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Persona, Politics and Chinese Masculinity in Japan: the case of Li Xiaomu

Since the late 1990s a vibrant body of scholarship on Chinese masculinities has explored cultural historical models of masculinity (Louie 2002; Song 2004), the diversity of masculinities in popular and literary Chinese culture (Zhong 2000; Song and Hird 2013), and the ways in which Chinese men who move overseas contend with conflicting models of masculinity (Louie, Kuehn, and Pomfret 2013; Khoo and Louie 2005). This final group of scholarship has predominantly explored how Chinese masculinity is re-negotiated in English speaking contexts, providing useful critiques of hegemonic masculinity in non-Chinese contexts as well as the ways in which Chinese men deal with the heritage of emasculated images. In this chapter, I turn our attention to Chinese masculinities in Japan. While attention has recently been paid to the influences of other East Asian masculinities in China (Louie and Low 2005), there is relatively little written about how Chinese masculinities are negotiated in Japan. Chinese masculinities in Japan connect to these regional developments, but they also elicit different questions. Tensions exist between Chinese masculinities as they are performed by men, Japanese perceptions of Chinese men, Japanese perceptions of Chinese masculinity, Chinese perceptions of Japanese men, and the ways these varying perceptions and representations influence how Chinese and Japanese men contextualise their masculinity within a wider cultural milieu. Consequently, contending with hegemonic masculinities within East Asia, as well as in Japan, tells us much about regional forms of hegemonic masculinity as they are situated within a global context.

In this chapter I provide a single case study of the ways Chinese men negotiate the presentation of self in everyday life (Goffman 1959), as well as in media. Rather than providing an ethnographic or discursive analysis, I trace the gendered performances of a single person, Li Xiaomu 李小牧, who not only inverts wider discursive representations of Chinese men for his own purposes, but also re-inscribes them through prolific engagement with the media. Based on everyday interactions and interviews with Li Xiaomu, as well as text and film analysis, this paper explores a single example of how Chinese men translate masculinity in a transnational context in order to construct a cosmopolitan public persona.

In using the term persona, I draw inspiration from Richard Dyer’s emphasis on the constructed nature of star persona within the Hollywood studio system:

> 'What is important about stars, especially in their particularity, is their typicality or representativeness. Stars, in other words, relate to the social types of a society' (Dyer and McDonald 1998: 49)

At the same time however, I put my own emphasis on the ways in which persona are constituted by change and mobility, rather than static types and 'structures' (Coates 2014). The hybridity of Li's persona tells us much about how masculinity is negotiated within a transnational context. His success plays upon imaginaries of what is typical about Chinese migrants in Japan, as well as inverting these imaginaries in certain ways. He has portrayed himself as a savvy Chinese businessman cum mafia boss, as well as a libertarian social commentator. More recently, his persona has metamorphosed into a respectable political figure intent on straddling the gap between Japan and the world. The effect of these performances is to create a complex masculine persona that bridges two cultural milieus.

In recent years, Li has come to explicitly narrate his public persona as 'cosmopolitan' using the Japanese pronunciation of the English term (*kosumoporitan* コスモポリタン) in both conversation and textual media. In practice, his fashion sense, discussions of sexual libertarianism and general love of omnivorous cultural consumption, positions him as a 'consumerist cosmopolitan' (Song and Lee 2010) in a 'cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics' (Rofel 2007: 111). Explorations of consumerist cosmopolitan masculinities in China have largely focused on how representations of consumerist and cosmopolitan lifestyles, embodied in television dramas and 'lads' magazines, propagate masculinities imagined as elite, ideal and aspirational. Under this description 'consumerist cosmopolitanism' can be interpreted as a form of hegemonic masculinity. The advent of the term 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 1982; Kessler et al 1982) allowed masculinities studies scholars to not only critique systems of patriarchy but also the unequal relationships between men. Originally theorized within the Australian context, discussions of hegemonic masculinity first focused on how young men can be perceived as being less or more of a 'man' within a particular national context, before developing a pluralistic model of multiple 'masculinities' (Connell 2005). As part of this pluralising move, attempts to envision 'masculinities on a world scale' (ibid: xxi) have produced analyses that view 'transnational hegemonic masculinities' in pluralistic terms (Hearn, Blagojević, and Harrison 2013) as well as recognizing forms of masculinity, such as the businessman, which dominate global financial systems (Connell and Wood 2005).

In this chapter I demonstrate how tracing a single persona across media and everyday practice is methodologically useful for theorizing how embodied persons relate to hegemonic masculinities. The relationship between embodied persons and discourse is less deterministic than is often described in text-based analysis. Establishing methodologies for teasing out the disjunctures between discourse and people will help us better theorize the role of gender in everyday life. Sustained critiques of the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' (cf. Donaldson 1993; Dimetriou 2001; Aboim 2010) have shown the conceptually slippery nature of defining either 'masculinity' or 'hegemony'. What are the distinctions

between dominant men, as persons and groups, as opposed to dominant masculinities, as ideals and discourses? Beasley (2008) and Donaldson (1993) emphasize a narrow definition of 'hegemonic masculinity' as the ideals and discourses that legitimate dominant perceptions of what it is to be a man. In particular, Beasley has developed a pluralistic model of legitimation, arguing that it is not merely dominant ideals that legitimate hegemonic discourses, but also politically subjugated hyper-masculinities, such as those found in working class ideals. These 'sub' hegemonic masculinities involve elements of 'supra' hegemonic ideals that legitimate one another within vertically and horizontally integrated power structures (2013: 41). When thinking about how certain groups of 'men' dominate others, such an approach bears much fruit. By embodying and reinscribing sub and supra hegemonic ideals as forms of 'citational' practice in everyday life (Butler 1993) dominant groups of men are able to strategically maintain their advantageous social position. However, the question still remains how these forms of analysis relate to the evolving practices and persona of a singular man.

