to raise the suspicions of business partners and official patrons. By framing their behavior as motivated by feelings rather than money, I believe my informants were also claiming a particular kind of elite moral subjectivity: one that was

5. In the Sichuan dialect, which was spoken by most of my informants, this form of instrumental entertaining was referred to as *goudui* (勾兌).

secure enough financially to be free from being governed by crude material interest alone. My informants often bragged about the *xiongdì* to whose success they had contributed, and in narrating their own rise in business, they were quick to credit the one or more *dage* (大哥) who had provided them with opportunities, capital, or important connections. Generosity was at the core of the boss-patron ideal that many of my informants emulated, and several of my interviewees told stories of friends and acquaintances who had borrowed money and gone into considerable debt to maintain the generous displays associated with this version of masculinity. One individual, whom I will discuss further at the end of this chapter, estimated that he spent RMB 2 to 3 million a year in one particular nightclub, and given that his bill often exceeded RMB 10,000 in a single evening, I believe his estimate.

Similarly, many elite men with whom I worked also framed payments to mistresses or hostesses as gifts—as tokens of concern for their well-being and happiness rather than as payments for time and services rendered. Just as in their relationships with other men, wealthy men and government officials strive to cultivate relationships of patronage with their mistresses and lovers. For example, I encountered several female university students in Chengdu who had their tuition and living expenses paid by wealthy, older male patrons. According to my male interviewees, the desirability of the woman “provided for” directly reflected her patron’s wealth, reputation, and status. Mistresses or lovers (and specifically not wives) were thus viewed as reliable indicators of the qualities (charm, sophistication, wealth, and appearance) of their male patrons. Providing for multiple dependents, be they mistresses or fellow businessmen, was thus central to the “boss-patron” imaginary that informed the practices of many of the elite men with whom I worked.

This is not to argue that these networks were islands of brotherly love and feelings in a commodified world. Although the businessmen mostly enjoyed banqueting, drinking, and cavorting with hostesses on their own, they sometimes resented being obliged to entertain clients, partners, and officials they did not like on a personal level, as well as the considerable amount of time, money, and energy consumed by this entertaining. They also complained about obligations to help out a business associate or to promote his product or service. One memorable example involved an entrepreneur, Mr. Cai, who owned the distribution rights to a brand of mooncakes considered by many to be inferior in taste and quality. Around the Mid-Autumn Festival, when mooncakes are traditionally given as gifts, they nonetheless dutifully purchased the dry, crumbly mooncakes from Mr. Cai to distribute to other members of their social networks.

Some also saw the constant drinking in KTVs and the hiring of sex workers to entertain others as the mark of an unsophisticated nouveau riche (暴發戶 *baofahu* or 土豪 *tuhao*), and they sometimes looked down on clients and officials who demanded this form of courtship. Some of the men with whom I worked contrasted China’s business world with an idealized West in which (they imagined)

their talents and abilities alone would be sufficient to win contracts and attract partners. Many of my interviewees complained that their endless obligations to business associates, government officials, and other members of their social networks prevented them from pursuing their own business and leisure interests. Several of them explained that successful, wealthy individuals in particular are forced to “live for others” (為別人生活) rather than for themselves. Many wished they could just give a bribe or a kickback and be done with it. But the inflationary pressures of entertaining, along with the persistent uncertainty of China’s business world, have rendered the production of relationships rooted in irrational, incommensurable sentiment all the more crucial to business success. Increasing market competition has made the cultivation of *guanxi* more rather than less important.

Despite their wealth and high status, many of my informants viewed their social and financial positions as precarious. They often contrasted the informal, voluntary kin networks on which they relied with the networks of those who possessed *beijing* (背景, literally, “background”). By *beijing* they were referring to those connected to powerful individuals through kinship ties, in particular the sons and daughters of powerful officials. My informants claimed that they needed to cultivate *guanxi* precisely because they lacked *beijing*, which others they were competing against possessed. They would often complain that, despite their efforts to cultivate powerful ties, their growth was ultimately limited by those with *beijing*. Frequently they found that the alliances formed at the banquet table and in the nightclub were vulnerable to periodic anticorruption purges. Once their official patron(s) lost power and influence, their fortunes were likely to suffer as well. Lacking the durable (nonvoluntary) kin-based connections of the true elite, my informants needed to constantly maintain their networks, and sometimes they had to be rebuilt from the ground up.

