

Stay-at-home Fathers in Contemporary Chinese TV Dramas

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Abstract

Stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs), as an emergent gendered identity, have recently featured in several family TV dramas in China. This article investigates the discourse of masculinity embodied by SAHFs in TV dramas, to provide a new perspective to academic debates about the cultural production of gender and hierarchy in contemporary China. In particular, it examines representations of SAHFs and their familial relationships in three popular TV programmes—Marriage Battle (Hunyin baoweizhan 婚姻保卫战, 2010), A Little Reunion (Xiao huanxi 小欢喜, 2019), and Super Dad and Super Kids (Xiong ba xiong haizi 熊爸熊孩子, 2017). Through the analysis of these three series, I identify a paradox in the televisual representations of SAHFs, that while the male characters all seemingly embody a new model of familial masculinity, namely a caring and sensitive figure, they still cling to patriarchal ideologies when negotiating family matters. My discussion of the paradoxical representations of SAHFs in the series offers an illustration of how patriarchal ideologies are sustained despite the ongoing renegotiation of gender roles within the Chinese family.

Keywords: stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs), family TV dramas, familial masculinity, patriarchal ideologies, paradoxical representations, gender roles.

This article investigates the discourse of masculinity in contemporary Chinese popular culture by focusing on the representations of stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs) in several TV dramas shown on prime-time national channels in recent years. The cultural impact of TV dramas is significant: the names of TV dramas become vogue words (Liu & Chen, 2011) and their plotlines generate heated debates on the Internet (Zhong, 2010). However, this genre of popular entertainment has not received a corresponding level of scholarly attention.¹ Studies of TV dramas from a gendered perspective are particularly scarce.² In this article, I provide a critical reading of the representations of men and masculinity in three TV dramas that feature SAHFs—an emergent gendered identity—to shed light on the development of Chinese family dramas, especially changes in gender ideology in contemporary Chinese popular culture. Song Geng (2010) suggests that the male images represented in TV dramas are a product of social changes. Drawing on this theory, I argue that representations of SAHFs in TV dramas reflect different and sometimes conflicting social and cultural constructions of masculinity in contemporary China.

¹ In English-language scholarship, there are only a few journal articles and book chapters on the overall development of TV drama in China (Keane, 2002; Zhu, Keane, & Bai, 2008; Kong, 2008; Zhong, 2010).

² Following Xueping Zhong's *Masculinity Besieged?* (2000)—a pioneering research on male subjectivities in Chinese literature and films produced during the 1980s, there is one study that focuses on male images in contemporary TV drama in China (Song, 2010) and it was further adapted into a book chapter (Song & Hird, 2014: 29-54).

Since the advent of the socialist market economy and the PRC's integration into global capitalism in the 1990s, the general thematic trend of Chinese TV dramas has shifted from depiction of politicised social changes and public events to more private concerns such as romantic love, marriage, and family (Zhu, Keane & Bai, 2008; Lu, 2000). As Sheldon Lu indicates, the triumph of this shift in TV drama production also implies a gradual acceptance by the state (Lu, 2000: 29). In other words, TV drama, as a quintessential mainstream cultural phenomenon, has developed in tandem with the country's political and social transition, away from the Party-state's total control towards a combination of coercion and ongoing adaptation of the public. In this way, the state can maintain power with legitimacy (Kong, 2014; Zhang, 2011; Fumian, 2016; Wen, 2013). As the result of pro-market cultural policies, family TV dramas have become a popular narrative form with huge profit potential, as they allow viewers to relate themselves to a shared experience or collective memory in a particular historical and social context shown on screen (Kong, 2014).

Yearning (*Kewang* 渴望), a famous TV drama released in 1990, is one such example—it signifies a symbolic shift in how the media responded to the thematic preference among Chinese viewers, as it put emphasis on delineating family life, with politicised national culture only serving as a backdrop. Significantly, it highlights the importance of romantic love over the ideology of the residual hegemony of filial obligation to parents and the ideology of marriage that was only for the reproduction of family status (Rofel, 2007: 53). By turning its attention to individual desires, *Yearning* introduces everyday experience of individuals within the “domestic space” as a legitimate subject in televisual culture and public discourse (Zhong, 2010:1-2). The success of *Yearning*, as Lisa Rofel argues, is largely due to its relevance to individuals' everyday experience, given that it “produced a powerfully seductive knowledge of viewers' lives that led them, in part, to view themselves as the program portrayed them” (Rofel, 2007: 62). Following the broadcast of *Yearning*, a number of successful TV dramas that focus on family relationships and everyday experiences of individuals in urban family settings have emerged, including *Comings and Goings* (*Lailai wangwang* 来来往往, 1999), *Chinese-Style Divorce* (*Zhongguoshi lihun* 中国式离婚, 2004), and *Nothing in the Mirror* (*Kong jingzi* 空镜子, 2002).

