Cultures of Gender in Urban Life

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Abstract. This essay looks at the urban environment vs gender, mostly dealing with also masculinity, in cities as Delhi and in different places in China. Grounded in this literature, the dissertation moves on to qualitative methods to understand the ways in which cultures of gender affect and are affected by urban spaces. Studies from Delhi have reported that the public and private spaces in the city are masculine domains where masculinity is symbolically, as well as fiercely articulated (hereafter key study findings). The tribal migrant men in Delhi, on the other hand, deal with these normalised concepts of urban masculinity with some difficulty while also suggesting a negotiation and alteration to gender identities more generally as a consequence of their migration and exposure to urban India. The essay also shows that in China, the gendering of male migrant cab driving work as high hegemonic masculine roles does not just combat historical tendencies towards delegitimising jobs as female and therefore anti-normative; it is currently under threat from regulatory change eroding autonomy and economic stability. This story also fits the service sector of urban China where femininity is commodified and served, and being a woman means continuing discrimination in service roles governed by everyday gendered work politics. These findings indicate the continued importance of traditional gendered identities and masculinities in urban areas, even as they undergo major socio-economic shifts. This paper adds to the literature on gender and urbanisation as well as processes of socio-spatial change in large cities. The essay ends with the observation that though there may be seedlings of change, the work to create inclusive urban settings for all genders is still fraught.

Keywords: Urban masculinity, Gender dynamics in cities, Cultures of gender, Gender and urban space, Migration and masculinity, Gender roles in public and private spheres, Masculinity and public spaces, Gender transformation in urban environments

1 Introduction

In this essay, I will be discussing the cultures of gender within urbanised cities, particularly Delhi and cities in China. I have never been to Delhi nor have any friends who lived in this city; therefore, all my impressions and understandings of the city came of ethnography and videos. Srivastava portrays a map of Delhi where men occupied the

common social spaces, and how the city is designed to be owned by men and masculinity[1]. Interestingly, Duncan provided another perspective of men's life in Delhi, suggesting that migrated tribal men's masculinity are being challenged[2]. The two articles took various approaches to analyse masculinity of Delhi men, while Srivastava focuses on local Delhi citizens, and Duncan discovers more about migrated ethnic minorities and the fluidity of masculinity. Furthermore, I will also discuss the cultures of gender in China. Choi did research on migrant taxi drivers in south China, where their masculinity are reinforced through driving[3]. What is more, Hanser conducted her research in China during the 2000s, and the culture of genders has some similarities with nowadays, but also many differences[4].

2   Masculinity in India

Masculinity is directly demonstrated and reinforced in Delhi. Srivastava mentions several sites in his work, such as streets, street corners, sitting rooms. These places include both public and private sites, and even sites for religious activities. Streets are one of the most open and public scenes in an urban city, and it is also used for religious purposes in Delhi[1]. According to Srivastava, "At a time of considerable cultural and economic changes- including the greater participation of women in the workforce- the localisation of masculinity allows for its reaffirmation". The religious prayer involves a march on street, where it stops by houses and men would join it, while women would serve them with food and tea. It is a purely visible gathering of masculinity, in front of the whole neighbourhood, which makes it a reaffirmation of masculinity. What is more, in the subsection of street corners, Srivastava talks about magazines that address female sexuality. The titles are around sex, virginity, and advertisements for lubricants and contraception. These magazines are called "women's magazine", supposed to be read by women as their target readers and consumers. However, it seems like a way of strengthening femininity by making women sharing more of the family budgets by purchasing these products, the ultimate outcome is generating men's anxiety about their masculinity, potentially causing more harm to women. One of the ways that men usually practice reemphasising their masculinity is domestic violence, through the sense of controlling women, men's pride and masculinity are satisfied and fulfilled again.

I gained a relatively different aspect from Duncan's work, on migration and tribal masculinity in Delhi[2]. The article is published two years later than Srivastava's work, so I suppose the research is conducted in a similar era where the basic situation of Delhi is the very same. The participant of his study is the migrants who were originally from the Northeast frontline, which is being characterised as insurgency, counterinsurgency, and ethno-nationalism[2]. Men's major job and responsibly in Northeast frontline is to act as protectors of women, defending their tribes from outsiders, such as enemies and rivals from other tribes. Under this circumstance, it is natural to think that masculinity is being immersed in their culture, as people rely on men's power and the concept is being reinforced daily. Surprisingly, women seem to have a good life in this region. The literacy rates are the highest among all India, and the age of marriage is later than women in elsewhere in India. However, as stated above, it is impossible for women to