Through the lens of hegemonic masculinity, the consumption practices that embody 'cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics' can be interpreted as forms of distinction (Bourdieu 1986) that differentiate Chinese men in terms of class and gender. However, analysing these issues across both texts and practices within a transnational context also reveals points of slippage between a critical interpretation of cosmopolitanism as gendered performance and cosmopolitanism as it has been interpreted elsewhere. Derek Hird and Geng Song emphasize the inherently unstable and fluid nature of Chinese masculinities as 'assemblages… composed of transnationally circulating images and practices, and locally situated identities, practices, and locales' (2013: 6-7). Taken as an assemblage, Li Xiaomu's career can be interpreted as one where the political effects of his consumerist cosmopolitan persona have changed over time. While still clearly embedded within the hegemonic masculinities found in both China and Japan, his shifting persona also demonstrates the possible inversions and slippages that occur through gendered practice. At times these manifest as political projects that speak beyond gender and class, as I will demonstrate through an analysis of Li's various gendered performances.

Chinese masculinity in Japan

In order to understand the cultural forms that Li Xiaomu 'poaches' in his construction of a public persona, it is important to understand the transnational context of Sino-Japanese masculinities. Due to a shared regional history, East Asia has historically shared similar cultural repertoires for 'being a man'. This is particularly the case between China and Japan where approximate models of the scholarly *wen* 文 and martial *wu* 武 (Bun/Bu in Japanese) have influenced the idealised image of masculinity historically (Louie 2002; Louie and Low 2005). The proximity of this shared history however, has also meant that China and Japan have used representations of each other to re-inscribe the sophistication or superiority of their own men. As Morris Low has shown, this was particularly the case in the late 19th century and early 20th century, when Japan's modernisation drive used images and caricatures of East Asian Others,

particularly Chinese men, to emphasize the physiological difference between the Japanese and their neighbours as a means to emphasizing the 'European' and civilized qualities of Japan's modern nation-state (Low 2005).

Since the end of the Asia-Pacific war (1945) China and Chinese men have been used in Japanese literature and film to refer to a form of vibrancy that was lost during Japan's accelerated modernisation. The figure of the wandering cosmopolitan Chinese gourmand, not only inspired a generation of Japanese readers about food, but also provided audiences thoughts on cultural difference that often emphasized the masculine qualities of Chinese consumption culture (Aoyama 2003). Haruki Murakami's short stories 'About China', position the gendered and sexed Chinese Other as a foil for thinking about the emasculation and disenchantment many Japanese men face (Lo 2004). Chineseness in Murakami's work, according to Lo, represents a lost internal Other whose vibrancy is relegated to imagined East Asian Others.

This kind of imaginary continued into Japan's so-called 'lost decades' (Fletcher and Staden 2014), albeit with greater emphasis on the East Asian Other within Japan. As Iwabuchi Koichi has argued, the commodification of the Asian Other living in Japan featured heavily in popular television and film from the mid-1990s onwards (Iwabuchi 2002). Iwabuchi has shown how visual media in Japan have created an image of 'Asia' where Japanese consumers find their 'lost purity, energy, and dreams' (2002: 550). Such representations oscillate between quasi-nostalgic admiration of the Chinese energetic spirit, such as in Shunji Iwai's film *Swallowtail* where Chinese migrants show money-making savvy in a magic-realist setting called 'yentown' (Iwai 1996); or Chinese energetic nationalism, such as a special episode on Takeshi Kitano's talk show 'This is what is strange about you Japanese' (*koko ga hendayo nihonjin* ここがへんだよ日本人) where 50 Chinese students were invited to debate their country's shortcomings with other foreigners as Kitano sagely laughed at the heated conversations (Hambleton 2011).

While Japanese imaginaries surrounding Chinese men emphasize vitality, this vitality takes on a more threatening shape when connected to accounts of actual embodied Chinese men in Japan. With continued concerns about Japan's future in economic and demographic terms Chinese men have increasingly become a heated topic. From fears about Chinese criminal activity in Japan (Coates 2015) to panics around quasi-legal purchasing and reselling practices popular among Chinese tourists (Sankei News 2015 Oct 7), fears that Chinese in Japan will not 'play by the rules' position Chinese men as both scapegoat and object of admiration. Within Japan's gay community, for example, racialized encounters with Chinese men are both fetishized and feared (Baudinette 2016). In relation to issues of heteronormative masculinity, Chinese men have been used to critique the rise of 'soft masculinities', such as the 'herbivorous male' (*sōshoku danshi* 草食男子) in Japan, where Chinese men are seen as outcompeting their Japanese male classmates in dating Japanese women because they are confident and persistent (Japan Times 2012). The English language ability of Chinese students has also fuelled critiques of Japanese youths and spurred concerns about Japan's role in global business markets (FNN News

2011). Indeed, Chinese graduates are increasingly being hired by Japanese companies to fill this occupational niche (Liu-Farrer 2011).

Much like other countries, Japanese hegemonic masculinities have been historically tied to Japan's national successes. In economic and demographic terms, the Japanese salaryman (*sarariman* サラリーマン) has served as the most famous embodiment of national success over the past 60 years (Dasgupta 2000; Dasgupta 2013; Hidaka 2010; Matanle et al 2014; Taga 2006). More recent discourses around China's economic success since the 1980s have similarly invoked masculine figures of business success (Song and Hird 2013; Louie, Kuehn, and Pomfret 2013). Considering the important role these masculinities have played, it is not surprising that Chinese and Japanese masculinities are increasingly posited against each other in relation to wider hegemonic ideals of what constitutes a transnational businessman. However, what are the consequences of these hegemonic forms for Chinese men in Japan?

