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MARGINALISED MASCULINITY IN THE FICTION OF MO YAN AND ZHU WEN: SOCIALIST RESIDUES, STRUGGLES, AND RESILIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines representations of marginalised masculinity in the fiction of Mo Yan and Zhu Wen, showing how male subjectivity is reshaped by ideological residues of the socialist past and the socio-economic upheavals of post-Mao China. In the late 1990s, state-owned enterprise (SOE) reform and large-scale layoffs produced a precarious population of displaced workers, with employees in crisis-ridden or shuttered factories—both younger and middle-aged—among the hardest hit. Their lives were shaped simultaneously by the lingering legacies of Maoist collectivism and the disruptive forces of market reform. Post-Mao writers increasingly responded to these transformations through new narrative forms that foreground social insecurity, gender anxiety, and the destabilisation of masculine identity. Focusing on Mo Yan's *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh* (1999) and Zhu Wen's *Ah, Xiao Xie* (1999), this study addresses a gap in scholarship on Chinese masculinity by offering a gender-focused analysis of marginal male protagonists caught between obsolete socialist certainties and unstable market futures. Approaching these works from a gendered poststructuralist perspective, it explores how they portray men's struggles, resilience, and failures under conditions of institutional decline and economic insecurity. Through detailed analysis and comparative reading, the paper demonstrates how Mo Yan and Zhu Wen critique the erosion of welfare, challenge dominant gender discourses, and represent masculinity as unstable and contested. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of marginality, gender crisis, and the broader cultural anxieties surrounding masculinity in post-Mao China.

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In the post-Mao period (from 1976 to the present), China has undergone major economic reforms. In particular, Deng Xiaoping's southern tour in 1992 marked a critical turning point in the 1990s, accelerating China's transition toward a market economy characterised by market competition and liberalisation policies (Zhao et al., 2024, p. 4). These reforms facilitated the rapid expansion of private enterprises, especially in coastal regions, generating an increasing demand for rural migrant labour. Largely excluded from urban welfare systems due to their lack of urban household registration (*hukou*), rural migrants provided a vast

supply of cheap, unskilled labour that fueled industrial expansion and rapid economic growth in coastal cities such as Shenzhen and Shanghai (Cheng & Beresford, 2012, p. 156). While private enterprises in coastal cities absorbed large numbers of migrant workers, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), particularly those concentrated in Northeast China, the country's traditional industrial heartland, underwent large-scale layoffs. Unable to compete with more flexible and capital-intensive private firms in the coastal provinces, many SOEs incurred substantial losses. These enterprises were often characterised by outdated machinery, homogeneous product lines largely unchanged for decades, low productivity, and poor management practices. Consequently, these enterprises were unable to compete effectively with private firms that operated modern facilities and advanced production systems (Cheng & Beresford, 2012, pp. 156–171).

With the emergence of a new socio-economic environment, some workers, particularly younger ones, chose to leave the SOEs to pursue better-paid opportunities in private firms and other sectors of the expanding market economy. Other workers, however, sought to remain in their workplaces, driven by their continued reliance on state-provided welfare benefits and by a limited capacity or willingness to navigate the uncertainties of the new labour market. Many of these workers retained expectations shaped by the socialist "iron rice bowl" (*tie fanwan*) system, under which state industrial bases and factories had guaranteed lifetime employment and comprehensive welfare benefits during the Mao period (1949–1976) (Kong et al., 2019, pp. 1–2). While this system provided long-term security, it also constrained incentives for productivity and institutional reform, leaving both enterprises and their employees poorly prepared to adapt to the demands of an emerging market-oriented society. Consequently, many sought to remain within their former work units (*danwei*), through which they had been embedded in the socialist system and regarded as a quasi–middle class, and continued to adhere to career expectations formed under the planned economy (Li, 2000). Rather than actively pursuing new opportunities in the market, they anticipated state intervention to restore stable and respectable employment. In particular, they were often reluctant to undertake physically demanding, low-status, or informal work commonly associated with rural migrant labour.

However, under the reform of SOEs in the late 1990s and the new socio-economic conditions, large numbers of SOEs were forced to close or drastically reduce their workforces on an unprecedented scale, resulting in widespread unemployment and a range of social problems (Kong et al., 2019, pp. 1–3). The reform process, marked by the large wave of layoffs known as the *xiagang chao*, affected more than 27 million workers who had previously held permanent positions (Zhao et al., 2024, p. 4). Employees in crisis-ridden or shuttered factories, both younger and middle-aged, were among the hardest hit. For the majority, displacement was unavoidable, compelling them to seek work in increasingly competitive and insecure labour markets. These transformations were sudden and largely unexpected, leaving many workers confused, disoriented, and despairing, and often requiring years to adapt to the new socio-economic environment. The pain of SOE reform reshaped their social identities, particularly those of laid-off employees, who were pushed into prolonged struggles for subsistence. While some displaced workers remained passive, waiting for SOEs to reverse their decisions and reinstate them, others sought to secure alternative livelihoods through their own efforts—at times engaging in work considered "illegal" or morally incompatible with socialist ethics in order to sustain household finances and meet rapidly rising medical expenses (Cheng & Beresford, 2012, pp. 169–171). In this sense, the consequences extended beyond individual workers to their families and communities, producing severe negative shocks including employment instability, financial hardship, and a profound weakening of the social and moral bonds that had previously connected workers to their employers and to the state.

In the context of post-Mao Chinese literature, writers began to experiment with new narrative forms and stylistic approaches while increasingly engaging with pressing social problems, including those generated by SOE reform in the late 1990s. These transformations produced a marginalised group of laid-off and precarious workers in declining SOEs, whose lives were shaped by the lingering legacies of Maoist socialism and the disruptive forces of market reform. The post-Mao economy itself is marked by a hybrid structure that combines capitalist market relations with residual socialist institutions and values. This dual historical pressure is reflected in the forms of masculinity that appear in the literary works of Mo Yan and Zhu Wen, two prominent male writers who not only foreground the lived experiences and struggles of state workers and laid-off men but also critically interrogate questions of Chinese masculinity. The men in Mo Yan's and Zhu Wen's 1990s-fiction are depicted as portraits of masculinity in transition. Their narratives foreground how male subjectivity is destabilised, contested, and reconfigured under conditions of institutional decline, economic insecurity, and the uneven coexistence of socialist residues and market imperatives. They depict male antiheroes and social misfits whose marginality stands in sharp contrast both to the heroic and ideologically exemplary male figures promoted in Mao-era literature and to the successful businessmen who have come to embody a dominant form of hegemonic masculinity in the post-Mao period (Zhong, 2000, pp. 87–89; Hunt, 2022, pp. 17–18).

Post-Mao literary representations of marginal male figures not only articulate pervasive gendered anxieties but also implicitly challenge dominant discourses of masculinity that privilege strength, heroism, and success. According to Zhong Xueping (2000), post-Mao literature is marked by complex and often contradictory concerns about masculinity that manifest broader socio-cultural transformations in contemporary China. From the early 1980s onward, the phrase *yinsheng yangshuai* ("the rise of the feminine and the decline of the masculine") gained wide currency as a popular way of describing a perceived shift in the relative status of men and women (Zhong, 2000, p. 5).[1] In response, a strand of so-called "searching for 'real' men" literature emerged, articulating a desire for the restoration of visibly strong, physically robust, and conventionally virile male figures (Zhong, 2000, pp. 40–41). The resulting preoccupation with male weakness was therefore not new to the post-Mao period, but in this later context it acquired erotic and sexual dimensions. These dimensions not only signal the historical specificity of the reform era but also more clearly expose the gendered nature of this anxiety, an obsession that is both expressed by and projected onto many contemporary male writers. This tendency can be seen, for instance, in the 1980s work of the male writer Zhang Xianliang. His novel *Half of Man Is Woman* (1985) portrays a protagonist whose political persecution during the Cultural Revolution leaves him sexually impotent, turning bodily dysfunction into an allegory for the psychological and existential wounds inflicted by Maoist repression. His subsequent recovery of sexual potency in the post-Mao period symbolises not only personal healing but also the emergence of a newly articulated resistance to ideological control, linking masculine virility to political and expressive liberation and the reclamation of male subjectivity.[2]

Themes of male weakness and sexuality persisted into the 1990s in the works of writers such as Mo Yan and Zhu Wen, where they became intertwined with questions of marginalised masculinity and the socio-economic upheavals produced by SOE and market reforms. Both writers demonstrate a sustained concern for "weak" men positioned as subordinate in terms of class, occupation, and social status, and thus marginalised in relation to hegemonic masculinity. These marginal male protagonists appear as paranoid individuals, psychologically or physically damaged figures, and seemingly "useless" antiheroes whose struggles embody the contradictions of the reform era. Writers of the 1990s, such as Mo Yan and Zhu Wen, having lost stable positions within the socialist system and been compelled to compete in an open market, articulate their responses to dominant discourses through representations of marginalised masculinity, capturing the ambivalent emotions of liberation and anxiety characteristic of the period (McDougall, 2003, pp. 272–274; Zhang, 2008, p. 10).

