A Study of Male Images in *Dear You* from the Perspective of Multiple Masculinities

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ABSTRACT

Based on R. W. Connell's theory of multiple masculinities and Elliott's theory of caring masculinities, this paper examines four types of male images and their constructions of masculinity in the film *Dear You*. Set against the cultural context of Chaoshan overseas-Chinese communities and the history of the Nanyang diaspora, the film presents the marginal masculinity of Zheng Musheng, the complicit masculinity of Chen Chuyuan, the hegemonic masculinity of Chen's Father, and the transforming masculinity of Xie Laishun. These representations demonstrate how patriarchal kinship structures and the transnational migrant-labor class shape masculine gender practices. The film further distinguishes between two forms of male responsibility ethics: Chen Chuyuan and his father reinforce patriarchal domination through the continuation of the patrilineage, whereas Zheng Musheng and the transformed Xie Laishun practice caring masculinities through concrete acts of care, thereby reconstructing the meaning of responsibility around recognition of women's agency. The film thus provides a representative text for understanding the formation and transformation of multiple masculinities within the localized context of overseas-Chinese communities.

Keywords: Dear You; Multiple Masculinities; Caring Masculinities

1. INTRODUCTION

Directed by Lan Hongchun and starring Li Sitong, Wang Yantong, Wu Shaoqing, and others, the realist film *Dear You* (2026) uses overseas remittance letters (qiaopi) as its narrative thread. It tells the story of Xiaowei, the grandson of the Chaoshan grandmother Ye Shurou, who travels to Thailand because of debt to search for his grandfather Zheng Musheng. During his search, Xiaowei discovers that his grandfather had died long ago and that the letters that had sustained Ye Shurou's hope for many years were actually written by Xie Nanzhi.

The Chaoshan region has long maintained family structures centered on clans, surnames, and the continuation of the patrilineage. The history of migration to Nanyang also led many families to adopt a structure in which men worked away from home while maintaining transnational family ties through qiaopi [4]. Moving from the present-day search for a relative into events in Nanyang more than half a century earlier, the film develops a narrative about responsibility, waiting, and human bonds across family memory, diasporic experience, and overseas-Chinese culture.

Currently, academic research on this film has been conducted from multiple perspectives. For instance, Han Wen explores the female perspective and ethical concerns in the film, examining how female immigrants in the hometown construct their identities and emotional communities in the absence of male figures [3]. Liu Ming and Wang Keyi, based on the framework of strengthening the sense of the Chinese nation community, analyze how the film reconstructs collective memory and multi-dimensional cultural symbols to reinforce the identity of Chinese people at home and abroad [1]. Huang Shixian focuses on the narrative function of the letter media, the aesthetic style of slow narration, and the spiritual connotation of the Chinese-people-ethical ethics [2]. However, these discussions rarely systematically pay attention to the male characters in the film and their gender implications. This article will utilize Connell's (R. W. Connell) theory of multiple male identities and Elliott's (Karla Elliott) theory of caring male identities to focus on the types of male identities presented by the four male characters and their formation mechanisms, and explore the clan structure of the Chaoshan overseas Chinese community and how the transnational working class shapes different male gender practices in the South Asian Chinese society.

2. NARRATIVES OF GENDERED POWER IN OVERSEAS-CHINESE SOCIETY

Connell argues that gender is a way of ordering social practice that is constrained by the structure of the human body and the processes of reproduction [5]. In other words, masculinity is not a set of psychological traits naturally possessed by men; rather, it is a configuration of practices formed within gender relations. Multiple masculinities emerge because masculinity changes with gender relations in particular social contexts. Set in Chaoshan overseas-Chinese communities and Nanyang Chinese society, *Dear You* depicts masculinity as shaped simultaneously by family, reproduction, migration, and labor. The film consequently reveals differences, contradictions, and transformations within masculinity.

2.1 Zheng Musheng and Marginalized Masculinity

Connell's concept of marginalized masculinity emerged from his effort to connect gender with class and race. Therefore, the "marginality" embodied by Zheng Musheng should be understood in relation to his class position as a low-income Chinese migrant worker and his transnational diasporic condition.

At the beginning of the film, Zheng Xiaowei repeatedly asks around the streets of Thailand about the whereabouts of Zheng Musheng but finds no clues. He later learns that his grandfather was nicknamed "Tiepu." After asking again, he discovers that many people know the name, yet no one can clearly identify the person it refers to. The nickname "Tiepu" embodies the masculinity of a working-class laborer: the repetition of the name blurs the individuality of the person and reduces Zheng Musheng to one ordinary member of the great wave of diaspora, whose former life has been submerged by time and collective memory.

2.2 Chen's Father and Hegemonic Masculinity

In *Masculinities*, Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" [8].

