Flower Drinking and Masculinity in Taiwan

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This study explores the role of the hostess club culture in the creation and maintenance of masculinity in Taiwan. The article focuses on flower drinking (the consumption of alcohol in bars, often integrated with prostitution), which is a common practice in Taiwan. Data were obtained from 58 in-depth interviews with men from a variety of occupations and social backgrounds (mean age = 38.50, SD = 11.00) and 73 questionnaires administered to soldiers (mean age = 21.00, SD = 1.10). Findings indicated that demonstration of skill at flower drinking and facility with the related social etiquette are important channels for male bonding that were central to the mid- to upper-class participants’ professional development. Flower drinking also provided a method of discriminating men from other men through their choices of why and where to go and how to behave while there. Specific ways that Taiwanese masculinity differs from Western and from Japanese masculinity, and support for the continuing relevance of the traditional Confucian ideal of masculinity, wen-wu, are discussed.

Although a broad vision for research into interconnected global masculinities (Connell, 2002) has been suggested as a goal for masculinity studies, this goal will be difficult to attain until a better understanding of local masculinities is achieved. Few studies have focused specifically on Chinese masculinity (the term Chinese is used in a cultural, and not a political sense in this article); this dearth is interesting considering the enormous importance of male–male bonds in Chinese history. China’s late imperial society was highly sex-segregated—more so than in the West or even elsewhere in East Asia; trade and commerce and even bureaucracy and scholarship were almost exclusively the domain of men (Mann, 2000). A broad network of male relationships was seen as a manly accomplishment since it represented the ability to travel and meet people outside the family, which contrasts with the traditional female role that was confined to the household (Huang, 2007). While this arrangement of work and gender may be, in some respects, similar to the Western situation, the Chinese context differs in that Confucian sexuality is characterized by containment rather than conquest and control (McMahon, 1988). Based on McMahon’s literary analysis, Louie (2003) argued that wen-wu, meaning literary-martial, captures both mental and physical aspects of the masculinity ideal for Chinese men. Both the wen path of learning with its “calligraphic traditions of imitating the masters, extensive rote learning of texts, and physical containment of examination candidates at all points of training” and the wu path, which represents “containment of war rather than rampant militarism” and “concentration on restraint, patience and the ability to know when to withhold” emphasize containment (Louie, 2003, pp. 6–7).

Our goal in this study was to examine some meanings and experiences of Taiwanese men in creating and sustaining masculinities. A secondary question explored was whether the traditional concept of wen-wu still influences construction and maintenance of masculinities in a modern Chinese society. We applied West and Zimmerman’s (1987) concept of doing gender and Bourdieu’s (2001) concept of symbolic goods to examine some ways masculinity is manufactured in Taiwan. Connell’s (1995) concept of plural masculinities, which suggests that there are specific core features to masculinity among different groups, as well as Allison’s (1994) descriptions of corporate outings in Japan, are used to consider whether the concept of wen-wu is still relevant in modern Taiwan.

We focused this study on a setting of cultural significance in which gender is salient: special service clubs.
Hostesses are employed at these clubs to drink with customers and ensure they continue drinking and having a good time. This type of activity involving recreation with hostesses is called he hua-jiu, literally, flower drinking. Physical contact may be negotiable. For example, customers may engage in kissing, fondling, wiping the hostesses’ private parts with an object, licking preserved plums placed on the hostesses, or any of a number of sexual games such as when tomatoes or ice cubes are placed between the hostess’s private parts and the customer’s buttocks (Hwang, 1996). Some of these clubs are integrated with prostitution.

We selected this context for three reasons. First, the practice of flower drinking stems from an older Taiwanese social institution. From the 19th century to around 1960, women at high-class clubs were available to accompany men at social gatherings. They received strict training from childhood in music or poetry and ancient literature. Their clients included wealthy businessmen, officials, and intellectuals. Second, employment is central in masculine identity because men evaluate themselves and others on the basis of criteria related to success in the workplace (Beagan & Saunders, 2005). The practice of flower drinking is widely believed to be crucial to doing business in Taiwan. For example, in 2001, the Taichung District Court sentenced the Taichung County Council speaker and vice-speaker to 20 and 12 years in prison, respectively, on charges of graft and other crimes. They were found to have spent more than N.T. $50 million (U.S. $1.5 million) of public money within 1½ years on hostess clubs. The verdict aroused protests from councilors nationwide: “How are we supposed to talk business if we don’t drink? How are we supposed to work? Why don’t we just shut down the Councils?” (“Representatives Corrupt,” 2001, p. 32). Such cases continue to occur (e.g., Chuang, 2009; “Legislative Speaker Sentenced,” 2004). The third reason is that socializing and alcohol use are connected for many men (Read, Wood, Davidoff, McLacken, & Campbell, 2002). Ritualized group drinking activities are the means by which many men negotiate masculinity (West, 2001). No published studies have specifically examined either heterosexual masculinity or hostess club culture in Taiwan, although a few have touched on these topics in relation to other issues (see Chen, 2006; Peng, 2007).

