

A Study on Chen's Masculinities in *Sour Sweet*

Xinyuan Fu

Shaanxi Normal University, School of International Studies,
Chang'an Road, Xi'an 710062, China

Abstract: *Sour Sweet* is Timothy Mo's first novel that has gained international attention. It tells the story of a Chinese family living in London. The hero Chen constructs four patterns of masculinities put forward by R.W. Connell: hegemony, complicity, subordination, and marginalization. This paper attempts to analyze Chen's multiple masculinities in different patterns of gender relations in *Sour Sweet* by using Connell's masculinity theory. Chen's different kinds of masculinities are in a dynamic process. At the very beginning, Chen mainly practices hegemony and marginalization. After Man Kee's birth, Chen's hegemony is gradually in crisis. When Chen and Lily begin to run their own restaurant, Lily shows more aptness in operating and Chen loses his dominant position in the family. Therefore, subordination replaces hegemony defining Chen's major masculinity.

Keywords: Chen, Masculinities, *Sour Sweet*.

1. Introduction

Timothy Mo (1950-) a contemporary Anglo-Chinese writer, has created seven novels including *The Monkey King* (1978), *Sour Sweet* (1982), *An Insular Possession* (1986), *The Redundancy of Courage* (1991), *Brownout on Breadfruit Boulevard* (1995), *Renegade or Halo* (1999) and *Pure* (2012). Born in Hong Kong, Mo lived there until age ten and then moved to Britain. "His British immigration status as well as his own anxiety and confusion about his identity doomed him to describe the immigrants' sense of drift, loss of belonging, feeling of loss and dislocation thematically and structurally in his works." (Huang and Ruan 125) *Sour Sweet* is Mo's second novel. Set in the 1960s, it presents the Chens' life experience in London as immigrants. It helped Mo win the Hawthornden Prize in 1982 and established his status in British literary field as well. The hero Chen in *Sour Sweet* is a weak and isolated man who finally allows himself to be murdered by the Triad. Chen constructs multiple masculinities which cannot be easily classified into a certain type. R.W. Connell (1944-), an Australian sociologist, defines "masculinity" as "simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (Connell 71). Connell claims that there are more than one kind of masculinity and divides the multiple masculinities constructed in practice into four main patterns: hegemony, subordination, complicity and marginalization. Connell's classification of masculinities provides a framework and theoretical foundation to analyze Chen's masculinities in *Sour Sweet*.

2. Chen's Masculinities

2.1 Chen's Hegemony

Hegemonic masculinity is defined as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 77). "It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to,

and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men." ("Hegemonic Masculinity" 832) Hegemony is the main masculinity that Chen constructs in the years when he and Lily have just married. Chen is a traditional Chinese man who believes wives should be subordinated to husbands. Lily holds the same view with Chen in this respect. Therefore, Chen becomes the head and represents the ultimate authority in the family.

When Chen and Lily first move to the UK, Chen's family follows the traditional Chinese family pattern, in which men go out and women stay home. Chen works in a restaurant to earn money while Lily takes the responsibility of taking care of the family. Every day, Lily stays at home doing some housework. Every night, before Chen's return, Lily always prepares an evening snack and soup waiting for her husband to consume, otherwise "she felt she would have been failing in her wifely duties" (Mo 2). Lily tries to play the role of a good wife. When Mui, Lily's sister comes to the UK, she also stays at home and tries to help Lily cope with the housework and look after Man Kee. Once when Mui doesn't take good care of Man Kee, she insists on preparing Chen's soup herself to make up for her carelessness. At that time, Chen is the centre of Lily and Mui's life. Although in fact Chen is less capable than his wife in many ways, "Chen thought himself the dominator rather than the dominated" (Mo 15). Chen enjoys the prestige and attention from the females and the dominant position in the family. Chen constructs his hegemony through his strong voice in the family. When Lily drops little cues and tries to persuade Chen to start up his own business, Chen gives blatant refusal "I do so much cooking I ought to do it all the time!" (Mo 7) Even if Lily is much more far-sighted, she cannot change Chen's decision. It is Chen who has the decision-making power in the family. Later, in order to avoid the pursuit of the Triad, Chen has to change his mind and becomes fully receptive to Lily's idea, but "he could not immediately fall in with a proposal to which he had previously been at best indifferent, on which he had poured volumes of masculine pragmatic cold water" (Mo 78). A sudden turn-around of his attitude will not only imply his early decision is wrong but also weaken his authority as the head in the family. Therefore, Chen uses an indirect way to show his agreement. Chen firstly criticizes Lily's idea of going into

