RIGIDITY AND RELATION: NEGOTIATING MASCULINITY IN SHANGHAI'S REFORM-ERA CINEMA (1978-2000)

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Abstract

The period of Reform and Opening up (1978-2000) was a pivotal era of socio-cultural transformation in China, profoundly reshaping identities, including cinematic representations of masculinity. This article examines the construction of Shanghai masculinities during this period through a visual and narrative analysis of four representative films: *Twins Come in Pairs* (1979), *Under the Bridge* (1984), *Shanghai Triad* (1995), and *Horizontal and Vertical* (1999). It employs the "TAO-Frame," a self-developed analytical framework, to dissect the interplay between rigid and relational masculine traits. The study finds that Shanghai cinema moved beyond the one-dimensional, heroic masculinity of the socialist era to construct a more complex, contingent masculinity. This was characterized by a negotiation between hegemonic, duty-bound "rigidity" (刚) in public and professional spheres, and softer, emotionally adaptive "relationality" (柔) in private and romantic contexts. Visual codes, particularly clothing and physique, served as key markers of this evolving identity. The article argues that Shanghai cinema acted as a cultural space for negotiating the tensions between tradition and modernity, collectivism, and individualism. It demonstrates that masculinity is not a fixed construct but a fluid performance, contextually adapted to the demands of a rapidly modernizing society.

Keywords: Shanghai cinema, masculinity, gender representation, Chinese film history, TAO-Frame

Introduction

The era of Reform and Opening up (1978-2000) in China marked a period of profound political, economic, and social transformation that reshaped individual and collective identities (Williams, 2004). Within this transformative context, Chinese cinema became a critical cultural space for negotiating new values and social dynamics (Yu, 2017). This article examines the visual and narrative representations of Shanghai men in films from this period, tracing the evolution of cinematic

masculinities as they mirrored and responded to these societal shifts. While the cinema of the preceding "Seventeen Years" period (1949–1966) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) predominantly featured one-dimensional, politicized male heroes embodying rigid collectivist ideals (Zhong & Shu, 2001), the post-1978 era witnessed a significant diversification. Shanghai, as China's cultural and economic epicenter, became a focal point for exploring these changes, with its men portrayed navigating the complex tensions between tradition and modernity, rigidity, and relational adaptability.

This article argues that Shanghai cinema from 1978 to 2000 did not simply replace socialist-era masculinities with modern ones, but rather constructed a contingent masculinity—a dynamic negotiation between hegemonic, rigid ideals often demanded by public life and the state, and softer, relational qualities necessitated by a modernizing private sphere. To adequately capture this nuanced interplay, this study complements established Western theoretical models with a culturally specific framework. While frameworks like R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity are invaluable for understanding power structures (Connell, 1995), they can sometimes fall short in explaining the culturally specific, often paradoxical, expressions of gender in East Asian contexts, particularly the traditional emphasis on "Gang-Rou Bingji" (刚柔并济) (Fang, 2009), or the harmonious combination of rigidity and softness. To address this gap, this study employs a self-developed analytical framework, the "TAO-Frame" (Theoretical, Analytical, Observational Framework). This framework is designed to dissect the situational performance of masculinity by identifying key behavioral trends. It posits that masculine identity is not monolithic but composed of various trends that are activated in different relational contexts. Key trends identified include: the Rigid/Hegemonic Trend (RGT), characterized by dominance, authority, and leadership; the Rigid/Subordination Trend (RST), which involves a rigid adherence to duty, ideology, or traditional norms, often at the cost of personal desire; the Soft/Relationship Balance Trend (SRBT), which values emotional intelligence, empathy, and negotiation to maintain relational harmony; and the Soft/Subordination Trend (SST), marked by passivity or self-indulgence. Through this lens, the article investigates how cinematic codes—particularly fashion and physique—were deployed to construct and articulate these shifting definitions of manhood.

