Masculinities in Asia: A Review Essay

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Abstract: Masculinity as an analytical concept has received limited attention in historical and cultural studies of Asia, and particularly of South and Southeast Asia. Only a small number of works produced in South and Southeast Asian studies address the historical construction and evolution of masculinities in the regions and even fewer offer in-depth inquiries into the extent to which historical forms of masculinity governed social relations. The specific dynamics of the relationship between ideologies and the ways that manhood is interpreted, experienced and performed in daily life in the past and in present times remain underexplored. This essay reviews three recent publications that demonstrate that masculinity has been crucial to ideologies and techniques of rule in colonial, national and globalised contexts and, as such, needs to be placed at the centre of analyses of empire, nation and globalisation. It directs attention to promising areas for future comparative research on masculinities in Asia.

Keywords: masculinities, Asia, colonialism, nationalism, globalisation

Since R.W. Connell, Jeff Hearn and Michael S. Kimmel (2005, p. 9) pointed out that research on men and masculinities remained, despite the growth in the field, a “First World enterprise”, significantly more scholarship on the subject has been produced in the context of Asia. Though still nascent, the study of men and masculinities in Asia has

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already emerged as an important component of gender studies as a whole, one indication of which is the proliferation of edited volumes that serve as “readers” for masculinities in Asia and its various sub-regions (Brownell and Wasserstrom, 2002; Louie and Low, 2003; Chopra et al., 2004; Srivastava, 2004; Frühstück and Walthall, 2011). In East Asia, pioneering studies such as Kam Louie’s work on Chinese masculinity (Louie, 2002), which argued that “the cerebral male model tends to dominate that of the macho, brawny male” (p. 8), and the influential volume by Roberson and Suzuki (2003), which challenged the “salaryman” model of middle-class masculinity in Japan, have been followed by a variety of research on masculinities too numerous to recapitulate here – ranging from investigations into the construction of masculinity in late imperial Chinese literature (Song, 2004; Huang, 2006; Vitiello, 2011) to analyses of the emergence of a transnational corporate masculinity (Hird, 2009; Dasgupta, 2010) and the “softer”, sensitive and feminised “New Man” (Louie and Low, 2003; Iida, 2005; Jung, 2011).

Scholarship on South and Southeast Asia has been slower to catch on to “masculinity studies”. Yet, South Asian studies has produced seminal work on colonial masculinities and their legacies, and has led the scholarly effort to push back the terrain of inquiry beyond the nineteenth century to attend to pre-colonial codes and hierarchies of masculine identities (Sinha, 1995; O’Hanlon, 1999). Broadening the scope of existing research on gender and Buddhism, which has focused almost exclusively on representations of the feminine (Cabezón, 1992; Gross, 1993; Wilson, 1996),1 the ground-breaking work of John Powers (2009) has examined early Buddhist discourses relating to masculinity and male sociality.

Although the field of gender studies in Southeast Asia has tended to focus primarily on women,2 similarly important steps have been taken there as well. There is now considerable research on transgenderism and homoeroticism that shows that understanding masculinity requires delinking it from “male bodies” as well as from heteronormatively gendered, “woman-desiring” men (Blackwood, 1998; Boellstorff, 2005; Garcia, 1996; Jackson and Sullivan, 1999; Johnson, 1997; Sinnott, 2004; Bhaiya et al., 2007; Peletz, 2009). Recent scholarship on heteronormative masculinity (Clark, 2004) that draws on R.W. Connell’s theory that there are culturally exalted, “hegemonic” forms of manhood that predominate has added to classic works on “men of prowess” and other idealised masculinities of self-restraint, discipline, control and charisma that have influenced paradigmatic understandings of gender relations in Southeast Asia (Anderson, 1965; Anderson, 1972; Geertz, 1973; Brenner, 1998; Spiro, 1997; Wolters, 1999).

Nevertheless, masculinity as an analytical concept has received limited attention in historical and cultural studies of Asia, particularly of South and Southeast Asia. Only a small number of works produced in South and Southeast Asian studies address the historical construction and evolution of masculinities in the regions, and even fewer present in-depth inquiries into the extent to which historical forms of masculinity govern social relations. The specific dynamics of the relationship between ideologies and the interpretation, experience and performance of manhood in daily life, both in the past and in present times, remain underexplored.

The three books reviewed here – a monograph on India and one on Philippines, plus an edited volume on Southeast Asia – thus mark important contributions to the study of men and masculinities in Asia. They not only illuminate the historical plurality and variability of masculinity and the dynamic and intersectional nature of gender identities and relations, but also provide deep insight into the complexities of doing and redoing
masculinity. Importantly, they demonstrate that masculinity has been crucial to ideologies and techniques of rule in colonial, national and globalised contexts and, as such, needs to be placed at the centre of our analyses of empire, nation and (economic and cultural) globalisation.