their own business is “absolutely ridiculous” (Mo 78). Then he waits until Mui mentions the topic again and uses the opportunity to express his agreement and admonishes Lily for not having suggested the idea early. In this way, Chen avoids admitting he is wrong and at the same time saves his face. Chen carefully maintains his authority in front of Lily and Mui which is the reflection of his hegemonic masculinity. Here is another example. Chen is angry when he finds Lily is secretly sending remittances to his parents. Chen admonishes Lily to stop it. Lily, however, argues that it is their obligations to do so. Then Chen shows real anger “No. This is the end of it. Who is head in our family? You think wife tells Husband what to do?” (Mo 107) Chen’s words reflect his consciousness of male chauvinism. In Chen’s mind, wives are subordinate to husbands and should obey husbands. It is the husband who has real power and ability to handle a problem. Lily’s disobedience makes Chen humiliated because it threatens Chen’s dominant position in the family. Chen, therefore, has to remind Lily that husband is the head in a family so as to maintain his authority and dignity. Besides, Chen practices hegemony through his tendency to control Lily. When Lily gives critical comments on the boxers’ technical attainments, “Chen had been irritated by this casual assumption of superiority; she was only a woman. Next time he went by himself.” (Mo 122) Unlike Lily, Chen is bad at martial arts and knows nothing about boxing. Lily’s proficiency unintentionally offends Chen’s dignity of being a man. He can’t allow his wife is stronger than him or accept the fact that he is weaker than his wife. In order to maintain his hegemony, he forbids Lily from watching the performances showing strong desire for control and male chauvinism. For Lily, Chen’s hegemony displays in his role, his rank. Lily would like to address Chen Husband for it implies “respect as well as salutary recognition of the status quo and all that it traditionally implied” (Mo 40). The capitalized “H” strengthens Lily’s reverence to her husband and signifies her belief in Chen’s dominance in the family.

From the discussion above, it is obvious to see that Chen’s hegemony lies in his dominant position in the family. Chen enjoys the decision-making power over things. Out of patriarchalism, Chen maintains his authority and dignity as a man and a husband and has a strong tendency to control Lily. This makes the Chen family follows the traditional patriarchal pattern at the beginning of their marriage. It has to be emphasized that Chen doesn’t practice hegemony all the time. According to Connell, “‘hegemonic masculinity’ is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable.” (Connell 76) Hegemony as one of Chen’s masculinity displays dynamically.

2.2 The Crisis of Chen’s Hegemony

Chen’s hegemony, with time going by, is gradually in crisis. The first major crisis of Chen’s hegemony comes when Chen’s dominant position in the family has been challenged by his son. After Man Kee was born, Lily and Mui’s lives gradually centre around Man Kee. “The transference of the

centre of gravity in the household had resulted in a diminishing of his own stature in the eyes of the two females.” (Mo 41) Chen is becoming less important in the family and his authority has been undermined by his son Man Kee. It’s just the beginning of Chen’s loss of his position as well as his hegemony. Moreover, Lily and Mui have “a tendency to confuse his behavior with Man Kee’s” (Mo 41).

Lily had to make a conscious effort not to burp Husband and, after Man Kee had passed beyond this stage, not to pat Husband on the back and stroke his stomach when he had finished soup. She still stood over him to make sure he drank it all, would dearly have liked to feed him herself a little faster. (Mo 41)

For Lily, it’s hard to distinguish the image of Chen and son. She treats Chen as a child who needs to be taken care of. Chen’s image in Lily and Mui’s eyes has been transferred from the head of a family to a child-like man. This process indicates the lowering of status of Chen and the decline of his hegemony.