The analysis focuses on four representative films that span different phases of the reform era: the early post-Mao comedy *Twins Come in Pairs* (1979), the urban drama *Under the Bridge* (1984), the historically set gangster film *Shanghai Triad* (1995), and the late-era realist work *Horizontal and Vertical* (1999). By examining their visual and narrative elements, this study addresses two key research questions: 1) How did the representation of Shanghai men in Chinese cinema evolve during the reform and opening-up era? 2) How do these representations reflect and respond to the sociopolitical and economic transformations of this period? Ultimately, this article reveals how Shanghai filmmakers constructed male characters as complex figures navigating shifting social hierarchies, cultural norms, and professional roles, offering a nuanced understanding of how gender was reconstructed within the contexts of national ambition, urbanization, and globalization.

Methodology and Analytical Framework

This study employs a qualitative, text-based approach to analyze the representation of masculinity in Chinese cinema. The primary research method is a qualitative close reading of four selected films, integrating visual analysis with narrative analysis. Visual analysis focuses on the semiotics of mise-en-scène, cinematography, and costume design, examining how visual codes construct and convey meanings about male identity. Narrative analysis centers on character development, plot structure, and dialogue, exploring how storytelling conventions shape the performance and evolution of masculinities.

The selection of the four case studies—*Twins Come in Pairs* (1979), *Under the Bridge* (1984), *Shanghai Triad* (1995), and *Horizontal and Vertical* (1999)—was guided by a purposive sampling strategy based on three criteria. First, chronological representation: the films were chosen to represent distinct phases of the reform era, from its optimistic beginnings to the market-driven complexities of the late 1990s, allowing for a diachronic analysis of change over time. Second, cultural significance: each film was influential or highly representative of the cinematic trends of its time, providing a valuable window into the cultural mainstream. Third, thematic relevance: all four films feature compelling male protagonists whose roles and relationships offer rich material for an in-depth examination of shifting masculine ideals.

The research process of this study is both systematic and iterative, aiming to integrate various analytical approaches to explore the evolution of masculinities in Shanghai cinema. The following diagram (see Figure1) outlines the Masculinities thematic analysis framework, showcasing how historical, visual, masculinities, and comparative analyses are interconnected to construct a comprehensive understanding of on-screen masculinities. This framework not only ensures that each analytical step builds upon the previous one but also creates a feedback loop that refines the overall interpretation. This sequence serves as the foundation for what is hereafter referred to as the **TAO-Frame** (Thematic Analysis of On Screen Masculinities Framework).
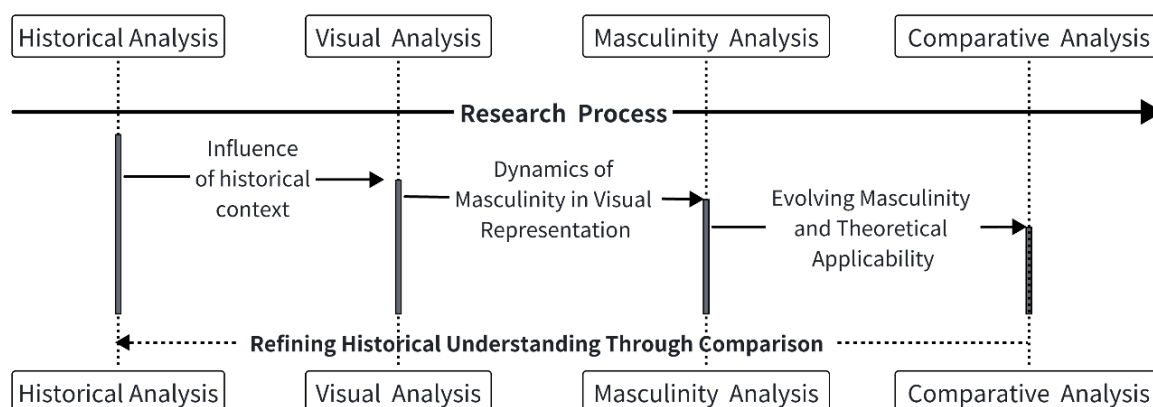

Figure 1 Thematic Analysis of On-Screen Masculinities

Note: This figure is the author's original creation. It was developed by the author to illustrate the TAO-Frame (Thematic Analysis of On-Screen Masculinities) and has not been published elsewhere.