Chandrima Chakraborty’s *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism: Past and Present Imaginings of India* offers a nuanced historical and literary study of Hindu ascetic masculinity in colonial and postcolonial India. Scholars of South Asia have made significant progress in analysing the ineluctably intertwined process of “imagining” women and the nation in anti-colonial and nationalist politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but much less attention has been paid to reimagining men and the nation. Chakraborty seeks to fill this lacuna. Through a close reading of the writings and speeches of Indian literati and nationalists as well as newspaper reports, films and Hindu Right websites and blogs, she documents the deployment of what she calls “ascetic nationalist masculinity” in the struggle to reclaim indigenous masculinities, produce national(ist) subjects, and create a modern nation-state. In so doing, she casts new light on the well-worn topic of (Hindu) nationalism in India.

The first chapter investigates formulations of ascetic martial masculinity and revolutionary violence by Bankim Chattopadhyay. In response to the colonial discourse of the manly Englishman and the effeminate Bengali babu, Bankim creatively merged the traditional Hindu masculine archetypes of Kshatriya (warrior) and Brahmin (priest) and established martial heroes and warrior ascetics of the past as models for normative Hindu masculinity. As Chapter 2 shows, Bankim’s ideal of ascetic martiality was both embraced and critiqued. In analysing select works of Rabindranath Tagore, Chakraborty reveals that the former swadeshi activist came to reject ascetic martiality and condemned swadeshis for employing violence to assert masculine power in the name of the nation. His vision of ideal masculinity emphasised, instead, a notion of ethical manliness founded on respect for difference and civic friendship. In Chapter 3, Chakraborty looks at how Mahatma Gandhi rewrote swadeshi ideology to refigure the nationalist ascetic as a self-controlled subject and disciplined, saintly body. His radical articulation of nonviolent resistance elevated the ascetic values of nonviolence, voluntary suffering, patience and endurance as ideal masculine attributes.

These three chapters offer an insightful discursive and genealogical investigation into the Hindu male ascetic. British scholar-administrators blamed Indian asceticism for the “inadequacies” in the Indian constitution: indolence, corporeal and moral weakness, lack of martial spirit, and so on. The colonial government saw Hindu ascetics as personification of the absolute renunciation of worldly duties or, at worst, religiously inspired criminality. It is in response to such assertions about the deleterious effects of Hindu asceticism that nationalist ideologues such as Bankim, Tagore and Gandhi directed their attention to the figure of the male Hindu ascetic, turning him into a powerful symbol of anti-colonialism. The masculine ascetic, attributed with indigenous models of masculinity and a superior morality that called for nationalist emulation, enabled the indigenous elite to decolonise and remasculinise the colonised individual, social and national Indian body. Bankim, Tagore and Gandhi thus reworked the terms of the colonial discourse of Hindu/Indian emasculation and challenged colonial ideologies of masculinity.

These chapters serve as background for the last chapter on Hindutva. Chakraborty persuasively argues that the Hindu Right, in its bid to legitimise its agenda of turning...
India into a Hindu state, draws heavily and selectively on texts from the nation’s past, glossing over the historical heterogeneity of earlier nationalist articulations of asceticism to authorise more radical formulations of ascetic nationalist masculinity. No longer an embodiment of protest, the figure of the ascetic nationalist male is transformed into an “angry Hindu” who defends the nation against its enemies, notably Muslims and the West. These aggressive, muscular Hindu nationalists assert their dominance over internal “others” – such as dissident Hindus and religious minorities – and demand overt and continual reassurances by Indian women of their chastity and obedience to heteronormative family values.

Chakraborty’s examination of ascetic nationalist masculinity suggests promising areas for comparative research on masculinities in South and Southeast Asia. As mentioned above, spiritual potency or “prowess”, harnessed through self-control, discipline and ascetic practices that restrain carnal desires, has long been an idealised – if also contested – masculine attribute in Southeast Asia. And in the colonial period, male asceticism was perceived, by both sides of the colonial struggle, as a source of subversive potential and revolutionary power, as evinced by the widespread involvement of monks and ascetics in popular millenarian and anti-colonial protests throughout Southeast Asia, from the Spanish Philippines to British Burma. In more recent times, the ascendancy of the Hindu Right in India has found a striking parallel in the masculinist, nationalist “969” movement in Myanmar led by Buddhist monks. The cultural and political efficacy of “ascetic nationalist masculinity” and the violent entanglement of religion, masculinity and the nation in both South and Southeast Asia deserve comparative scrutiny.