Discourses around the competitive vitality of Chinese men in Japan are often discriminatory. However, as in the case of Li Xiaomu, Chinese masculinity in the Japanese context also provides an opportunity for Chinese men to invert the image of Chinese vitality for their own purposes. This inversion occurs in a context where Chinese migrants are increasingly present in media as both authors and objects of discourse around Chinese migration to Japan. It also occurs in a context where the mostly highly valued forms of transnational Chinese masculinity are attached to entrepreneurial success, risk-taking and cosmopolitanism (Osburg 2013; Song and Hird 2013); and Japanese masculine icons such as the actor Takakura Ken served as models for, and critiques of, Chinese masculinity in the reform era (Zhong 2000). As a celebrity and author, Li Xiaomu has contributed to the image of Chinese male criminality in Japan; what might be seen as a form of sub-hegemonic masculinity within the Sino-Japanese context. At the same time, he also demonstrates the opportunities that arise from this image, demonstrating the tactics available in the construction of transnational Chinese masculinities today.

Translated back to China, Li's persona embodies dreams of going overseas to become rich, metrosexual and fashionable. In shifting between China and Japan, the limits on his own authorship are laid bare however, as both the films he has participated in and his commentaries critical of Chinese politics and history are censored. His experiences of translating masculinities between these contexts means that for him, 'it is easier to be cosmopolitan' in Japan than it is in China, as he told me over drinks one evening. And yet, part of the motivation he has for wanting to be this kind of man relies heavily on the cultural repertoires of classic discourses of Chinese masculinity, such as scholarly achievement. Having enacted and affirmed the image of the Chinese gangster in Japan, he now presents himself as a morally admirable person by emphasising his *wen* masculinity, presenting himself as a respectable salaryman in a bodily sense, and appealing to a transnationally abstract notion of cosmopolitanism that has grown from the consumerist to the political.

Li Xiaomu as underworld figure

Li Xiaomu has written 22 books, 20 in Japanese and 2 Chinese translations; has been involved in a NHK documentary series on the Kabukicho; was a script consultant for Jackie Chan's film *Shinjuku Incident* (新宿事件); and regularly contributes to Japanese magazines such as *Newsweek*. He has a growing body of followers on China's various social media, and in 2015 he entered Japanese politics for the first time. He originally branded himself as the *kabukichō annaijin* 歌舞伎町案内人, a guide to Tokyo's largest adult entertainment district, the Kabukicho. He no longer works directly in the adult entertainment business, but manages connections and an image that still embodies his brand, albeit with greater emphasis on his success as a writer and social commentator. Born in 1960 in Changsha, Hunan province, Li was sent to a boarding school specializing in ballet at the age of 13, before going on to work as an intern at a performing arts magazine in Shanghai, and running a modeling agency in Shenzhen. In 1988 he moved to Japan as a self-funded student, studying for two years in a Japanese language school. While a student, Li Xiaomu was attracted to the Kabukicho due to his interests in fashion and modeling. In the opening 10 minutes of a special about him on the Chinese television program *Zhiri*, he connects his desire for the Kabukicho directly to his sense of self as a man:

> When I first came to Japan, I got off the bus in Shinjuku and headed straight to the Kabukicho, I walked down this road, there weren't as many restaurants as there are now, mostly adult entertainment businesses. I was like 'Waa, look at the lights, red ones, green ones, and all the pictures!' I said to myself, it was right that I came here, as a man (Zhiri 2014).

Li Xiaomu worked as a cleaner in a 'love hotel'; a dishwasher in a restaurant; a waiter in a gay bar; and a tissue advertiser for local businesses within the Kabukicho. As he explains it, after seeing the looks of bewilderment coming from Chinese visitors to the Kabukicho, Li approached local businesses to ask if he could work as a tout for foreigners looking for fun in the adult entertainment industry. Li's business became a huge success, as flows of Chinese migrants on student visas, and the first wave of Chinese tourists, came to explore the bright consumption spaces of Tokyo. After meeting several Japanese writers who focused on the Kabukicho area, Li Xiaomu was encouraged to start writing about his own experiences in the early 2000s. As Li Xiaomu explained it to me, this shift in career was fortuitous. In 2003 Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintarō initiated a campaign to clean up the Kabukicho area. From 2003 to 2005 over 280 brothels had been closed, with over 400 arrests and 1000 citations of foreign visa violations (Kwon 2013). At the same time, Li Xiaomu opened a Hunanese restaurant within the Kabukicho, and continued writing memoirs and accounts of his experience as a tout within the district.

I first met Li Xiaomu in 2009 when I was conducting fieldwork for my PhD on Chinese migrants living in Tokyo. I was invited to his restaurant by some

friends, and was immediately struck by this husky-voiced shop owner with a twinkle in his eye and a shop plastered with copies of his articles, as well as photos of him working on a film set with Jackie Chan. On one wall of his restaurant, a giant mural of Mao Zedong magnanimously looked down upon the restaurant's diners, and he spent most of his time entertaining guests and talking to customers. Li Xiaomu's demeanor comes across as intentionally constructed and highly performative. The opening prologue of his first book *Kabukicho Annaijin*, which was written in Japanese with the help of Naoki Nemoto, conveys the nature of his masculine performance clearly:

> As usual, I am standing in the place where I decided to conduct my business, in the tumultuous Kabukicho. I am wearing a green Versace suit made of light cloth for the summer weather. On the cuffs of my tailor-made shirt I have diamond links from Tiffany's, and a thin Yves Saint Laurent tie. On my feet I wear size 10 Ferra shoes I bought on a trip to New York and on my wrist I wear a Fendi watch. My hair is styled like an English gentleman, and there isn't a hint of stubble on my chin. I am 178 centimeters tall, 54 kilograms. My style is one of confidence! (Li 2002: 5)

After this meticulous description of his expensive fashion style, the story goes on to describe him rushing to the scene of a suicide in the area, where he recognizes the face of a young woman who worked in a hostess bar. The story carries on like this after the prologue, starting with his first arrival in the Kabukicho as a student fresh from China, and slowly telling the tale of how he came to riches while surrounded by violence and hedonism. His writing is filled with confident descriptions of his outfits, rife with brand names that demonstrate his knowledge of the fashion world and confidence as a global consumer.

