



Performing and Failing Masculinity: Gender Performance in Twentieth-Century Chinese Women's Literature

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Abstract. This study examines the construction, discipline, and collapse of masculinity across distinct historical phases of twentieth-century China through the core texts of Eileen Chang's *Jasmine Tea*, Yang Mo's *The Song of Youth*, and Yan Geling's *Youth*. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performance and R. W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, it analyzes the mechanisms through which the male subject is both constituted and devalued. The research demonstrates that masculinity is not a stable essence but a process of constant fabrication through bodily actions, emotional norms, and political demands, while simultaneously failing in practice. The three female authors, using men as their vantage point, reveal how gender norms impose dual oppression on both men and women, exposing the temporal nature and impossibility of the state and society's imagined "qualified masculinity." This study reinterprets the historical formation and crisis of modern Chinese masculinity from the perspective of gender politics.

Keywords: gender performativity; hegemonic masculinity; bodily discipline; Chinese women's literature; twentieth century

1 Introduction

Within the intersecting fields of modern and contemporary Chinese literature and gender studies, the construction, discipline, and failure of gendered identities remain central concerns. Particularly against the backdrop of China's modern political upheavals, "how to become a qualified man" emerged as a performative construct shaped by ideological and propaganda apparatuses. Judith Butler's theory of gender performance posits that gender identities are produced through the repeated enactment of bodily postures, attire, and actions. R. W. Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity" elucidates the process by which men are constructed according to the hegemonic model, which Connell defines as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy"[1]. Throughout distinct historical phases—from "late Qing survival strategies" to "Seventeen-Year Literature," "Cultural Revolution aesthetics," and "post-socialist market

logic”—China’s hegemonic masculinity has been repeatedly deconstructed and re-shaped. Literary works document these shifting standards of male gender performance.

This thesis examines three works by Eileen Chang, Yang Mo, and Yan Geling as case studies, exploring the performative logic, failure mechanisms, and latent subversiveness of masculinity within China’s modernity context. The works of these three authors span distinct political eras and offer unique vantage points. Positioned within ideological discipline yet observing the fissures in male performance through female experience, their writings offer unique value in gender politics. Drawing on theories of gender performance and hegemonic masculinity, this study innovatively focuses on the performative pressures and failure mechanisms endured by men as “bearers of gender norms,” demonstrating how these failures become pivotal for female authors to reveal the patriarchal discipline defining their times.

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity stands as a core theoretical framework in contemporary feminist and gender studies. Even critics acknowledge that her work “has influenced and will continue to influence numerous disciplines” [2]. Butler fundamentally challenges the naturalness of “biological sex”: “What is ‘biological sex’? Is it natural... or is it, like gender, a cultural construct?” [3]. Drawing on Foucault’s case studies of intersex individuals, she underscores the social construction underlying biological sex, exploring how social norms “produce intelligible gendered selves” [3] and arguing that biological sex is not a natural attribute—“perhaps it has always been gender” [3]. She then points to the underlying production mechanism of gender: the heterosexual matrix constructed by discourses of power. This institutionalized heterosexual system defines biological sex as male/female bodily characteristics, shaping individuals into men/women within society who possess heterosexual desires aligned with their gender. Only such individuals are deemed “legible” in terms of gender identity [3]. Thus, each person becomes a subject of this gender only through “referencing” the norms of sex/sexuality associated with male/female gender within the heterosexual matrix. Butler further demonstrates through the scenario of ultrasound-based fetal sex determination that the referencing of gender manifests in bodily practices [4], where so-called gender is “the style of the flesh” [3]. Thus, gender is not freely chosen; it is “the illusion of a consistent gendered self constructed through everyday bodily postures, gestures, and other performances” [5]. It is an external power demanding the subject repeatedly “does” or ‘performs’ certain behaviors. Performativity is “a practice of repetition and citation through which discourse acts upon the body” [4].

Butler further notes that “gender is perpetually manufactured as a reproduction of hegemonic norms” [4]. The subject’s ongoing gender performance relies on two mechanisms of hegemonic gaze and interrogation. Foucault introduced the concept of the “internalized gaze,” arguing that prisoners voluntarily regulate their behavior due to the fear of surveillance by ubiquitous monitoring mechanisms, thereby ensuring the “automatic operation of power,” where “each becomes his own jailer” [6]. Conversely, Butler observes that “performance... summons the subject from fragmented social parts and embeds it in society through powerful interrogations” [7]. Even before birth, individuals are prematurely incorporated into the gender order through the language “this is a boy/girl,” becoming gendered subjects. From names and clothing to room colors,

everything becomes props for gender performance [7][8]. They must repeatedly invoke and perform the “correct” gender conforming to social norms under interrogation, thereby constructing gender identity. Yet Butler also emphasizes that performance possesses subversive potential, for gender norms require constant reenactment to hold—a process that “is a coercive, threatening practice... to the extent that its execution is never complete, its performers can never fully achieve what they are expected to accomplish.”[4]. However, Butler also warns that subversion itself may be co-opted by the gender system, thereby reinforcing norms [4]. Separating subversive references and performative acts from the power structures they challenge remains difficult, as subversion itself is inevitably and inescapably entangled in discourse and law [2].