Guided by the criteria of selecting works that have received limited scholarly attention within the framework of marginalised masculinity, and that engage specifically with the tensions between socialist ideals and emerging capitalist norms, as well as the restructuring of SOEs in the 1990s, this study focuses on Mo Yan's *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh* (henceforth *Shifu*; Chinese title *Shifu yuelaiyue youmo*, 1999) and Zhu Wen's *Ah, Xiao Xie* (Chinese title *Xiao Xie a Xiao Xie*, 1999) (Mo, 2000; Mo, 2001a; Zhu, 2006; Zhu, 2007). These texts foreground themes of male vulnerability, male sexuality in relation to the socialist past, SOE reform, and men's struggles and resilience within the emerging capitalist order, thereby distinguishing them from other works by these authors from the post-Mao period. Existing scholarship on post-Mao masculinity, including studies by Zhong Xueping (2000) and Pamela Hunt (2022), has largely overlooked detailed analyses of marginalised masculinity as structurally produced through the specific socio-economic conditions of the 1990s in *Shifu* and *Ah, Xiao Xie*, and has not provided a comparative examination of these two works. Moreover, limited attention has been devoted to these texts from a poststructuralist perspective, an approach that is particularly well suited to illuminating the fluidity, instability, and internal contradictions of masculinity. Such

[1] The popular term *yinsheng yangshuai*, commonly translated as "the rise of the feminine and the decline of the masculine," expresses the widespread belief that women have become too strong while men have become too weak (Zhong, 2000, p. 5). In the post-Mao period, this discourse was shaped by the perception that the Mao-era emphasis on gender equality had granted women excessive space and voice, epitomised by the figure of the "Iron Girl", thereby emasculating men and producing what was perceived as an unnatural imbalance between the sexes. These anxieties were further intensified by the repression of sexuality and the experience of political persecution during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), which left enduring psychological and cultural scars on gender relations (Zhong, 2000, pp. 40–41; Hunt, 2022, p. 18).

[2] Zhang Xianliang's fiction engages with the social and cultural legacies of Maoism primarily through a discourse of male sexual liberation that is marked by pronounced misogynistic tendencies. Female characters are frequently abandoned once they have assisted the male protagonist in recovering his sense of virility and subjectivity, serving largely as instruments for the restoration of male identity (Zhong, 1994, pp. 175–178). In Zhang Xianliang's writing, masculine power is asserted through the appropriation and exploitation of the female body, while women are positioned as a "silent" or "objectified Other" within the male quest for subjectivity (Lu, 1995, p. 16). This approach stands in sharp contrast to the work of women writers such as Wang Anyi, Tie Ning, and Chi Li, whose fiction offers alternative narrative possibilities to the male-centred tradition. By foregrounding women's personal experiences and private lives, these writers articulate new ways of thinking about sexual difference, the female body, and desire, and in doing so redefine female subjectivity beyond its function as a mere support for male self-realisation (Swanpitak, 2025, p. 167).

a perspective is especially productive when applied to marginalised male identities and their strategies of adaptation and resilience, particularly in relation to the concept of gender performativity, whereby identity is constituted through the repetition of acts over time, thereby generating instability and opening up potential sites of transformation (Butler, 1990). Addressing this gap, the present study examines representations of marginalised masculinity in *Shifu* and *Ah, Xiao Xie* through a gendered poststructuralist lens, while also providing a comparative analysis of the two works. Drawing on theories of marginalised masculinity and gender performativity, it explores how male subjectivity is constructed, destabilised, and renegotiated within the broader context of post-Mao transformation. Moving beyond conventional literary analysis, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that brings together literary criticism, gender theory, and cultural studies within the field of Chinese studies. It provides new insights into the fiction of Mo Yan and Zhu Wen by showing how marginalised masculinities are shaped by socialist residues and the socio-economic struggles of men in the 1990s, while also foregrounding the writers' concerns with a perceived crisis of masculinity and their efforts to challenge dominant gender discourses. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of masculinity, marginality, and the broader cultural anxieties surrounding gender in post-Mao China.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the rise of women's studies and feminist analysis in the late twentieth century, representations of Chinese femininity, gender identity and living conditions of women have attracted far more scholarly attention than representations of masculinity in fiction. Nevertheless, since the mid-1990s, the study of Chinese masculinities with a focus on literary representation has emerged as a small but rapidly growing field.[3] This section reviews the major works most relevant to this study and identifies the gap that this research seeks to fill. A central concern of this paper, in line with earlier scholarship on masculinity in Chinese studies, is how male writers engage with the plurality of masculinities and articulate their responses both to Communist ideological legacies and to the transformations of post-Mao society through their fictional male characters.

From the perspective of plural masculinities, Kam Louie's pioneering monograph *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (2002) proposes the influential *wen-wu* framework, which highlights the cultural specificity of masculinity in the Chinese tradition. In this model, ideal manhood is understood as a balance between *wen* (cultural attainment, literary refinement) and *wu* (martial valour, physical prowess). Drawing largely on classical narratives such as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margin*, Louie shows how exemplary masculine figures in premodern China combined intellectual and moral cultivation with martial capability, even though these texts primarily portray the political and public dimensions of life. Louie further argues that while both *wen* and *wu* were recognised as legitimate masculine virtues, *wen* was generally accorded higher status than *wu* throughout most time of Chinese history (Louie, 2002, pp. 6–12). The *wen-wu* matrix has been highly influential in demonstrating the plural and culturally embedded nature of Chinese masculinity. However, precisely because it functioned as an overarching normative ideal within official and elite discourses, it is less readily applicable to the private, embodied, and sexual dimensions of masculinity.

Geng Song's monograph *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture* (2004) extends Kam Louie's work by integrating insights from gender studies and further complicating the understanding of Chinese masculinity. Song argues that *wen* and *wu* are not monolithic categories but internally differentiated, producing multiple forms of masculinity shaped by the interplay of gender, class, age, race, and social position (Song, 2004, pp. 5–17). He emphasises that the study of masculinity must be undertaken alongside an examination of femininity, as the two are mutually constitutive. His analysis focuses in particular on "effeminate" or "fragile" male figures—most notably the *caizi* (the talented scholar whose value lies in his delicate body and literary talent)—and on the elevation of the fragile scholar as an ideal masculine form with specific cultural meanings in premodern Chinese literature. Under the concept of the "fragile scholar," Song

[3] Mid-1990s scholarship on gender and masculinity in Chinese literature includes several influential studies of premodern texts, notably Louise Edwards's *Men and Women in Qing China: Gender in The Red Chamber Dream* (1994) and Keith McMahon's *Misers, Shrews, and Polygamists: Sexuality and Male-Female Relations in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Fiction* (1995). Both works provide important insights into gender relations and masculine norms in late imperial Chinese fiction. In the field of contemporary Chinese literature, Lu Tonglin's *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism and Oppositional Politics: Contemporary Chinese Experimental Fiction* (1995) is a seminal study. Lu argues that although male writers such as Mo Yan, Zhaxi Dawa, Su Tong, and Yu Hua critique Communist ideology and the Cultural Revolution, their works nevertheless reproduce misogynistic tendencies that reinforce gender hierarchies and male dominance. However, because her analysis foregrounds misogyny rather than masculinity as a gendered subject position, and because her explanatory framework is less convincing in the socio-economic context of the 1990s and 2000s, her work is not treated as central to this paper's literature review, though it remains an important reference for understanding gender politics in post-Mao fiction.

further examines a range of masculine archetypes in Chinese tradition, highlighting how this figure is endowed with distinctive textual and cultural privilege, as manifested in figures such as the *junzi* (gentleman), the *shi* (scholar-official), the *da zhangfu* (great man), the *yingxiong* (hero), and the *haohan* (good man).