Li embodies the 'consumerist cosmopolitanism' that Geng Song and Tracy Lee have analyzed in Chinese lad magazines (Song and Lee 2010). His intimate knowledge and sensational account of this Japanese locality suggests that his pathway to cosmopolitanism, was a self-conscious re-embedding in a non-Chinese locality which allowed him to demonstrate his ability to transcend his Chinese-ness (Rofel, 2007: 111). Li Xiaomu conveyed his cosmopolitan sensibility in an interview I conducted with him in 2014. When asked about the intentions behind his prolific writing, he stated:

> I'm not Chinese, nor am I Japanese, I am just me. I'm also not an artist or scholar, I am merely someone who has a particular kind of experience that lends itself to storytelling. I can tell a story others can't. I view things from a particularly objective standpoint because I have no loyalties or major influences, and I have no ulterior political motives. I simply tell it as it is. I rely on my inherent nature (*xing* 性) to write, which is mostly hedonistic and curious…haha (Li 2014)

Li Xiaomu's first book catalyzed his position as a public persona. After the initial success of *Kabukicho Annaijin*, he was invited to publish a Chinese translation of the Japanese version, and also started working on a NHK series on the Kabukicho, published on DVD in 2004. While doing this, he continued to write

several follow up memoirs to his original book, and worked as a columnist for local Chinese newspapers. His popularity attracted the attention of Chinese broadcasters too, with a short piece in the series *Tangrenjie* 唐人街 in 2005 and a part in the short online documentary series introducing various aspects of Japan called *Zhiri* 知日.

Li couples descriptions of his fashion sense with images of his body and portrayals of his physicality, emphasizing his capacity as a man. Within the promotional materials and covers of his earlier books, his stylish underworld image is reminiscent of the 'stoic' gangster masculinities popularized in the films of Takakura Ken, East Asia's 'Clint Eastwood' (Standish 2013; Lo 2010), as well as the more playful gangster tropes of Chow Yun Fat. Descriptions of his physical prowess are also invoked to portray Li as a man of action. Often citing his physical prowess due to his background in dance, Li describes his ability to get to a particular place, get into fights, flee the scene and on one occasion receive a significant amount of punishment during a fight with Yakuza. Li's physical prowess extends to his descriptions of his own sexuality. Although never explicitly detailing sexual encounters, he often hints at his ability to seduce women, and proudly recounts the fact that he has been married and divorced over 4 times.

The complex persona that Li performs has been fictionalized in film. According to Li Xiaomu, and relatively evident from the pictures of him and Jackie Chan in his restaurant, one of the productions he is proudest of is his collaboration in the film *Shinjuku Incident,* directed by Derek Yee (2009). Officially he was listed as a script consultant in the film's credits, but according to Li, the majority of the story was his own. Jackie Chan had read the Chinese translation of his first book and approached Derek Yee to produce a film based on it. The film takes a somewhat fictional take on Li's story. Jackie Chan plays as the protagonist who, growing up as an earnest Northeastern man, follows his childhood sweetheart to Japan when he hasn't heard from her in several years. In the opening sequence, Chan's character, *Tietou* (Steelhead 铁头) is introduced using tropes reminiscent of the Mao era figure Leifeng. Wearing the Russian style *Leifeng Mao* (Leifeng hat 雷锋帽) and driving a tractor, Steelhead is an innocent farmer who supports his fellow villagers. In some senses, the story comes across as a speculative tale about what would happen to Leifeng if he moved to Japan in the 1990s. After discovering his childhood sweetheart has married a Japanese mafia boss (*Yakuza* ヤクザ), and that economic deprivation leaves him and his fellow Chinese migrants vulnerable, Steelhead resolves to organize his 'brothers' together to get rich quick. His brothers engage in a variety of illegal operations, signified by a scene where he and his closest friend visit prostitutes together. They eventually challenge the established Taiwanese mafia in the Kabukicho and before getting drawn into a Yakuza war. In the end, *Tietou* sacrifices himself to guarantee the safety of a Japanese policeman who befriended him, as well his former sweetheart and the remaining brothers who had not yet been killed in the conflict.

The image of Chinese criminality in Japan is one which plagues the everyday lives of many Chinese men (Coates 2015). The additional surveillance

to which they are subject due to this image, alongside various cultural barriers they face, ensures that integration into Japan is a work of great labour. As Timothy Tsu has noted, areas affiliated with Chinese migrants in Japan are also associated with imaginaries of danger and deviance (Tsu 2011). As Tsu notes, *Shinjuku Incident,* alongside Li Xiaomu's other earlier works, has in many senses contributed to the negative representation of Chinese in Japan. When I asked about this issue in an interview, Li Xiaomu was unapologetic about his contribution to the image of Chinese men as involved in criminal activity:

> 'I don't think that because I'm Chinese I should protect the image of Chinese migrants…The criminal image of Chinese people committing crimes comes from the 1990s to the early 2000s. At that time, in truth, Chinese migrants did commit a lot of crimes. It's because that generation of migrants grew up in a period where the education system was lacking, and a lot of people had no money. That's after the opening reforms, right? So Chinese people of that generation, they just wanted money, but they also weren't willing to earn it slowly' (Li Interview 2014).