Yet within theories of gender performance, the lens does not exclusively focus on male collectives. The social norms governing “how men should become men” can be supplemented by the theory of “hegemonic masculinity.” This concept points to a “pattern of practices... that maintains male dominance over women” and “embodies the most valued mode of male existence,” demanding that all men orient themselves around it [9]. This hegemonic masculinity manifests sometimes as institutionalized domination over women, and other times as the domination and marginalization of certain male groups by others [10]. To maintain its status, it frequently regulates men and devalues women [9]. This regulation and devaluation often operate through cultural, institutional, and symbolic power. The idealized male archetype it constructs is frequently divorced from lived experience, yet is persistently promoted and celebrated in state, media, or religious narratives, thereby constituting a discipline of male bodies and behaviors [9]. Men must continually perform bodily actions conforming to hegemonic norms—such as strength, emotional control, and heterosexual privilege—to gain social recognition.

Within contemporary Chinese literary studies, the relationship between gender and the body has long been central to academic inquiry. Three representative works—those of Eileen Chang, Yang Mo, and Yan Geling—situated respectively within wartime narratives, the seventeen-year socialist period, and the memories of the Cultural Revolution and Reform and Opening Up, collectively form a crucial textual field for understanding modern Chinese gender politics. Their depictions of male bodily actions, gender roles, and performative failures collectively constitute this field.

Scholarship on Eileen Chang has yielded substantial achievements in both Chinese and English literary circles, with gender and bodily issues being particularly prominent. Scholars like Xu and Ma, along with Gu, present women’s contradictory predicaments within urban modernity from perspectives of subject construction and consciousness awakening[11][12]. Recent Chinese scholarship has further expanded this line of inquiry through close textual analyses of *Jasmine Tea*. Liu Yuxin and Lu Xiaoyan, for instance, examine the novel through a “character constellation” approach, demonstrating how Nie Chuanqing and other marginal figures are shaped by oppressive family structures and emotional deprivation, thereby foregrounding masculinity as a fractured and pathological formation rather than a stable norm[13]. Other studies shift attention from gender ideology to spatial and psychological mechanisms: Li Zun highlights the role of enclosed domestic space in producing emotional confinement and self-alienation[14], while Wang Shi interprets Nie Chuanqing’s obsession with an

imagined “spiritual father” as a symptom of paternal absence and failed masculine identification[15]. Overall, existing research has revealed the gender complexity in Eileen Chang’s works through multiple approaches—feminism, psychoanalysis, family structure, body politics, and cross-media studies—yet significant gaps remain: First, while addressing bodies and postures, few studies treat them as “gender performances” repeatedly enacted under normative forces. Second, while male characters receive attention, the underlying causes of misalignments and fissures in gender practices remain under-examined. This paper, through a close reading of *Jasmine Tea*, focuses on Nie Chuanqing’s failed masculine performance within the literary/martial paradigm, demonstrating how men too become subjects oppressed by gender norms, thereby filling these gaps.

Research on Yang Mo and her masterpiece *The Song of Youth* has long centered on revolutionary narratives, female characterization, and the ideological construction of Seventeen-Year Literature. Li Rong highlights how the “revolutionary body” as an ideal template obscures gendered experiences, noting the highly mechanized portrayal of bodies in Yang Mo’s texts[16]. Shi Xiaofeng identifies a repressed erotic structure within *The Song of Youth*: revolutionary discourse dissolves private emotions through the “clean body,” thereby maintaining purity[17]. Complementing these readings, Xu Zidong reinterprets the novel as a rare instance where “romantic choice” and “political orientation” fully overlap, arguing that Lin Daojing’s relationships with multiple male figures function as condensed metaphors for competing life paths and ideological futures[18]. Building on this insight, Wang Junhu and Wang Jing propose a multi-layered textual model, suggesting that beneath the overt revolutionary narrative lie suppressed structures of desire and a pervasive sense of existential wandering, which subtly destabilize the novel’s ideological coherence[19]. From a historical-material perspective, Zhang Jun and Dong Qing demonstrate that the heroic image of Lin Daojing is not a direct reflection of revolutionary reality but a romanticized reconstruction shaped by Yang Mo’s personal aspirations and the conventions of socialist realism[20]. Meanwhile, Long Yonggan analyzes the “poetics of revolutionary intellectual formation,” showing how the novel strategically transforms autobiographical experience into a legitimized revolutionary subject through narrative selection, affective regulation, and the integration of romance into political awakening[21]. However, existing research lacks analysis of how interactions between Lin Daojing and male revolutionaries conversely expose the fragility and performative nature of masculinity. Furthermore, prior studies have not sufficiently explored how residual emotions latent within the text undermine the stability of revolutionary narratives. This paper employs an intersectional framework of gender performance and body politics to reveal the deep tensions within *The Song of Youth* between disciplined private emotions, suppressed gender desires, and the male hero paradigm.