The image of the caring family man who believes in companionate marriage and hands-on fatherhood has appeared in family dramas in recent decades, and especially since the 2010s. This emergent gendered identity represented on the Chinese screen is in stark contrast to previous images of distant, disciplinarian, or absent fathers/husbands (e.g., in *Yearning*). Although Chinese masculinity has become an emergent field of study in the past two decades which has identified this type of man as the “new man” (Song & Hird, 2014; Song & Lee, 2012; Wong, 2016), in-depth TV drama discourse analysis of this model remains a gap to be filled. My TV drama analysis on SAHF—a representative gender identity within this “new man” model—can therefore bring a new perspective on the discourse of familial masculinity in contemporary Chinese popular culture.

My article focuses on the representations of male characters, and their relations with their spouses (and children), in three TV dramas: *Marriage Battle* (*Hunyin baoweizhan* 婚姻保卫战, 2010), *A Little Reunion* (*Xiao huanxi* 小欢喜, 2019), and *Super Dad & Super Kids* (*Xiong ba xiong haizi* 熊爸熊孩子, 2017). Family dramas have gained increased popularity in recent decades, but these three were the only ones that featured SAHFs by 2020 when I started

my analysis.³ While all three touch upon the lives of SAHFs, they put particular emphasis on different themes: *Marriage Battle* focuses on SAHFs' spousal relationships; *A Little Reunion* highlights the differences in parenting between men and women, and *Super Dad & Super Kids* delineates the father-son relationship. Male characters in these dramas all seemingly embody a new caring masculinity within the family, but the patriarchal ideologies that they hold are still discernible when they negotiate family matters. The paradoxical representations of SAHFs in the selected dramas indicate how patriarchal ideologies are sustained despite the ongoing redefinition and renegotiation of gender roles and masculinities in contemporary urban China.

Methodology

The article uses 'SAHFs' instead of 'househusbands' as an analytical term for the following reasons. Firstly, the term SAHFs has been more widely used in extant literature than househusband (e.g., Liong, 2017a; Liu & Chou, 2019; Medved, 2016; Lee & Lee, 2018; Doucet, 2016). The preferential use of SAHFs is due to the explicit indication of child-rearing responsibilities that the term conveys, which most people, including SAHFs themselves, might prefer. In their research on how college students perceive the role of househusband and housewife, Diane Wentworth and Robert Chell (2011) conclude from their result that both roles are only considered as valuable if they stay at home for the purpose of assuming child-rearing responsibilities. Similarly, Mario Liong suggests that 'full-time fathers' (*quanzhi baba* 全职爸爸) is a more frequently used term devised by Chinese media rather than 'househusband' (*jiating funan* 家庭妇男), given that the former portrays men as professional parents (Liong, 2017a: 405). In other words, the term SAHFs in English (and full-time fathers in Chinese) indicates that men give up their careers to actively make another form of contribution to the family and society. In contrast, the more conventional term "househusbands" is more likely to be associated with an unemployed and effeminate image. Evidently, quotes from the analysed dramas that refer men as "househusbands" have negative connotations (see quotes, in particular, from the section on *Marriage Battle*). Secondly, the term 'househusband' implies men's marital status, and thus it leaves out gay, single, separated, divorced, or cohabitating primary caregivers. For instance, the father from *Super Dad & Super Kids* assumes the sole caregiver role, as he is separated from his wife.

Before moving on to discussion of the three TV drama series, a brief explanation of my approach to discourse analysis is necessary. My reading of SAHF images in TV dramas is inspired by Martin Huang's (2006) perception of gender as a relational concept. In his critical analysis of different male images presented in late imperial literature, Huang notes that the naturalness of gender inequality can be revealed by not only exploring how different men struggle for hegemony in the construction of masculinity, but also, equally importantly, probing into "how different models of masculinity were proposed and negotiated in relation to the feminine" (Huang, 2006:8). Regarding gender as a "cultural performance" (Butler, 1990), I analyse and interpret the performance of male characters not only in relation to one another to identify the construction of hegemonic masculinity among men, but also in relation to their spouses to include femininity and/or motherhood in the re/masculinising of onscreen SAHFs. I approach the dramas under discussion primarily by analysing the plotlines and dialogues, given that these elements are particularly revealing when it comes to masculinity and power negotiations among the onscreen couples.