Unlike Louie, who foregrounds the *wen-wu* framework, Song places greater emphasis on the *yin-yang* paradigm, arguing that its structuring role in Chinese conceptions of gender relations helps explain the cultural legitimacy of male effeminacy. His analysis also engages with male homosexuality, homosocial desire, and other forms of male bonding. Methodologically, Song adopts a Foucauldian approach, drawing on Michel Foucault's theories of history, power, and sexuality to examine how gender roles are shaped through shifting configurations of power. His reading of *yin-yang* discourse foregrounds the ways in which masculinity is produced through social positioning and power relations rather than fixed biological or moral traits. In this regard, *The Fragile Scholar* makes a significant contribution by applying contemporary gender theory to the analysis of effeminate masculinity in premodern Chinese literature. However, because Song's analysis is grounded primarily in premodern texts, his arguments and conclusions are largely confined to traditional cultural contexts and are less directly applicable to the post-Mao literary and socio-economic conditions.

While both Louie and Song later acknowledge the importance of global influences on masculine ideals in China, highlighting the plural, fluid nature of masculinity and its historical continuity in a globalising world where Chinese culture interacts with the West and masculine ideals become reworked and hybridised,[4] their analyses do not focus primarily on contemporary literature. Questions of how male writers respond to Communist ideological legacies and to the socio-economic transformations of the post-Mao era through their fictional male characters are more fully addressed in scholarship on contemporary Chinese literature of the 1980s and 1990s. In this regard, Zhong Xueping's monograph *Masculinity Besieged? Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late Twentieth Century* (2000) is a key study. Zhong examines literary representations of masculinity primarily in fiction of the 1980s, drawing on works by male writers such as Zhang Xianliang, Liu Heng, Han Shaogong, Yu Hua, Wang Shuo, and Mo Yan. She argues that these writers are deeply preoccupied with questions of masculinity, marginality, and gender, situating the male search for identity within the broader intellectual quest for modernity in post-Mao China. Central to Zhong's analysis is the perception, prevalent in the 1980s, that gender balance had shifted to men's disadvantage, producing a discourse of male weakness and crisis.

In *Masculinity Besieged*, Zhong contends that post-Mao male writers and critics repeatedly articulate anxiety over masculine decline and express a desire for the restoration of strong, potent masculinity. Her study explores this theme more extensively than earlier scholarship, particularly through close readings of marginal male figures whose instability and sense of loss reflect broader cultural tensions. However, Zhong also notes that this literary recuperation of masculinity often comes at the expense of women, who are further marginalised as male subjectivity is recentred. In her discussion of Mo Yan, Zhong focuses on *Red Sorghum* (1986), interpreting the hyper-masculine grandfather figure as an imagined return to China's vigorous cultural roots, at once a critique of Communist excesses and a nationalist response to the influx of foreign masculine ideals. By contrast, my study shifts attention to Mo Yan's 1990s-fiction, with a focus on male weakness and marginalised masculinity in *Shifu*. While Zhong's book concludes with a brief afterword situating her arguments in the context of the 1990s, it remains primarily anchored in the literary and ideological concerns of the 1980s, leaving later representations of masculinity under conditions of market reform less fully explored.

Another important contribution to the study of masculinity in post-Mao literature is Pamela Hunt's monograph *Rebel Men: Masculinity and Attitude in Postsocialist Chinese Literature* (2022), which can be read as a sequel to Zhong Xueping's earlier work. Hunt examines fiction by male writers of the 1990s and 2000s—specifically Zhu Wen, Feng Tang, Xu Zechen, and Han Han—focusing on protagonists who adopt oppositional or rebellious stances toward mainstream society. She argues that while these "rebel men" appear to challenge social norms through themes of marginality, sexuality, migration, and mobility, their expressions of rebellion are often underpinned by surprisingly conservative gender positions that reaffirm male dominance in both domestic and social spheres while keeping women marginalised. Hunt concludes that despite their countercultural posturing, these writers ultimately continue to value conventional masculine attributes and seek to sustain hegemonic masculinity and male agency.

Central to Hunt's analysis is a persistent cultural anxiety surrounding gender, examined through the frameworks of hegemonic, marginalised, and protest masculinities. Both the writers and their male protagonists are marginalised in various ways by social status, cultural position, or ideological stance, and respond through forms of protest masculinity that function to reassert masculine legitimacy. Hunt's study

[4] See Kam Louie's *Chinese Masculinities in a Globalizing World* (2014) and Derek Hird and Geng Song's edited volume *The Cosmopolitan Dream: Transnational Chinese Masculinities in a Global Age* (2018) for further discussions of the transformation and diversification of Chinese masculinities in the context of globalisation.

underscores the importance of analysing literary resistance and attitude through a gendered lens, demonstrating that masculinity in contemporary Chinese literature is not simply "in crisis" but is continually renegotiated, contested, and reconstituted, even in texts that initially appear to foreground marginality and decline. Her work has inspired my own focus on marginalised masculinity in greater depth, particularly through a close reading of Zhu Wen's *Ah, Xiao Xie*, alongside a comparative analysis with Mo Yan's *Shifu*. At the same time, Hunt's analysis does not fully examine how marginalised masculinity is structurally produced through the specific socio-economic conditions of the 1990s, especially the reform of state-owned enterprises, labour displacement, and the erosion of socialist welfare guarantees. This paper extends Hunt's insights by employing a gendered poststructuralist perspective and drawing explicitly on R.W. Connell's concept of marginalised masculinity and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. In doing so, it places greater emphasis on how male writers respond not only to enduring Communist ideological legacies but also to the disruptive transformations of the post-Mao market economy, particularly those associated with SOE reform and the lived experience of working-class precarity.

Other relevant scholarship includes Wendy Larson's *Zhang Yimou: Globalization and the Subject of Culture* (2017), which examines issues of family, capitalism, visual gaze, and cultural subjectivity in Zhang Yimou's film *Happy Times* (2000), adapted from Mo Yan's *Shifu*. While offering valuable insights into globalisation and cultural production, Larson's study focuses on the cinematic adaptation rather than the literary text and does not address questions of masculinity or marginal male subjectivity. In addition, several recent Chinese-language studies on Mo Yan's *Shifu*, such as those by Han (2019) and Huang and Mo (2020), concentrate mainly on humour, narrative technique, or translation strategies, rather than on gendered subjectivity. Scholarship on Zhu Wen's fiction is even more limited, partly due to his relatively brief literary career and his lesser prominence compared to Mo Yan. Existing Chinese-language studies, including those by Zhao (2018) and Xiong (2020), are generally brief and lack sustained theoretical engagement with masculinity and marginality.

This research builds on existing scholarship on masculinity by engaging with perspectives on the plurality of masculinities and on writers' responses to both Communist ideological legacies and the socio-economic transformations of post-Mao China. It addresses a gap in the field by offering a detailed analysis of marginalised masculinity in Mo Yan's *Shifu* and Zhu Wen's *Ah, Xiao Xie*, situating these representations in relation to socialist residues, men's struggles and resilience, gender dynamics, SOE reform and its effects, and the pressures exerted by the market economy on laid-off and state workers in the 1990s. Because both texts remain relatively under-studied, this paper provides a close, gender-focused analysis from a gendered poststructuralist perspective, while also offering a comparative reading. In doing so, it examines how the two writers deploy narrative strategies to represent marginalised masculinity and to negotiate the intersections of gender, labour, class, and socio-economic restructuring in post-Mao China.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this paper, I ask the following questions: How is marginalised masculinity represented in the fiction of Mo Yan and Zhu Wen? In what ways do these two writers engage with socialist residues and depict men's struggles shaped by Mao-era ideologies as they seek to survive within the rapidly transforming society of the 1990s? Finally, what do their narrative strategies and literary representations reveal about the weakness and crisis of masculinity in contemporary China, and what broader implications do these representations have for understanding gender, labour, class, and post-Mao transformations? I approach the question of masculinity in contemporary Chinese fiction from a gendered poststructuralist perspective, drawing on R.W. Connell's theory of marginalised masculinity and Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. Integrating these two theoretical frameworks provides a productive analytical lens for examining masculinity, marginality, struggle, resilience and failures in the selected case studies—Mo Yan's fiction *Shifu* and Zhu Wen's fiction *Ah, Xiao Xie*.

This study understands masculinity as plural, unstable, and relational, shaped through intersections with class, age, social position, and lifestyle. Rather than treating masculinity as a monolithic category, it emphasises the plurality and complexity of masculine formations and the diversity of male experiences. Masculinity is thus conceptualised as performative and context-dependent, varying across social, historical, and cultural settings as individuals negotiate available cultural resources and power relations in the construction of masculine identities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). The view of masculinities as fluid, hybrid, and historically contingent, responding both to China's global entanglements and to local socio-economic transformations, constitutes a central thread of this paper.