**Method**

**Participants**

To examine the relation between flower drinking and masculinity, we conducted interviews with 58 men who went flower drinking and collected questionnaire data from 73 soldiers. The sociodemographic data for each set of participants are presented in Table 1.

We conducted in-depth interviews with 58 men from the greater Taipei area. Their ages ranged from 20 to 75, with an average age of 38.50 (SD = 11.00). The majority were married (32; 60%), had completed an undergraduate degree (30; 52%), and were considered middle to upper class (37; 64%). Interviewees came from all walks of life, and included a cross-section of occupations and social backgrounds (e.g., legislators, lawyers, and factory workers).

Questionnaire data were collected from 73 men from two companies of soldiers of the same battalion, which had a total of about 200 men. The men’s ages ranged from 20 to 25, with an average age of 21.00 years (SD = 1.10). They had a variety of backgrounds, as all Taiwanese men must complete two years military service, and soldiers are assigned to a battalion by drawing lots from all over Taiwan. Four were college graduates, 19 had a junior college diploma, 30 had graduated from high school or vocational school, and the remainder had no high school diploma.

**Interview Procedure and Data Analytic Technique**

We used quota sampling to include men from a broad range of classes and occupations, aiming for around 20 participants with occupations in each of Bourdieu’s

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### Table 1. Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Interviewees (N = 58)</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (M = 38.50)</td>
<td>30–45</td>
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<tr>
<td>n (%) &lt;30</td>
<td>19 (33)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>9 (15)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Years of education</td>
<td>30–45</td>
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<tr>
<td>n (%) &lt;16</td>
<td>28 (48)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>30 (52)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital status: n (%)</td>
<td>Married: 35 (60)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Single: 21 (36)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic status: n (%)</td>
<td>Working class: 18 (37)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle class: 20 (42)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Dominant class: 10 (21)</td>
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<td><strong>Servicemen (N = 73)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Age (M = 21.00)</td>
<td>20–22</td>
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<tr>
<td>n (%) 20–22</td>
<td>65 (89)</td>
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<td>8 (11)</td>
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<td>30 (42)</td>
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<td>&lt;12</td>
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*According to Bourdieu’s (1984) classification system.*
(1984) class categories (dominant, middle, and working class). Participants were all acquaintances of, or referred by acquaintances of, the second author or research assistants. The second author or one of her two male research assistants conducted the interviews, which lasted 1½ to 3 hours and took place at either a quiet coffee shop or private room at the interviewee’s place of work. Before starting, participants were reminded they could refuse to talk about any topic or end the interview at any time (none did either). The researcher asked for the demographic details described in the previous section, and then asked the participant to “Tell me about…” each of the following topics: circumstances of first visit, motivation for frequenting hostess clubs, companions they go with, relations with women at hostess clubs, personal attitudes toward sex and sexual experience, the difference between men who go and those who do not, and the impact of their flower-drinking outings on their families and coworkers. The interviewers had memorized this sequence of questions and generally followed it, although if the participant jumped ahead, then the researcher followed the natural course of the discussion. The interviewers used reflective listening to prompt the participants through stories or to encourage explanations. All questions were addressed with each participant, but not necessarily in the same order.

We conducted two stages of data analysis. After transcribing the tape-recorded interviews, we broke down each participant’s interview data into units. An open coding procedure was used such that new categories were formed for each meaning unit that did not fit the existing categories. Units in each category were collected together to aid in the second stage of analysis. For example, all expressed “motivations for the first visit” were listed together for further examination.

In the second stage, we examined each of the categories for themes and patterns. For example, the “first visit” category was examined to see what different types of motivations were mentioned by the participants. The different types were then compared across the subgroups of interest (e.g., married vs. single, over 45 vs. younger, etc.). The themes were continually brought back to the data for verification and improvement. The final step was development of a theoretical model that best fit the categories and their relationships. Effort was made to find data that challenged early conclusions. Emphasis was maintained on understanding and portraying the men’s perspective.

**Questionnaires**

A male assistant administered the questionnaires. He had already served one year with the battalion as a counselor and had established a certain amount of trust with the respondents. Participants were not chosen according to any specific criteria, and were given the questionnaire when they were off duty. They completed the questionnaire individually in a quiet meeting room on base. The questions included general demographic information, age and motivation for first visit, the frequency and cost, motivation to continue going, the age and partner of the first sexual encounter, the number of sexual partners, and whether relatives also frequent hostess clubs and how often. Anonymity was assured for all participants.

**Results**

**First Visit**

We examined the interview and questionnaire data to discover the factors relating to the decision to try flower drinking for the first time and the men’s feelings and reactions to the experience. We also examined the reasons other people gave to convince them to try the experience and their own motivations to try it and to continue to go. Table 2 presents characteristics of participants’ first visits to hostess clubs.