In recent years, Yan Geling’s works have garnered widespread attention for their complex portrayal of historical trauma and gender power dynamics. In gender studies, Wu Huilin, drawing from feminist and memory studies, argues that Yan Geling’s works rewrite history from a female marginal perspective, highlighting repressed memory and autonomous subjectivity[22]. Xia Meng and Katherina Li situate Yan Geling within the context of China’s history of sexual discipline and Cultural Revolu-

tion trauma, revealing how female bodies are shaped by both political ideology and disciplinary mechanisms.[23][24] While her writing is widely recognized as feminist, some argue that it reproduces patriarchal patterns, constituting pseudo-feminism [25][26]. Recent scholarship has further complicated this debate by shifting attention to male figures within revolutionary collectives. Lu Xuedong, through a close reading of *Youth*, analyzes Liu Feng's two "touching incidents" as a narrative experiment in human nature, arguing that the novel exposes how collectivist morality selectively punishes and redeems male desire, thereby revealing the inherent violence embedded in moralized masculinity[27]. While these studies offer rich interpretations through feminism, bodily narratives, memory politics, and male imagery, several limitations exist. First, most fail to examine Yan's characters within a "gender performance" framework, neglecting how their daily actions and postures constitute regulated, gendered practices. Second, existing studies on male imagery lack systematic analysis of the mechanisms producing masculinity. By examining Liu Feng in *Youth*, this paper reveals how the "de-eroticized model male" of the Cultural Revolution era relied on sustained gender performance to maintain legitimacy, yet ultimately collapsed due to the untamable nature of desire, thereby filling gaps in existing research.

In summary, despite their differing historical contexts, these three works exhibit high comparability in terms of bodily discipline and the failure of gender performance. Addressing this research gap, this paper employs a combined "gender performance-hegemonic masculinity" framework to analyze the construction, execution, and collapse of masculinity across the three works. This paper is structured as follows:

Part 2.1 begins with *Jasmine Tea*, examining how Nie Chuanqing, as a "failed man," embodies the comprehensive collapse of the literary. Part 2.2 centers on *The Song of Youth*, discussing how male revolutionaries are shaped into archetypes through political discipline, and analyzing Yang Mo's latent resistance to this masculine discipline. Part 2.3 focuses on *You Touched Me*, demonstrating how the "struggle body" of the Cultural Revolution and the "market body" of post-reform discipline render Liu Feng unfit for any era's masculine paradigm, while revealing Yan Geling's potential to resist the state's masculine performance through a more traditional patriarchal model. The conclusion synthesizes these cases to argue that modern Chinese masculinity is a perpetually unstable and failing performance. Through sequential examination of these three cases, this paper aims to reveal that masculinity across different historical periods is not a natural essence, but rather a historical product that is regulated, disciplined, continuously performed, and perpetually failing.

2 Textual Analysis

2.1 Jasmine Tea: The Collapse of Masculinity

Jasmine Tea was published in the July 10, 1943, issue of *Magazine*, Volume 11, No. 4, coinciding with the serialization of the third part of *Agarwood: The First Incense Burner in Violet*. Though this story has long occupied a relatively marginal position in Zhang Ailing studies, it holds unique significance—it is her only novel narrated from a

boy's perspective[28]. A female writer choosing to have a "male student" recount his humiliation, father-hatred, and disorder carries strong gender political implications.

To grasp this, one must first revisit the prevailing societal vision of the "qualified man"—that is, hegemonic masculinity. Louie and Edwards' "wen/wu" paradigm frames Chinese masculinity through two poles: "wen" (literary) denoting cultural refinement, and "wu" (martial) signifying physical and military prowess. The ideal man embodies both, using "wen" to demonstrate moral and aesthetic cultivation, and embodying decisiveness and action through martial prowess [29]. Although later generations often emphasized "prioritizing culture over martial prowess," within the context of national crisis since the late Qing dynasty, robust physical strength and military power became inextricably linked to "saving the nation and securing its survival." Republican-era intellectuals and overseas students universally regarded "physical fortitude" as integral to patriotism and modern civic identity [30][31][32]. Within this framework, "excellence in both literary and martial pursuits" functioned as the hegemonic masculine script of the era—both an aspirational identity and a normative standard for male social gender.

Under this script, Nie Chuanqing was marked as a "substandard man" almost from his first appearance. On the 'literary' dimension, he was neither a brilliant scholar nor capable of fulfilling the role of "family hope." His academic performance was poor, particularly in literary history classes—the very subject that most embodied scholarly capital—where his results were "pitifully low." He fails to earn the admiration of his male peers, instead fantasizing about imitating successful men's signatures. He practices a "handsome, manly" style of signing on discarded checks, only to be abruptly interrupted by his father's slap and the tearing of the paper. On the 'martial' front, his physique is described as having "narrow shoulders" and "a slender neck," an oval face with "a hint of feminine beauty" clashing with a nose "slightly too prominent;" he walks "head tucked in," hands "tucked into sleeves," stands "cowering" in class, and "weeps bitterly" over the lectern in humiliation. These details fix him in a posture of timidity and withdrawal, lacking both physical stature and courage, as well as aggression and dominance, constituting a complete failure in the realm of "martial prowess."

Nie Chuanqing's body is male, yet it fails to embody masculinity, thus becoming, in Butler's words, "those bodies that cannot be assigned to one of the two genders do not belong to the category of the human... constituting the realm of the non-human, the denigrated"[3]. Jasmine Tea faithfully portrays the denigration Nie Chuanqing's body thus endured: beaten by his father until "his ears were slightly deafened," reviled as "pig," "dog," and "three parts human, seven parts ghost," and at school berated by Yan Ziyè with phrases like "a man's tears are the height of shame" "If all Chinese youth were like you, China would have perished long ago." Yan Danju called him "a girl who loves to make a fuss," demanding he "show some manliness—it's not proper to cry so easily, to be so prone to sorrow and illness." Though his biological sex is male, he endures constant condemnation for "not being manly enough." This precisely demonstrates Butler's insight: Gender is not an inherent essence but an effect produced through constant repetition within power contexts; these repeated actions (mannerisms, postures, speech) later masquerade as "natural," obscuring their historical and political construction [3].