Drawing on Connell's framework, masculinity can be analytically differentiated into four broad categories: hegemonic, subordinated, complicit, and marginalised masculinities (Connell, 2005, pp. 76–81). Pioneered by Connell, hegemonic masculinity refers to the culturally dominant and socially honoured form of masculinity within a given society, functioning as the normative ideal against which other masculinities are

measured and legitimised. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as a configuration of gender practice that provides "the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy," thereby guaranteeing, or appearing to guarantee, "the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell, 2005, p. 77). As a historically contingent and "currently accepted" strategy, hegemonic masculinity is constituted in relation to other forms of masculinity, particularly those it excludes or subordinates (Connell, 2005, p. 77). Subordinated masculinity refers to forms of masculinity that are actively devalued or excluded from hegemony, most notably homosexual masculinities. Complicit masculinity describes men who do not fully embody hegemonic ideals yet still benefit from patriarchal privilege. Such men often participate in marriage, fatherhood, and community life, exercising authority through negotiation and compromise rather than overt domination. Men who accrue the benefits of patriarchy without enacting an explicitly dominant or aggressive masculinity can thus be understood as occupying a complicit position (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832).

Marginalised masculinity, by contrast, emerges from the interaction of gender with other structures of power such as class, race, and social status. Rather than being defined solely through relations internal to the gender order, marginalised masculinities are shaped by structural exclusion and socio-economic disadvantage, positioning certain men outside the privileges associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005, pp. 80–81). As Connell formulates it, marginalised masculinity refers to men who are subordinated through class or racial hierarchies and are therefore excluded from the hegemonic group (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 844). Marginalisation is always relational, defined in reference to the authority and legitimacy of hegemonic masculinity. Importantly, marginalised masculinity should not be understood as a fixed character type but as a configuration of practices produced in specific historical and social contexts within shifting structures of power relations.

In this study, the concept of marginalised masculinity is developed as a key analytical framework for examining how male writers represent male subjectivity in post-Mao Chinese fiction. The protagonists under analysis are shaped by enduring socialist residues and are rendered marginal through their lack of social, economic, and institutional power, even as they attempt to accommodate certain values of the new market-oriented society. They stand in opposition to the dominant ideals of 1990s China—most notably wealth accumulation, entrepreneurial success, and business acumen—and are equally distant from the socialist heroism promoted during the Mao era. Their marginalisation is further reinforced by their refusal or inability to fully participate in mainstream society and by their rejection of many of the dominant values associated with urbanisation, market reform, and modernity. Socio-economic exclusion, together with experiences of ideological disorientation and alienation from the political and cultural centre, thus constitutes a central dimension of their marginalised masculinity in these texts. The representations examined here do not primarily centre homosexual masculinities, although writers such as Zhu Wen at times associate male weakness with traits culturally coded as feminine or homosexual. Importantly, marginalisation does not imply a complete rupture from hegemonic masculinity. These male figures often continue to conform to certain patriarchal norms and may still benefit from, and contribute to, a gender order that privileges men over women. In this sense, socially marginalised men can simultaneously reproduce hegemonic masculine behaviours, asserting authority over women and over men of similar or lower socio-economic status. The protagonists in the case studies examined here therefore occupy a paradoxical position: marginalised in relation to dominant socio-economic and ideological structures, yet complicit in sustaining the patriarchal centre of the gender order. This paradox constitutes a defining feature of male protagonists in the works of male writers, including Mo Yan and Zhu Wen, whose portrayals frequently exhibit misogynistic tendencies that reinforce gender hierarchies, as well as male superiority (Lu, 1995, pp. 13–14).

To add a poststructuralist dimension to the analysis, this paper draws on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity to examine how male protagonists attempt to adapt, survive, and demonstrate resilience amid post-Mao socio-economic transformation. From this perspective, identities, including masculine identities, are not fixed or essential attributes but flexible and unstable formations constituted through repeated performative practices. Identity emerges through the effects of performative acts by which subjects come to recognise themselves and to be recognised by others. Butler defines performativity as "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler, 1993, p. 2). Identity therefore does not exist before performance; rather, it is produced through repetition over time (Butler, 1990). Because performativity is never fully complete or guaranteed, it always contains the possibility of failure, slippage, and resignification, and such performances may fail to secure social recognition or institutional legitimacy. This instability makes performativity not only descriptive but also a potential site of transformation.

Butler's framework complements Connell's concept of marginalised masculinity by illuminating how male subjects in post-Mao Chinese fiction repeatedly perform, revise, and experiment with masculinity in response to structural constraints, socio-economic pressures, and historical change. In the rapidly shifting environment of the 1990s, male characters renegotiate their identities amid the collapse of Maoist certainties

and the demands of market reform. Their performances of masculinity are often unstable and inconsistent, failing to conform either to socialist ideals of heroic masculinity or to capitalist norms of entrepreneurial success. These failures are not merely individual shortcomings but expressions of broader structural contradictions and historical dislocations. Through their portrayals of economically marginalised, physically weakened, and psychologically disoriented men, whose performances of masculinity fail to secure social recognition or institutional legitimacy, Mo Yan and Zhu Wen foreground the trauma of rapid social change and reveal both the fragility and exclusions experienced by marginalised men, thereby illuminating the broader crisis of masculinity in post-Mao China.

4. ANALYSIS OF MO YAN'S AND ZHU WEN'S FICTION

This section analyses representations of marginalised masculinity in Mo Yan's *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh* and Zhu Wen's *Ah, Xiao Xie* from a gendered poststructuralist perspective. It focuses on the effects of SOE reform and the market economy on male workers, highlighting their struggles, adaptive strategies, and forms of resilience, as well as the persistence of socialist residues shaping masculine subjectivity.

4.1 Mo Yan's *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh*

Mo Yan (b. 1955) is one of the most prolific and influential contemporary Chinese writers. Emerging in the literary scene in the 1980s, he has sustained an extraordinarily productive career for over four decades, publishing hundreds of works across multiple genres. His major novels include *Red Sorghum* (1986), *The Garlic Ballads* (1988), *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* (1996), and *The Republic of Wine* (2000). He received the Mao Dun Literary Prize for his novel *Frog* in 2011 and was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012, gaining wide recognition both within and beyond China.

Mo Yan's writing is characterised by a dynamic range of themes and styles, from magical realism to black humour, from epic historical narrative to bawdy fable. His work revitalises the largely neglected tradition of literary humour in modern Chinese literature through comic yet sympathetic portrayals of individuals navigating the fragmented realities of post-Mao marketisation. Many of his characters, such as Ding Shikou in the novella *Shifu*, are caught uneasily between past and present, abruptly thrust into a social order governed by a radically different cultural and economic logic (Huang & Goldblatt, 2009, p. 34). Mo Yan's distinctive sense of humour is closely tied to his reflexive use of *youmo* (humour), a key term within *Shifu*. Despite its ironic title, the novella does not aim for overt laughter; instead, it constructs a series of darkly comic and absurd situations surrounding a laid-off factory worker in his fifties. In the text, *youmo* encompasses meanings ranging from incongruous absurdity to unsettling irony (Huang & Goldblatt, 2009, p. 34). Through this mode, Mo Yan underscores that *Shifu* offers a sharp critique of the "downsizing" crisis facing state workers under SOE reform in the late 1990s, foregrounding the socio-economic hardships, adaptive struggles, and inner conflicts of laid-off workers shaped by enduring socialist residues (Mo, 2001b, pp. xvii–xviii). In this way, laid-off workers are represented as a distinctly marginalised group within the post-Mao social landscape.

4.1.1 Socio-economic difficulties after layoff

The protagonist Ding Shikou, often addressed as *shifu*, a term that can be translated as "master worker", in Mo Yan's *Shifu* is portrayed as a diligent factory labourer who has devoted forty-three years to a state-owned enterprise, only to be laid off just one month before his anticipated retirement. Having long internalised Mao-era socialist values, Ding embodies the moral ideals of the socialist worker: he feels "enormously grateful to society" and believes that happiness must be repaid through selfless labour and dedication (Mo, 2001a, p. 1). Recognised by his superiors as a "provincial model worker," Ding is socially minded, disciplined, and deeply shaped by the ideological expectations of the Maoist industrial order. His loyalty to the state and the Party is also accompanied by a sense of reverence and fear, reflecting the enduring authority of socialist institutions over individual subjectivity. Yet these exemplary qualities do not lead to security or reward in the post-Mao reform era. Instead, Ding is abruptly laid off, receiving little compensation despite decades of service. His displacement highlights the fragility of socialist masculinity under post-Mao restructuring: the moral capital of hard work and collectivist devotion no longer guarantees dignity or protection. As China's market reforms in the 1990s accelerated the rise of private and foreign enterprises, many inefficient SOEs were unable to compete and collapsed, rendering workers such as Ding structurally marginal within the new socio-economic order. In Connell's terms, Ding exemplifies marginalised masculinity, as his exclusion from economic power and institutional recognition positions him outside hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005, p. 80).