**Interviewees.** A common theme among the interviewees was that “a male uninitiated in hostess clubs is inexperienced in life,” and “going to a hostess club is a key way to become a man.” Given this viewpoint, it is not surprising that initiation for many occurred as a teenager. One-third of the 47 interviewees who had ever tried flower drinking first did so as a teenager (16 of 47; 34%). Of the 48 servicemen who had ever tried it, 73% were under 20 years of age on their first visit. As one interviewee explained, “I was young and curious. I guess all boys would be. I think many boys go through this phase.”

Of the interviewees who first went flower drinking as a teen, most (75%; 12 of 16) did so when they transitioned from school into the labor force. None of these men went on to higher education. As a 59-year-old civil servant explained, “I began flower-drinking when I got my first job before my 20th birthday.” The interviewees who went on to college from high school also generally started flower drinking at a later age, some during college and others when they started work upon completing their studies and military service.

Only one of the 47 interviewees who had ever been to a hostess club was unaccompanied on his first visit. Two interviewees’ male relatives marshaled them through this rite of passage. For example, a journalist recalled the following:

I was taken to a hostess club when I was nine years old by my father who was a businessman. My father advised me that a man had to learn how to drink, smoke, and visit special services before he got married so that he would not become dazed by hostesses when he was married.
For most men, friends and work colleagues or their boss played the role of initiator. Friends persuaded 22 of the 47 (47%) who had ever gone flower drinking to go to a hostess club as a purely recreational activity. A boss or colleagues persuaded the remaining 22 of the 47 (47%). A garage mechanic recalled his first experience:

I didn’t want to go at first. But [my boss and colleagues] said that as a man you have to go and see what it is about, so I did. People said that once you’ve been, you are less likely to become dazed by similar situations later. You would have almost become immune to sea-sickness [when a man believes he has real feelings for a prostitute].

Many interviewees stated that they were persuaded to go by appeals to their manliness—that is, success at flower drinking would be seen as proof of their masculinity. In a recreational context (not directly involving business or work), masculinity was understood to refer to the ability to display one’s sexual prowess by confidently flirting with the hostesses. In a work-related context, masculinity was proven by socializing with work-related acquaintances to cultivate business ties. A TV show producer explained:

After leaving military service and starting to work, I started going flower drinking with my boss. You start to feel that you have to identify with this culture and learn how it works, and get used to it to survive and get ahead.

Servicemen. Results from the 73 questionnaires confirmed the interview data overall. Thirty-seven of the 48 servicemen (77%) who had ever been to a hostess club went with friends their first time, and eight (17%) first went with their boss from work. Only two men (4%) were unaccompanied their first time. Although only one of the soldiers had made his first visit with a relative, of the 48 men who had ever visited hostess clubs, 46 (96%) said that they had relatives who visit hostess clubs. In comparison, only two of the 25 (8%) soldiers who had never been said that their relatives were regulars. Servicemen with relatives who engage in the practice may be more likely to consider visiting hostess clubs a normal aspect of manhood and to engage in the practice themselves.

Characteristics of Men Who Visited Hostess Clubs

Servicemen. Sexual experience and attitudes toward sex were the most distinguishing factors separating soldiers who had visited hostess clubs from those who had not. The majority of the enlisted men who had ever visited a hostess club (43; 90%) had also had some other sort of sexual encounter not involving prostitutes. One half had a one-night stand (24; 50%). Only five used a prostitute for their first sexual encounter. Among those servicemen who had never visited a hostess club (25), not one indicated he had a one-night stand. Both groups were homogenous in terms of educational background.

Interviewees. Asked why they think some men go flower drinking and some men do not, every one of the interviewees (N = 15) who was not a regular expressed that personality and character play a major role. They explained that people who “think of flower drinking as valuable in obtaining social resources” or who are more “interested in sensual pleasures” tend to look for and be receptive to opportunities to go. Four of the 43 regulars (9%) also made similar statements. For example, one regular said that, “colleagues who are disinterested in hostess clubs all have several characteristics in common: they are family-oriented, have
higher work ethics, and do not have jobs requiring bribery or lobbying.” Among the remaining 39 regular flower drinkers, we found no common pattern of responses indicating why some men go flower drinking and some do not.

We analyzed the interviews to check the hypothesis that a person’s occupation influences whether they go flower drinking. Thirty-one men (of the 58 interviewed; 53%) had jobs that allowed them control of an exchangeable resource or that relied heavily on social networking and connections (e.g., sales representatives, journalists, and gang members). Twenty-six of these men (84%) engaged in flower drinking. Of the 27 men interviewed whose jobs did not involve resources or connections (e.g., taxi drivers, mechanics, and school teachers), 18 (67%) were flower drinkers. This analysis suggests a possible trend for an association between flower drinking and occupation, but it is by no means conclusive given the high percentage of men without a job requiring exchange of resources and connections who also visited hostess clubs. We also examined the interview data to check whether older men or married men might be more frequent users and found no clear patterns.