The TAO-Frame moves beyond a simple binary of dominant/subordinate to identify a spectrum of behavioral trends that characters exhibit in different relational contexts:

- Rigid/Hegemonic Trend (RGT): Characterized by performances of dominance, authority, decisiveness, and leadership, often in public or professional settings.
- Rigid/Subordination Trend (RST): Involves a rigid adherence to an external code—be it ideology, professional duty, or traditional patriarchal norms—often at the expense of personal emotions or desires.
- Soft/Relationship Balance Trend (SRBT): Marked by the use of empathy, emotional intelligence, negotiation, and caregiving to build and maintain harmonious personal relationships.
- Soft/Subordination Trend (SST): Characterized by passivity, self-indulgence, or an avoidance of responsibility.

By applying this framework, the study systematically analyzes how male characters navigate different social spheres, revealing the contingency and performativity of their masculine identities. This methodological approach allows for a detailed and culturally sensitive interpretation of the cinematic data, linking specific textual evidence to broader theories of gender and societal change.

Historical and Cinematic Context: From Ideological Rigidity to Market-Driven Diversity (1966–2000)

The evolution of Shanghai masculinities in cinema from 1978 to 2000 cannot be understood without acknowledging the dramatic rupture caused by the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the subsequent seismic shifts of the reform era. The Cultural Revolution subjected the film industry to severe ideological control, fundamentally reconfiguring cinema into a tool for political indoctrination (Clark, 2008). Artistic production was governed by rigid principles like the "Three Prominences" (三突出), which mandated the glorification of idealized proletarian heroes at the expense of psychological depth and narrative complexity (Yu, 2017; Zhong & Shu, 2001). Feature film production stagnated, replaced largely by "model operas" (样板戏电影) that showcased one-dimensional, politicized male figures embodying unwavering loyalty and revolutionary fervor (Zhang, 2022). These characters, stripped of personal emotions and humanistic qualities, established a cinematic baseline of extreme rigidity against which the nuances of reform-era masculinities would later emerge.

The cessation of the Cultural Revolution and the launch of the Reform and Opening-up policies in 1978 revitalized Shanghai cinema, initiating a period of "rediscovery and reformation."(Li, 2006) Filmmakers, liberated from the strictest ideological constraints, began a process of cultural introspection, exploring the psychological wounds of the recent past and the challenges of a rapidly modernizing society(Shen, 2005). Early films of this period, such as *Evening Rain* (1980) and *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980), signaled a critical shift away from idealized heroes toward complex individuals grappling with personal and ideological conflicts. This thematic diversification was accompanied by institutional decentralization, which allowed studios in Shanghai to experiment with new genres and narrative styles aimed at re-engaging domestic audiences(Li, 2006). The focus began to shift from the purely political to the deeply personal, paving the way for more intimate and emotionally resonant portrayals of male characters who were not just symbols of the state, but individuals navigating their own lives. The 1990s accelerated this transformation through two powerful, competing forces: marketization and globalization(Conceison, 1994). The state-led promotion of "Main Melody" films (主旋律电影), such as *The Founding Ceremony* (1989), sought to align popular entertainment with nationalistic narratives, often featuring heroic male protagonists as paragons of moral integrity and collective resilience (Conceison, 1994). These productions, benefiting from technical advancements, redefined masculinity as a symbol of national strength. Simultaneously, the 1994 box-office sharing policy opened the floodgates to Hollywood blockbusters. Films like *The Fugitive* (1993) introduced Chinese audiences and filmmakers to new standards of storytelling, spectacle, and character development, particularly action-oriented, multi-dimensional male protagonists who combined traditional virtues with modern individualism and emotional complexity (Jeffords, 1993). This dual impact forced Shanghai filmmakers to innovate, creating hybrid genres that blended Hollywood-style aesthetics with Chinese cultural themes (Williams, 2004). Male characters increasingly became vehicles for exploring the tensions between tradition and modernity, national and global identities, setting the stage for the diverse and often contradictory representations of masculinity analyzed in this article.