Ding's marginalised masculinity becomes further visible through the intersection of physical injury and economic vulnerability. Shortly after being laid off, he falls off his bicycle, suffering a severe injury that confines him to hospital for two months. The medical expenses nearly exhaust his and his wife's savings,

underscoring the absence of meaningful welfare support in the post-Mao environment. Although the city mayor publicly declares that Ding may seek assistance at any time, Ding's attempt to do so ends in humiliation: he is forcibly thrown to the ground by security guards and is only admitted after attracting public attention. Even then, he is offered a token sum of one hundred yuan by the assistant director of the general office, which he refuses, insisting, "I can't accept your money" (Mo, 2001a, p. 13). His refusal reflects a lingering socialist sense of dignity and a rejection of charity as a substitute for institutional responsibility, highlighting the paradox of his marginalised masculinity: he remains ethically aligned with socialist values even as he is materially excluded from the system that once upheld them. Confronted with immediate financial precarity, he tells his wife, "We have exactly ninety-nine yuan. When that's gone, there's no more" (Mo, 2001a, p. 13). The narrative further underscores his despair, observing that Ding "sighed despondently, and sat down, defeated," while insisting that "Any man who can't make a living and take care of his family has no right to lash out at his wife" (Mo, 2001a, p. 14). Such moments not only reveal Ding's masculine vulnerability but also expose the persistence of patriarchal cultural expectations in which masculinity remains tied to breadwinning and social authority. Ding articulates this logic explicitly when he declares that "Any man who can't make a living and take care of his family is like a woman who can't have children. He can't hold his head up in society" (Mo, 2001a, p. 25). This statement illustrates how marginalised masculinity becomes associated with femininity: within dominant gender discourse, the loss of economic capacity and authority is coded as feminisation. Yet, following Connell's relational model, this does not imply structural equivalence, as marginalisation is defined in relation to the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group (Connell, 2005, pp. 80–81). Marginalised men, though subordinated in ways associated with femininity, retain residual patriarchal privilege while remaining devalued relative to hegemonic masculinity. Mo Yan captures this tension: SOE reform and lay-offs both destabilise male identity and reproduce gender hierarchies by defining masculinity against feminine lack, revealing the paradoxical position of marginalised masculinity within the gender order.

Through Ding, Mo Yan represents a male subject shaped by enduring socialist residues yet rendered marginal by his lack of economic power, occupational mobility, and institutional recognition—features consistent with Connell's concept of marginalised masculinity. Laid off and financially insecure, Ding embodies the crisis of masculine identity produced by SOE reform. His experience demonstrates how men formed under Mao-era ideologies become disoriented within the post-Mao market economy, where labour no longer guarantees stability and masculinity is no longer anchored in socialist moral value. The narrative thus critiques the erosion of state welfare and the consequences of reform-era restructuring while foregrounding the emergence of marginalised masculinity under these conditions.

4.1.2 Adaptation and self-conflict

Driven by his sense of familial responsibility and his belief that earning income is a man's duty as the head of the household, Ding Shikou attempts to seek new employment after his layoff. At first, Ding expresses his anxiety to Lü Xiaohu, his younger apprentice, who serves as a foil to Ding's old-world values by emphasising personal wealth and individual well-being. Ding admits his inability to imagine doing any work outside the factory after a lifetime of industrial labour. Suddenly thrust into the wider world, he is disoriented and unprepared for career switching, market competition, or informal trade. At his age, he feels unable to compete with younger people in making a living through small-scale entrepreneurship or manual service work. As the narrative observes, Ding struggles to accept that in a city of such size there is not "a single thing he could do to make a living," because for decades the factory had functioned as his "second home," and the awards he earned were the product of "buckets of sweat" (Mo, 2001a, pp. 20–21). This moment captures both his economic vulnerability and the collapse of the socialist work-unit (*danwei*) identity that had once anchored his masculine dignity and social worth. Ding's disorientation in the post-Mao era is further underscored when he encounters a public pay toilet and feels ashamed at having to pay even for such a basic necessity. Impressed by the modern facilities, including a hand-drying machine, he is mocked by Lü, who comments: "Shifu, you're like a man from Mars. I can't think of anything you don't have to pay for these days" (Mo, 2001a, p. 24).

However, Ding attempts to adapt to the new social order. One day, while strolling in search of work, he wanders around the lake and discovers the abandoned hulk of a bus beneath the poplar trees—its tyres gone, its windows shattered, and its paint almost entirely stripped away. Ding begins to imagine converting the derelict vehicle into a living space and a possible source of income. Lü Xiaohu, who consistently emphasises personal wealth and pragmatism in the new market economy, encourages him, remarking that "after getting laid off, everyone comes up with his own brilliant idea" (Mo, 2001a, p. 23). Eventually, with Lü's assistance, Ding renovates the bus and transforms it into a makeshift "love hotel", a resting place for couples hidden in the woods behind the factory. Yet Ding's deep moral conservatism, shaped by Maoist sexual repression and socialist ideals of propriety, leads him to regard this enterprise as shameful and quasi-illegal. Because the bus is used without official permission and the business involves illicit intimacy, Ding feels it brings him no dignity. He cannot reveal it even to his wife, and only Lü remains aware of the venture, offering advice and support

when Ding becomes anxious or discouraged. This episode highlights Ding's conflicted attempts to survive in the market economy while remaining bound by the moral and ideological residues of the socialist past. Read through Butler's notion of gender performativity, Ding's adaptative strategies can be understood as unstable and contradictory performances of masculinity. He is compelled to negotiate a new masculine identity through an enterprise that enables economic survival even as it undermines his sense of moral and masculine legitimacy. From the perspective of Butler's gender performativity, this identity is constituted through unstable, repeated acts shaped by regulatory norms, rendering his masculinity contingent and internally contradictory (Butler, 1993, p. 234). His resilience thus manifests in pragmatic strategies of survival within the emerging socio-economic order, even as these practices involve "illicit" labour and conflict with the moral framework inherited from socialism.

His self-conflict becomes increasingly severe. Haunted by the illegality and moral ambiguity of the love-hotel business, Ding begins to experience intense anxiety, uncertain whether he is "a saint or a sinner," and even dreams that the police have come to arrest him (Mo, 2001a, p. 37). He wakes in terror, his heart racing, while Lü continues to urge him to prioritise personal wealth over what he regards as outdated moral ideals. Although the venture brings Ding a brief period of financial stability, it is ultimately undermined by his lingering socialist ethics and sexual conservatism. His inability to reconcile market pragmatism with moral propriety culminates in the story's final episode: during winter, a couple rents the room but fails to emerge after several hours. Fearing that the couple may have died, Ding panics and insists on reporting the incident, despite Lü's harsh advice to ignore it. He even persuades Lü to bring him to his policeman cousin, who accompanies them back, only for them to find the room empty, as if no guests had been there for days. Indeed, there is nothing inside, consistent with the fact that Ding has had no customers since the beginning of winter. The cousin, understandably annoyed at what he perceives as a false alarm, leaves without another word. Lü, stunned, delivers the story's closing remark in disapproval, "Shifu, you'll do anything for a laugh" (Mo, 2001a, p. 58), echoing the title of the short story itself. The episode suggests that the couple may have been a hallucination, produced by Ding's mounting guilt and psychological strain. The narrative thus culminates in his moral and ideological disorientation, exposing the unstable subjectivity of a man caught between socialist residues and emergent market values. Ding performs masculine agency through pragmatic adaptation, most notably by converting the bus into a makeshift "love hotel" to sustain his role as provider under conditions of economic marginalisation. Yet this agency is shaped by a tension between economic necessity and socialist moral conservatism. His masculinity is therefore paradoxical: efforts to fulfil patriarchal expectations of provision depend on practices he perceives as morally compromising, thereby undermining his sense of masculine dignity. His adaptive attempts—and their ultimate failure—further underscore his marginalised masculinity.

4.2 Zhu Wen's *Ah, Xiao Xie*

Zhu Wen (b. 1967) is a prominent post-Mao male writer. Prior to his literary career in his twenties, he resigned from his engineering position at a state-owned power plant in 1994, a decision that positioned him within the emerging cohort of freelance writers (*ziyou zuojia*).[5] Zhu Wen later emerged as one of the leading figures among this group in Nanjing. He is also regarded as a prominent writer of the cohort known as the "New Generation" (*xinshengdai*), a label applied to writers born in the late 1960s and early 1970s who began publishing their literary works after 1989 (Lovell, 2007, pp. xii–xiii).[6] This generation is commonly understood to share several distinctive literary characteristics: a strongly individualistic and private narrative voice; a position outside the old-style socialist literary system; a rejection of the idealism and social commitment espoused by writers of the 1980s; and a condition of being structurally compelled to sustain themselves within the emerging market economy from the 1990s onward (Lovell, 2007, pp. xii–xiii).