In his interactions with Yan Danju, this sense of failure and degradation became even more apparent. According to patriarchal logic, “conquering women” is often seen as part of gaining male identity validation. As Yan Danju is Yan Ziyè’s daughter, conquering her implies drawing closer to Yan Ziyè—his ideal male paradigm—on this foundation. Thus Nie Chuanqing both scorns her “promiscuity” and envies her resources, vaguely aware that if he possessed similar conditions, “he could seize the opportunity to become a perfect man”—that is, embody the male ideal. His pursuit of Dan Zhu concealed a yearning for successful gender performance, only to be once again dismissed by her as “not like a man.” Ultimately, he violently shouts, “I want you dead!” and attacks her. This use of violence replicates his father’s failed masculine performance, reaffirming his own failure. It is also a hysterical, extreme reaction born from the complete annihilation of any possibility for his final performance to succeed. Butler notes in *Gender Trouble* that the power of norms often forces subjects to internalize pain and shame as “self-denial,” preventing simple withdrawal from existing gender orders. Even when harmful, norms remain the condition for a subject’s recognition [33]. Nie Chuanqing exemplifies this predicament: he despises the oppressive demand for “versatility in both literary and martial arts,” yet cannot envision a way of life detached from the male script. Trapped in a cycle of failed performances, he marches toward self-destruction—“he cannot escape.”

Through her portrayal of Nie Chuanqing’s failure, Eileen Chang critiques patriarchy. On one hand, she reveals that a male model embodying both literary and martial virtues—worthy of emulation—simply does not exist. Nie Jiechen, as the father, fails miserably on both fronts: a “sweatshirt covered by a grease-stained light blue soft satin vest” —vulgar, indolent, addicted to opium beds, and maintaining authority through violence. He embodies the image of a Qing dynasty relic, utterly devoid of the dignity and decorum expected of a father. Nie Chuanqing “deeply despised and loathed the Nie Jiechen within himself,” yet increasingly mimicked his mannerisms. This “resemblance” brought only shame and disgust, further precipitating the failure of his performance. On the other hand, the true masculine paradigm in Nie Chuanqing’s heart—Yan Ziyè, knowledgeable, respected, and loving toward his children—refused to become his model for performance. Yan Ziyè was not only “someone else’s father”; he even expelled Nie Chuanqing from the male community in the harshest manner, directly judging him as “unworthy of being a man” rather than merely “not good enough.” Though the text doesn’t explicitly state it, one can imagine Yan Ziyè must have internalized “what it means to be a man” as part of himself, constantly engaging in self-censorship—revealing the surveillance and punishment mechanisms of hegemonic masculinity. Finally, Zhang Ailing chillingly exposes Nie’s motive for declaring his love to Dan Zhu: “If she loved him, he would gain the power to dominate her, to inflict all manner of subtle mental abuse.” This piercingly exposes how hegemonic masculinity oppresses women to validate its own status. In other words, *Jasmine Tea* does not merely narrate the psychological tragedy of a “failed youth”; it systematically deconstructs masculinity, revealing that even “men” are oppressed by gender norms and can become their victims.

This deconstruction technique is closely intertwined with Eileen Chang’s self-narrative strategy. While Joseph Tsang and Zhang Junli interpret Nie Chuanqing as

a reflection of Eileen Chang's brother, numerous scholars note that *Jasmine Tea* is "her most autobiographical work." Nie Chuanqing's "slight deafness, inflicted by his father," forms a clear intertextuality with Chang's recollection of paternal violence in her essay *Whisper*; The father's opium addiction, the configuration of stepmother and maid, and the experience of studying in Hong Kong also show high overlap [28]. Yet the choice of a "boy" rather than a 'girl' to bear this "father-hating" narrative constitutes a strategic gender performance. Directly identifying patriarchal violence through a daughter's perspective risks violating traditional "filial piety" and female submissiveness norms, leading readers to interpret the text as a "rebellious daughter's accusation" while overlooking its subversive potential. By projecting paternal resentment and collapse onto a failed male figure while formally maintaining the appearance of a "psychological tragedy," Eileen Chang avoids direct confrontation with patriarchy as an "angry daughter." This allows her to forge an aesthetic compromise of contrasting irregularities and ambiguity between gender expectations and aesthetic pursuits

Viewed through the intersecting lenses of the Wen-Wu paradigm and gender performance theory, *Jasmine Tea* ceases to be merely a marginal work and instead emerges as a pivotal node in Eileen Chang's gender politics: by deconstructing a young man's comprehensive failure across both scholarly and martial dimensions, it exposes the violent structure of hegemonic masculinity upon men themselves; simultaneously employing gender reversal to translate female anger into male collapse, thereby lending a hint of compliance to this subversion of gender order.