**Motivations**

We examined the interview data to find what personal motivations for going flower drinking the interviewees described in relating their own experiences. Our analysis resulted in four main motivations to go flower drinking: friends, work, personal pleasure, and sexual needs. Overall, the reason to visit a hostess club seemed to center first and foremost on group excitement; it was seen as an opportunity to collectively show off and cement male friendships and relations. The goal of group excitement was important, no matter whether the group was one of friends or work related. Men experienced this group in one of two ways. Some derived personal pleasure from the process, which was then also a motivation to participate. Other men had a more utilitarian perspective. They enjoyed the result, not the process, and derived little or no personal pleasure from the experience.

For some of the men who derived personal pleasure from the experience, fulfillment of sexual needs was a component of that pleasure and, thus, also a secondary motivation to go. However, generally speaking, personal pleasure was at least as related to being part of the group of men as it was to interactions with the women. None of the men habitually went alone.

We now explore the three motivations of friends, work, and personal pleasure in greater detail.

**Friends.** Interviewees reported a need to show willingness to play along when someone in a group proposed such activities for recreational reasons. They explained, “If a person bluntly refuses to join in, it would cause awkwardness.” The person would likely “be criticized for not showing others respect.” Once at the hostess club, there is great pressure to consume alcohol and to flirt. Interviewees felt that, especially in a group of friends, “if a person did not join in flirting and fondling the hostesses, he would be taunted as a hypocrite [for being there but not participating], a party-pooper, or as lacking in machismo.” For example, one of the interviewees was, in fact, a homosexual. He said that because of pressure from friends and his desire to fit in, he not only went flower drinking twice, he also conformed to heterosexual flirting rituals during those visits:

An invitation to go flower drinking is considered a symbol of friendship among regulars. For example, a 50-year-old writer thought that a woman is the gift to give when a Taiwanese man wants to show friendship:

> You know, in Taiwan, if friends have not met in a long time, and one wants to show his good will, he will take you drinking. Afterwards he will arrange a woman for you. It’s considered polite.

Rejecting such an offer is equal to a rejection of the friendship. We found this sentiment among the youngest and the oldest interviewees in this study, who were a half-century apart in age. The five servicemen we interviewed in their early 20s and the three men over 70 were all initiated by friends. The 75-year-old disclosed that as a miner in his 20s, “We would freshen up after work and then go to one teahouse after another as long as we had money to spend.” None of the five young servicemen interviewed started visiting hostess clubs later than age 16. One serviceman was taken to hostess clubs by friends at age 10. The servicemen reported “going straight to hostess clubs after getting paid,” similar to the situation 50 years ago, when teahouses would be packed with miners on pay day.

**Work.** Thirty-one of the 43 regulars (72%) interviewed felt the practice of visiting hostess clubs was helpful to their work. In Taiwanese corporate culture, it is widely believed that if one does not invite one’s clients to hostess clubs, business arrangements will be in jeopardy and the opportunity to compete may be lost.
We asked a sales manager of a car company how likely it was for him to make deals by taking his clients socializing at hostess clubs. He replied:

In general, seven out of ten. Maybe many people are competing for the same thing. Everyone has his methods, but there can be only one winner, so [it] is necessary. If you don’t, you don’t have even the chance to compete.

In fact, 19 of the 31 (61%) actually considered flower drinking not only to be helpful to business, but even a crucial part of their job or as part of their job description. Seven of the 19 even said that they accepted work-related flower drinking “only in the face of pressure from the boss” and “only in consideration of career goals.” For them, the point of visiting hostess clubs was to advance their careers, and definitely not for pleasure. They felt there would be dire consequences for refusal and that nonconformist employees risked losing the contract or displeasing the boss, or even isolation by colleagues, not to mention loss of opportunity for promotion. A 37-year-old doctor at a university hospital described how his supervisors demanded doctors socialize with pharmaceutical company representatives in hostess clubs:

“There is a wide variety of medicines to choose from so competition among pharmaceutical companies is intense. They’d do anything to treat doctors. As doctors refuse to take commissions, almost 100% accept flower drinking instead. Those who don’t receive low grades for their performance, and are not considered for promotion. Since everyone else is going, even those with a sense of morality are forced to join.”

The other 12 of the 19 considered flower drinking to be the only way to mobilize social resources and smooth financial exchanges and, therefore, crucial to their work. However, these 12 also said that they did not mind it, or even enjoyed it personally. These men were, for the most part, small- and medium-sized entrepreneurs, legislators, journalists, and lawyers.

Pleasure. In time, a man’s motivation for going flower drinking becomes complex. Having experienced it a few times, he might no longer be going simply to humor the boss or avoid isolation. He may come to enjoy such outings. Furthermore, many interviewees said that “to have fun [go flower drinking] but still look after one’s family is a display of masculinity.” Many men described the dual benefits of how “being seduced and flattered by women without paying [when being treated as a guest or paid to go by one’s employer] is relaxing and fun, especially with the added possibility of career success.” A number of interviewees appeared to have internalized the associated morals; they considered that “a host must offer flower drinking when seeking transaction, or be considered ill-mannered.”

To them, accepting a flower-drinking engagement is a social event, not a form of bribery.