Through Chen's Father's authority within the patrilineal family, the film presents a concrete form of hegemonic masculinity within the Chaoshan clan order. His power does not primarily derive from physical strength but from the discursive authority attached to his position as head of the household, senior male, and guardian of the patrilineage. This authority is particularly evident in his power to determine his son's marriage and family reproductive arrangements. The clan structure, with its strong regional characteristics, thus provides the institutional foundation for Chen's Father's masculine authority.

In one scene, the four young masters of the Chen family all come to meet Xie Nanzhi for a marriage arrangement. When her maternal grandaunt asks what she requires, Nanzhi says that she has only one condition. Chen Chuyuan then says, "I am the third son in my family. I can accept whatever you require." However, when Nanzhi says that she wants a uxorilocal marriage, requiring the husband to marry into her family, Chen Chuyuan chooses to give up. When others advise him to go back and ask Chen's Father, he says bluntly, "No. He'll bury me alive." This episode demonstrates that in a clan order emphasizing the patrilineal surname and continuation of the bloodline, marrying into the wife's family is understood as an act in which a man leaves his own line of inheritance and damages the integrity of the patrilineal family. Although Chen's Father does not appear in this scene, his authority is already manifested through his son's fear.

Later, when Chen's Father accompanies Chen Chuyuan to propose to Nanzhi, he boasts about his son's financial and family circumstances, believing that marrying Chen Chuyuan means that Nanzhi is "fortunate." At the same time, he dismisses Nanzhi's refusal of marriage by telling her that "if you rely on yourself for the rest of your life, you'll never finish suffering." In addition, based on a fortune-teller's claim that she is destined to have six children, he arranges for three children to bear the Chen surname and three the Xie surname, directly incorporating Nanzhi's body, reproductive capacity, and children's surnames into a calculation of the continuation of two family lines.

Chen's Father's interference in Chen Chuyuan's marriage and in Nanzhi's choice of marriage initially reflects the power logic embedded in traditional masculinity. He opposes Nanzhi on the basis of his own will, while also believing within a male-centered family ethic that men's economic capacity, social experience, and family resources are essential foundations of women's happiness. Therefore, when Nanzhi refuses the marriage, Chen's Father does not genuinely respond to her autonomous choice; instead, he attempts to redefine her future through male experience. This practice demonstrates how hegemonic masculinity obscures women's agency.

2.3 Chen Chuyuan and Complicit Masculinity

Men who possess institutional power or substantial social wealth may remain personally distant from "hegemony." Hegemony can be fully established only when cultural ideals correspond with institutional authorization. Other members of society, while themselves subordinated, may "imitate," "appropriate," or even "collude" with hegemonic models and thereby enjoy the "patriarchal dividend" generated by the exclusion of women [6].

Compared with his father, Chen Chuyuan does not possess complete power. He fears his father's opposition to marrying into Nanzhi's family and cannot independently determine the form of his marriage. Before his father, Chen Chuyuan is a subordinate. Yet this subordination does not make him an innocent party outside patriarchy.

After his first failed marriage arrangement, Chen Chuyuan marries another woman. He later divorces her because she is unable to have children and then considers marrying Nanzhi again. This plot directly connects women's marital value with reproductive capacity and shows how the patrilineal family's demand for the continuation of the bloodline enters men's marital choices. When Chen's Father plans Nanzhi's reproduction through the arrangement of "six children" and the allocation of surnames, Chen Chuyuan never objects. Although he does not issue commands as directly as his father does, he tacitly accepts the arrangement.

He is not the fullest practitioner of hegemonic norms, but he enjoys the "patriarchal dividend" by submitting to the patrilineal family order. Although he may occupy a subordinate position before the older generation of men, he can still transfer the discipline imposed upon him to women occupying a lower position within the power hierarchy.

2.4 The Transformation of Xie Laishun's Masculinity

Xie Laishun is not an ideal father in the traditional sense. He drinks heavily and leads an undisciplined life. Under the influence of patriarchal marriage institutions, he accepts the idea that "a daughter is a child who will eventually leave," expressed in the local term *zouzi*. As a dialect expression, *zouzi* presupposes that daughters will eventually marry and leave their natal families, reflecting the patrilineal family's different conceptions of male inheritance and female belonging. Xie Laishun initially passes this idea on to Nanzhi, showing that he is not outside the influence of the region's patriarchal culture. However, after the family's inn is burned down, Nanzhi has to reduce the family's financial burden by doing laundry, washing dishes, and running a street stall. Xie Laishun also finds work in a factory and gradually assumes his responsibilities as a father.