Visual Constructions of Modern Masculinity

The physical and visual depictions of masculinities in Shanghai cinema from 1978 to 2000 offer a rich text for understanding the era's evolving cultural norms and ideological currents. Male appearances, body types, and, most significantly, clothing choices in the selected films moved beyond mere aesthetics to become potent signifiers of class, modernity, and identity. These visual markers were not incidental; they were deliberately coded cinematic expressions that articulated shifting definitions of manhood. Through a micro-analysis of mise-en-scène, cinematography, and costume design, this section explores how these visual elements constructed masculine identities, focusing on the dialectical tension between the idealized body and grounded reality, and the powerful semiotics of attire.

- *Idealized Bodies vs. Grounded Realities: The Politics of Physique*

A prominent tension in the era's cinema was the contrast between idealized, aspirational male bodies and the grounded, unembellished realities of everyday life. In the wake of the Cultural Revolution, a new aspirational male image emerged in fictional films, closely tied to the national project of the "Four Modernizations"(Yu, 2017). This image often featured protagonists with lean physiques, angular features, large, expressive eyes, and fair skin—traits culturally associated with intellectual refinement (文), discipline, and progress (Wang, 2009). In Sang Hu's *Twins Come in Pairs* (1979), the elder brother, Da Lin, cinematically embodies this ideal. The camera often frames him in bright, even lighting, emphasizing his clean features and neat appearance, which immediately signal his status as a responsible, forward-thinking youth (see Figure 2). His physique is not one of brute strength but of controlled, intellectual energy, representing a nation shifting its focus from revolutionary struggle (武) to skilled production. This portrayal reflects a specific ideological choice: to valorize a form of masculinity rooted in knowledge and technical expertise.

Figure 2: 1979 The older brother

Note: Still image sourced from the 1979 Chinese film *Twins Come in Pair*.
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This idealized aesthetic is further refined in *Under the Bridge* (Liang, 2006). The protagonist, Gao Zhihua, though a manual laborer, is portrayed with a slender build and a polished, almost delicate appearance that seems to defy his working-class background (see
). The cinematography reinforces this by frequently capturing him in softer light, minimizing the grit of his labor and highlighting his thoughtful expressions in close-ups. This deliberate visual strategy serves a specific narrative function: to present him not merely as a worker, but as a hopeful figure whose inner moral fortitude and potential for upward mobility transcend his class limitation. His body becomes a symbol of the reform era's promise.

Figure 3: Gao Zhihua, portrayed with a soft and refined visual aesthetic

Note: Still image sourced from the 1984 Chinese film *Under the Bridge*.
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Even in the highly stylized world of Zhang Yimou's *Shanghai Triad* (1995), the male figures of authority, particularly the mob boss Tang (Kraicer, 1997), possess a refined, controlled physicality. Cinematographer Lü Yue often uses low-angle shots when framing Tang, subtly granting him visual dominance and power, while the opulent, shadowy interiors of his mansion construct an environment where power is exercised through strategic, almost theatrical, control rather than overt physical force (see **Figure 4**). Such cinematic portrayals align male physicality with societal goals, reflecting national aspirations but also, in doing so, imposing narrow, often exclusionary, standards of masculinity(Mitchell, 2007).

Figure 4: Mob Boss Tang

Note: Still image sourced from the 1995 Chinese film *Shanghai Triad*.
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In stark contrast to these polished representations, Wang Guangli's *Horizontal and Vertical* (1999) offers a realist counter-narrative that deliberately challenges these aesthetic conventions (Pollacchi, 2014). Employing a raw, almost documentary-style approach with handheld cameras and natural lighting, the film focuses on men whose bodies are inscribed by their labor. The characters here have fuller faces, sturdier frames, and darker, weather-beaten complexions—the authentic marks of a life of physical toil (see **Figure 5**).