³ *Modern Marriage (Women de hunyin 我们的婚姻, 2022)* is another notable drama dealing with SAHFs that has subsequently been broadcast.

To analyse the plotlines and dialogues in the TV dramas, I borrowed Norman Fairclough's (1992: 130-133) theory of the "intertextual chain" and its relationship with the concept of hegemony to gain insights into how TV drama discourse is reproduced and/or changed as part of a larger social practice involving power relations on screen. The intertextual chain in the analysis mainly refers to the overlapping themes that emerge from dialogue and plotlines among the three selected TV drama series, and how phrases, idioms, and/or concepts in the dramas are drawn from texts outside of TV drama. Among the three chosen serials, *Marriage Battle*, as the earliest and arguably most well-known Chinese family drama which revolves around lives of different types of SAHFs, serves as a prototype for the masculinities represented in the other two shows. I thus begin with an analysis of *Marriage Battle*, before proceeding to examine how its key themes permeate the other two dramas, while exploring the new focuses developed in the later drama.

Four Main Themes

My analysis of plotlines and dialogues in these three dramas has revealed four main common features in the construction of SAHFs' masculinities and their familial relationships, namely, the importance of work in the construction of masculinity, class specificity, the absence of intergenerational impact, and the presence of a happy ending.

Firstly, the importance of work to male characters is such that crises in life (e.g., corporate layoffs and injury) are presented as the only reason for men to stay at home in the selected dramas. Becoming a SAHF is therefore something that is forced upon a male character by circumstance rather than voluntarily chosen; work remains the priority in men's lives, and only unemployment or inability to work legitimises the act of entering the domestic sphere. While depicting SAHFs onscreen as caring men promotes a progressive concept of manhood, presenting the role of SAHF as due to circumstances beyond the male character's control does very little to change unequal gender relations. The partial exception is *Super Dad & Super Kids*, in which the father also eventually goes back to work but reflects on his duties as a father and a husband during his time of unemployment, rather than being perennially frustrated by his attempts to return to work like the male characters in the other two series.

Secondly, a consistent pattern running throughout the chosen dramas is the exclusive portrayal of urban middle-class Chinese families. This class specificity does not necessarily reflect the reality that only men from married (and heterosexual), middle-class families are willing or able to assume the role of SAHFs.⁴ Rather, this portrayal of financially stable nuclear families on screen is due to the preferences of drama creators, mainstream audiences, and government discourse in contemporary China, which universalises the everyday experiences of urban middle-class households while marginalising SAHFs from other socio-economic circumstances. As Mary Douglas Vavrus puts it, "the media representation process plays an integral part in extending, constraining, and promoting particular ideals as appropriately masculine" (Vavrus, 2002: 353). The class specificity within the SAHFs' households is not an isolated event, but rather a representative case within the wider phenomenon of Chinese cultural production. The affluent urban middle class is the social category that ideally embodies the qualities and lifestyles deemed desirable to individuals and essential to the construction of a modern, prosperous, and harmonious socialist market (Fumian, 2016; Hird, 2009; Song & Hird, 2014).

⁴ For example, Mario Liang's research on SAHFs in Hong Kong touches upon the lives of working-class SAHFs (Liang, 2017a).

Thirdly, the dramas largely ignore intergenerational relations within SAHF households and instead focus on spousal relations. There is nothing, for example, about whether parents, in-laws and/or close relatives support the decision of men to take up the role of SAHF, and how they involve themselves in the household—do they help the parents with the childcare and household chores? Although the influence of kinship has lessened due to the growth of strong conjugal ties and individualistic culture in the nuclear family in post-reform China, it is inappropriate to look at the everyday lives of SAHFs in isolation; the continuing influence of the elder generation on the marriage lives of their adult children cannot be neglected (Harrell & Santos, 2017). Intergenerational impact, moreover, is captured in many other Chinese family dramas, such as *A Beautiful Daughter-in-law Era* (*Xifu de meihao shidai* 媳妇的美好时代, 2009), *Tears of a Daughter-in-law* (*Xifu de yanlei* 媳妇的眼泪, 2007), *My Mom and My Mother-in-law* (*Dang popo yu shang ma* 当婆婆遇上妈, 2011). The absence of intergenerational relationships within the SAHFs' households on-screen is thus quite striking in its oversimplification of SAHFs and their relationships with the wider family.