When I pressed Li Xiaomu about whether he sensationalized his tale, seeing that he did not die in the end, he responded with the following:

> *'Shinjuku Incident* is all true, and it is basically my story. Moreover, Jackie Chan represents me, my story. The story of Jackie Chan's character helping the police, and the story of his childhood sweetheart marrying a Japanese gangster, that is my story! Although, the woman was previously my wife not my childhood sweetheart…Its mostly truths woven together to make a story, each event is based on truth, although it didn't all happen to one group of people…its tells a truth that most Chinese people living in Japan would understand, I think. Among the Chinese community in Japan, no one criticized me. This is an open media society, and yet no one said that what we conveyed in that movie was untruthful. Of course, in China the film is banned. But it was generally welcomed in Japan' (Li Interview 2014).

Whether Li Xiaomu's tale is true or not is a question that perhaps cannot be answered. However, what is interesting about his comment is the way he conveys the constructed nature of stories, and the ways in which his claim to authorship allows him to convey truths that are purportedly typical to the Chinese migrant experience. In light of the media image of Chinese migrants as being engaged in criminal activity, and a broader fear of the vitality of Chinese men, Li's authorship provides a useful case study for thinking through the connection between textual forms of Chinese masculinity and the individuals who embody and enact these forms. Li's admission to weaving truths to create a story is suggestive of Judith Butler's argument that gendered performance is 'citational' (Butler 1993). At the same time, the fact that his citational practice is not only enacted in everyday life, but is used to produce texts based on everyday experience, shows the entangled nature of textual forms of masculinity, the way they are enacted, and the way they are reproduced as texts. Finally, the popularity of Li's texts and films, and his rise as a public persona, also suggests

that his translation of self, as a Chinese man in Japan, is a successful cooptation of masculinities within the transnational context

Li Xiaomu's written works were all initially produced for a Japanese audience, which is perhaps why the emphasis on Chinese criminality received little criticism. In this sense, Li's constructed star persona can be seen as occupying a position that comfortably nestles within wider media impressions of Chinese migrants. In translating his original book into Chinese however, Li's tale also affirms the aspirations attached to becoming a businessman overseas. As Kam Louie has noted in his analysis of the blog 'Taming the Chinese Fire' displays of conspicuous wealth and rampant individualism have become typical in the imagery and performances of the international metrosexual 'beautiful man' (Louie 2014). Although the men Louie discusses mostly do business in America, similar comparisons can be made between their own masculine performances and those of Li Xiaomu. As Louie notes, there are similar models of masculinity in China and Japan, which may help explain Li Xiaomu's success in translating his masculine persona transnationally.

Cosmopolitan critique

Alongside his works as the *Kabukicho Annaijin*, Li Xiaomu started working as a columnist for the Japanese magazine *Newsweek* in 2005. These works signified a shift in Li's interests and also a shift in the persona that he constructs for himself today. Now in his fifties, his works predominantly try to provide a critique of both China and Japan, which posits him less as 'consumerist cosmopolitan' than a cosmopolitan public intellectual.

> 'At first I merely wrote my own story, relied on my own experience to tell a story, because at that time I didn't really know how to write but I knew how to express myself in life. Later, I moved to write more about my perspectives on Japan. In particular, I wanted to tell Japanese people about the Japanese people I met in my line of work. I wanted to tell them how I felt about Japan, as a foreigner' (Li Interview 2014).

His collected works for Newsweek have now been compiled into a book titled *Kabukicho yori ai wo komete* (From the Kabukicho with Love, 歌舞伎町より愛をこめて Li 2009). The cosmopolitan intention of his columns is made more explicit when produced as a body of work, and he states in the prologue that 'the kabukicho is a microcosm of Japanese society' where he has, as a 'third eye/perspective', observed the changes and problems with society today. Li Xiaomu posits this 'third eye' as neither being the perspective of Japan, nor the perspective of China, but rather the perspective of someone who through moving has transcended both. Within the various articles collated in the book, Li provides a wide range of commentary that signifies his views on masculinity and self. In the article 'In order to be sexy for women, brains are sexier than appearances' (2009:30). Li discusses the slang term for an attractive person *moteru* モテる which refers to someone who attracts people around them but Li also uses it to make a play on the phrase 'to have lots of money' (*okane wo motte iru* お金を持てる), stating that those who know how to spend their money are

the most attractive. Despite Li's obvious allusions to being *moteru* in his earlier works, he explains in this article that as men grow older it is important to foster their intellects, as that will ensure that they remain sexy into their twilight years. Li stated much the same in my interviews with him:

> 'For the future, the most important thing for me is to study more. The one thing I regret is that I didn't study enough when I was younger. The more I study the more I feel 'aiya, I'm still not good enough. There's still so many things I don't understand'. And so I spend time every day studying. Japanese, politics, literature etc. I'm a very curious person.' (Li interview 2014)

Li's move towards a more scholarly presentation of self echoes the privileging of *wen* masculinity common to the cultural history of East Asia (Louie 2002). Indeed, the fact that he turned to a more explicit emphasis on his scholarly ambitions in later life in some ways echoes Confucius' classic phrase about the proper stages of a man's life.

> 'The Master said, "At fifteen, I set my mind upon learning; at thirty, I took my place in society; at forty, I became free of doubts; at fifty, I understood Heaven's Mandate; at sixty, my ear was attuned; and at seventy, I could follow my heart's desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety." (Lunyu 2.4) (Confucius and Slingerland 2003: 9)

At the same time, rather than trying to embody a sagely and moral exterior, he is an indulgent and hyper-sexualized scholar, who has also internalized the individualist ethos of the 'consumerist cosmopolitan'. During one interview with Li Xiaomu he quoted Mencius' phrase 'food and sex is the nature of humanity' (*shisexingye* 食色性也), but rather than following Mencius' implication that because it is nature it need not be talked about, Li Xiaomu argued that acknowledgement of these basic desires is the key to a happy and functioning society.