Once a man is socialized into flower drinking, it may take on an important place in his life: “These places are definitely necessary to men. They help us relax, to be free, and let down our defenses. We can talk about anything.” Some interviewees perceived hostess clubs as fulfilling a biological need. The general explanation was that “men are not like women,” and that “it is difficult for men to just have sex with one person.” For example, a 40-year-old journalist stated:

“A man who makes love with the same woman for a long time will become impotent. Taiwanese men are willing to endure unhappy and changeless marriages because hostess clubs offer married men chances to commit crimes. After committing these crimes [having sex with other women] they will treat their wives better.”

Overall, the regulars interviewed saw flower drinking as an activity within the confines of their work and public existence. They perceived it as men’s entitlement to satisfy their sexual needs, as well as a reward for their power and hard work. They also thought hostess clubs helped to minimize “the possible harm of natural male promiscuity on marriage and family.”

In sum, it appears that men tend to be introduced to sex clubs by other men, particularly their friends, colleagues, and bosses, and that the initial experience for a majority happens while still a teenager. Pressure to at least try out flower drinking and to learn the behaviors appropriate to flower drinking is quite strong and difficult to resist. Analysis of the interview data suggests friends, colleagues, and bosses remain important to an individual’s continuing to frequent sex establishments as men benefit from flower drinking in terms of improved bonding with other men and enhanced opportunity in their careers. Regular flower drinkers have many occasions to go to hostess clubs: to show someone gratitude, to reward someone for work well done, to introduce one person to another, or to negotiate business. Once accustomed to it, many men feel entitled to the activity for both work and recreation.

Masculinity

Analysis of the interview data revealed that the practice of flower drinking manufactures masculinity by distinguishing men from women in two ways: allowing men to experience their dominance over women and to demonstrate this power to other men, and by allowing men to experience themselves as part of a group of men by drinking and wan nuren (playing women).

Differentiation from women. By reinforcing asymmetrical relations between men and women, the
flower-drinking culture ratifies and amplifies Taiwanese masculinity by reinforcing a man's sense of power and control. As a political party worker put it, "In Taiwanese culture, a man shows his masculinity by treating women with some degree of roughness." In the protective safety of a hostess bar, a customer can demonstrate to others without challenge that he has acquired important masculine attributes of dominance. Of course, he is able to make this demonstration only with the cooperation of the hostess; she is an important participant. Flower-drinking practices reinforce an association among sex, money, and power.

A military officer in our study stated: "In hostess clubs, every man regards himself as a master. ... Only there can a man feel such a strong feeling of dignity." This same man also stated that, "Men like the hostesses' company because their ego, which is so often belittled in front of superiors at work, could be repaired." Furthermore, in Taiwan, "Were you enjoying being an emperor last night?" is a common teasing greeting to a friend who is a regular. A salesman described the feeling of being emperor of the domain:

When you enter the place in a bad mood, the girls still smile at you. That feeling is so different. You want to smoke, she lights up a cigarette immediately; your glass is empty, she pours more drinks. It's a kind of respect you get sitting next to her. Girls nowadays? If you want something, get it yourself.

The relationship between hostesses and customers is not simply sexual, but rather one of dominance; sex is not the only or even the main goal of a hostess club's services. Rather, the purpose is to make a man feel manly and give him the illusion that a hostess compliments him because she admires and respects his social status and character, which is irrelevant to the fact that she is being paid.

Belonging to a group of men. Hostess clubs allow men to feel part of a group of men by promoting male bonding by providing a ritual. A political party worker explained: "Da-tuan [a big group] in Taiwanese means you and your friends go to many places. ... Men get together to do something bad in order to cement their relationships."

As such, flower drinking is a ritual that allows men not only to gain power, but also to strengthen identification with one another and magnify fraternal bonding. The salesman explained the "fountain of fun" to be had at hostess clubs:

I spend money to have fun, not for sex. If I want sex, I won't spend so much money, but just find a woman to have a forty-five-minute fuck. I spend so much money at hostess clubs to play, to have a really great time, and to feel really good.

Discriminating Men From Men

Our analysis also indicated clear ways men of different socioeconomic levels differentiate themselves through flower-drinking practices: the reason to go and the behavior acceptable while there.

The reason to go. Of the 43 regulars interviewed, about one-third (15; 35%) claimed they went mainly for recreational reasons and to enhance their sexual vigor. One-third (14; 33%) stated that their motives were exclusively work related, and the remaining third (14; 33%) said they went sometimes for the sake of their work and sometimes just for pleasure.

Eleven of the 15 (73%) who reported visiting only for pleasure were working class, and the other four were middle or upper class. In fact, the lower the education, the more forthright the person seemed to be about going for pleasure. Men of middle and upper classes and with at least a university education tended to describe motives focusing on work-related engagements. Only one of the 14 (7%) who reported visiting solely for work purposes was working class. Also, only one of the men who reported mixed reasons for visiting hostess clubs was working class.