Figure 5: Labor-marked faces and bodies

Note: Still image sourced from the 1999 Chinese film *Horizontal and Vertical.*
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The film does not shy away from showing sweat, dirt, and fatigue. The camera lingers on their calloused hands and tired faces, transforming these "imperfections" into markers of authenticity and dignity (Bourgeus, 2019). This aesthetic choice aligns with Bill Nichols' (1991) concept of "realist cinema," which prioritizes social authenticity over idealized imagery. By validating the unpolished, working body, the film serves as a powerful critique of the often-sanitized portrayals in mainstream cinema. This duality powerfully highlights the performative nature of masculinity, which, as theorized by Judith Butler (Butler, 2022) and R.W. Connell (Connell, 1995), is socially constructed. While the idealized bodies in fictional films reinforced dominant cultural expectations, realist works like *Horizontal and Vertical* provided a vital space to validate non-conforming, diverse, and authentic forms of male identity.

● *The Semiotics of Attire: From Mao Suits to Business Suits*

If the body was the canvas, then clothing was the language through which evolving masculinities were most clearly articulated (Sae-Hee, 2005). The transition from the ubiquitous blue or grey "Mao suit" (Zhongshan suit) and worker's uniform to the modern business suit encapsulates the entire ideological journey of the reform era (Liu & Liu, 2021). The material, cut, and context of clothing in these films function as a rich visual shorthand for social status, political allegiance, and personal ambition.

In the early reform period, the uniform remained a dominant symbol, representing a direct link to the state and collective identity (Finnane, 2008). In *Twins Come in Pairs*, the elder brother's consistent attire of a simple, often slightly worn, work uniform is a potent visual signifier of a disciplined, collectivist masculinity (see **Figure 6**).

Figure 6: The elder brother wears work uniform

Note: Still image sourced from the 1979 Chinese film *Twins Come in Pair*.
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The very uniformity of the garment, devoid of personal flair, marks him as a dedicated servant of the state, his identity subsumed within his professional role(Tsui, 2013). It represents order, duty, and a rejection of individualistic frivolity (Sen & Lee, 2008). The younger brother's preference for more casual, Western-style shirts, often with brighter patterns or a more open collar, signals a rupture. The softer fabric and looser fit suggest a body more at ease, less constrained by ideology. This choice reflects a nascent desire for personal expression and an embrace of modern, global styles, marking him as a figure of transition. This visual dichotomy between the brothers becomes a central metaphor for the ideological crossroads at which China found itself.

As the reform era progressed, the Western suit emerged as the new symbol of power and modernity(Anderson, 2023). This is most vividly illustrated in *Shanghai Triad*, where the tailored suit is the exclusive uniform of the male elite. A micro-analysis reveals its function: the sharp, structured shoulders of the boss's suit create an imposing silhouette, visually expanding his presence. The dark, often pinstriped fabric absorbs light, lending him an aura of inscrutability and menace, while its pristine condition contrasts sharply with the grime of the city's underbelly (see **Figure 7**). It is a form of armor, signifying a new, ruthless form of corporate-style authority. The stark visual contrast between his polished attire and the simple, functional clothing of his underlings visually reinforces the rigid social hierarchies of this new urban order.

Figure 7: The mob boss's tailored suits

Note: Still image sourced from the 1995 Chinese film *Shanghai Triad*.
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Taken together, the visual strategies across these four films map a clear, albeit non-linear, trajectory of masculine representation. A powerful comparative axis emerges between the films of the early

reform era and those of the 1990s. In *Twins Come in Pairs* and *Under the Bridge*, the visual construction of masculinity is still deeply enmeshed with the language of the state and the collective. The ideal man is visually coded as clean, orderly, and intellectually inclined, even when from a working-class background, reflecting a national, top-down aspiration for a "civilized" and modern citizenry. The lighting in these films is often bright and realistic, emphasizing social harmony and ideological clarity. Conversely, the 1990s films display a far more fragmented and market-driven visual logic. *Shanghai Triad*, with its glossy, high-contrast cinematography, presents masculinity as a stylized, cinematic commodity, drawing heavily from the aesthetics of both classic Hollywood gangster films and Hong Kong cinema. Its visual language speaks of power, wealth, and danger. *Horizontal and Vertical*, in direct opposition, employs a raw, unpolished aesthetic to critique this very glossiness, locating masculine authenticity in the grime and sweat of physical labor. This divergence reveals a crucial shift: by the 1990s, there was no longer a single, state-endorsed visual ideal for masculinity; instead, cinema had become a contested field where different, often conflicting, versions of manhood—the globalized elite, the authentic laborer—vied for visual representation.