Corruption, Patronage, and Masculinity

Many of the practices I observed and analyzed in my research form the basis of the broad social field described by scholarly and nonscholarly observers alike as corruption (腐敗) in China. Corruption, however, is a polysemic term that carries with it a great deal of moral baggage and thus often lacks analytical precision. The literature on corruption both within China and elsewhere is too vast to be dealt with in detail in this chapter. Instead I aim to suggest some limitations to what is arguably the most widespread characterization of corruption (and not insignificantly how it is framed by the Chinese state)—the failure of public institutions to curb the private desires of individuals. Writing about corruption in Ghana, Jennifer Hasty summarizes the limitation of this individualist approach to corruption as follows:

This normative scholarship on corruption tends to view the practices of cor-

ruption as alienated, self-interested acts by greedy public servants poaching

resources from the public purse of the state to their own pockets. (Osburg, 2016)

University Press, 2016. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/washington/detail.action?docID=4592525>.

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on national resources and as selfish crimes of calculated desire in the absence of public discipline. It is therefore assumed that a more pervasive public exercise of social discipline through state institutions will work to prevent corruption by stifling the selfish greed of individuals. What this corruption scholarship fails to recognize, however, is that forms of desire that fuel corruption are not merely selfish and private but profoundly social, shaped by larger sociocultural notions of power, privilege, and responsibility. (Hasty 2005, 271)

Evolving configurations of masculinity are key to understanding the “notions of power, privilege, and responsibility” that underpin many corrupt activities in China in two ways. First, as members of these networks, businessmen, state enterprise managers, government officials, and members of the underworld aspire to emulate (and are judged in terms of) a similar paternalistic “boss-patron” ideal—as both a generous dispenser of assistance and opportunities for whom all are eager to do favors, and someone who commands a large and powerful *guanxiwang* (關係網). The power and status of an elite man are measured, I would argue, above all other factors by his ability to accomplish goals, for both himself and others, through his social network. Secondly, male government officials, as high-status men, are not exempt from being measured according to the symbolic codes of elite masculinity—mistresses, imported cars, and luxury brand clothing and accessories. Thus many forms of extralegal and grey income generation should be understood as their attempts to support a lifestyle that maintains their gendered status and recognition within their broader social networks.

Furthermore, as much anthropological work done on corruption in Africa has noted, forms of official malfeasance are often grounded in local norms, ethics, and expectations from kin and other members of an official’s social network (Olivier de Sardan 1999). In his essay on the moral economy of corruption in Africa, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan argues that corruption is anchored in “ordinary everyday practice” and enabled by the “value systems and cultural codes, which permit a justification of corruption by those who practice it” (ibid., 25–26). Rather than viewing corruption as evidence of moral decay or a lack of ethics, he argues that the practices of corruption are “standard practices deeply rooted in more general social relationships” (ibid., 50). In other words, one person’s concern for his nephew’s business success might be another person’s insider dealing. Or, the relationships that many of my informant-friends frame as “helping friends” or fulfilling obligations to their “brothers” would no doubt be perceived by most Chinese citizens as the highly immoral basis of corruption. This grounding of corruption in everyday ethics helps to explain why, to quote Daniel Jordan Smith’s observation about corruption in Nigeria, ordinary Chinese are “paradoxically active participants in the social reproduction of corruption even as they are also its primary victims and principal critics” (2007, 5).

In his account of the history and origins of corruption in the Chinese Communist Party, Lü Xiaobo (2000) argues that the CCP failed both to establish a “modern” bureaucracy committed to formal rules and procedures and

to maintain an inspired, loyal cadre core dedicated to the goals of “continuous revolution.” He shows how many CCP policies, which promoted the goals of revolution over bureaucratization, undermined the establishment of an elite culture committed to formal bureaucratic rules and norms. Instead, the insecurity and uncertainty generated by constant political campaigns led officials to seek protection in interpersonal networks, thereby undermining the bureaucratic power of the state and strengthening informal networks, a process he calls “organizational involution.”

Building on Lü’s (2000) historical argument, I understand corruption in the PRC today as primarily a product of these evolving informal, yet deeply powerful, networks. While there are no doubt many acts of simple theft and deception committed by self-interested individuals, corruption as a larger social phenomenon relies on the coordination and cooperation of others. In contemporary China, it is built on particularistic, gendered networks bound together by overlapping ties of affect, interest, loyalty, and mutual obligation that permeate different levels of state and society. Thus I view corruption as a product of elite networks and their moral economies—as the dominance of an informal mode of power and distribution over the legally enshrined one.

In order to better illustrate some of the points I have been arguing here, let me show how the themes of this chapter play out in the life of one individual, whom I call Mr. Wei.

Mr. Wei: A Man Straddling Many Worlds

Mr. Wei claimed to be a self-made man who had prospered through hard work and a good reputation, but he also had an excellent family background (背景). Originally from Jiangsu, his father fought in the Red Army and was later assigned to a government job in Sichuan. Mr. Wei himself became an official at a young age, working for the city construction and planning bureaus. He explained to me that during his time in the construction bureau, in order to accomplish his official tasks he had to interact and do business “with all kinds of people” including, in his words, “社會上的人,” referring to people with expansive social networks that included members of the *jianghu* world. He said that he did many favors for people at the time but refused to take any money from them. In this way, he claimed, he was able to earn people’s respect and gain a reputation.