Finally, these TV series all end with SAHFs going back to their jobs and subsequently enjoying a happy relationship with their families. The portrayal of families with returning-to-work SAHFs as complete, united entities signifies that paid work is still considered to be central to men's identities, even though it might no longer be the overriding priority in their lives. The male characters do tend to value the familial relationship more after connecting with their emotional selves during their stays at home. However, the temporary nature of the role of SAHFs in the dramas bestows men an unconventional, but clearly masculine identity derived from their career and social status. Furthermore, the clichéd happy ending of each family in the dramas conveys social expectations of how Chinese families 'should' be—men should have prosperous careers and happy marriages. This consistent pattern of the plotlines demonstrates the intention of maintaining and promoting the stability of conventional types of manhood and nuclear family, which ties in with the mainstream state ideology of 'social stability' and building a 'harmonious society'.

The Anxious SAHF: *Marriage Battle*

The story of *Marriage Battle* portrays a new image, in which men and women take up unconventional gender roles within the Chinese family: men become stay-at-home fathers/husbands to take care of the family, while women pursue their career goals and fulfil their dreams outside the home. The independence and strength of female characters allow their male counterparts to adopt certain qualities that are usually socially perceived as feminine, such as emotional sensitivity and vulnerability, and the desire for stability. However, this gender dynamic triggers clashes and conflicts between men and women in this series due to their different perceptions of career and family life.

The basic storyline of this thirty-three-episode TV drama series revolves around four couples who are going through challenging times in their marriages. The three leading male characters who live in the same building subsequently establish a "husbands' committee" to discuss problems within their households, as they fight for their marriages. The successful businesswoman Yang Dan 杨丹 (played by Ma Yanli 马艳丽) divorces her husband at a point when both of their careers are going well. Yang Dan is portrayed as a strong, independent woman who prefers to dress formally throughout the series. Her divorce news comes as a shock to Yang's female college friends Lan Xin 兰心 (Yuan Li 袁立) and Li Mei 李梅 (Ma Yili 马

伊琳), prompting them to reflect on their own marriages. Xu Xiaoning 许小宁 (Huang Lei 黄磊) is a long-term SAHF in this series who supports his breadwinning wife Lan Xin and takes care of their daughter as well as household chores. Before assuming the role of a SAHF, Xu had been forced to leave his former job as a hotel manager due to a mistake he made at work. The image below of Xu Xiaoning and Lan Xin summarises the family status of this couple – the wife is in charge both in and outside the home, whereas the husband is always afraid of his wife. In contrast to Li Mei, who is a loving, home-making character with a soft voice, Lan Xin has a high-pitched voice, especially when she yells at Xu when he does something wrong. The depiction of Xu in an ‘effeminate’ apron reflects to a certain degree the stereotypical perception that SAHFs ‘should’ look exactly like SAHMs (stay-at-home mothers) on the Chinese screen, which inevitably delegitimises the experience of men who do care work.



Figure 1: Xu Xiaoning and Lan Xin in Marriage Battle (screenshot from episode 10 [11:05])

After having a conversation about her career prospects with the ambitious businesswoman Yang Dan, Li Mei quits her job in a securities firm and becomes the CFO in Yang’s company. Li’s transition from a caring wife and mother to a career-driven woman becomes a challenge in her marriage with Guo Yang 郭洋 (Tong Dawei 佟大为). Coincidentally, Li’s husband Guo is forced to resign his job as an interior designer after an incident at work, so he has to stay at home while looking for the next job. Both Xu and Guo are SAHFs, but they are different, in that the long-term SAHF Xu enjoys caring for the family full-time, while Guo is not content with his stay-at-home life and is constantly looking for a way to go back out into the world and start his own business. The disagreement over labour division within and outside the home triggers countless arguments between the temporarily unemployed Guo Yang and his wife Li Mei, who recently shifted her focus to her new job as a CFO. This tension almost leads to divorce and does result in a love affair between Guo and another divorced woman named Zhang Jin 张瑾 (Meng Guangmei 孟广美), who provides Guo with a job opportunity to manage her company. However, Guo and Li eventually both realise that they still love each other and the couple work things out in the end.

The third leading male character, Lao Chang 老常 (Liu Jinshan 刘金山), is a 50-year-old businessman who owns an automotive ‘4S’ shop.⁵ Lao Chang is typical of media depictions of men born in 1960s China, as someone who firmly believes that ‘men rule the outside and women rule the inside’ (*nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei* 男主外, 女主内). As Mary Bergstrom points out, each decade in China is commonly associated with a change in mindset, and thus people tend to be categorised according to the decade in which they are born, e.g., the post-1960s (*60 hou* 六十年后), the post-1980s (*80 hou* 八十年后), and the post 1990s (*90 hou* 九十年后) (Bergstrom, 2012: 6). This attempt to generalise generations according to ten-year label is of course overly simplistic – people born within a ten-year period are so different that there can be no clear, fixed definitions of individuals according to their decade of birth. Lao Chang’s generational status, however, is put forward by the creators of the drama as closely connected with Lao Chang’s entrenched gendered notion of labour division in and outside the home. His views therefore constantly clash with those of his 27-year-old second wife Chen Meng 陈梦 (Yu Na 于娜), as he wants Chen to serve as a caring housewife, while she is eager to work and build her own career.