be really empowered in a region where men act as protector and are fully in charge. The violence on women is also tremendous in this region. The term violence here refers to domestic violence, and other like murder, rape, tortured by the armed forces. In addition to this, According to Frontline News, Delhi still registered the highest rate of crimes against women in the country in 2022, as demonstrated in Figure 1 [5]. One of the reasons of these violence is obviously toxic masculinity; however, due to militarisation, many men in frontier have mental problems as well. There is a high rate of drug usage, also alcohol. The final choice after being incapable to deal with all these stresses and attentions, is to migrant to another place.
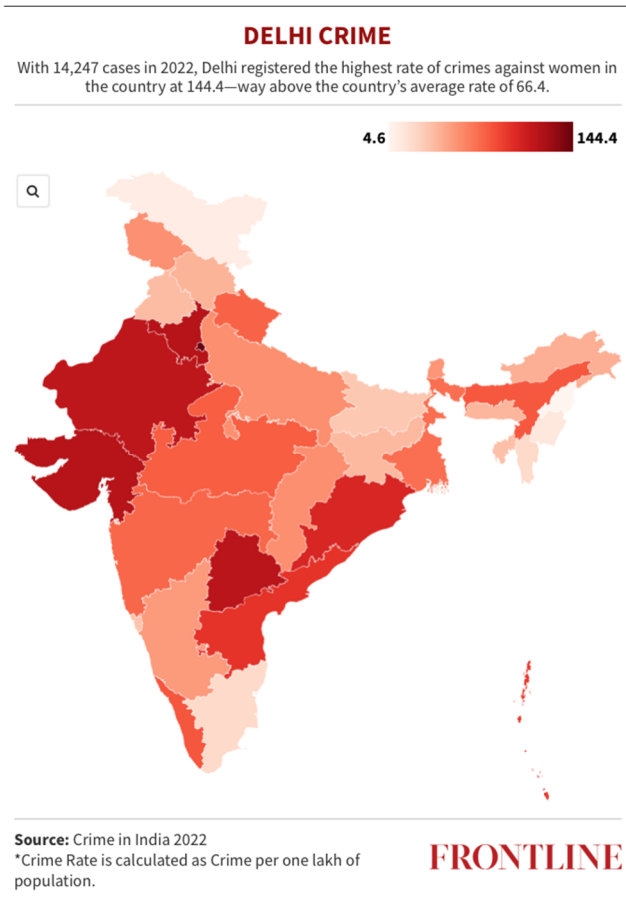
Fig. 1. From Frontline News.

After moving to Delhi, unlike Srivastava's work, where masculinity is reinforced in every site, migrant men's masculinity is actually being challenged. The main cause of this is that fact that women thrive in Delhi, while men are struggling with livelihoods. A huge shock on their masculinity is because their concept of protecting women, which were learnt in their hometown and has immersed deeply in their consciousness, is no

longer existed. Women do not need these sorts of protections anymore, and they certainly don't want it. After moving out of the environment, the old way of reproducing and reinforcing masculinity has been abandoned, therefore these men may find themselves living with no purpose. On the other hand, after migrant men found their place as an urban dweller, they "become protectors and enablers who navigate and survive the city[2]. They will learn the new form of masculinity- the form that Srivastava writes about, obvious, visible and necessary masculinity to the neighbourhood. After all, masculinity still exist, and it will always do. Migrant men might have experienced a period of having their pride and masculinity challenged, as their old environment has disappeared. After a period of life in Delhi, they would quickly dive into the masculinity in Delhi. There is a fluidity of different forms of masculinity, where in the frontier it is through being the armed force, and in Delhi it is being the urban dweller.

Another interesting study conducted in India, but not Delhi, is Chowdhury's study on male autorickshaw drivers in Kolkata. He mentions that cars are seen as an extension of male body or are feminised as an object to be forced into submission[6]. Men are in control as a driver, which reinforces their masculinity. The speed of driving, the route to go, all the service of the customer is purely dependent on the driver's attitude and choice. While driving their own car, no one can challenge their masculinity and authority. This also reminds of Choi's work on male migrant taxi drivers in south China, where she comes up with similar ideas suggesting that taxi drivers are keen on having their own cars. Here the migrant taxi drivers are not foreign migrants, they migrated from the most north province of China to the most south province of China. According to one of her participants, "men who cannot drive and do not know the computer cannot be called man……driving at least counts as a skill"[3]. Drivers and computer engineers are essentially two of the many male occupied careers, where men can potentially develop and reproduce masculinity within the big environment. In Choi's study, the male drivers felt that their masculinity has been challenge since Chinese government published Administration of Urban Taxis. Their power over customers is being taken away, because they cannot be private drivers anymore- every taxi driver must be managed under a company. In this case, their taxi cars are no longer their own properties, they have to rent cars from the company, and then get paid depending on the number of customers and kilometres they drove. In addition to losing their own car, their salary also lowered due to the "unfair treatment" from taxi companies. The less they earn, the bigger they feel the pressure about feeding the whole family and become the responsible dominant male. The masculinity of taxi drivers has been hit twice by the government, by taking their power away and lowering their income.