Early in his career his superiors were investigated for corruption. During the investigation Mr. Wei was questioned by anticorruption investigators but refused to provide any information about his superiors. He was held in detention for several weeks. During that time he felt that his family and friends turned their backs on him, and his wife nearly divorced him. Finally, he was released from custody but stripped of his official position. Temporarily estranged from his family and former friends, he borrowed some startup capital from an underworld friend and went into business. Naturally, he chose a career closely related

to the work of the construction bureau—the demolition and relocation (拆遷) business. His act of sacrifice and loyalty to high-ranking construction bureau officials all but ensured Mr. Wei's business success.

Because of this demonstration of loyalty, Mr. Wei won the respect and trust of many powerful officials in the construction and land bureaus; these were the very people who decided which neighborhoods would be torn down to make way for new developments. He explained that this act of sacrifice demonstrated that he was a man who could be trusted, who “understood the value of *yiqi*” and the importance of relationships. In addition to hiring Mr. Wei's company to demolish old neighborhoods, local government agencies subcontracted the negotiation of compensation for displaced residents to his company, and he commanded a gang of young thugs to scare away residents who were reluctant to leave their homes. He also acted as a broker with government bureaus involved in real estate, helping his friends, both new and old, to acquire land marked for development and approval for their projects. Countless entrepreneurs courted him for his access to inside information about land auctions, zoning, and development plans.

His business grew very quickly, and he not only commanded an important position in the legitimate world of real estate, but became an underworld boss (a self-described 老大) to several younger followers, his “little brothers,” who helped carry out some of the less savory aspects of his business. Mr. Wei thus had many faces. When dining with other entrepreneurs outside his circle of friends, he presented himself as a modern businessman, launching into monologues about the latest business strategies and management techniques. When alone with me or with his circle of friends he focused on his roles as the “boss” (老大) of the demolition world and paternal “big brother” (大哥) to his “little brothers” (兄弟).⁶ When describing himself, he emphasized his role as a provider to many: his family, the employees of his legitimate company, and the *xiongdi* who had pledged an oath of loyalty to him. Mr. Wei characterized his relationship with his *xiongdi* as follows:

My *xiongdi* look to me as a god. They don't have much education or good family backgrounds, so I provide for them and teach them how to achieve success in today's society. They come to me with business ideas, and I help them get started with advice and money. Sometimes they try to cheat me, but I can always see through them. They also come to me with personal problems. Sometimes they even cry in front of me. Without me they would be lost.

Shortly after I left Chengdu and returned to the US, Mr. Wei called me one morning and declared that he was already the boss (老大) of the demolition business and soon he would be the boss of the city. He had sold his year-old Toyota Crown and bought a brand new Mercedes and hired a full-time driver.

6. Some of his friends saw his underworld aspirations as somewhat juvenile. They would say that he watched too many Hong Kong gangster movies.

His real estate business was booming, and his fame and reputation had spread from Chengdu to neighboring counties. After we had updated each other on our lives, he mentioned that he was calling from the hospital. Previously, during my fieldwork, he had been hospitalized for a few weeks because of stomach problems caused by excessive drinking. He informed me that it was stomach problems again that had sent him back to the hospital. When I asked why he had endangered his health again, he explained that the several weeks of nightly entertaining (應酬) necessary to court a new group of officials in Chengdu had led to his hospitalization. I told him he needed to take better care of himself and that his health was more important than anything. It was the foundation of any other success. He replied, “I can’t stop or slow down. I have many people whose livelihoods depend on me [literally “depend on me to eat,” 靠我吃飯]. I’ve got about fifty employees and even more *xiongdì*. Their livelihoods depend on my success. I have to keep going.”

On my latest trip to Chengdu in 2013, I asked him whether, now that he was becoming well-known, and given his previous experiences with anticorruption officials, he was worried about falling out of the state’s favor and having his business activities investigated. Given the recent anticorruption campaign and the detention of the former mayor of Chengdu, Li Chuncheng (李春城), and several other Sichuanese officials, I asked Mr. Wei if he worried about an investigation into his business. He told me that even though he gets detained once every few months he is not at all worried. Previously he had explained to me, “The government needs people like me. I can accomplish things that the police and the government cannot do or that are not convenient for them to do.” The activities to which Mr. Wei refers are the more violent aspects of China’s privatization of formerly collective or state-owned land. It is the younger brothers at the bottom of the underworld organizations who are sent to scare away or inflict violence on residents who refuse to leave housing pegged for redevelopment or who protest their often paltry or skimmed compensation funds. The implied or actual threat of violence is also used to persuade residents to accept below-market prices for their housing and land rights.