As mentioned earlier, the drama comes with a happy ending for each character. The long-term SAHF Xu Xiaoning eventually switches his identity to a co-partner of Lan Xin’s thriving leather-goods business. With the “almost (extramarital) lover” Zhang Jin leaving the country, Guo Yang not only takes over her company, but also has an improved relationship with his wife Li Mei – who also has a successful career. Lao Chang goes back to work, and fully supports his wife Chen Meng’s clothing store. Lastly, businesswoman Yang Dan gets back together with her ex-husband. Certain details of the plot are glossed or overly simplified in order to reach this seemingly “perfect” ending, in which everyone has a satisfying career and a beautiful relationship with their significant other.

I have identified three main features in understanding the representation of masculinity and family life in this drama: homosocial bonds among the three leading male characters; a gendered division of labour; and the importance of work in the construction of masculinity. Among these three features, the first two uniquely emerge in this particular series, whereas the last one is a recurring theme among all three analysed TV dramas.

Homosociality

This series devotes a good deal of time to delineating the homosocial bond among the three main male characters. Among the three, Xu Xiaoning acts as a problem solver who can understand both men and women most of the time, due to his innate sensitive and caring personality and the fact that he has been a SAHF for the longest time of the three. Thus, he has been elected as the leader of the “husbands’ committee” to provide the other two men with insightful solutions to the issues within their families. The all-male association in the drama can be seen as a modern version of the brotherly solidarity found in premodern Chinese discourses of masculinity, that is, sworn brotherhood in the *jianghu* (江湖 subcommunity) world (Boretz, 2011), albeit without the dubious legality.

A similar homosocial bond can be found in many other modern/contemporary Chinese TV dramas, including the brotherhood among a group of businessmen during late imperial China portrayed in *The Big Dye House* (*Da ran fang* 大染坊, 2002), and the all-male

⁵ The 4S here is short for sales, service, spare parts, and surveying in the car-buying market.

comradeship during the revolutionary era depicted in *Unsheathing the Sword* (*Liang jian* 亮剑, 2005). Indeed, since late imperial times, Chinese masculinity has been primarily constructed as part of a homosocial network, rather than in opposition to ‘woman’ (Song, 2004). However, the main difference between the conventional homosociality seen in premodern China and that depicted in *Marriage Battle* is its functionality. Homosocial networks in premodern China served as men’s collective attempts to uphold and maintain power and hegemony (Song & Hird, 2014; Song, 2010). However, the “husbands’ committee” in *Marriage Battle* not only functions as a site for the construction and/or maintenance of masculinity, but also addresses these men’s own family matters to seek advice from one another to save their marriages.

Gendered division of labour - “Men rule the outside, women rule the inside”

The three leading male characters, to varying extents, support the binary model of gender roles, that is, ‘men rule the outside, while women rule the inside’ (*nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei* 男主外, 女主内). From their conversations with one another and with their wives, all three of them seem not to accept the idea that a woman could be more career-oriented than a man, revealing a deeply male anxiety when faced with incidences in which ‘women rise, and men decline’ (*yin sheng yang shuai* 阴盛阳衰). In episode one, when Xu Xiaoning and Guo Yang hear the news that businesswoman Yang Dan is going through a divorce, both agree that being with Yang for all these years has not been easy for her husband, as Yang is a career woman who is too strong and independent for any man to handle. Their conversation represents the persistent advocacy of a traditional femininity in post-reform China, as proposed by John Osburg (2013). Osburg points to allegories popular in contemporary Chinese society in which only women who are less career-oriented and cultivate their feminine virtues deserve a happy marriage, as overachievement in education and business of a woman is the equivalent of “a woman that no man would love” and “a woman that men dare not touch” (Osburg, 2013: 162). The fact that the long-term, caring SAHF Xu holds the same view as Guo implies the complicit hegemonic masculinity that Xu represents. Xu’s gendered ideology continues to manifest in his following exchange with Chen Meng, who does not consider the domestic sphere to be where her imagined happiness resides (episode 3):

陈： 本以为跟老常结婚算是找到了幸福的港湾了…其实吧，老常也对我挺好的，可我怎么就找不到幸福感呢。

许： 我觉得你现在还可以吧。比起那些什么剩女啊、职场白领啊，那幸福多了，这人啊，得学会知足。

Chen: I thought marrying Lao Chang means happiness...He treats me well, but I don't feel happy.