2.2 The Song of Youth: Male Performance and Female Desire

Hegemonic masculinity theory posits that gender practices are jointly constituted by "individual life histories—cultural discourses—institutional structures" [1]. During the "Seventeen-Year Period" (1949–1966) after the founding of the People's Republic, under the influence of class struggle ideology, the traditional Confucian masculine 'literary' temperament fell out of favor. Intellectuals and the (petty) bourgeoisie, deemed to have "blood ties" to the bourgeoisie, were relegated to the margins of proletarian revolution and socialist construction. Replacing them was the "iron triangle" of socialist male exemplars: worker Wang Jinxi, farmer Chen Yonggui, and soldier Lei Feng [29]. These "worker-peasant-soldier" models did not inherit the aspirations or passions of traditional "literary/martial" male ideals. Instead, they were molded into "sexless," 'emotionless' "cogs in a vast machine" [29]. Heroic emotions were strictly politicized, demanding "selflessness" and "love for socialism, the Party, and the leader". Romance, treated as narrative embellishment, was obscured under labels like "revolutionary comrades" or "partners," rendering their emotional structures entirely subservient to political ethics[34]. In the realm of "martial prowess," propaganda posters prominently feature the robust physiques and well-developed muscles of peasants and workers, celebrating manual labor as superior to intellectual work [34]. The hegemonic masculinity of the Seventeen Years thus manifests as a triad of "robust physique—absence of private emotion—loyal sacrifice for the nation," forming a highly unified national masculine paradigm.

In *The Song of Youth*, Lu Jiachuan and Yu Yongze are almost molded from the same template of masculinity: one a thoroughly affirmed Marxist, the other a thoroughly negated petty-bourgeois intellectual, both highly stylized in appearance, posture, and speech. Li Rong notes that Seventeen Years literature commonly employs a “face-body-class” isomorphy to construct a “visualized political body” [16]. When Yu Yongze first appears, he is dark and lean, yet as the plot unfolds, his face grows pale in the eyes of the female protagonist Lin Daojing. This is because a “fair complexion,” “small eyes,” and “wearing the robes of an old scholar” constitute the typical bodily coding of the “petty-bourgeois intellectual” in the visual culture of the Seventeen Years: weak, introverted, and aesthetically rendered as sickly. In contrast, Lu Jiachuan’s “tall, dark” appearance symbolically corresponds to the robust reliability of worker-peasant cadres, perfectly aligning with the fixed template of the “revolutionary male” in the literature of the seventeen years [35]. Yet precisely because the body is depicted so schematically, it begins to reveal an unnatural rigidity, exposing cracks in the performance.

This performative failure manifests not only in Lu’s “excessive perfection” but also in Yu Yongze’s “excessive ugliness.” After Lu’s arrest, he was “hung from a beam,” “blood trickled from the corners of his mouth,” and “he fainted only to be revived by water.” Yet even in this near-death state, he persisted in responding to interrogation with revolutionary rhetoric, insisting that “blood can awaken hearts” and “sacrifice brings victory.” This was clearly not a natural physical reaction, but a masculine performance tailored to political demands. Emotion, fear, and pain were stripped away, rendering him more like a revolutionary statue than a man with a tangible body. Yu Yongze, in official discourse, serves as the negative embodiment of “petty bourgeois self-interest.” His failure, according to the critical vocabulary of the time, stemmed from “indifference to the revolution and obsession with personal advancement.” During the protest scene, he even “stood high on the steps,” arm-in-arm with his alluring new wife, coldly observing Lin Daojing being beaten. Yet this extreme leap—from a chivalrous May Fourth youth who championed Nora to a near-counterrevolutionary villain—feels psychologically jarring, exposing the text’s crude character adjustments made to serve political demands. Within the gender narrative, Yu Yongze could have embodied an alternative masculinity: his dedication to scholarship and devotion to love pointed toward a more private, less heroic male archetype. Yet the work inexorably seals this path, categorizing his intellectual and romantic pursuits as “petty bourgeois selfish desires,” ultimately casting him as a figure to be discarded and despised. This excessive vilification, however, makes contemporary readers sense an “unnecessary hatred” upon rereading, revealing the scissors behind the narrative—ideology constantly trimming the contours of male bodies and emotions. It can be said that Lu and Yu’s “failures” expose the predicament of gender performance on different dimensions: one loses humanity through excessive repression, the other loses complexity by being forced into a “villainous” narrative. In the sense of “repeated bodily actions and discourses” as Butler describes, such bodily writing ceases to represent concrete ‘people’ and instead becomes two models that socialist discourse demands intellectuals “perform”: either the stubborn petty bourgeoisie like Yu Yongze, who must be subjected to struggle and criticism; or the self-sacrificing revolutionary like Lu Jiachuan,

whose private emotions and physical pain are entirely drained away, leaving only the pure will “for the revolution.”

Yang Mo demonstrated remarkable compliance with this political discourse. Scholars note that during the 1950s “ideological transformation” campaigns, Yang repeatedly affirmed the Party’s value system through self-criticism. Her diaries are filled with expressions like “exposing my thoughts” and “analyzing myself” to demonstrate her political “rebirth” as an intellectual [36]. Between the initial draft and final version of *The Song of Youth*, Yang Mo repeatedly revised the manuscript under political criticism and external feedback, deleting petty-bourgeois life details, toning down private romantic sentiments, and adding chapters on political struggle, rural training, and class stance. Critiques of *The Song of Youth* in the late 1950s by *Literary Gazette* and *China Youth* further prompted her to adjust character portrayals. Yu Yongze’s depiction grew increasingly negative, while workers and Party members became more positively stereotyped, aligning the work’s structure with the state’s propaganda logic of “intellectual transformation” From the perspectives of reception history and textual evolution, Yang Mo undoubtedly internalized the political gaze, revealing the formidable disciplinary power of the state’s masculine paradigm.