Relational Dynamics and the Performance of Gender

Beyond the static visual language of physique and fashion, the performance of masculinity in post-Mao Shanghai cinema was most dynamically revealed through relational contexts. Male identity was not portrayed as a fixed entity but as a fluid, situational construct, shifting dramatically between professional, familial, and romantic spheres. It is within these interactions that the tension between inherited ideals of rigid dominance and emerging modes of relational softness becomes most palpable. Through a micro-analysis of key scenes, dialogues, and character interactions, this section examines how these relational dynamics, analyzed through the lens of the TAO-Frame, expose the evolving complexity and contradictions of masculine identity during China's transformative era.

- *Negotiating Public Duty and Private Affections: The Duality of Roles*

A central theme structuring male identity in these films is the dialectical conflict between public responsibility and private desire, a legacy of the collectivist past clashing with a new focus on individual fulfillment. In *Twins Come in Pairs* (1979), this duality is personified by the two brothers. The elder brother, Da Lin, is a quintessential example of what the TAO-Frame identifies as a Rigid/Subordination Trend (RST). His identity is almost entirely defined by his professional role. This is vividly illustrated in his interactions with his girlfriend, Fang Fang. In a key scene, while discussing her need for experimental materials, his dialogue is focused entirely on the logistics and "importance" of her work for the nation. His tone is earnest but impersonal; his body language is stiff, lacking the relaxed intimacy expected in a romantic context. He is physically present but emotionally distant, embodying a form of masculinity where personal desire is sublimated into public duty. He becomes the "castrated hero" (Cui, 2003; Williams, 2004), an archetype whose commitment to the collective good renders him incapable of genuine relational connection, revealing the limitations of a purely rigid masculine ideal.

In contrast, his twin brother, Xiao Lin, charts a more complex developmental path from a self-indulgent Soft/Subordination Trend (SST) towards a balanced and adaptable masculinity. Initially carefree, his transformation is marked by his performance of a Rigid/Hegemonic Trend (RGT) in his professional life. A pivotal scene shows him confronting his unproductive colleagues. His speech is direct and decisive, his posture confident, and he uses strong, declarative sentences to persuade them to meet their deadlines. He effectively performs the role of a leader. However, it is his

romantic relationship with Yuan Yuan that reveals the most significant evolution. Here, he exhibits a Soft/Relationship Balance Trend (SRBT). In a critical scene where Yuan Yuan impulsively packs her bags to leave, Xiao Lin's response is a masterclass in "soft dominance". He does not block her path or raise his voice. Instead, he closes the physical distance between them, speaks in a calm, gentle tone, and uses questions rather than commands ("Have you really thought this through?"). He validates her feelings while gently guiding her to reconsider (see **Figure 8**). This ability to be decisive at work yet empathetic in love captures the emerging ideal of a balanced masculinity, where emotional intelligence is a vital complement to traditional strength (Fang, 2012).

Figure 8: Xiao lin and Yuanyuan

Note: Still image sourced from the 1979 Chinese film *Twins Come in Pair*.
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This dynamic finds a darker, more complex echo in *Shanghai Triad* (1995). As a ruthless mob boss, Tang Shuisheng is the epitome of the Rigid/Hegemonic Trend (RGT) in public. His power is performed through non-verbal cues: a slight nod to command an execution, a cold, unwavering gaze that silences subordinates. Yet, his private interactions with his mistress, Xiao Jinbao, reveal a strikingly different facet. The film uses spatial dynamics to highlight this shift; in the opulent, semi-public spaces of his club, he treats her as a possession, but in the intimate space of their bedroom, a more complex dynamic emerges. In one scene, after a public conflict, he approaches her. The camera moves in for a close-up, capturing a flicker of what might be vulnerability in his eyes before he demands a kiss (see **Figure 9**). His dialogue, "给余胖子点面子，香一个 (Do Yu Pangzi a favor and don't embarrass him，Kiss me)," is a command cloaked in the language of negotiation.