The transference of power from Chen to Lily puts Chen’s hegemony in a bigger crisis. Chen is becoming more and more afraid of Lily and gradually losing his power. He has to drink soup under Lily’s reproachful eyes, get home early to please Lily, listen to Lily’s words and sometimes even lacks the nerve to refute her. “He can offer no guidance or explanation to his family for their life in Britain.” (Rothfork 56) Lily, on the contrary, takes the responsibility when she finds Chen is incapable of giving them a good life. She has strong plans for the family especially for Man Kee’s future since son has taken the place of husband in her heart. The change of the relation between Chen and Lily is reflected in the following texts.

She was now actually less dependent on Chen. Then he had been the focus of her day, the point around which she organised herself and through which her activities took on meaning. Now she was using Chen. There was a subtle change. (Mo 40)

The change becomes more quickly and obviously when they begin to run their own restaurant. Lily turns from a housewife to Chen’s colleague. Her ability on management and operation fully shows up. It has made Chen pale by comparison. Therefore, Lily gradually becomes the actual dominant in the family while Chen the subordinated. Lily’s decisions are less dependent on Chen as well. Whether to send remittances to Chen’s parents or to buy a car or to send Man Kee to a Chinese school, Lily has strong plans. Chen’s ideas are no longer important and cannot influence Lily’s final decision. Either Chen is convinced by Lily or he has to accept Lily’s arrangements with reservations. Compared with Lily, Chen behaves more like a woman, weak and incapable. In this way, Chen’s hegemonic crisis is well presented to readers.

2.3 Chen’s Subordination

“Hegemony relates to cultural dominance in the society as a whole. Within that overall framework there are specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between

groups of men.” (Connell 78) Those who practice subordination position a lower place in a gender hierarchy among men and is usually related to femininity which is marked by “wimp, milksop, nerd, turkey, sissy, lily liver, jellyfish, yellowbelly, candy ass, ladyfinger, pushover, cookie pusher, cream puff, motherfucker, pantywaist, mother's boy, four-eyes, ear-'ole, dweeb, geek, Milquetoast, Cedric, and so on” (Connell 79). Chen's physical appearance gives a hint that Chen practices subordination.

Chen had a pasty, bun-like face with squashed features which gave it a character it would otherwise have lacked. His skin was as smooth as a child's. Apart from some down on his cheeks near the ear he was free of facial hair; he had never shaved in his life. The only razor in the house, in fact, belonged to Lily. (Mo 16)

Descriptions like “pasty”, “bun-like”, “smooth” usually remind readers of a child's appearance instead of a man's. Besides, it is ridiculous that in the family it is the wife who uses a razor rather than the husband. Beard, as an important secondary sex character for males, doesn't grow on Chen's face, which reveals that Chen lacks some masculine features. As for his height, Chen is only a little taller than his wife Lily and even shorter when she dressed in shoes with slight heels. When they walk together, Chen's stocky legs, long torso and jerky strides is in sharp contrast with Lily's long slim limbs, graceful carriage and lightsome pace. As a husband, Chen is physically less masculine than Lily. His physical disadvantages give him an inferior position among groups of men.

Chen's incapacity in machinery and mathematics also reveals his subordinated masculinity. As a man, Chen shows no aptitude for driving in which most of men do better than women. Because of Chen's physical disadvantages, he has to “slide far down the seat to reach the pedals with his short legs” (Mo 149). Besides, Chen has trouble in steering and balancing the car. Even Lily can't help thinking it will risk son's life. After Chen's third lesson, Mui is told that Chen is not “mechanical”. On the contrary, Lily is obviously “mechanical”. She can not only “reach the pedals easily enough” (Mo 150) but also “manipulated all the controls in a twinkling of the eye” (Mo 150). What's more, Chen is really bad at mathematics. Even his son Man Kee is better than him. When there is something wrong with their tax, Chen's way to deal with it is to escape. It is Lily and Mui who try to figure it out. “Husband was no help. Innumerate Chen had just decided to ignore the whole problem; then it might go away.” (Mo 162) Mui then questions Chen's ability to fend for the family. In strength, Chen is still weaker than Lily who can shift the door from its stiff hinges more easily than him. “From the very beginning, Lily shows more aptness for traditionally male activities such as martial arts, driving and fixing things around the house, while Chen assumes the customary female role of the family with his general passivity.” (Juhász 3) Such sharp contrasts highlight Chen's femininity which accords with the words mentioned before like “wimp”, “ladyfinger”, “dweeb” proving his subordinated masculinity.