Yet even beneath this highly compliant gender performance, *The Song of Youth* retained an “underlying eroticism” the author could not entirely eradicate. These residues primarily manifest in Lin Daojing’s emotional experiences toward Lu Jiachuan, often packaged within narrative niches like dreams and poetry that evade scrutiny. For instance, Lin Daojing dreams of drifting alone in a small boat across an empty sea: “Only then did she see: what a handsome and robust man he was! He smiled at her, his dark eyes brimming with a captivating, seductive power. She loosened her grip... Wasn't this Lu Jiachuan? Startled, the oar slipped from her hands into the water. Lu Jiachuan immediately plunged into the sea to retrieve it. But the dark water swallowed him, and the sky turned pitch black in an instant. Crying and screaming, she threw herself into the sea...” This is a classic erotic dream. [35]. Freud noted in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that all elongated objects in dreams—such as sticks, spears, etc.—symbolize the male genitalia, while ships often represent the female [37]. In Lin Daojing’s dream, the “oar” and “ship” thus appear to carry latent erotic connotations. Her plunging into the waves and following them in the dream also seems to symbolize a secret yearning for the dangerous and unknown, yet intensely stimulating and erotic [17]. The author likely did not intend this implication, but this dream sequence appears to reveal a momentary exposure of the “new person’s” body not yet fully tamed: in the dream world, rational discourse is minimized, replaced by an ineffable, illicit pleasure that should never have appeared in the “clean texts” of the seventeen-year period. This leakage may connect to Yang Mo’s real emotional experience. In her memoirs, she repeatedly acknowledged Lu as her “favorite” character, and in reality, one of Lu’s prototypes was a revolutionary comrade she deeply cherished [20]. This likely fostered subconscious feelings toward him, which unconsciously seeped into her writing.

From this perspective, the profound resonance *Youth Song* achieved in its era likely stemmed not only from its grand narrative of “intellectuals embracing revolution,” but also from its clandestine preservation—within a highly repressive political context—of a woman’s gaze and longing for a man. This reconnected the castrated revolutionary

masculinity to the currents of humanity and desire. Literary works of the 1950s and 1960s often comprised explicit and implicit texts. The explicit text structure was typically dictated by the era's collective consciousness under state will, while the implicit text structure sometimes manifested through fragmented, incomplete means—such as flirtation between men and women—yet it was precisely this that constituted the work's appeal [19]. Thus, *The Song of Youth* exhibits a pronounced “duality” at the authorial level: its surface narrative reflects absolute obedience to the re-education of intellectuals, while its subtext preserves the authenticity of female emotion through fragments of desire and dream structures, becoming a latent resistance to the performance of model masculinity.

2.3 You Touched Me: Discipline and Failure of Hegemonic Masculinity

Entering the Cultural Revolution era, China's hegemonic masculinity underwent another transformation. The Cultural Revolution is often defined as a “period of gender dissolution,” where youth were encouraged to abandon sexuality, romance, and private emotions—deemed crimes against communist ideals [24]. The regulation of sexuality reached a historical peak: premarital sex was deemed decadent, gendered clothing distinctions were eliminated, and romantic love was labeled bourgeois sentimentality [38]. Under the primacy of class struggle, discussions of sex and love themselves became politically stigmatized [39]. The “Four Olds” campaign dismantled the Confucian “literati” male paradigm, replacing it with a “worker-peasant-soldier” model centered on struggle, violence, and class passion [40]. The ideal male thus shifted from a “laboring body” to a “struggling body,” entirely rejecting eroticism while embodying a more aggressive and politically radical masculinity.

The character Liu Feng in *You Touched Me* epitomizes this extreme model of masculine virtue during the Cultural Revolution. Born into poverty, physically robust, resilient, kind, and selfless, he was widely recognized as the “living Lei Feng” within the cultural troupe. His first description in the novel—“round face, thick eyebrows, single eyelids, round nose...”—bears striking resemblance to Lei Feng's appearance [41]. His physique was also distinctly masculine: “athletic and sturdy... with pronounced musculature.” Xiao Suizi first noticed him because “he... wore a military-issued black cloth shoe on his right foot... and a dirty white soft-soled practice shoe on his left.” The military uniform itself was highly ideological; the emphasis on “issued” signaled his complete conformity to that ideology. The practice shoe on his right foot was for practicing turns at any moment, also hinting at his model worker status, devoted to his core duty as a dancer. His physique perfectly aligned with the heroic norms forged by the state during the “Seventeen Years” to the Cultural Revolution era. This norm, at the time, “erased individuality through the uniformity of clothing and bodily space, thereby reshaping the subject into a docile, politically compliant body” [34]. Moreover, as the “Army-wide Model for Learning from Lei Feng,” Liu Feng continually performs masculine norms through acts of kindness and assistance. He even suppresses his long-held affection for Lin Dingding, expressing it only through the subtle gesture of baking cookies. “His pursuit was arduous, precisely because of this suppression. Suppression simultaneously purifies, ultimately refining into the

soul," all accomplished through gender performance within what Butler terms "enacting one's own body" [5].