Thus, the reason a man goes flower drinking differed by social status. The working-class regulars interviewed generally believed flower drinking to be a justified form of recreation and entertainment, as well as a man's prerogative. A soldier with less than a 10th-grade education answered the question of why he went flower drinking in this way: "It is in my nature to love going to those places. What can you do? Other men love playing ball by nature. Everyone has his own preference for recreation." Three soldiers explained their reasons this way: "He can demonstrate his charm," "Most men go to play women," and "A man wants to satisfy his vanity, to play the hostesses, so whenever he has money he will go there and be the master."

Overall, middle- and upper-class men explained the point of visiting hostess clubs in terms of exchanging resources for the sake of their career, and not for pleasure. In fact, if a man of middle- and upper-class status allowed the recreational aspect of the activity to take over, and he became overly indulgent in the pleasures of drink and sex, he was not considered a "real man." Many repeatedly stressed that the essence of being a man is to have a successful career and that learning the art of flower drinking is required for career building.

For the really upper-class men, hostess clubs were a favorite place to display their wealth and further connections. They also provided an opportunity to display their familiarity with the rituals of flower drinking and the proper degree of self-control, which set them apart from the uninitiated and from the lower-class patrons for whom self-control is less important. The host and guest roles played during an outing reflect...
Behavior. A man’s behavior while flower drinking also provided a marker discriminating men from men. A man’s behavior on these occasions was seen not only as an indicator of his masculinity, but also of his status—that is, a man who acts appropriately and handles any situation with ease is thought of highly. A military officer explained it this way:

I felt my superior was watching me when I was there. He would bring some people [to hostess clubs] but wouldn’t bring others. He would observe whether a person could control himself.

Among his peers, a man who has self-discipline and good judgment, who is not controlled by his lust, and who does not let himself become trapped in a situation accumulates symbolic capital. Men who “devote true emotions and money to the clubs,” men who “only find guts enough to take advantage of women under the influence of alcohol,” or those “unable to control their tears after drinking” are laughed at. In short, ambitious upper- and middle-class interviewees defined real machismo as “using flower drinking only to make exchanges, showing a regard for one’s career above all else, and not being controlled by emotions or pure pleasure.” Allowing the recreational purpose to take priority over business goals was not considered manly. The recreational purpose should not take precedence over family responsibilities either. “To play, but to take care of your family as well” was a final theme noted among our interviewees. For example, a 75-year-old described how, in his youth working as a miner, “I earned daily wages that could be used for three days. I spent one day’s share at a tea house [hostess club], and gave my family the other two shares.”

Discussion

Results confirmed that flower drinking supports male bonding and is a suitable context for examining the creation and maintenance of masculinity. The men in this study engaged in doing gender (see West & Zimmerman, 1987); they enacted and constructed gender with other men and used it to create or display differences with other men by demonstrating restraint.

Male Bonding

Although sexuality was highlighted in the context examined, it was not the main reason most participants gave for why they went flower drinking—that is, although the games with the hostesses were enjoyable and were part of the motivation for going, for the majority it was the opportunity to bond with other men that was of foremost importance. Most interviewees mentioned, but did not necessarily emphasize, fulfillment of sexual desires when going, even for recreational reasons. They cared more about having a good time, which was related to positive feelings regarding self-image in front of companions.

Social rituals work as an energy generator that gives strength and support to all participants (Collins, 1988). In a flower-drinking ritual, the hostess pulls a group of men into games and becomes a shared topic, fostering bonding and heightening each man’s self-image to himself and among his male companions. Our analysis suggested that it is this bonding that is of primary importance in the practice of flower drinking, no matter what the man’s socioeconomic background or whether he is going for recreational or occupational purposes.

Use of hostess clubs for this purpose is not unique to Taiwan. Sturdevant and Stoltzfus (1992) reported that American soldiers may use hostess clubs for group bonding and excitement. As managers in corporations are mostly men, the same structural reasons for male bonding for business exist in many cultures, although the context and method may differ. For example, going hunting and fishing or discussing sports are ways of cementing personal relations among American businessmen (see Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995, as cited in Connell, 2002). Sports, in particular, may be a way that boys learn to bond with other males (Messner, 2001), which carries through to adulthood. This association of sports and masculinity seems to hold true in Taiwan as well. Our participants emphasized the masculine properties of flower drinking by categorizing it as another natural activity for men, like playing ball.

Manufacturing Masculinity

Kimmel (1987) suggested that large-scale structural shifts in a society can affect microstructural relations between and among individuals, especially between men and women in love, marriage, and the family. Taiwan seems to be no exception. In the past, marriages were arranged by a couple’s parents; no emotional connection between the bride and groom was necessary. In addition, most women were uneducated and did not work outside the home. Only courtesans studied art, music, and literature, and they acquired these skills in order to serve as intellectual companions to men of the upper class. In modern Taiwan, couples are free to fall in love, women are educated, and they work in most professions. Most of our interviewees did not want to remove these new freedoms and rights from women, but they did want to escape from them sometimes. For example, several expressed that they often felt inadequate because
their wife’s or girlfriend’s level of education or salary was higher than theirs. They said they went flower drinking to “become an emperor.” The hostess club was like a gas station where the hostesses could refill their masculinity.

