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Hird, D.

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Xi Family Values

Derek Hird
Senior Lecturer in Chinese Studies
University of Westminster

Xi Jinping has been variously termed an [“alpha male”](#) in (and out of) a bromance with Donald Trump; a macho, [Putin-like](#) aggressor covetous of neighbouring territories; and one of several national leaders [exhibiting](#) chauvinistic “straight-man cancer” (*zhinan ai*). Yet few column inches have been spent on analysing his masculinity and views about gender. Looking at Xi through the lens of gender reveals vital clues about his reshaping of Chinese gender relations and in particular family roles. While Xi has tried to paint a picture of himself as committed to gender equality, his gender critics decry the conservatism of his views. Whether one considers Xi the benevolent father of the nation, a hetero-patriarchal oppressor of women and sexual minorities, or somewhere in between, his enactment of masculinity and vision of gender hierarchies are helping transform gender relations in China.

If Xi is genuinely committed to gender equality, he has his work cut out for him. In what became an international cause célèbre, five young feminists were [arrested](#) and detained in China in March 2015 for simply protesting against sexual harassment on public transport. Later that year, Xi [reaffirmed](#) China’s commitment to gender equality and women’s development in front of global leaders at the United Nations in New York. Yet China has a long way to go in this regard, as both quantitative and qualitative data show. Ranked 90th on the UN’s 2015 Gender Inequality Index, well behind even Iran, a swathe of [statistics](#) demonstrate China’s huge gender gaps from pay to leadership roles. Recent sociological and anthropological research reveals cultures of masculinity that embrace [workplace](#) gender discrimination, sexualised business [socialising](#) (*yingchou*), endemic sexual [exploitation](#) of women, the collecting of [second wives](#) and girlfriends to demonstrate male power and status, the [exclusion](#) of women from key decision-making roles, and the [undesirability](#) of women over twenty-eight or highly educated women as wives—to name a few key areas.

Xi has been silent on these pressing issues of gender inequality. However, he has set out a clear message on family values in several speeches, contributing to the emergence of [neo-familism](#): the reassertion of parent-child relations and the rise of intergenerational intimacy as focal points of contemporary Chinese life. Designating the family as the spiritual and moral foundation of Chinese civilisation, Xi calls attention to “the family, family education, and family values” (*zhuzhong jiating, zhuzhong jiajiao, zhuzhong jiafeng*). Emphasising the [“unique role”](#) of women in the family, he has identified their main service to the country as caring for the elderly and educating children. By [describing](#) the perfect wife as “virtuous” (*xian*) and the perfect mother as “kind” (*ci*), Xi has reproduced the well-worn trope that the stability of the household, headed by a patriarch, rests on the shoulders of the virtuous wife and good mother.

As examples of good mothers, Xi cites two stories that every Chinese school child knows: the devotion of Mencius’ mother to her son, and General Yue Fei’s mother’s insistence that he defend the country rather than care for her. Xi recounts that his own mother seared the story of Yue Fei into his memory when young. His message is clear: a good mother sacrifices her own interests for those of her son. His choice of Mencius and Yue Fei as masculine models [underlines](#) the age-old ideal that Chinese men should balance *wen* (cultural attainment) and

wu (martial valour), and also seizes the chance to laud fervent nationalism. Xi completes his lesson in Confucian family values by exhorting younger brothers to respect elder brothers, and all children to be filial. He also claims that these very family morals were espoused and practised by male socialist heroes such as Zhou Enlai, Zhu De and Mao Zedong.

Conservative views on women's role in the family have even become integrated into Xi's "Chinese Dream" (*Zhongguo meng*). The Chinese Dream promotes a masculinist, nationalist vision of a strong, rich China that is aggressive in pursuing its territorial interests, and prioritises educated urban male, hi-tech, creative industries jobs rather than the production-line jobs of [migrant rural women](#) that have built the reform-era economy so far. Xi's Chinese Dream [intertwines](#) nationalism and masculinity through its models of patriotic manhood and exalted motherhood.

The media presentation of Xi's own masculinity breaks with the styles of his two most recent predecessors, Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin. Neither Hu nor Jiang encouraged or received the same public adulation as the "fathers of the nation", Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, yet Xi is [stepping into](#) the role of the "big man" with relish, and has tolerated the appearance of some [personality cult](#) trappings. Emanating manly vigour, Xi has also assertively [promoted](#) the development of the Chinese men's football team. Moreover, in striking contrast to his predecessors, Xi's marital relations have become a significant component of his masculine image. His wife, the folk singer Peng Liyuan, plays the perfect "first-wife" foil to Xi's strong masculine character. Fashion-obsessed and charmingly feminine, by giving up her career for her hero-husband she has provided a subservient [wifely model](#) for all of China's women.

What sort of masculinity can we conclude that Xi epitomises? An assemblage of culturally nationalist Confucian, Han-centred, authoritarian socialist and media-savvy marketplace masculinities, his gender identity is significantly constructed through the acts of female "others", such as his wife's passive adulation and his mother's selfless care. This vision of masculinity fits a growing neo-familism in Chinese society in which women's career interests are largely subordinated to their husband's and whose primary duties are domestic. Combined with decreasing numbers of women in leadership positions and increasingly large gender pay gaps, how times have changed since Mao pronounced that "women hold up half the sky".