Although Zhu Wen's writing career was relatively brief—having transitioned to filmmaking in the late 1990s and published only a limited number of literary works thereafter—his fiction nonetheless exerted a significant impact on the Chinese literary scene. Zhu Wen's most influential novella, *I Love Dollars* (1995),

[5] Freelance writers (*ziyou zuojia*) include those who have resigned from state-employed positions, such as Wang Xiaomi, Lin Bai, Li Feng, Zai Yongming, Zhu Wen, and Han Dong, as well as those who never sought formal employment, including Li Dawei, Wei Hui, and Mian Mian. By positioning themselves outside state institutions, these writers freed themselves from state control both financially and spiritually, sustaining their livelihoods exclusively through the earnings generated by their literary work (Kong, 2005, pp. 33–34).

[6] The period during which Zhu Wen emerged as a professional writer coincided with one of the most traumatic transitional phases experienced by Chinese writers in the post-Mao era: the shift from the intellectually elitist culture of the 1980s to the frenetic commercialism of the 1990s, mediated by the violent suppression of the 1989 pro-democracy movement (the June Fourth Incident) (Lovell, 2007, pp. vii–viii).

shaking the Chinese literary establishment through its irreverent portrayal of a young male protagonist whose carefree and provocative lifestyle challenged prevailing moral and aesthetic norms (Visser, 2010, pp. 275–276).[7] Through this work, Zhu Wen articulates a new image of the writer in a market-oriented society, foregrounding desire, sexuality, and the commodification of social relations. *I Love Dollars* offers a critical exploration of the moral ambiguities and human condition produced by an increasingly money-driven world, revealing the tensions between market logic, ethical values, and masculine identity in post-Mao China (Hunt, 2022, pp. 41–46).

Zhu Wen continues his exploration of male experience in post-Mao life in his fiction *Ah, Xiao Xie*, where male characters grapple not only with the consequences of market reform but also with the lingering legacy of the Maoist past. This dual burden is reflected in the forms of masculinity that emerge in his fiction. Zhu Wen's protagonists stand in marked contrast to both the socialist model of masculinity—defined by strength, diligence, and moral purity—and the figure of the successful reform-era businessman, who embodies a post-Mao ideal through wealth accumulation and market success. The male characters in *Ah, Xiao Xie* are socially marginal and exemplify what can be conceptualised as marginalised masculinity. They are out of step with society and unable to secure a stable place within it, revealing their failure to attain hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Yet despite their marginality, these men continue to struggle for survival in post-Mao society, displaying a form of resilience amid idiosyncratic experiences of psychological distress and economic depression.

4.2.1 Struggles in the factory

In *Ah, Xiao Xie*, the protagonist Xie Weigang, known as Xiao Xie, is a computer software engineer employed at a perpetually unfinished and centrally (mis)planned power plant. Set in the 1990s, this sinking SOE is depicted as a site of stagnation and melancholy, treating its employees like indentured serfs and offering them little more than existential and economic despair. The narrative follows the lives of a group of young, unmarried men who live and work in this factory, all of whom experience varying degrees of psychological and financial depression. Among them, the most melancholic figure is Xiao Xie himself. He exemplifies a form of marginalised masculinity through his physical appearance and personality, and through his ultimately unsuccessful attempts to resist the disciplinary authority of the factory regime.

In terms of his physical appearance, the story describes that he is "stick-thin, mouth full of skewed fangs, Adam's apple sticking out a mile, glasses that had one earpiece stuck on with first-aid tape, a cunning glint to his eyes, filthy fingernails—pretty much your standard computer-genius-on-the-brink look" (Zhu, 2007, p. 187). Both in appearance and personality, far removed from the muscular socialist hero or the successful reform-era businessman, Xiao Xie occupies an in-between position shaped by the historical transition from the Maoist to the post-Mao era. Trapped in a decaying SOE with no prospect of a meaningful career trajectory, he represents a man stranded between two historical orders and excluded from both. In other words, in terms of his marginalised masculinity as Connell's concept, Xiao Xie occupies a structurally subordinate position within the gender order (Connell, 2005, p. 76). Lacking economic power, occupational mobility, and institutional recognition, he is excluded from hegemonic models of masculine success, whether embodied by the socialist worker-hero or the entrepreneurial subject of the post-Mao market economy.

One telling example of Xiao Xie's marginalised masculinity is his failure to resist the disciplinary authority of the factory regime, most clearly manifested in his inability to resign from the power plant. In contrast to modernised plants in Shanghai and Hebei, equipped with advanced industrial machinery from leading Japanese and Swiss manufacturers, Xiao Xie's factory is portrayed as technologically backward, slow, and brutish. Yet it also retains a certain "safe" and nostalgic quality, resembling a relic of the Soviet industrial era (Zhu, 2007, p. 188). After stagnating in the factory for four years, Xiao Xie realises that his youth and productive years are rapidly slipping away. Determined to escape before the institution exhausts him entirely, he submits his resignation. However, the factory bosses interpret his decision as a personal affront and refuse point-blank to accept it (Zhu, 2007, p. 186). The story reveals although the factory is unprofitable and workers' wages have been reduced to subsistence levels—leaving them earning far less than their peers who graduated at the same time but found employment elsewhere—Xiao Xie's attempt to leave is nonetheless thwarted by institutional power. In response, Xiao Xie attempts to resist the factory's authority by pursuing a range of alternative strategies to secure his departure, yet these efforts ultimately fail to free him from institutional control. Read through Butler's notion of gender performativity (1993, pp. 2–3), Xiao Xie appears not as the

[7] The protagonist, a freelance writer living in an urban setting, is fixated on U.S. dollars and sexual desire. He engages in casual sexual encounters with prostitutes and even attempts—though ultimately fails—to procure a prostitute for his father, a gesture he frames as an expression of filial responsibility. Structured around a theme of generational conflict, the narrative follows the father's unexpected visit, during which the two wander through the city, flirt with waitresses, argue over the narrator's lifestyle choices, and go to bars together (Visser, 2010, pp. 275–276; Hunt, 2022, pp. 41–46).

bearer of a stable masculine identity but as a subject constituted through repeated and unstable performances, in which masculinity takes shape through a series of failed acts that never stabilise into a coherent form.

Xiao Xie's first strategy is to mobilise his deteriorating health—specifically his liver condition—as a justification for leaving the factory by taking extended sick leave. When the factory authorities learn of Xiao Xie's prospective new job in the Taiwanese computer company, they immediately order him back to the factory hospital for further medical examinations, thereby reasserting institutional surveillance over his body. In a desperate attempt to make his illness appear genuine and irreversible, Xiao Xie deliberately consumes excessive amounts of fatty food in order to damage his liver and produce abnormal medical test results (Zhu, 2007, p. 187). He thus turns his own body into a site of resistance, using self-inflicted physical deterioration as a performative resource to legitimate his exit from the factory. Yet this bodily performance of incapacity also fails to secure institutional recognition. Masculine agency here becomes paradoxical: it is enacted not through strength, productivity, or autonomy, but through self-damage, vulnerability, and pathological embodiment, underscoring the precarious and self-destructive forms that marginalised masculinity can assume under post-Mao conditions. This failure is further highlighted through contrast. While his colleague Wang Yalin, who possesses personal connections with the factory bosses, is able to leave the factory with ease and secure another job, Xiao Xie is subjected to repeated medical examinations and prolonged bureaucratic obstruction. Despite his abnormally high liver transaminase levels, his resignation is ultimately not approved. The scene thus exposes the classed and relational nature of masculine agency: exit from the socialist institution depends not on bodily suffering or rational choice, but on social capital and institutional privilege, both of which Xiao Xie lacks.