Yet even this exemplar of flawless masculine performance reveals cracks in his gender act. Liu Feng's infatuation with Lin Dingding began with desire, sparked by his sight of her discarded sanitary pad. "Even if Liu Feng didn't see Lin Dingding's feminine core, he saw what was closest to it. He saw something even more intimate than the core itself—that crimson, life-giving flow capable of nurturing a new life, emerging from that tiny palace of flesh and blood through a soft, dark channel..." Thus, "his desire was purely biological, not noble." Consequently, his gaze toward Lin Dingding was "laced with carnality, now seen as hormone-driven." Gender norms demanded he become a "desire-devoid" man, yet desire, as a fundamental bodily force, could not be entirely extinguished. It ultimately overflowed in the prop warehouse during that single touch where "the soul drove the limbs." It can be said that Liu Feng's touch was not merely a transgression of private emotion, but a tearing apart of the entire politicized model of masculinity. It exposed the fundamental demand of hegemonic masculinity itself: self-castration. In truth, it was no longer truly "manly." "Being a model soldier is certainly glorious and sacred, but it's a grueling task, a kind of vow... all constant reminders and confirmations: 'You're so virtuous, you mustn't be as mundane as us, tainted by the same passions and desires.'" As symbols of "selflessness" and "desirelessness," heroes are fundamentally stripped of the lust and wildness inherent to male subjects. They are purified, hollowed-out beings. "What makes a person human is precisely that humanity which inspires both hatred and love, laughter and pity. And it is precisely humanity's unpredictability, unreliability, and infinite transformations—not lacking in sin, carnal desires, and sensual pleasures—that constitute its charm." Thus, heroes cannot serve as points of reference for others' desire structures. When the touching incident occurred, Lin Dingding's reaction wasn't fear of Liu Feng's body—she "didn't even remember where his hand had reached." Yan Geling directly states: "Her body wasn't repelled by Liu Feng... What she couldn't bypass was the concept of the model soldier." This precisely exposes the irreconcilable contradiction between the state-manufactured male ideal and authentic human nature.

Yan Geling intensifies this contradiction through Liu Feng's punishment after the touching incident. During the public denunciation, Liu Feng—who "just recently had military medals pinned on him by the Political Department chief at the All-Army Model Soldiers Conference in Beijing"—now "shrinks two centimeters in height... sweat or tears dripping onto the floor," and "reduced himself to a pitiful state." This stark contrast in status exposed how the state apparatus redefines what constitutes a "qualified body" through public humiliation and bodily discipline. Though Liu Feng had done favors for most people, at the struggle session, "everyone's criticism was directed at him." Even his well-intentioned gesture of helping He Xiaoman was maliciously interpreted as "low and tasteless—he'd even touch someone so rotten." Foucault noted that the gaze represents the internalization of hegemonic ideology by individuals. It does not originate from a central figure but is "collective and anonymous" [42], comprising "indications from everyone, from everywhere, yet from no one and nowhere" [43]. In other words, the crowd's condemnation of Liu Feng stems not from personal moral judgment but from an unconscious obedience to institutional

norms—collectively enacting the state's logic of disciplining bodies and behavior. Butler observes that gender performers failing to conform to norms face exclusion, punishment, and "social death" [33]. Liu Feng, originally upheld as a model of 'selflessness' and "desirelessness," sustained the illusion of masculine social norms. Yet when he revealed human desires, his body was instantly transformed into a "contaminant," becoming an Other society must expel. The ritual of "social death" depicted by Yan Geling reveals how the political system maintains the purity of the masculine paradigm through dual mechanisms of commendation and exclusion.

Yet within this collective obedience lies latent resistance. Liu Feng became the "target of collective criticism" precisely because his failure forced repressed desires, jealousy, and anxieties within the collective consciousness to surface. "Deep down, everyone in the Red Building... to see Liu Feng slip up, reveal the slightest trace." Their denunciation of Liu Feng was not merely obedience to the system's moral dogma; it was an attempt to subvert the system's standards through a collective ritual of punishment. Liu Feng's 'decadence' satisfied people's envy and distrust of the "saint," allowing them to release their suppressed humanity and desires under the veneer of political correctness. As Butler observes, "the pleasure and vertigo of performance derive in part from the recognition of the fundamental contingency of the relationship between gender and sex" [3]. In other words, recognizing gender as a construction brings observers pleasure and dizziness. Thus, after the touching incident, everyone "breathed a sigh of relief... We could all safely return to the darkness to rest." Yan Geling even poses a deeper interrogation: "If Liu Feng is merely this, what of Lei Feng?" The public's distrust of the "perfect model" reveals their growing skepticism toward the paradigm of the "pure, desireless" male. Liu Feng's touching becomes a symbol of the "shattering of political myth." His downfall is not personal moral decay, but the collective unconscious acknowledgment of the unsustainability of the ideal male paradigm.