The services provided by club hostesses are symbolic services (Bourdieu, 2001). The symbolic good produced and consumed in the clubs is masculinity rather than sex—that is, sex is not the point of the club’s services. Rather, the purpose is to make a man feel manly and give him the illusion that a hostess compliments him because she admires and respects his social status and character, which is irrelevant to the fact that she is being paid. The sexual games of the hostesses cannot be compared to the services provided by prostitutes. The hostesses engage in a machismo-creating process.

In this framework, the flower-drinking culture is an important institution of masculinity in Taiwanese society in that it promotes two important masculine dispositions necessary for Taiwanese boys to cross the threshold into the world of men: sexual vigor and the social games of preserving and accumulating capital. Taiwanese men may employ flower drinking as proof that they have enough sexual vigor to conquer and possess women; it is also a specific illusion for Taiwanese men to preserve and accumulate capital in various professional fields. To go flower drinking because of work-related engagements is thus glorified as a norm of responsible manly behavior (at least by other regulars). Peer groups, corporations, and some families support the culture of flower drinking by playing the role of its supervisor and initiator, and by ensuring that men are immersed in these rites. These groups spanning private and public sectors have become the social conduits and institutional initiators of flower drinking as a way of manufacturing masculinity.

Restraint

Flower drinking functions to discriminate men from other men, both within and across socioeconomic status. Men of a similar standing compete for the attentions of individual hostesses. They may try to outdo each other by seeing who can provide the best looking hostesses or compete to be good at the skill of flower drinking or for the entitlement to go out with the boss. Across socioeconomic status, the place frequented and the behavior exhibited while there serve as markers of status, which may be a cultural difference from Western practices (see Frank, 2002).

Connell’s (1995) concept of plural masculinities suggests that there are specific core features to masculinity among different groups. The practice of flower drinking seems to allow for development of two distinct masculinities: a working class one, which expressly seeks and enjoys the pleasures of women, and a ruling class one, which must deny attachment to those pleasures in favor of career success. However, from an indigenous perspective, the distinction between the two is not so clear. Flower drinking may have multiple significances in the same time and place; it may have recreational and work functions at the same time. Pleasure and work, public and private overlap. All our regulars reported a concern with acquiring a certain skill at flower drinking so as not to be seen as incompetent at a later point in time. Competency conveys status. The requisite skills were: how not to fall in love with the hostesses, how not to confuse the game with real feelings, how to drink without going to excess, and how to enjoy oneself without caring too much or spending too much that it would impact the family. The core skill for all the men was restraint. Considering the imprecise boundary between business and personal relations (Tong & Young, 1998), an emphasis on restraint is not surprising. A man’s physical and financial self-control when drinking and surrounded by hostesses may be taken as an indication of moral character or worthiness as a business partner.

This observation brings us back to a consideration of wen-wu, the traditional Chinese masculine ideal of restraint. While all men in our study needed some form of restraint, the upper-class men needed more. They practiced restraint in nearly every way, except expense. According to Confucian ethics, consideration of a person’s status or role is necessary to know what rules guide proper behavior—that is, the requirements for propriety (li) differ according to status. Our data support the contention that the traditional ideal of restraint continues to be relevant to construction of Chinese masculinities. Future research should explore whether these masculinities reflect separate wen and wu properties and, if so, whether one of these masculinities might be considered the hegemonic masculinity in Taiwan, as Connell’s (2002) concept of plural masculinities suggested.

Cultural Differences

Three points of difference are important to note when making cultural comparisons with Chinese masculinity. First, identity is different for Chinese individuals than it is for Westerners. For Chinese, identity is defined in terms of the relationships in which a person is involved (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The implication is that the expectations of one’s in-group “are what confer value on the individual, so if status as a member is lost, status as a person is also lost” (Bedford & Hwang, 2003, p. 130). Thus, pressure to conform and participate may be quite strong in ways that do not exist for Westerners. Second, possession of a network of relationships has traditionally been seen as a marker of manhood. Alienating male group members may have implications for masculinity that are different from a Western context. Third, in Chinese culture, the ability to conduct oneself according to the proper norms for social behavior may have ethical implications (Hwang, 1987). Refusal of an
invitation or failure to give or reciprocate the proper gift can be seen as evidence of a lack of moral character.

Unlike arguments made by Western researchers such as Bourdieu (2001), who suggested that men patronize hostess clubs to sustain their masculine power, or Hirsch et al. (2007), who suggested that men’s extramarital exploits were a function of gendered ideals for a women’s sexual respectability, in Taiwan, the underlying reasons are more complex. Consumption in hostess clubs may be a tool for evaluation and demonstration of moral character and social competence. Success at projecting the correct image is crucial for continued relations with the in-group. In Taiwan, going to a hostess club is not necessarily a private activity solely for entertainment or physical needs. It also may have a thoroughly public function related to a man’s career.