Unlike Chen's Father, who arranges marriages for his son and Nanzhi in accordance with family interests, Xie Laishun begins to actively restrain his own paternal authority. The value of a father is no longer to choose a "beneficial" marriage for his daughter, but to give her the confidence to reject an unequal relationship. Nevertheless, his earlier absence from everyday responsibilities is not thereby erased. The significance of Xie Laishun lies precisely in this incompleteness: masculinity is not a one-time transition from tradition to modernity, but something continually negotiated and adjusted through material pressures, father-daughter relations, and concrete choices.

3. THE ETHICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY

Hegemonic masculinity is not a model practiced collectively by all men, nor will alternative masculinities automatically be accepted by all men. Elliott proposes the concept of caring masculinities in order to explore the possibility of transforming masculinity into practices of care and advancing gender equality (Elliott, 2016: 252). Rather than emphasizing whether men possess caring emotions or intentions, this theory focuses more closely on whether care is realized through concrete practices (Elliott, 2016: 255) [7]. From this perspective, a reconsideration of the film reveals that "enduring hardship," "keeping one's word," "supporting the family," and "responsibility" in Chaoshan regional culture do not have a single gendered meaning. Their ethical value depends on whether these qualities ultimately serve family control or caring practices that recognize the agency of others.

Zheng Musheng was strong-willed. After going to Southeast Asia, he had been engaged in manual labor to earn money. After making his first income by pedaling a tricycle, he bought nice fabrics for Ye Shurou. Although he couldn't see his wife and children for a long time, he always fulfilled his duties as a husband and father. He sent remittances to the family every month without fail, and was the economic pillar of the family. From this perspective, he demonstrated the role characteristics of "worker" and "provider" in the traditional male image.

Although Zheng Musheng possessed the physical strength and protector image in the traditional sense, the caring dimension of his gender practice mainly lies in not demanding reciprocal emotional or obligation returns and respecting

the autonomy of the other party. For example, when he saw the hotel on fire, he rushed into the fire without hesitation. When he heard the cry for help from Xie Nanzhi, he abandoned his savings and the letters sent from home, and rescued Xie's father from the fire. In my opinion, this is an important plot that shows Zheng Musheng's masculine qualities of type. After this, he did not regard Xie Nanzhi as a substitute for his distant wife, nor did he demand emotional returns for helping Xie Nanzhi, demonstrating his recognition of the other party's subjectivity.

Zheng Musheng is the medium connecting "branch" and "leaf". When he was in prison, his concern for Ye Shurou and the children needed to be entrusted to Xie Nanzhi to read to him every time there was a letter from home, helping him reply and send money. Thus, Xie Nanzhi came to know this "sister" who was far away and had never met in person. In this interaction process, Xie Nanzhi gradually established an emotional connection with Ye Shurou and, after Zheng Musheng's death, chose to continue maintaining this relationship actively, demonstrating her concern for Ye Shurou's situation and her own active responsibility. Zheng Musheng's death made the male subject withdraw from the real relationship, but the connection between these two women did not end here.

The film does not completely deny the traditional male qualities such as bravery, labor, keeping promises, and family responsibility, but changes the specific manifestations of these qualities. Therefore, Zheng Musheng's caring orientation coexists with his traditional roles as a "worker", "provider", and "protector". The film not only presents his side of responsibility, response to others' needs, but also shows the side of men accepting support in relationships through his reliance on Xie Nanzhi's help. Xie Laishun's respect for his daughter's choice of marriage can likewise be incorporated into the discussion of caring masculinities. Yet this respect coexists with shortcomings in his fulfillment of everyday responsibilities, demonstrating that the transformation of masculinity requires ongoing negotiation and is not a complete transition from tradition to modernity. The value of Xie Laishun as a character lies precisely in this incompleteness.

Neither Zheng Musheng nor Xie Laishun is a perfect male figure, and neither completely escapes existing gender norms. Nevertheless, at crucial moments they choose to restrain their power, respect women, and use masculine strength to engage in practices of care. By contrast, the limitations of Chen Chuyuan and his father lie not simply in their conservatism, but in the fact that they consistently understand responsibility as the maintenance of patriarchal domination rather than recognizing women as relational subjects with complete agency.

4. CONCLUSION

Through the four male characters Zheng Musheng, Chen's Father, Chen Chuyuan, and Xie Laishun, *Dear You* presents differences in masculinity and its relational character within Nanyang overseas-Chinese society. The masculinities represented in the film cannot be simply categorized as "dominant," "weak," "family-oriented," or "irresponsible." Rather, they are configurations of practice formed within structures of patrilineal clans, the continuation of bloodlines, intergenerational authority, transnational migration, and working-class labor. Regional culture is therefore not merely a folkloric backdrop to the film; it is a crucial dimension for explaining how different men acquire power, assume obligations, and negotiate gender relations.

Within the regional experience of Chaoshan, the film reexamines the ethics of male responsibility and provides a text of contemporary relevance for understanding the formation, negotiation, and transformation of multiple masculinities in the Chinese cultural context.

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