Another line of possible comparative inquiry concerns the question of indigenous response to (neo)colonial and Orientalist discourses of manliness. As Michael Pante reveals in his article in this issue, the Filipino elite, like their Indian counterpart in British India, frequently faced charges of political immaturity and effeminacy (Pante, 2014). Across South and Southeast Asia colonised subjects actively appropriated and reconfigured the masculine norms and practices that were most valued by the colonials in their attempts at remasculinisation. Yet, as Pante reminds us, asymmetries in socio-economic status produced significant discrepancies in responses to dominant ideologies and institutions of masculinity. Jessica Hinchy’s piece in this issue on the “failed” masculinity of the transgender hijra in British India serves likewise as an instructive counterpoint to Chakraborty’s study which focuses on canonical nationalist writings by elite men, and highlights the need to consider expressions of male respectability by not only the colonial and native elite but also those beyond the dominant class (Hinchy, 2014).

The two remaining works under review represent critical interventions in this regard. Kale Bantigue Fajardo’s *Filipino Crosscurrents: Oceanographies of Seafaring, Masculinities and Globalization* is a rich and provocative ethnography of working-class Filipino seamen who emerged as key figures of state- and corporate-generated Filipino masculinity at the turn of the twenty-first century. Parallelling the recent historiographical return to thalassology (Horden and Purcell, 2006), Fajardo’s oceanography – what the author describes as “situated traveling fieldwork” – accentuates seaborne interactions and connectivity, and the dynamic nature of oceanically connected lives shaped by “crosscurrents”. This is a fitting approach to the cultural politics of seafaring, Filipino masculinities, and globalisation, one that brings focus to the large-scale processes under examination and offers a fascinating look at Filipino masculinities in their complex totality.
Fajardo argues that as a result of neoliberal capitalist globalisation and the Philippine state’s institution of Filipino/a overseas migration as a key long-term economic development strategy, Philippine state officials, multinational corporations, and the seamen themselves, often deploy hetero-patriarchal narratives that portray Filipino seamen as geographically and sexually mobile, heroically nationalistic, simultaneously family-oriented or heteronormative, and macho. Essential to this story is the feminisation of the Filipino/a and, more generally, Southeast Asian global labour; Orientalist, misogynistic and racist representations of the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries and people as hyperfeminine, weak, subservient and pliant remain persistent today. At the same time, the Philippine state has played an active role in promoting and regulating Filipino labour migration and crafting narratives of heroism and masculinity to reinforce it. For example, Fajardo analyses in Chapter 1 the ways in which Philippine state officials and corporate elites co-opt the history of Manila-Acapulco galleons and “heroic” Filipino sailors as compelling narratives and figures in order to attract capital investment and naturalise the “global city-ness” of the new port development and free trade zone in Manila. Imaginaries of Filipino seafarers – and other overseas Filipino workers – as bagong bayani (new heroes) should be read as a product of multiple interlocking conditions that materially and discursively subordinate and discipline Filipino/a subjects and labour.

Fajardo’s vivid ethnographic accounts of the lives of Filipino seamen at sea and in ports, and at home and in diaspora, acknowledge that the seafaring bagong bayani has served as a powerful formulation of Filipino masculinity. In recalling with pride the galleons and indio/native sailors who travelled the vast expanse of the Pacific during the Spanish colonial period, Filipino seamen linked their own hardships and courageous masculinities to those of past “Filipino” seafarers, and emphasised the parallels between the high-quality Filipino seamanship found today and what they believe existed in the past. Yet, this gendered script of the nation describes only some aspects of some Filipino seamen’s experiences and identities. As Fajardo demonstrates, rather than enacting and consolidating state-driven hegemonic masculinities, Filipino seamen have been able to carve out non-normative and non-conventional ways to be Filipino men. For instance, Filipino seamen who “jumped ship” in ports outside the Philippines removed themselves from the oppressive and inequitable state-sanctioned program of Filipino/a labour migration and, furthermore, articulated a counterdiscourse of bagong bayani that resisted state constructions of seamen who jump ship as “deserters”.

Another telling counternarrative of masculinity came from Filipino seamen who expressed camaraderie with Filipino transgender “tomboys” as working-class Filipino male/masculine subjects who, in Fajardo’s words, “coexperience” and “conavigate” oppressive socioeconomic conditions. Eschewing dominant understandings of the Filipino man as emotionally repressed, detached or macho, many of the seamen Fajardo encountered stressed the masculine quality of pakikiisa – the ability to emotionally connect with and depend on each other. In these and other ways, Fajardo deftly uncovers fissures in recurring narratives about Filipino seamen’s heroic nationalism, heteronormative family values and macho-ness.