> 'From my observations in the Kabukicho, that is my own perspective, *shiyu* (食欲 desire for food), *wuyu* (物欲 desire for objects), *xingyu* (性欲 desire for sex), these three things are the most basic of human desires. When you can't satisfy these three desires, you can't live with confidence. If you live unhappily, then you'll probably live a shorter life and achieve nothing. To pursue these desires you need to be diligent, you can't rely on tricks, and you need to think carefully about who around you is a good person. You should study from their example. In terms of sexuality, China understands very little, while Japan has a very human-centred approach (人性化 *renxinghua*). So long as a legal system supports the desires of people then they can flourish. China has none of this, so it is easier to be a man in Japan. As long as you obey the law, you won't impinge on other people's desires' (Li Interview 2014).

In this sense, we can see how the transnational milieu that Li Xiaomu occupies has enabled him to construct a hybrid masculinity that both embodies Chinese

consumerist and scholarly visions of masculinity, while also providing a critique of China. Moreover, this masculine performance translates classic scripts of Chinese masculinity to become a hedonistic cosmopolitan ethos.

Li Xiaomu's commentaries have grown increasingly critical and cosmopolitan. Part of this manifests in the way he is critical of Chinese men in Japan, stating that they focus too much on making money and not enough on learning from Japanese society. As he states:

> 'I feel that a lot of Chinese men who come to Japan won't change if they don't study. They come here, and they're still just a Chinese man. Most importantly, they need to study, learn Japanese, and understand Japan. Then, they can learn how to take control of their lives in a way that isn't possible in China. Japan is generally an open and law oriented society where people have rights. If they don't understand Japanese however, a lot of Chinese men won't even understand the rights they have. This is a big problem for a lot of Chinese men who come to Japan.' (Li Interview 2014)

Within migration studies, these kinds of comments, which distance the migrant self from his or her peers, are seen as a common strategy used to produce a sense of belonging or inclusion within the host nation context (Castles and Miller 2003). Having lived in Japan for over 26 years it is expected that Li would have critical reflections on Chinese migrants in Japan. In translating what it means to be a good Chinese man in Japan, Li Xiaomu cites issues such as study, morality and rule of law, which are part of various privileged forms of masculinity in Northeast Asia. At the same time, he conveys these opinions with a cheeky wit that targets both Chinese and Japanese alike, with gender and multiculturalism being two of his favourite topics. For example, Li wrote an article titled 'There are still samurai in Japan. In truth they are foreigners!' (まだ侍は日本にいる。ただし外国人だ！*Mada samurai ha nihon ni iru. Tadashi, gaikokujin da!*) (Li 2009: 35). Within this article, he makes fun of the Japanese samurai image and the association between this classic form of masculinity and the modern salaryman. Arguing that, if one of the key features of the samurai ethos is 'fatalism' (*bishi* 必死), then foreigners who come to Japan and do anything to make money are the most fatalistic of them all. Further, according to Li, the greatest samurai are the women who work in the Kabukicho.

In critiquing Japanese and Chinese society, Li takes advantage of the fact that he mostly publishes in Japanese. To a Japanese readership, his cheeky criticisms seem appropriate to his Chinese underworld image. Conversely, his political commentaries, mostly written in Japanese, only reach a particular readership, making him less of a target for Chinese government censors. More broadly, his work and public persona stemming from his *kabukicho annaijin* days, has positioned him as someone who is expected to say outlandish things. Recently, his works have taken on an increasingly political flavor, where he has collaborated with Japanese authors to provide commentaries on Sino-Japanese relations, such as the book 'An Extraordinary commentary on China and Japan' (常識外日中論 *jōshiki gai nichūron*) (Li and Katō 2011) and the changing Chinese

mediascape (Li and Cai 2012). In the past 5 years he has written commentaries on the 1989 Tiananmen protests, critical of their coverage in China; he has written on the history wars between China and Japan, stating that in some ways anti-Japan youth protests in China have been good for raising the level of political interest among young Japanese; and, he has praised the ability to learn more about the Cultural Revolution while living abroad.

When I asked him about whether he is worried about publishing such criticisms as a Chinese person, he compared himself to another prominent Chinese figure in Japan, Prof. Zhu Jianrong from Toyo Gakuen University. Prof. Zhu is a political commentator on Sino-Japanese relations and was detained in China in 2013 during a visit to his hometown in Shanghai (Japan Times 2013). He was officially held due to espionage charges, however, according to Li Xiaomu he was really detained due to his diplomatic comments around the Senkaku/Diaoyu island dispute. As Li frames it, the fact that Prof. Zhu was a respected scholar made his comments seem a greater threat than Li's, who is mostly tolerated by Chinese officials.

> 'Because I have lived here so long, and because of my work in Kabukicho, everyone knows I am going to say these things. The Chinese embassy doesn't pay too much attention to me. I am not a real scholar like Zhu Jianrong and I'm careful about what I write in Chinese' (Li Interview 2014).

Despite Li's claims that he is more tolerated than others, he is nonetheless careful when publishing in Chinese. For example, care is evident in the translation of his collected commentaries into Chinese: *Riben Youbing* (日本有病 Japan has a problem/is sick) (Li 2011). Much shorter, and excluding the third section of the original Japanese version which discusses issues such as Tiananmen, this book is carefully constructed for Chinese audiences. Below the title on the front-page it states:

> I'm not a spy and I'm not a traitor. I warmly love China, and care for Japan. I am a Chinese man who has written about Japan in the western media. Having lived in Japan over 20 years, I am a Chinese-made eye on Tokyo, exploring the humorous and terrifying aspects of Japan. (Li 2011)

And so, despite feeling confident in his ability to provide cosmopolitan critique in Japan, we can see the limitation of his cosmopolitan ethos when translated back to a Chinese language context.