Chen's subordination is exhibited obviously in his relation

with his colleagues especially his enemy Fok. “Fok singled Chen out as a special target for his malice. This took the form of insulting innuendoes and, as Chen showed no signs of reacting, openly contemptuous remarks. Chen didn't care.” (Mo 30) It is obvious to see that Chen is not a strong man who dare to defend his self-esteem. Weakness and cowardice make him the target of jokes. When Fok tempts him to gamble and gives him the epithet of “Uncle” in an ironic tone of voice, Chen shows his consistent tolerance and is even not sure whether he likes it or not. The description of Chen's reaction when he is bullied by Fok reveals his incapability and helplessness. “For a moment, one ludicrous moment, Chen wondered whether he wanted Lily for a night...With every ‘Uncle’ Fok pushed him violently in the chest. The smile left Chen's face. He was confused, frightened.” (Mo 77) Chen plays a subordinate role in the gender hierarchy among men.

According to Xiao Chunduan, oriental ethnic groups tend to be portrayed as subordinated, weak and feminine, which coincides with Chen's image in *Sour Sweet*. (54) Timothy Mo pictures Chen a feminine appearance and womanlike personality to signify his lower position in gender hierarchy among men. Chen's subordination displays more and more obviously and gradually outweighs his other masculinities.

2.4 Chen's Complicity and Marginalization

According to Connell, men who practice hegemony all the time are quite few. Many of them benefit from hegemonic pattern and at the same time make extensive compromises with women such as showing respect to women, doing housework, bring home the family wage and so on. (79) “Men who received the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance could be regarded as showing a complicit masculinity.” (“Hegemonic Masculinity” 832).

Chen, on the one hand, gains power, prestige, honor from the patriarchy and on the other hand makes compromises with Lily, which is in line with complicit masculinity. When Chen and Lily argue whether they should send remittances to Chen's parents, Chen displays his hegemony by emphasizing that he is the head in the family. However, it is Chen who finally makes a compromise. “Lily looked up; her eyes met Chen's and there was mutual understanding. Chen sighed. ‘Do this for me at least, Man Kee's mother.’” (Mo 107) Concerning Man Kee's schooling, Chen and Lily cannot reach an agreement. At the beginning, Lily is unable to persuade Chen to send Man Kee to Chinese schools. Later Son's suffering in school together with Lily's dissatisfaction with western school education confirm Lily that “Man Kee must go to supplementary Chinese classes straight away” (Mo 235). Therefore, Lily puts forward the suggestion again to her husband and is surprised that Chen agrees. Chen's compromise on sending remittances and Man Kee's education signifies his complicity. Moreover, Chen's complicity can also be found in some details such as giving Lily ten pounds every week for housekeeping.

“Hegemony, subordination and complicity, as just defined,

are relations internal to the gender order. The interplay of gender with other structures such as class and race create further relationships between masculinities.” (Connell 80) According to Connell, race relations and class relations become integral parts in shaping marginalized masculinity. (80) Therefore, it’s important to take Chen’s racial identity and class identity into consideration when analyzing his marginalization.