Xu: I think that you are doing great though. You are at least better than leftover women (*sheng nü* 剩女) or white-collar professional women who must work all the time. It would help if you learned to be content with what you have.

Although Xu tries to make Chen see what she has is valuable, making a comparison between her as a wealthy housewife and unmarried career women again implies that marriage is the key to women’s happiness. In the same episode, the response that Guo gives to his wife Li Mei, who is considering taking a higher-paid job in her friend Yang Dan’s company, further clarifies his deeply rooted patriarchal ideology and male anxiety towards career-oriented women. He

says, “No matter how hard you work, you are still a woman, who needs to find your self-worth in a man. Although I admire successful businesswomen, I do not want a strong and aggressive woman lying in my bed every day...I do not think the idea of ‘men rule the outside, and women rule the inside’ is necessarily correct, but the society works like this. A good housewife is the definition of a good woman, so why do you have to fight for territory at work with men?” [不管你多么努力工作，你说到底还是个女人，女人的自我价值感来自于男人。哪怕你是个成功的职业女性，我会崇拜你，但我可不想和一个‘男人婆’天天在床上躺着……我不认为男主外，女主内是正确的观念，但咱们社会就是如此运作的。当一个好的家庭主妇是好女人的标准，所以你为何要在男人的领地较真呢]. Guo’s view indicates that he thinks women are still subject to the control of men (authority of the husband) in every aspect of their lives, even though men and women now have more equal opportunities in the workplace. Lao Chang holds the same view as Guo, that the workplace is an exclusive territory for men. In episode 19 when Chen Meng has been doing a splendid job at Lao Chang’s 4S shop and has become popular among all the staff and customers during his leave, Lao becomes extremely anxious and angry. He says to his assistant, “The tiger (refers to himself) is being left out, while the monkey (refers to his wife) is being hailed. What kind of world we are living in? My territory has been invaded!” [老虎被冷落，猴子被拥戴。都什么生存法则？沦陷了，我的领土沦陷了].

As the oldest man in the drama, Lao Chang stereotypically embodies more explicit and aggressive notions of gender than the other two younger men; this mostly manifests in his conversation with his wife. For instance, in episode 17, Chen Meng fights for her right to work outside, as she strives to be financially independent. Lao Chang responds: “Why do women need a sense of independence? Nature gives you the right to give birth and raise children as well as a pair of skilful hands. This means that your mission as a woman is to cook, raise children, and take care of your man. Besides, doing a good job cannot beat marrying well. If you go out to work, it will undermine my dignity as a man, because it will look like I cannot treat you well.” [女人要独立意识干嘛？大自然给了你们生儿育女的权利义务，又给了你们灵巧的手。就是为了让你们在家里头做饭生孩子伺候男人。再说了，干得好不如嫁得好。如果你出去工作，会摧残我作为男人的自尊，外头看起来像我对你好似的]. Lao Chang’s belief that being a capable, successful woman is ultimately a less rewarding path than simply marrying well shows resistance to the idea that women can have their own pursuits outside the family, as well as devaluing women’s success and wealth. Moreover, Lao Chang’s anxiety over the possibility of being judged if his wife goes out to work reflects his own insecurities about his masculinity, given that he feels the need to maintain his masculine credentials by being the sole breadwinner in a marriage where the wife is younger and more attractive than him. This view resonates with the economist Gary Becker’s (1973) theory of marriage, in which Becker describes marriage as a transhistorical and culturally universal exchange; men trade their assets of money and status for women’s asset of youthful beauty.

All the leading male characters depicted in the drama, to a varying degree, cling to patriarchal notions of gender when faced with the rise of female individualism and empowerment. Even Xu Xiaoning, as the most caring and understanding husband and father figure, continues to adhere to patriarchal and gendered stereotypes. This depiction supports Harrell & Santos’s assertion that ideas and concepts derived from classic patriarchy are highly adaptive, and that they paradoxically coexist with a modern, individualised social environment in present-day China (Harrell & Santos, 2017: 18-31). To a certain extent, discourses of gender inequality are also embodied by female characters. For example, the working wife Lan Xin constantly shifts the blame to her stay-at-home husband Xu Xiaoning for the stress she

experiences in the workplace, stating “If you were capable of earning money, I would not really need to work this hard.” [要是你有能力赚钱，我才不用这么辛苦]. When Xu tries to offer her advice for her job, she responds impatiently, “What do you know about business? Just do your job as a househusband, it is enough for you.” [你懂做生意吗？做好你的家庭煮夫的工作，对你来说足以]. Moreover, when they have different opinions as to whether their daughter should continue to study the piano in episode 19, Lan says to Xu, “When it comes to our daughter’s education, you’d better agree with my decision, otherwise I will be mad at you.” [关于咱们女儿的教育问题，你最好是跟我统一阵线，不然我可跟你急]. Putting Xu in an inferior position within the family simply because he does not have a job implies the importance of work to a man’s sense of masculinity as well as highlighting the abnormality of his identity as SAHF. Therefore, the ‘reversed’ gender inequality puts forward by this female character further reinforces the gendered notion of labour division in and outside the home.