Figure 9: Tang's private interactions with Xiao Jinbao

Note: Still image sourced from the 1995 Chinese film *Shanghai Triad*.
Used here for academic analysis under fair use.

This oscillation between public brutality and private, albeit manipulative, tenderness illustrates how even the most hegemonic forms of masculinity are contextually performed, revealing a space for a transactional Soft/Relationship Balance Trend (SRBT) to exist within a rigidly hierarchical power structure.

- ***Contested Masculinities in Familial and Peer Relationships***

The performance of masculinity becomes even more intricate within the dense networks of family and peers, where traditional expectations collide with modern sensibilities. The protagonist of *Under the Bridge*, Gao Zhihua, exemplifies this complex negotiation, embodying different facets of the TAO-Frame in different relationships. Within his peer group, Gao functions as a moral anchor, performing a Rigid/Hegemonic Trend (RGT). This is powerfully demonstrated when a desperate, unemployed friend proposes a fraudulent scheme. Gao's refusal is not preachy but firm, his tone laced with disappointment rather than condemnation. His dialogue focuses on their shared past and future, appealing to a sense of collective honor. "We've been through worse," he might say, "we don't do things like this." It is an act of moral leadership, using his relational influence to protect the community's integrity. This rigidity re-emerges as a Rigid/Subordination Trend (RST)—a rigid defiance against outdated norms—in his confrontation with his mother. When she vehemently opposes his romance with a single mother, her arguments are rooted in traditional concerns for "face" (面子) and social stigma. The scene is staged in their cramped living quarters, the close proximity heightening the emotional tension. Gao's resistance is not just verbal; his body language—standing firm, refusing to break eye contact—is a physical manifestation of his resolve. His refusal to bow to patriarchal and societal pressure signifies a crucial generational shift, an assertion of individual romantic choice over prescribed familial duty (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

However, it is in his relationship with his girlfriend and her child that Gao's capacity for a deeply empathetic Soft/Relationship Balance Trend (SRBT) is fully realized. His nurturing behavior is shown in small, powerful details: the gentle way he helps the child with her homework, the quiet reassurance he offers his girlfriend when she expresses her insecurities. In one poignant scene, there is little dialogue; instead, the camera focuses on his hands as he carefully peels an apple for the child. This simple, domestic act becomes a profound statement of a new form of masculinity, one that finds strength in caregiving and emotional labor. This breaks from rigid patriarchal norms that would devalue such "feminine" tasks (Schippers, 2018). The duality in Gao's character—morally rigid with the outside world, relationally soft within his chosen family—reflects an evolving masculinity that incorporates both vulnerability and strength (Kimmel, 1987). As Anthony Giddens theorized (Giddens, 1992), modern "pure relationships" are built on emotional exchange, and Gao's character arc provides a cinematic embodiment of this transition, showcasing a man navigating the complex intersections of public morality, personal agency, and modern love.

A cross-case analysis of the relational dynamics reveals a persistent and fundamental theme: the situational performance of masculinity contingent upon the distinction between the public and private spheres. Despite the vast differences in their social roles—a state cadre, a laborer, a mob boss—the male protagonists in *Twins Come in Pairs*, *Under the Bridge*, and *Shanghai Triad* all demonstrate a remarkable capacity to toggle between different masculine trends based on their context. In the public or professional realm, they consistently perform versions of Rigid/Hegemonic (RGT) or Rigid/Subordination (RST) masculinity, aligning with external expectations of authority, duty, and control. This public performance serves to affirm their social standing and legitimacy. However, in the private, intimate sphere of romantic or familial relationships, each character reveals a capacity for a Soft/Relationship Balance (SRBT), expressing vulnerability, empathy, or a need for connection. This recurring pattern suggests that the "Gang-Rou Bingji" (刚柔并济) ideal is not just a philosophical concept but a lived, practical strategy for navigating modern life, a strategy