Having been discredited by the state's masculinity standards, Liu Feng still fails to find his place even after the era shifts. Post-reform China witnessed another pivot in hegemonic masculinity. Beginning in the 1980s, the rise of the market economy undermined the legitimacy of the worker-peasant-soldier male archetype. The traditional "literati" image was inverted into that of the "modern gentleman" who could prove himself through economic prosperity, with "professional success" becoming central to masculinity [29]. By the 1990s, white-collar men were constructed as the national masculine ideal—civilized, well-educated, and possessing transnational competitiveness [29]. Their identity construction relied on "othering": low-skilled migrant workers, fallen working-class heroes, tasteless nouveau riche, corrupt officials, and even higher-tier "gold-collar" professionals collectively formed the negative reference points for their class and gender order [29]. Within this paradigm, Liu Feng epitomizes the failed male archetype: peddling pirated books, abandoned by his wife, and struggling at the bottom of society. His "first impression is grayish: his skin, his mood, all faded and dull, lacking freshness—that bleakness, that worn-out decay." He is genuinely kind, yet every day of his life feels like punishment. Yan Geling lavishes praise on Liu Feng: "a master craftsman, a master of acrobatic feats, a man of noble character and virtue like a saint, a man of unparalleled devotion." This prompts readers to question

the very model of masculinity—from the Cultural Revolution to the market economy, not a single era could embrace Liu Feng’s exceptional “ordinariness.” This undeniably reveals that masculine traits are not natural essences but a series of historically constructed performances. Liu Feng’s life trajectory stands as the starkest testament to the fragility of this performance mechanism—no matter how times change, there will always be those discarded and despised for “failing to conform to masculinity.”

Yet as Li Nanxin critiques, Yan Geling constructs Liu Feng’s innocence by defending his actions with “Lin Dingding’s body showed no aversion” and “Years later, she wouldn’t resist being touched” as justification[26]. Yet Liu Feng did indeed touch Lin Dingding without consent, an act constituting harassment. Using her lack of resistance or protest as grounds for innocence effectively re-enters the patriarchal narrative—where arousing female desire serves as proof of a man’s “civilized” prowess. Yan Geling appears to subvert the era, yet her method defends the older, more entrenched patriarchal narrative structure. Simultaneously, Liu Feng’s ‘kindness’ is demonstrated through his “obsessive love for Lin Dingding,” “rescuing the fallen woman Xiao Hui,” and “being favored by He Xiaoman.” His persistent refusal to engage in sexual relations with Xiaoman further demonstrates his “masculine martial prowess” in “controlling desire.” This reveals that while Yan Geling attempts to subvert male-centered culture, her narrative fails to escape the confines of male-centered hegemony, “like the men they reject, they too risk becoming alienated and self-objectified” [29]. Yan Geling’s Liu Feng, portrayed as a castrated hero and inherently uncharismatic male, ultimately proves his masculinity by “rescuing women,” “awaiting women’s understanding,” and “offering his kindness.” Using women’s physical reactions, emotional responses, and even gratitude to validate male “kindness” and “genuine affection” represents, undeniably, an incomplete subversion of gender norms.

3 Conclusion

Traced chronologically, these three texts outline the trajectory of modern Chinese masculinity’s transformation while demonstrating how female writers engage with gender politics through male perspectives. Set in wartime Shanghai’s urban modernity, Eileen Chang’s Nie Chuanqing in *Jasmine Tea* inherits the late Qing dual ideal of “literary/martial” excellence yet fails at every turn in reality—physically frail, emotionally weak, academically underachieving—ultimately condemned as unmanly. Through this “failed man,” Zhang reveals that male identity itself is a fractured performance rather than a stable essence, foreshadowing the instability of gender performance as described by Butler.

Moving into the seventeen-year period of New China, *The Song of Youth* depicts masculinity highly standardized under the high-pressure discourse of revolution. Lu Jiachuan and Yu Yongze are respectively molded into “correct” and “incorrect” models of intellectuals: The former becomes a “model male” through iron will, martyrdom, and erased desire, while the latter is condemned as a weak, self-serving petty bourgeois—yet this critique ironically exposes the artificiality of the revolutionary male

archetype. Simultaneously, the text's depictions of poetry and dreams subtly preserve feminine desire and tenderness, revealing Yang Mo's latent resistance.

In Yan Geling's *Youth*, the crisis of masculinity further manifests within a post-socialist context. Liu Feng, who once perfectly embodied the "Lei Feng-style" masculine ideal of the Cultural Revolution era, ultimately fails in his performance due to his inability to completely castrate his sexual desire, suffering social death. This exposes the fragility of hegemonic masculinity: even the most norm-compliant subject remains vulnerable to abandonment at any moment due to a single "slip" of desire. Amidst the value shifts brought by reform and opening-up, he still cannot integrate into the new masculine paradigm measured by capital, desire, and consumption—for he remains the kind-hearted good man Liu Feng shaped by the demands of the Cultural Revolution era. His utter disorientation reveals masculinity's unattainability and its inherent oppression.

Across these three works—from the "failed intellectual" under urban modernity, to the "model male" and "fallen male" within the seventeen-year revolutionary narrative, to the "good man with nowhere to belong" in post-socialist memory writing—masculinity is never natural but a performative practice organized by the discourse of the times, repeatedly collapsing at the level of the body and desire. Through meticulous depictions of male performance and failure, female writers not only expose the patriarchal system's dual discipline of men and women but also carve out new imaginative spaces for gender politics within these fissures.

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