Originally Chinese, aiming to become a politician in Japan

When one enters Li Xiaomu's restaurant today, one is no longer greeted by Mao Zedong's beaming gaze. Rather, a wider collection of his recent activities hoard his walls: posters from a recent film he starred in called *Ningen* 人間 (Giovanetti and Zencirci 2015), various cultural activities he's engaged in, as well as the promotional posters from his recent political campaign. All of these

changes mirror changes in Li's ambitions and outlook. When asked why he had removed the image of Mao, Li explained how his years in Japan had changed his opinions about the famous figure from his home province (Hunan), making it difficult for him to respect his former hero. As he narrates it, his life in Japan has exposed him to critical voices that he doubts he would have met elsewhere, revealing details of China's history he was unaware of, as well as providing him the distance he needed to reflect on his own experiences of China.

It is for these reasons that Li Xiaomu has recently become an enthusiastic spokesperson for democracy. After having lived in Japan for over 26 years, Li started the procedures to change his nationality to Japanese in late 2014, finally becoming a citizen in February 2015. He did so in order to be able to run as a candidate for the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in local elections for Shinjuku ward, where the Kabukicho is located.

> Although Japan is my second motherland, Chinese blood still flows in my veins. I would not throw away my first motherland. Or at least that was what I thought. My decision to change my nationality came from my thirst for a challenge. I am the kind of person who cannot be contented. If I don't face new challenges I cannot relax…however there was also another influence, my exchange with Chinese democracy activists. (Li 2015:152)

According to Li, his writing had started to not only attract tourists and fans to his restaurant, but also public intellectuals. Consisting of both Chinese democracy activists and Japanese commentators on China, his restaurant, as he describes it became a 'salon' for political commentary. Prior to changing his nationality, Li was approached by representatives of the DPJ to ask whether he would be interested in running in the local Shinjuku ward elections. However, as he narrates it, he only became aware of how special an opportunity it was through his exposure to political commentators and activists.

In the months leading up to the elections in April, 2015, Li's face was plastered on posters throughout Shinjuku ward and if you went to a major intersection it was likely you would run into him, campaigning with a megaphone. Li's demeanour has totally changed. Dressed in an understated suit and tie, he carefully bowed at passers-by, thanking them for their attention, and politely asking them to vote for him. His physical appearance and performance was more reminiscent of a Japanese salaryman than his previous image as an underworld figure. The salaryman image persists as the most legitimate form of hegemonic masculinity in Japan today (Dasgupta 2013). Ostensibly associated with suits and ties, the most valued salaryman is one who, despite long hours of work, maintains an invigorated and healthful (*genki* 元気) attitude. The promotional materials Li had for his campaign, while still portraying him as a highly active man, depicted his vitality through images of earnest and powerful athleticism and clean salaryman attire, rather than the previous impression of a fashionable person ready for a fight. Li's efforts to embody the image of the salaryman can be interpreted as his attempt to legitimate his own political aspirations.

Li is no ordinary salaryman however, portraying himself as an

'international' cosmopolitan who will help Japan negotiate a globalising world. His campaign focused on making Shinjuku the centre of Tokyo's efforts to internationalise, particularly in preparation for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic games. Its slogan was 'Inviting the world to Shinjuku!' with dynamic pictures of him in action poses. Despite his enthusiasm, Li received a very small portion of the vote, ranking as one of the lowest candidates in the ballot. Nonetheless, his experience in running for office has catalysed his cosmopolitan project to new heights. Only 5 months after the election, Li Xiaomu has published another book retelling his experience of running for election, as well as explaining the reasons for why he decided to do so. Titled 'Originally Chinese, aiming to become a politician in Japan' Li's account takes a more political tone than it ever has before (2015).

According to his book, along with various public statements, Li had three reasons for running in the 2015 election. His first reason was to convey his experience of democracy to China. As he states:

> 'If I am able to convey the wonderful experience of having freedom of political expression, freedom of speech and the right to be elected, then I will be able to irritate the continued dictatorship of the Chinese Communist party and promote democratisation' (2015:1959).

Secondly, his goal was to improve the social status of those who work in the Kabukicho, as well as the impression of the Kabukicho all together. Finally, he was filled with a desire like an 'unquenchable spring' to promote Shinjuku as a welcoming space that 'utilises the idea of 'cosmopolitanism' to link closed-off Japan to the world' (2015: 1649).

Even though Li Xiaomu has made great efforts to re-construct his public persona as a cosmopolitan social commentator and political activist, the legacy of his previous masculine persona has still hindered his efforts. For example, when his film was screened at the Toronto film festival in 2014, he was detained at airport immigration for several hours, which in his own account was firstly because of his Chinese passport and finally because Li claimed a security official had found images of his mafia-esque publications online. More recently during his political campaign, social media discussions about his possible connection to mafia also proliferated. In the most extreme cases, such as on the anonymous posting board 2channel, statements were made that a vote for Li Xiaomu was a vote for greater gang influence within Tokyo (2Chan 2015). Similarly, right wing groups created political videos against Li Xiaomu's right to participate in the elections. For example, one video states:

> 'A Chinese spy operative has been running in Japanese elections! And he has the strong support of the DPJ, the DPJ's leader Kaeda and the Asahi News? This is truly Xi Jinping's dream to infiltrate the local Japanese assembly with naturalised citizens!' ('Japan's Bright Patriotic Future' Nihon no Akarui Mirai Aikoku 2015)

Despite online protests against Li Xiaomu, he continues to receive support from his fans, and continues his prolific media activities. If anything his public persona has grown into a hybrid masculinity that straddles between China and