The importance of work to men and masculinity

From the dialogues in this drama, I have isolated two consistent patterns that indicate the significance of work in the construction of masculinity, namely, an emphasis on the temporary experience of leaving the workplace, and on the secondary nature of the role of SAHF in comparison to the role of professional, white-collar work.

As mentioned earlier, crisis is the only reason for men in the drama to agree to assume the role of SAHFs, indicating that being a SAHF is forced upon men by circumstance rather than a voluntary choice. Thus, a sense of resistance is evident when Guo Yang and Lao Chang talk about the role of SAHFs. Following his corporate layoff, Guo stays at home to take care of their son (episode 5). When Guo’s son asks if Guo will help him get dressed and cook from now on, Guo replies expressing his resistance, “You wish! You want your dad to be out of work forever? That is not possible!” [你想得美！你想要你爸爸永远失业啊？那是不可能的]. The temporality of his assumption of the role of a SAHF is repeatedly emphasised by Guo Yang in the following episodes. For example, Guo tries to differentiate himself from Xu who enjoys being a SAHF (episode 7). He says to his wife, “I am a temporary househusband...Unlike Xu, I am a proper masculine man.” [我这是临时的…不像许小宁，我可是真正的男子汉]. This implies that Guo considers the role as emasculated, and thus he stresses the temporary nature of his current situation and focuses on the foreseeable future during which he will return to work. Similarly, Lao Chang emphasises the temporality of his stay-at-home situation by saying that he will be back to work as soon as he recovers from his leg injury (episode 20).

Even the long-term SAHF Xu Xiaoning, the most caring and emotionally expressive male characters seems to hold a somewhat contradictory perspective on the role of SAHFs. On the one hand, as the most experienced SAHF and one who enjoys the role, he advises Guo to treat his stay-at-home life as a proper job and enjoy the freedom to do those things in life which he did not have time to do when he was stuck in a corporate job. On the other hand, the following exchange (episode 19) between them shows that Xu considers managing caregiving and house chores secondary to breadwinning, and agrees that staying at home without a proper job is a form of torture for men (emphasis added):

许：我的确每天都希望有你这么个伴儿，陪我说说话，可当这天真正到来的时候，我感到非常地悲愤。因为你，郭洋，一身的武艺，顶天立地的大丈夫，你

怎么也不应该沦落到回家这一步啊。我看这女人不仅是要半边天，她们简直就是要翻天啊。女耕男织、女外男内、阴阳颠倒，全都是悲剧。

郭：你不是挺喜欢当家庭煮夫的吗？

许：我也是个大男人啊。我跟你讲啊，你现在受的蹂躏和内心的纠结，我全都经历过。这么说吧，现在的你就是曾经的我。刚开始呢，浑浑噩噩，每天想不出来干点什么好，当然了，也什么都不想干。刚开始的时候，吵架比以前多。不仅否定了咱们的能力，连咱们的性别都被否定了。

郭：委屈你了。

许：既然已经回了家，那就得适应环境、顺势而为。咱们就苦中作乐吧。

Xu: I did want to have a friend like you who assumes the same role as me to chill and chat daily. But when this day comes, I feel angry. Because you are a well-educated and extremely talented man, *you should never end up staying at home*. I think women not only want half of the sky, but they want everything. *It is indeed a tragedy that women rule the outside, while men must make sacrifices by staying at home*.

Guo: I thought you really enjoyed life as a stay-at-home husband.

Xu: *I am also a man*. Let me tell you, I have been through all the pain you are feeling now. At the beginning, I did not want to do anything, and always fought with my wife. Staying at home makes you think that it denies our capabilities, but more importantly, *it denies our gender as men*.

Guo: I am sorry that you had to go through that.

Xu: Now that fate has made you a SAHF, you should accept your stay-at-home life and make the best of it. *Let's try to find joy amidst the suffering*.