Chen emigrates from Hong Kong to the UK with his wife as labors. He firstly works in a restaurant and then runs his own business. As a working-class man and Chinese race, Chen lives a hard life. The novel begins with the descriptions of the Chens’ tough situation in the UK. “The Chens had been living in the UK for four years, which was long enough to have lost their place in the society from which they had emigrated but not long enough to feel comfortable in the new.” (Mo 1) As an immigrant, Chen is hard to integrate into the British society where it is white-dominated. Nor would Chen like to be part of it. Chen shows strong resistance to British society. Chen refuses to accept the culture and people here. When he is looking for business premises with Lily and Mui, they encounter a group of workmen. “Chen was wary of this class of Englishman.” (Mo 83) Chen’s reaction reflects that he is vigilant in the foreign country and lacks safety. For him, the people here are frightening. He hardly ever talks with English people unless serving customers. The depiction of the immigrants as the central characters and the English as the peripheral, as Çelikel states, highlights the isolation of the migrants. (229) Chen’s isolation is also shown when he points a ship and talks to his son.

It is a special little ship for people like us, Son. It is very little and very old but that is only what strangers see. We know better, don’t we, Son, because it is the ship that will take us all back home when we are finished here. It will take you to your homeland, Son, which you have never seen. (Mo 155)

Years of lives in the UK don’t give Chen a sense of belonging. He doesn’t regard himself “as a member of the community” (Suprajitno 84) where he lives now. “Like many Chinese immigrants before him, Chen regards the UK as only a place to make money. To him, Hong Kong is his true home.” (Suprajitno 79) He feels that he is a foreigner, an outsider, an interloper, an adoptive Londoner. He is alienated and marginalized in the UK. That’s why he expresses his desire to be buried at home to his son. “The concentration on his Chinese characters conveys a sense of claustrophobic insularity as well as an impression of rootlessness.” (Dominic 172) Timothy Mo depicts Chen a Chinese immigrant living in London giving him a marginalized masculinity.

3. Conclusion

Chen constructs four patterns of masculinities in *Sour Sweet*. His different kinds of masculinities are not fixed but in a dynamic process. Hegemonic masculinity is the major masculinity of Chen during the early years of his marriage. At that time, Chen is the authority and head in the family. After his son Man Kee’s birth, Lily’s attention turns to Man Kee and Chen gradually loses his central position. Lily’s power

symbolizes that Chen’s hegemonic masculinity is in crisis. Chen has to make compromises with Lily and practices complicit masculinity. Chen’s subordinated masculinity is mainly exhibited in his relation to Fok and hinted in his physical disadvantages. With time going by, Chen’s subordinated masculinity is more and more presented. Chen’s marginalized masculinity begins to display when he and Lily emigrate to the UK. It is related to the change of his racial and class identity. Through analyzing Chen’s masculinities, Chen’s image of a traditional Chinese man with male chauvinism who features weakness, cowardice, and incapability is well presented to readers.

References

- [1] Çelikel. Mehmet Ali, “Food and Body as Markers of Identity in Timothy Mo’s *Sour Sweet*,” *BULETINUL Universității Petrol–Gaze din Ploiești*, 62(3), pp. 228-232, 2010.
- [2] Connell. R.W, *Masculinities*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2005.
- [3] Connell. R.W., and James W.Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender and Society*, 19(6), pp. 829-859, 2005.
- [4] Dominic. Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2002.
- [5] Juhász. Tamás, “The Dream of Sharing: Business and Community in Timothy Mo’s *Sour Sweet*,” *The Ana Chronist*, 12, pp. 220-232, 2006.
- [6] Mo. Timothy, *Sour Sweet*, Abacus, London, 1983.
- [7] Rothfork. John, “Confucianism in Timothy Mo’s *Sour Sweet*,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 24(1), pp. 49-64, 1989.
- [8] Suprajitno. Stefanus, “Between Two Worlds: Timothy Mo’s *Sour Sweet*,” *K@ta: A Biannual Publication on the Study of Language and Literature*, 4(2), pp. 75-90, 2002.
- [9] 黄彩虹、阮炜: “阴阳失衡 两顾无依——《酸甜》的文化身份解读”, 《英美文学研究论丛》, 2010年第2期, 第123-137页。
- [10] 肖淳端: “解读《酸甜》的错置书写”, 《暨南学报(哲学社会科学版)》, 2012年第10期, 第50-56+162页。