Japan. In the recent citizen festival in Shinjuku, Li organized to lead a group of young Chinese students during their first *mikoshi* 神輿 festival, a boisterous activity where a palanquin bearing a god (*kami* 神) icon is carried around the local neighbourhood. As Jennifer Robertson has argued, the popularisation of *mikoshi* over the past 30 years stood as 'a conscious effort on the part of municipal governments to reclaim from inexorable urbanisation, and more recently 'internationalisation', the indigenous village within the city' (Robertson 1987: 124). As Robertson notes, innovations within these festivals, such as the inclusion of women and children, has signified new imaginings for the future of local areas in Japan. Today, it is increasingly common to see non-Japanese participating in the festival, however it is less common to see Chinese migrants participating. Li Xiaomu's boisterous insistence has positioned him as a spokesperson for reimagining local Sino-Japanese relations. In a similar vein, Li's efforts in Japan have reverberated back to China allowing him to perform masculinities he once thought impossible. For example, he was recently invited to give a lecture at Fudan University about his career and views on Sino-Japanese relations. Making a play on the homophonic nature of Japanese words Li presented a seminar titled 'From Romance to Politics' (*Seiji => Seiji* 性事=>政治), where he traced his underworld past to his future political ambitions. After I congratulated Li about his lecture at Fudan through online correspondence, he replied 'I've finally realised my dream of lecturing at Fudan, haha', suggesting the dreams of scholarly success in China die old, even if framed in a joking manner.

Conclusion

> A life-history, and a gender project within a life-history, does not unfold seamlessly. It involves a number of distinct *moments*, in which different gender commitments are made, different strategies are adopted, or different resolutions of gender issues are achieved. (Connell 2009: 102)

Li Xiaomu as a *person* is by no means representative of all Chinese men in Japan. However, his elaborate persona provides useful material to explore how hegemonic masculinities are translated, constructed, and performed in everyday discourse and practice. His experience as a Chinese migrant in Japan, coupled with his role as a media producer helps us think through how masculinities as embodied in texts relate to individuals' gendered performance. This is particularly the case because he is an author. As John Hartley recently phrased it, an author is '*one who channels system-level or institutional authority into text* ' (2013: 25 italics in original). From this perspective, an author is not the sole creator of his or her work, nor is the author 'dead' (Barthes and Heath 1978). Rather, they act as conduits for wider meanings and practices, (re)creating these wider relations of power within text. At times they invert these relations. At times they contribute to them. And, at times they do both at the same time with unpredictable effects. What kinds of system-level authority does Li Xiaomu channel? His authorship and presentation of self 'poaches' (De Certeau 1984) from perceptions about Chinese men in Japan, from images of the 'consumerist cosmopolitan', from the Japanese salaryman, as well as wider transnational images of successful entrepreneurial cosmopolitans. He contributes to these images, taking advantage of and re-producing these hegemonies of class and

gender within his work. And yet, his most recent political activities suggest that 'cosmopolitanism' as a form of hegemonic masculinity can be operationalized for differing political purposes.

As Lisa Rofel has argued, consumerist 'cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics' can be interpreted as 'a self-conscious transcendence of locality, posited as a universal transcendence, accomplished through the formation of a consumer identity; and a domestication of cosmopolitanism by way of renegotiating China's place in the world' (Rofel, 2007:111). Li's recent political activities are specifically targeted at 'renegotiating China's place in the world'. In recent years however, rather than attempting to re-assert China's image of power through consumption and hyper-masculine performances, Li has taken to performing earnest criticisms of China's lack of electoral democracy. He also posits criticisms against Japan as closed and parochial. He has become increasingly active in defending the rights of sex-workers, and is involved in volunteer work within Tokyo's Kabukichō. Further, he plays an active role in translating between local Japanese groups and local Chinese groups in Japan, as well as participating in wider transnational cultural activities. In this sense, Li's embodiment of consumerist cosmopolitanism, as an elitist assemblage, suggests a wide array of political aspirations and possibilities.

Cosmopolitanism has been envisioned in multiple ways: '1) a socio-cultural condition; (2) a kind of philosophy or world view; (3) a political project toward building transnational institutions; (4) a political project for recognizing multiple identities; (5) an attitudinal or dispositional orientation; and (6) a mode of practice or competence' (Vertovec and Cohen 2002: 8-14). Rather than a definitive term, cosmopolitanism sits as an 'empty signifier' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) that connects chains of signifiers and practices for differing political effects. In this sense, the meaning of cosmopolitanism and its effects cannot be fixed. In a similar way, assemblages of masculine 'types' do not remain fixed, but rather, are influenced by the politics of their social location, as a form of 'becoming' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). While consumerist cosmopolitanism increasingly acts as a form of hegemonic masculinity *within* China, translated into the Japanese context it also speaks from a different position. Li's old persona as an underworld figure is consumerist cosmopolitan, but is affected by sub-hegemonic discourses that associate Chinese migrants with criminality. Li's fame, and legitimation in the eyes of the Japanese media, allowed him to shift between sub-hegemonic and supra-hegemonic forms of Chinese masculinity in Japan. It also held transformative effects in how he understood his own cosmopolitan aspirations. This suggests that, in as much as masculinities are assemblages, so too are people, personae and the potentially fluid politics that emerge from moving between cultural milieux.

Critical masculinities studies have adopted a wide range of tools to theorize how it is that some men remain dominant, dominating both other men and women. Such criticisms have largely developed a critical politics of ethnicity, class, and gender, although these issues have also been connected to nation-level politics. While Chinese masculinities in Japan demonstrate how the hegemonic ideals that propagate this inequality take on local and regional forms they also

speak to other politics. As the case of Li Xiaomu suggests, while hegemonic masculinities produce ideals that potentially reproduce inequalities, the way men channel these ideals is also highly consequential. Li Xiaomu has performed and contributed to the sub-hegemonic image of Chinese men as threatening in Japan. From this position however, he has developed a level of fame that has allowed him to change over time, engaging in an increasingly earnest form of cosmopolitan politics. His negotiation of masculinity across two cultural milieus suggest the possibilities afforded by successfully co-opting and adopting hegemonic masculinities. At the same time, it signifies the continued importance of ethical reflexivity and a commitment to political cosmopolitanism among men who have attained status.

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