The career of Mr. Wei thus illustrates two different trajectories of elite power in contemporary China: on the one hand, it illustrates the privatization of the state—the appropriation of state resources and power by non-state elites—and on the other, it demonstrates the official penetration and cooptation of informal modes of power (such as the masculine solidarity of underworld gangs). These two trajectories (both away from the almost complete state monopoly on power in the Maoist years) have not led to an increasing separation between “state” and “society” but rather have generated networks, the nodes of which extend through multiple modes of power and forms of authority. Despite the ways in which some of the practices can be interpreted as evidence of the weakness of state control, I argue that they are not inherently resistant to state power. While illegal, corrupt practices might undermine the formal laws and institutions of

the state, they do not necessarily undermine the reach and effectiveness of state governance. By cutting deals with *heishehui* bosses over seafood banquets, local governments are able to exploit the masculine solidarity of junior members of these groups to manage the underground economy and to undertake tasks that would incite public outrage if carried out explicitly by organs of the state, such as forcing evictions and quashing protests. These elite networks provide protection and opportunities for the accumulation of wealth and status for both state and non-state elites, and they are also the networks through which the state-driven goals of economic growth are achieved. While entrepreneurs and underworld leaders cultivate relationships with members of the state to obtain protection, insider access, and government privileges, state officials rely on entrepreneurs to achieve development goals that advance their careers, and they depend on unofficial incomes and deeds to support the extrabureaucratic “face” and status appropriate for a powerful official in the reform period. Elite networks are thus the social formations that organize corruption and govern its transactions through its “unwritten rules” (潛規則). In short, these networks, governed by their ideologies of mutual aid, brotherhood, and accumulation, are becoming significant institutions in their own right. They support forms of distribution that undermine official state hierarchies and organize the market economy to their advantage.

Conclusion

The tumult of twentieth-century China, from the reformist movements of the early twentieth century to the Cultural Revolution-era attacks on traditional culture, significantly weakened the ideological foundation that helped to legitimize the position of the scholar-official (才子) as the most exalted form of masculinity. In addition to hostility toward intellectuals during the peak of the Maoist period, the CCP promoted a more physically-oriented masculinity associated with the peasant and working classes. At the beginning of the reform period in the early 1980s, we see the continued celebration of a rugged, *wu* masculinity in film and literature, as many Chinese men sought to overcome perceived emasculation by both the patriarchal state and the economically dominant West (Zhong 2000). During this same period, the emerging field of business was a domain at the margins of respectability that required daring, brashness, and wits to survive. *Jianghu* ideology offered a compelling, deep-rooted cultural framework to justify their chosen path and to orient their actions and relationships. As a nonelite cultural form, *jianghu* ideology was able to persist through the cultural tumult of the Mao period in literature (both in *Sanguo Yanyi* and *Shuihu Zhuan* and later in extremely popular martial arts novels), art, and everyday practice. And the form of the voluntary brotherhood provided the ideal template for the informal networks that structured many business ventures and official-entrepreneur alliances in the PRC.

China's ever-increasing integration with the global capitalist system has only further disturbed the dominant position of the *caizi* at the pinnacle of Chinese masculinity, as the status of merchants in the guise of the global businessman and entrepreneur constantly grows. While one occasionally hears references to the ideal of the "Confucian businessman" (儒商), and Confucius (along with Mao) is being reinterpreted as a business strategist (Louie 2002, 55), this chapter argues that the decline of the *wen* scholarly mode of masculinity during the Mao and early reform periods created a space for *jianghu* ideals, once confined to the margins, to move into the mainstream as they became a key cultural resource for the business world. However, as business practice becomes increasingly normalized, the metaphors of the early reform era, when entrepreneurial activities were morally and politically suspect, have lost much of their salience. (No one "plunges into the sea" of business anymore.) The ongoing corruption crackdown initiated by Xi Jinping suggests that the informal networks of businessmen and officials forged through lavish banquets and expensive gifts may be declining in significance. Thus, the affinities between the business world and the *jianghu* world may be diminishing along with them. We are already seeing the revitalization of *wen* conceptions of masculinity that accommodate the hegemony of global capitalism through the rise of white-collar masculinity in China (see Hird, this volume). Furthermore, in the past few decades, the discourse of *suzhi* (素質, personal quality) has increasingly become the hegemonic measure of social status in the PRC. Because it is more aligned with *wen* conceptions of masculinity, those with *suzhi* are understood to possess high levels of education, manners, and taste. Rough and ready businessmen such as Mr. Wei are usually disadvantaged by this discourse and labeled *baofahu* (nouveau riche) or *tuhao* (vulgar rich). In such a context, *jianghu* ideals may lose their salience in the business world and return to their traditional place at the margins of Chinese society.

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