As with Allison’s (1994) study of men’s patronage of hostess clubs at their company’s expense, in Taiwan, male consumption of female sexuality may be an institutionalized practice. However, Allison reported how Japanese leaders at large enterprises may use group outings to hostess clubs as a reward and as an explicit component of managerial policy to boost group productivity. This is an important point of difference with the case in Taiwan. Both the Taiwanese men who embraced the practice and those who felt compelled to participate suggested that flower drinking was important in career development and success—that is, it was part of their own active strategy to advance their individual professional status, not an organizational policy to benefit a corporation or institution.

Prior to 1970 in Taiwan, only upper-class men used flower drinking to accumulate and display wealth and social capital in exclusive clubs. In modern Taiwan, hostess clubs have evolved so that anyone can use flower drinking to further his career or to enhance the chance of becoming a small business owner (or to demonstrate sexual vitality). For Taiwanese, flower drinking is an opportunity to demonstrate initiative, competitiveness, and to further personal interests, which represents a completely different masculinity from the salarymen of Japan that, as described by Allison (1994), is focused on cooperation and collective work.

Limitations and Future Directions

Certain limitations should be acknowledged when applying the results of this study. First, our sample of soldiers, while representing men of all backgrounds from all over Taiwan, is not necessarily representative of the wider population of men in that age range. Also, our sample of interviewees consisted of acquaintances of, or people referred by acquaintances of, the second author or her two research assistants. Second, most of the information relating to flower drinking in this study was derived from our interviews with self-confirmed regulars. In a study of the relation between personal drinking and perceived social norms for alcohol use, Wild (2002) found that compared with lighter drinkers, frequent heavy drinkers believed that heavy alcohol use is more normative in social reference groups. Wild’s results and the theory of cognitive dissonance might suggest that the predominance and acceptability of flower drinking expressed by the participants in this study may not be representative of men who are not regulars. Thus, the strong claims of the importance and centrality of flower drinking both for masculinity and business in Taiwan should not be interpreted as representative of all men in Taiwan. Future research might explicitly compare the views of regulars with those who do not partake to develop a better understanding of the necessity of flower drinking for heterosexual male–male relationships in Taiwan.

Another area for future research is the gay community of Taiwan, which is becoming more visible and open. Given that gender in Chinese culture is more connected to beliefs about family and social roles than beliefs about biological sex, and that sexuality is closely linked to the filial duty of carrying on the family lineage (Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002), there is a need to investigate the role this practice plays among men in the gay community. From this study, it appears that flower drinking emphasizes heterosexual male culture. Is this emphasis related to the filial requirement for men to have children to carry on the family name? As the practice is also of central importance to conducting business in Taiwan, does this mean that homosexual men must participate in flower drinking in order to achieve masculine ideals related to career success? Does the homosexual community have an alternative to the flower-drinking culture described in this study?

Finally, the ways in which flower drinking differentiates men from women are likely to have a negative impact in both the public sphere and in the private lives of women. Although the past decade has brought many advances for women’s rights in Taiwan, flower drinking seems to reinforce traditional arrangements between men and women—the demurring woman and powerful man. As one interviewee said about modern Taiwanese girls who do not give men proper respect, “Girls nowadays? If you want something, get it yourself.” This situation is not unlike Kimmel’s (1987) observation that the rise of feminism in the United States provoked some men “to retreat to traditional configurations” (p. 262).

Messner (2002) noted that possible intended and unintended consequences of the construction of masculinity and male bonding in American sports may include the subjugation of women. Likewise, it appears that in Taiwan, the masculinities supported in flower drinking may depend on women for realization; men’s solidarity is forged at the price of women’s positions as full subjects. Women are gifts provided by men to each other. Men may internalize the associated morals and simply
perceive it as a part of Taiwanese culture. Accustomed to treating women as they please at special service establishments, these men may carry their learned attitudes home to their wives and families. In the private sphere, women may be impacted as the wife of a flower drinker, both on an emotional level, with fears about her husband’s fidelity, or on a financial level, if her husband spends family money in hostess bars. In the public sphere, the culture of flower drinking affects female employees’ chances for promotions and raises. Work ideals that define the qualities, skills, and behaviors of an employee in terms of masculinity make it difficult for women to be identified as valuable workers by colleagues and management. This perception may prevent women from participating in many of the interactions necessary for business or reduce opportunities for making business connections.

Research is needed to identify women’s perceptions of flower drinking and the impact that the flower-drinking culture has on women and the construction of femininity—both directly as wives of flower drinkers and indirectly in terms of the role of flower drinking in office politics. The hostesses provide a symbolic representation of femininity that is important to the construction of masculinity. To provide a balanced picture of the role of flower drinking in Taiwanese society, the voices of women must be examined as should the traditional and modern conceptions of marriage and family. What is the particular nature of femininity in the context of hostess clubs in Taiwan? How does this femininity relate to the masculinities constructed through this practice? How does it normalize other forms of femininity? Future research should address how the changing roles for women and the evolution of what it means to be a woman in Taiwan relate to masculinity for Taiwanese men.

References