The themes of transnational labour migration, globalisation, and competing masculinities reappear in Men and Masculinities in Southeast Asia, which brings together ethnographic studies of hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities in present-day Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, Cambodia, Timor-Leste and Indonesia. Edited by
Michele Ford and Lenore Lyons, the volume focuses on heteronormative masculinities in an effort to offset the predominance of non-heteronormative genders and sexualities in the literature on masculinity in Southeast Asia. As the editors explain in the introductory chapter, a central concern of the volume is the impact of cultural and economic globalisation on gender relations. Critical of the idea of globalised/globalising forms of masculinities, the volume argues for scholarship that foregrounds the study of localised masculinities while also taking into consideration translocal and crosscultural flows of ideas, people and capital that shape relations of power in Southeast Asia.

The first three essays in the collection explore the masculinities of Filipino seafarers (McKay and Lucero-Prisno), Thai migrant construction workers in Singapore (Kitiarsa), and low-wage Vietnamese immigrant men to the United States (Thai), focusing, much like Fajardo, on the varied strategies that these men develop to mitigate their marginalised socioeconomic status and anxieties about masculine inadequacy and disempowerment. In the workplace, these men may emphasise a “dutiful” professional masculinity of self-discipline, competence and endurance of hardship whereas their off-duty and pleasure-oriented activities in port bars, red-light districts and living quarters tend towards a hypermasculinity that accentuates physical dominance, gallantry and risk-taking heterosexuality. Still, back home in their local or national communities, the toiling migrant workers can transform themselves – if only temporarily – into successful marriageable partners, family breadwinners and overseas adventurers, and by so doing recover their sense of masculine self-worth.

The increasing scholarly attention to migrant men and masculinities is timely and welcome, given that millions of men and women from Southeast Asia leave their homes each year as transnational migrant labourers. In fact, this is a phenomenon common to both South and Southeast Asia – Philippines, India and Bangladesh are the world’s leading international labour exporters – and, as such, represents another research area ripe for comparative and collaborative work among South and Southeast Asia specialists. Yet, what about male/masculine subjects in these regions whose labour and everyday practices are marked less by the kinds of far-reaching movements and mobilities that characterise the lives of transnational and transoceanic labour migrants? How do they understand and embody their masculinities? What difference does it make that their masculinities are (re)produced primarily “at home” rather than overseas, in borderlands, or in diaspora?

These questions are addressed in the remaining essays of *Men and Masculinities in Southeast Asia*. Taking an innovative approach to the study of hegemonic masculinities in Singapore, Sophie Williams, Lyons and Ford analyse members-only online discussions by and about Chinese Singaporean male sex tourists to the nearby Indonesian island of Batam. Trudy Jacobsen examines how Cambodian men understand and negotiate seemingly contradictory tropes of idealised manhood: whereas traditional paradigms of Cambodian masculinity posit that the “good” man is family-focused and limits his entertainment to wholesome pursuits, notions of modern manhood cast the “successful” man as unbound by such constraints. In both cases, performance and discourse of virility emerge as a key vehicle for masculinity and fraternity, rather than sexual pleasure or eroticism. It is not only among migrant labourers that overt expressions of sexual experience and capability serve as vital means of enhancing one’s sense of manliness.
The next two essays interrogate the relationship between masculinity and violence and the struggle among men with limited resources to acquire masculine respectability. In an ethnographic study of violence-prone, male-dominated groups in Timor-Leste—gangs, martial arts groups and ritual arts groups—Henri Myrttinen uncovers how members of these disaffected groups attempt to come to terms with a double alienation from “traditional” Timorese masculinity and an urban, “modern” and post-conflict masculinity. Ian Wilson similarly contends that the resurgence of jago (local strongmen) masculinity among disenfranchised young men in Jakarta’s slums and poor neighbourhoods represents resentment towards the post-New Order state and its failure to adequately redress the institutionalised inequalities of the New Order. The “underworld” masculinities of gangs and the jago illuminate the fraught combination of a sense of entitlement, victimhood and agency that has become constitutive of the self-image of Timorese and Indonesian young men as virtuous protectors of the people whose acts of violence are motivated by a sense of honour and justice that exceeds that of the law and the state.