Another strategy Xiao Xie adopts in an attempt to make his resignation possible is to negotiate directly with the factory manager. Aware that the manager holds ultimate authority within the institution, Xiao Xie becomes fixated on rumors about the manager's alleged homosexual predilections and imagines that he might exploit this stigmatised sexual identity as leverage to coerce acceptance of his resignation. According to Connell's theory of masculinity, this scene stages a collision between hegemonic masculinity and what Connell terms subordinated or homosexual masculinity (2005, pp. 76–79). The factory manager, despite rumors of homosexuality, occupies a position of institutional and gendered power that aligns him with hegemonic masculinity through authority, seniority, and control over labour. This encounter underscores the relational and contingent nature of masculinity: subordinated identities may coexist with—and even enact—hegemonic power, while remaining constrained by and compelled to negotiate its norms. Thus, the collision both destabilises and reproduces masculine hierarchies. As Xiao Xie is unable to obtain a meeting with the manager, who remains mysterious, difficult to approach, and repeatedly avoids him because of the resignation issue, he alters his strategy by positioning himself in the men's restroom across the corridor from the manager's office. There he waits for three consecutive days in the hope of encountering him. When the manager finally appears, Xiao Xie abruptly confronts him in a sexually suggestive and aggressive manner, provoking panic and terror rather than compliance. As the narrator reports, "The moment he [the manager] got his belt undone, Xiao Xie lunged with such precipitation that the manager screamed out in terror" (Zhu, 2007, p. 189). The narrative highlights Xiao Xie's desperate and transgressive performance, which becomes associated with sexual deviance. His sexually aggressive gesture functions as a performative attempt to assert agency and masculine leverage; however, it collapses into farce and humiliation rather than securing recognition or institutional release, resulting instead in further punishment. His action thus paradoxically reinforces, rather than destabilises, his marginal position within the gender order.

Xiao Xie's transgression leads to intensified institutional discipline: the factory cancels his sick leave, orders him to return to work, and issues a formal warning. Unexpectedly, Xiao Xie obeys and docilely resumes training and labour in the factory, wearing what the narrator describes as a "martyred" expression (Zhu, 2007, p. 189). This "martyred" demeanour reflects his internalisation of marginalisation, as he endures discipline without resistance and performs submission as a strategy of survival. It thus signals a form of constrained agency, whereby his marginalised identity is reinforced through compliance with institutional power. In contrast, his younger male colleagues—four computer programmers—assert their agency by resigning in protest and walking out without formal approval. They are eventually fired for going AWOL (absent without leave) beyond the permitted time limit, yet all four go on to thrive in the market economy, securing employment or entrepreneurial success (Zhu, 2007, pp. 199–200). Unlike Xiao Xie, they do not remain in what the text depicts as "a doomed, sub-Soviet electricity plant" (Zhu, 2007, p. 199). This contrast exposes the classed and dispositional dimensions of masculine agency. Xiao Xie's obedience, institutional loyalty, and internalised discipline, shaped by socialist work-unit ideology, render him incapable of adopting the rule-breaking exit strategies that enable his peers' success. His repeated failures thus illustrate how marginalised masculinity in post-Mao China is produced not only through economic exclusion and institutional power, but also through an inability to abandon the residual norms of socialist compliance.

4.2.2 Resilience

While the narrative foregrounds Xiao Xie's physical and emotional weakness, it also portrays his unexpected resilience. This paradox points to Zhu Wen's implicit critique of the parallel between Xiao Xie and the beleaguered state-owned factory itself. Both are downsized, marginalised, and in danger of disappearance, yet both stubbornly persist, refusing to vanish. In this sense, Xiao Xie's battered body and damaged masculinity become symbolic of the decaying but enduring socialist industrial system in the reform era.

Xiao Xie's resilience is seen in an episode involving his playboy roommate Hao Qiang, who frequently brings young married women into their shared dormitory room. Xiao Xie's proximity to Hao Qiang's sexual affairs inadvertently draws him into danger. One day, while Xiao Xie is alone in the room, two men suddenly appear, lift him up, and throw him out of the fourth-floor window without warning or explanation. His fall is briefly interrupted by a clothes rack suspended outside a second-floor window, before he slips through its slats and lands on bags of garbage outside the dormitory, where he loses consciousness. The incident is clearly a botched murder attempt, yet Xiao Xie miraculously survives. Medical examinations report his injuries "little short of a miracle," though his survival comes at the cost of a feminised bodily condition: he begins to find blood in his stool several times a month, an experience he compares to "a girl getting her first period" (Zhu, 2007, pp. 197, 204). His injured, leaking body thus becomes a site where masculinity is symbolically destabilised. However, this association with femininity should not be read as a direct equivalence between marginalisation and feminisation. Rather, it reflects dominant gender discourses in which vulnerability and bodily exposure are feminised and used to mark certain men as marginal. Despite the absence of any clear evidence of a struggle in the dormitory room and the suspicious circumstances surrounding the fall, the factory authorities classify the incident as an attempted suicide rather than attempted murder. This institutional misrecognition further deepens Xiao Xie's marginalisation and exposes the negligence and irresponsibility of the socialist work-unit (*danwei*) system, whose protective functions have been steadily eroded under the pressures of market reform. Through this episode, Zhu Wen offers a pointed critique of the state's failure to safeguard, recognise, and care for its employees in the reform era.

Traumatised by the incident and rendered hypersensitive and paranoid, Xiao Xie no longer feels safe in the dormitory. He receives no compensation or institutional support for the violence inflicted upon him. In response, he submits another letter of resignation to the factory bosses. This time, they agree to let him go, but only on the condition that he reimburse the factory for the costs of training him over the years. The demand places him in severe debt and profoundly humiliates him. As the narrator reflects, the workers suddenly realise that, in the eyes of their state employers, they are "little better than indentured labourers or prostitutes," forced to "buy back their own freedom, like slaves" (Zhu, 2007, pp. 198–199). Xiao Xie bitterly counters that the factory should instead compensate him for the loss of his youth. Xiao Xie insists on resigning through formal procedures. After prolonged negotiation, the factory demands 40,000 yuan as the price of his release, later agreeing to reduce the sum to 20,000 yuan. Confronted with the impossibility of raising such a sum in a short time, Xiao Xie becomes increasingly anxious. Those around him propose a range of desperate strategies, from petty trading and theft to bodily self-harm and feminised tactics such as marriage or impersonation aimed at securing a wealthy husband (Zhu, 2007, pp. 200–201). These suggestions encapsulate the social realities of the 1990s, pointing to survival strategies that verge on criminality, self-destruction, and feminisation—abject options available to marginalised men under post-Mao conditions.

Unexpectedly, however, the factory agrees to Xiao Xie's immediate resignation, allowing him to leave with an outstanding debt of 20,000 yuan, while withholding his personal work file until repayment. The narrator initially celebrates this apparent breakthrough, imagining that Xiao Xie can finally escape the factory and begin a respectable career as a software designer. Paradoxically, Xiao Xie then abruptly refuses to leave and insists on staying, while the factory manager now urges him to depart. He offers no explanation for this reversal, which exposes the depth of his institutional dependence. Deprived of stable income and welfare outside the work unit, Xiao Xie continues to perform obedience by appearing punctually, remaining visibly present, and publicly affirming loyalty to factory leadership. His passivity and perceived weakness become objects of ridicule, with his name circulating among co-workers as a catch-all term for failed or abortive undertakings and other misfortunes, including sexual dysfunction such as premature ejaculation or impotence. Three explanations circulate for his decision to stay: the possibility of promotion, emotional attachment to a female co-worker, or the need to retain state medical insurance due to recurring health problems (Zhu, 2007, pp. 203–204). Together, these possibilities underscore that Xiao Xie's persistence is shaped less by ambition than by bodily vulnerability, affective ties, and reliance on the residual protections of the socialist welfare system. His endurance redefines masculinity not in terms of autonomy or dominance, but as survival through attachment and dependence, revealing how marginalised masculinity in post-Mao China is constituted through failed performances, physical fragility, psychological distress, and continued reliance on institutional remnants of socialism.

In the final scene, Xiao Xie is believed to have committed suicide, only to reappear unexpectedly as the narrator and Xia Yuqing are on their way to his funeral. Xia Yuqing, another figure of pathos, is a former social climber, once physically imposing and masculine, whose career stagnation in the sinking state factory has left him chronically depressed, sleepless, and indifferent to maintaining his body. His physical degeneration, marked by slack, artificial-looking muscles, mirrors the decline of the SOEs themselves, where workers are left idle and purposeless. As the narrator and Xia Yuqing struggle along the road carrying an oversized funeral wreath—an absurd burden they repeatedly attempt and fail to discard—the image evokes a China weighed down by the remnants of an obsolete socialist system. Xiao Xie's survival disrupts the logic of tragedy: he continues to report to work with the crowds, despite having nothing to do. The parallel between Xiao Xie and the state-owned factory thus persists, both are damaged yet enduring, marginal yet stubbornly present. Male bodies in the story, especially Xiao Xie's, are weak and injured, but they also display a peculiar resilience, much like the cumbersome wreath and the failing factory itself. Rather than narrating irreversible catastrophes, the text foregrounds endurance as a mode of survival. Read through Butler's notion of gender performativity (1993, pp. 67–68), such resilience is not an expression of an inner essence but is constituted through repeated, regulated acts that sustain the subject despite constraint. Masculinity thus emerges as unstable and continually re-enacted under shifting socio-economic conditions, where resilience itself becomes a performative negotiation with power rather than a sign of autonomy. In *Ah, Xiao Xie*, it is rendered marginal by post-Mao realities, caught between lingering socialist structures and a market economy, and shaped by ongoing struggles, resilience, and negotiation.