3   Masculinity in China

Another study conducted in China, is Hanser's work on sexual politics of service work in urban China[4]. Unlike Choi, Hanser focused on the women's perspective, and it is conducted in 2005, much earlier than Choi's work. Although it has been 18 years ago, I find some quotes and facts in Hanser's work still existing today. People directly express their discrimination against girls with thick makeups and suggests that work in

the underground would taint a young girl permanently. Until today, older generations in China still hold similar ideas towards young girls. Girls are not supposed to wear thick makeups; quitting school to become a salesclerk in the underground basically means you have no hope in your life. However, if a boy quit school and become a constructive worker, people would say he is a responsible man who learnt to earn his own life. Coming back to the discourse of sexual politics of service work, it is always visible on women. As a salesclerk, women must be pretty, delicate, and attractive. Especially sexually attractive back then. Hanser wrote that she witnessed a conversation between two salesclerks, when one commented on the other one's breast, asking if she was wearing bra. The conversation flows to one saying that the other salesclerk's breast isn't in the correct position, and her butt does not look well enough. The comments on breast and butt directly demonstrate the sexual politics of salesclerks, as people are so focused on it and have high awareness of it. In Hanser's work, a good female service worker, is basically defined by the femininity of the woman. One simple way of reinforcing femininity is through sexualisation and objectification of women, where women are experiencing the male gaze, and being treated as something to be picked by men. As shown on the figure 2 below[7], combining with Choi and Hanser's research, it can be seen that taxi driver is a completely male oriented career, where cashier and restaurant server are female oriented due to their nature as service-related careers.

	China		Malaysia		United States	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Taxi driver	43 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	180 (98.4%)	3 (1.6%)	47 (97.9%)	1 (2.1%)
Cashier	6 (10.0%)	56 (90.0%)	22 (9.5%)	209 (90.5%)	10 (13.0%)	67 (87.0%)
Restaurant server	5 (9.2%)	46 (90.8%)	38 (9.3%)	369 (90.7%)	13 (11.7%)	98 (88.3%)

Fig. 2. From Lee Ellis.

Similar to the male-dominated urban spaces in Dehli, urban spaces in China are also oriented by male. In this specific social environment, women are often faced with objectification, where their physical appearance determines their value in public places. Particularly in service-related jobs, women are expected to meet certain beauty standards and also being competent in work skills. On the other hand, men in services jobs are rarely judged on their physical appearance, and standards on their appearance are different. For instance, waitresses may usually be required to wear tight dresses or short skirts above knee, but waiters generally wear suits or comfortable clothes that do not require any exposes of body skin or shape. Following Hanser's research, she revealed a gender biased society which has been constructed through male dominance in social space, especially workplace. With the same actions or decisions, men are facing a much more general environment that they would be easily praised, where women are often criticised for similar choices.

    If we step a bit forward and consider the differences between taxi drivers, cashier, and restaurant servers, they all seem to be a form of service-oriented career. However, the gender ratio in these three jobs is extremely varied – where taxi drivers seem not fit

in with the other two. Considering this, taxi driver is the least exposed career in these three. To elaborate, restaurant server and cashier have to directly communicate with their costumers, and their physical appearance matters to the costumers, especially for restaurant servers whose appearance can be fully seen all the time. On the other hand, taxi drivers always remain seated in the driver's seat, and the passenger rarely have the chance to look at their physical appearance closely. They might be able to pay attention to their faces and clothes in the upper body, but it is worth noticing that taxi drivers generally do not have a dress code to follow, and people do not hold any expectations of their physical appearance. Comparing to restaurant and the environment that cashiers work with, taxi is the most private working place among these three jobs. Taxi itself is a small and closed private space, although it usually being considered as a part of social spaces due to the nature that it is part of service-oriented place.

4   Conclusion

In conclusion, in many urbanised cities, the culture of genders can be seen in every spot. Including public places like streets, street corners, and department stores, to domestic homes, and to transportations such as autorickshaws and taxis. The reinforcement of masculinity and femininity is not separated; they happen simultaneously. As femininity being reinforced on salesclerks, the male customers will have their masculinity being satisfied, therefore purchasing more products. At home, through making women cook, clean, and other domestic work, masculinity is also showed by the dominant status of men. The same applies to domestic violence, and other forms of violence against women. In public spaces, masculinity is even more visible and obvious. There are many careers that are occupied by males, and the gender pay gap is consistently being questioned around the globe. There are always places and ways for men to fulfil their masculinity, because the system and city is basically designed for men to live. The environment is changing today, as there are campaigns about female empowering happening frequently. However, I do not think that it is possible to have visible outcomes from these campaigns in recent years. The people who are in charge, or at the top of the hierarchy, are still men. There is still a long way to go for women to truly experience mobility in social aspect.

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