powerfully captured and explored by Shanghai cinema. It challenges a monolithic view of hegemonic masculinity by demonstrating that softness and relationality were not signs of weakness, but essential, complementary components of a successful and complete masculine identity in modernizing China.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has examined the construction of Shanghai masculinities in Chinese cinema from 1978 to 2000, a period of unprecedented societal change. By applying the TAO-Frame to four representative films, this study has moved beyond a simple descriptive history to reveal the nuanced and often contradictory ways in which male identity was negotiated on screen. The central argument of this paper is that Shanghai cinema during this era did not merely replace a monolithic socialist masculinity with a modern one, but instead cultivated a contingent masculinity. This masculinity was fluid and performative, characterized by a constant negotiation between the rigid, hegemonic ideals demanded by the nation's modernization project and the softer, relational qualities required by an increasingly complex private sphere. In response to the first research question—how the representation of Shanghai men evolved—this study has identified a clear trajectory from one-dimensional archetypes to multifaceted individuals. The cinematic man of the early reform era, as seen in *Twins Come in Pairs*, often embodied a transitional conflict between collectivist duty (RST) and emergent individualism. By the mid-1980s, films like *Under the Bridge* began to explore a more integrated masculinity, where moral rigidity in the public sphere (RGT) could coexist with profound emotional empathy in private relationships (SRBT). The 1990s, influenced by marketization and globalization, further complicated this portrayal. The hyper-masculine, power-driven figure in *Shanghai Triad* and the authentic, unembellished laborer in *Horizontal and Vertical* represent two divergent, yet equally significant, facets of masculinity in a society grappling with its identity. Visual symbolism, from the ideological weight of the uniform to the aspirational promise of the suit, served as a crucial cinematic language to articulate this evolution.

Addressing the second research question—how these representations reflect broader sociopolitical transformations—this analysis demonstrates that Shanghai cinema functioned as a vital cultural mediator. The softening of rigid masculine boundaries directly mirrored China's ideological relaxation and growing engagement with global culture. The rise of individualistic and emotionally expressive male characters resonated with a society shifting from collectivism toward personal ambition and self-realization. The tensions portrayed on screen—between duty and desire, tradition and modernity, public face and private feeling—were the very tensions being experienced by millions in a rapidly urbanizing China. The films did not just reflect reality; they provided audiences with narrative templates and symbolic figures through which to understand and process the anxieties and aspirations of their own changing lives.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the application of the TAO-Frame, which offers a more granular tool for analyzing East Asian masculinities than a sole reliance on Western hegemonic masculinity frameworks. While Connell's theory provides a crucial understanding of power dynamics (Connell, 1995), the TAO-Frame's concepts of RST, SRBT, and RGT allow for a more nuanced appreciation of the *coexistence* and *contextual performance* of both rigid and soft traits. The fluidity observed in these films, where a single character can exhibit different masculine trends in different relationships, aligns closely with the core tenets of the TAO-Frame, capturing the unique sociocultural fabric of Shanghai, where historical legacies and global influences intersected to produce a distinctive modern identity.

In conclusion, the representation of Shanghai men in films from 1978 to 2000 provides a rich and complex archive of a nation in transition. These cinematic portrayals capture the multifaceted negotiation of what it meant to be a man in modern China, navigating the crosscurrents of tradition, socialism, and global capitalism. Shanghai cinema, with its unique status as a cosmopolitan hub, not only redefined masculinity on screen but also contributed to broader cultural discourses on gender, family, and national identity. While this paper has focused on visual and narrative elements, future research could fruitfully explore other dimensions, such as sound design and audience reception, to provide an even more comprehensive understanding. This study underscores the enduring significance of Shanghai cinema as a key medium for shaping and reflecting the complexities of masculinity, offering a solid foundation for further inquiry into the intersection of gender, culture, and film in China and beyond.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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