5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Mo Yan and Zhu Wen offer two distinctive yet complementary literary representations of marginalised masculinity in post-Mao China. Although both writers depict men shaped by the socio-economic upheavals of the 1990s, their differing generational positions, narrative styles, and thematic emphases produce varied articulations of masculine crisis, struggle, and resilience amid socialist decline and market transition. A comparative reading of Mo Yan's *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh* (1999) and Zhu Wen's *Ah, Xiao Xie* (1999) thus illuminates how marginalised masculinity emerges through the uneven coexistence of socialist residues and reform-era restructuring.

Mo Yan, who began his literary career in the 1980s, belongs to an older generation whose experiences are more deeply rooted in Maoist socialism. His fiction often retains a strong connection to rural life, collectivist moral frameworks, and the ideological structures of the socialist state. In *Shifu*, the protagonist Ding Shikou embodies the socialist worker ideal: he is diligent, socially minded, selfless, and devoted to the factory system that has shaped his identity for more than forty years. Ding's status as a "model worker" reflects Mao-era norms in which masculinity was anchored in labour, discipline, and moral contribution to society. At the same time, Ding also retains reverence and fear toward the Party-state, revealing the enduring psychological authority of socialist institutions over male subjectivity. However, Ding's exemplary socialist masculinity provides no protection in the reform era. Laid off only one month before his anticipated retirement, in his fifties, he is abruptly expelled from the very system that once promised stability and dignity. His marginalisation demonstrates how the moral economy of socialist labour collapses under market reforms, leaving older workers disoriented and structurally excluded. Ding's attempts to adapt, most notably through the love-hotel business, are marked by intense contradiction. While the venture offers temporary financial survival, it also produces profound shame and moral anxiety, since Ding's values remain shaped by Maoist sexual repression and collectivist propriety. Mo Yan thus presents marginalised masculinity as an unstable condition in which socialist residues persist even as economic necessity forces men into morally ambiguous forms of survival. Ding's attempts to meet patriarchal expectations of provision rely on actions he regards as morally compromising, thereby eroding his sense of masculine dignity. His eventual psychological breakdown and hallucinations further highlight the crisis of masculine identity brought about by the erosion of state welfare and institutional betrayal, while his failed adaptations reinforce his marginalised position.

In contrast, Zhu Wen emerged in the literary scene of the 1990s as part of a younger generation of freelance writers characterised by disillusionment, irony, and rejection of socialist idealism. Unlike Mo Yan's rooted engagement with Maoist moral legacies, Zhu Wen's writing reflects the frenetic commercialism and ideological exhaustion of the post-Mao era. Importantly, Zhu Wen himself once worked in a state-owned power plant, and this experience informs his bleak portrayal of young men trapped in sinking SOEs. In *Ah, Xiao Xie*, the protagonist Xiao Xie represents marginalised masculinity not through socialist heroism betrayed, but through physical weakness, psychological melancholia, and institutional entrapment from the outset. Xiao Xie's marginality is expressed through his bodily fragility, eccentric personality, and failure to attain hegemonic masculine ideals of strength, success, or authority. Whereas Ding's crisis emerges from the collapse of a

formerly stable identity, Xiao Xie, a young computer software engineer, exists in a context already characterised by stagnation, hopelessness, and bureaucratic control. His attempts to resign, his self-destructive strategies of illness, and his transgressive performances of sexuality all reveal marginalised masculinity as unstable, improvised, and repeatedly denied institutional recognition. Zhu Wen's narrative further expands the gender dimension by engaging not only heterosexual norms but also homosexuality, and the stigma attached to subordinated masculinities. In so doing, Zhu Wen portrays male subjectivity as damaged yet enduring, depicting a marginalised masculinity caught between decaying socialist structures and a market economy that produces forms of masculine potency from which these men remain excluded. In interviews, Zhu Wen has suggested that his characters, including Xiao Xie, parallel the lived experiences of himself and his peers in the 1990s, remarking that "that's how we felt back then—powerless, ridiculous," shaped by the weight of historical upheaval across both the Maoist and post-Mao eras (Lovell, 2009).

Despite their differences, both texts converge in their critique of reform-era inequality and the erosion of state welfare. Ding's bicycle injury and subsequent medical impoverishment, alongside Xiao Xie's bodily vulnerability and exposure to violence within state accommodation, reveal how workers are abandoned without meaningful compensation or institutional protection. Both writers thus expose the dark underside of SOE reform, which undermines workers' confidence in the socialist promise and puts them in increasingly precarious positions within the new market economy. At the same time, both protagonists embody Connell's concept of marginalised masculinity through their lack of economic power, occupational mobility, and institutional recognition. Their experiences also resonate with Butler's notion of gender performativity: masculinity is not presented as a stable essence, but as a fluid and contradictory set of struggles, adaptations, and fragile performances shaped by structural constraints, socio-economic pressures, and historical change.

Narratively, Mo Yan employs dark humour and irony to depict Ding's decline into confusion and absurdity, while Zhu Wen foregrounds bleak resilience and grotesque endurance in Xiao Xie's misfit masculinity. Yet both stories ultimately end in failure. Ding's moral frustration culminates in hallucination and humiliation, while Xiao Xie's attempts at resistance collapse into farce and continued institutional entrapment. Ding's agency is shaped by a tension between economic pragmatism and socialist moral conservatism, whereas Xiao Xie's more overtly paradoxical masculinity oscillates between submission and vulnerability. In different ways, both protagonists fail to achieve stability or success in the reform-era 1990s, illustrating the limits of masculine agency under post-Mao transformation. Importantly, both texts centre male crisis and agency, while female characters remain largely side-lined. Women appear as wives, lovers, or fleeting figures rather than fully developed subjects, suggesting that even narratives of marginalised masculinity may reproduce patriarchal structures by granting men the privilege of struggle and subversion while denying women comparable agency.

Ultimately, *Shifu* and *Ah, Xiao Xie* challenge dominant constructions of masculinity by exposing their instability and contingency. Rather than a coherent and authoritative ideal, masculinity is rendered fractured, performative, and shaped by shifting socio-economic and ideological conditions. The marginalised protagonists, marked by economic precarity, institutional displacement, and moral contradiction, fail to embody hegemonic ideals of power, autonomy, and control; yet it is precisely through this failure that dominant masculinity is unsettled, revealing its historically contingent nature. Drawing on Connell's framework, hegemonic and marginalised masculinities are understood not as fixed types but as configurations of practice produced within shifting social relations (Connell, 2005, p. 81). In this sense, men excluded from economic power and institutional recognition remain implicated in—and at times reproduce—patriarchal norms. Butler's concept of gender performativity further reinforces this view, conceptualising masculinity as a series of repeated, unstable acts rather than a fixed essence (Butler, 1993, p. 76). A defining feature of marginalised masculinity in *Shifu* and *Ah, Xiao Xie* is its paradoxical character: the protagonists are simultaneously subordinated within the socio-economic order and implicated in reproducing gendered and social hierarchies. This tension both unsettles hegemonic masculinity by revealing its fragility and contextual dependence, and sustains it through everyday practices of compliance, authority, and gendered conduct. By foregrounding vulnerability, constrained agency, and adaptive survival, Mo Yan and Zhu Wen depict a crisis of masculinity in post-Mao China while reconfiguring it as fluid, relational, and historically contingent. Their portrayals of laid-off workers, struggling SOE employees, and institutional decline offer a critical literary engagement with reform-era transformation and deepen our understanding of masculinity, marginality, and gendered anxieties in the post-Mao cultural landscape.

DECLARATION

1. Conflict of interest
The author declares no conflict of interest.

2. Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process
The author declares that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted technologies were used to generate the content, ideas, or theoretical contributions of this work. During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT-5.2 solely for language editing. After using the tool, the author thoroughly reviewed and edited the text and takes full responsibility for content of the published article.

3. Data availability statement
This study draws on historical, gender, cultural, and literary materials. All data are derived from published sources and are accessible through the relevant repositories, subject to applicable access conditions.

4. Ethics statement
This study is based on literary research and involves no human participants; ethical approval was not required.

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6. Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRediT)
Ruttapond Swanpitak: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Resources

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