The final essay explores the relationship between military service, masculinity and citizenship as experienced by Malay Muslim men in Singapore (Lyons and Ford). The military and its relationship to masculinity have not been given due consideration in the extensive body of scholarship on gender and the nation. The connection between the military and manhood remains naturalised and intact in much of Asia, where many countries mandate military service for men. Countries with no compulsory “national service” such as Pakistan, India, Indonesia and Thailand have some of the world’s largest active and reserve militaries, while others such as Myanmar and Philippines have long histories of military governments and armed insurgencies. It is only fitting then that the concluding chapter considers how the military functions as a forum for institutionalising values associated with manliness, valorising masculinism and recognising masculine standing.

In Chinese-dominated Singapore, Malay men have long been stereotyped as intellectually and otherwise indolent (in sharp contrast to the stereotype of the hardworking and high-achieving Chinese race). As national subjects whose loyalty to the nation-state is invariably questioned because of their race and religion, Malay Muslim men are denied high-ranking positions or prestigious combat roles in the military. Yet, precisely because of the systemic discriminations that Malay men face, the military serves as a venue through which they can partake of the traditional association of military men with physical and mental fortitude and patriotism. Many Malay men expressed a sense of pride and achievement in their military service and characterised themselves as “more loyal citizens” than Chinese servicemen who supposedly viewed military service as a waste of time. Lyons and Ford provide new and much needed insight into the way that gender ideologies lead subaltern men to participate in and comply with a state institution that helps to uphold hegemonic codes that contribute to their own social, economic and political marginalisation.

Some readers will undoubtedly take Ford and Lyons to task for their failure to address why, despite the variety of localised masculinities to which Men and Masculinities in Southeast Asia attends, status, sex and violence emerge as prominent themes. That these themes recur throughout the volume may be a logical outcome of its preoccupation with the links between the performance of heterosexuality and dominant constructions of masculinity. On the one hand, this emphasis facilitates, as intended by the editors, an analysis of how women and their bodies function as sites for the
production and recognition of masculinity. On the other hand, it limits the volume’s analysis of the relationship between women and masculinity and risks reducing women to the stereotypical role of objects of desire and victims of violence. The conceptual privileging of Connell’s notion of hegemonic masculinity, defined by exclusive heterosexuality and sexual conquest, also has the effect of at times essentialising the Southeast Asian masculine subject. One is left to wonder what the volume may have gained from a more critical assessment of the merits and demerits of studies that give primacy to heterosexuality in constructions, performances and narratives of masculinity.

Collectively, the various histories and ethnographies of masculinities in South and Southeast Asia discussed here serve as evidence of the centrality and continued relevance of masculinity to analyses of colonialism, nationalism and globalisation. They demonstrate that all of these processes have relied upon the elaboration and management of a shifting hierarchy of masculinities, and underscore the highly gendered nature of political, military and economic institutions. Another important insight that emerges from these books collectively is, as Michael Roper and John Tosh (1991, p. 1) have stressed, that masculinity has been and continues to be defined to a large extent in relation to “the other”. Throughout South and Southeast Asia, colonials achieved their manliness by insisting on their difference from the “emasculated” colonised men and the “civilising” effect of imperial masculinity. Visions of remasculinised man and nation have depended no less on the denigration of variously gendered, racialised, classed and sexualised others: just as there is no masculine Hindu defender of the nation without the Muslim enemy in India, the figure of the “lazy”, “inept” and “weak” Malay Muslim animates the hegemonic masculinity of the industrious and daring Chinese man in Singapore. It is therefore critical that any understanding of masculinity be situated within broader analyses of the unequal relations of power and discourses of difference and otherness that make possible and sustain normative constructions of masculine identity and behaviour.

Finally, the three reviewed works highlight the need for comparative and interdisciplinary dialogues on masculinities that engage scholars of gender in Asia from a variety of geographical locations, theoretical perspectives and disciplinary approaches in a conversation. The point is not to identify a “regional hegemonic masculinity” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 850) or a unique “Asian” view on manhood. The heterogeneous and conflicting norms and practices of manliness explored in the reviewed works illustrate the difficulties of discerning a singular national – let alone regional – masculinity. Cross-border dialogue and thinking will allow us to explore a wide range of competing articulations and experiences of masculinity within Asia itself and denaturalise taken-for-granted ideas about masculinities in/and Asia. Such conversations, in turn, will enable us to deconstruct essentialised understandings of Asia and its knowledge field.

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Notes

1. Gender analyses of Buddhism in the Southeast Asian context have tended, similarly, to focus on discourses about the feminine.
2. The notable exception, for a long time, was Ong and Peletz (1995).
4. Historical scholarship on Philippines, notably the work of Alfred McCoy and Norman Owen, stands out in this regard (McCoy, 1999; Owen, 1999).

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