While Guo regards work as the only way to maintain his masculine identity, his wife Li does not consider SAHFs as an improper and emasculated role for men. Instead, she thinks having a stay-at-home father/husband could be beneficial for their marriage and family life, as she responds, “Why not? If our home is always sweet and harmonious like this, your permanent unemployment is worth it.” [当家庭煮夫有啥不好？如果咱家一直这么甜蜜和谐，那你永久失业也值了]. However, Li’s belief that only when her husband is out of labour force can the happiness of the family be guaranteed suggests a bifurcated understanding of labour division and familial responsibilities, rather than a flexible and equitable arrangement between couples.

My analysis of *Marriage Battle* highlights three main elements for understanding how the masculinity of SAHFs and modern marriage life are represented on the Chinese screen, that is, homosocial bonds, the coexistence of the awareness of women’s empowerment alongside a persistent gendered ideology (embodied by both men and women), and the centrality of work in the construction of masculinity. These three elements, of course, represent an oversimplification of the everyday experience of middle-class Chinese households with SAHFs. In addition, this drama – and the following two dramas analysed below – also omit certain key

elements of contemporary family life, particularly intergenerational relations between couples and their parents (and wider relatives). The influence of children on couples' relationships and family life is also radically underplayed; children do not have many scenes, and whenever they do, they are always well-behaved and quiet. Their existence in the drama functions as though they are 'props' for the construction of a standard nuclear family. By contrast, the drama discussed below, *A Little Reunion*, extends beyond these thematic confines by focusing on parent-child relationships and parenting philosophies that lie outside the range of *Marriage Battle*.

Tiger Mum versus Cat Dad: *A Little Reunion*

A Little Reunion portrays the two purportedly conflicting parenting philosophies held by women and men, namely extremely strict working mothers versus emotionally sensitive fathers, which is a continuation of the discourse about strong working women and nurturing men shown in the other two dramas. While *A Little Reunion* only features one SAHF prominently (with other working parents), it is well worth examining the drama, not only because representations of SAHF remain relatively rare onscreen, but also to see how it reveals the construction of familial masculinity in relation to femininity and motherhood.

This 49-episode drama depicts how three Beijing-based families navigate the ups and downs of their lives while helping their children prepare for the national college entrance exam (*gaokao* 高考). In this series, the white-collar working mother Dong Wenjie 董文洁 (Hai Qing 海清) and the single mother Song Qian 宋倩 (Tao Hong 陶虹) represent the strict, disciplinarian mothers who put every ounce of their effort into providing the best environment for their son and daughter when preparing for the highly competitive exam. Meanwhile, Dong's husband Fang Yuan 方圆 (Huang Lei 黄磊) and Song's ex-husband Qiao Weidong 钱卫东 (Sha Yi 沙溢) play the role of 'good cop'. They focus more on the happiness of their children and consider becoming friends with them to be essential for their growth, rather than micromanaging every aspect of their children's lives. The specific SAHF theme occurs when 45-year-old male Fang Yuan (Huang Lei) unexpectedly loses his job and eventually returns to the family. For a very long time, Fang pretends to go to work every day to try not to cause concerns at a critical time for his family - his wife Dong is having a hard time at work, and his son is preparing for the *gaokao*. In *Marriage Battle*, when the interior designer Guo Yang gets laid off, he does the same thing as Fang Yuan - trying to sort it out on his own while pretending to be at work by going out every weekday. Ostensibly, work has been presented as such a key element in the construction of masculinity that the loss of it would presumably put an enormous burden on the entire family, even though they are not the sole breadwinner in the household. Hence, their initial reaction to unemployment is to deal with it on their own rather than sharing the news with their partners. As Guo in *Marriage Battle* said to his wife after his unemployment, "You can certainly express affection and talk about daily stuff with your wife, but as a man, something you just cannot share with your wife" (episode 3). This statement implies that men and women are built differently; and men's pride and tendency in making 'big decisions' on their own suggests the residue of their hierarchical superiority in families.

In the following pages, I will first discuss the implications of the theme 'tiger mum versus cat dad' in *A Little Reunion* and beyond, to see how gender ideology is changing in contemporary Chinese popular culture. I will then examine how class specificity and the importance of work in the construction of masculinity—two recurring themes in the other two

analysed dramas—are revealed in *A Little Reunion*, by highlighting the perspectives from both male and female characters.

The implications of the theme ‘tiger mum versus cat dad’

A Little Reunion resonated across different generations in China to become one of the highest-rated TV series in 2019, with many viewers commenting on how much the show resembles the reality of their own experiences with their own parents (Xu, 2019). To give one example, one young urban professional said in an interview with *China Daily* that she could see a strong resemblance between her mother and the ‘tiger mom’ character Song Qian in the show (Xu, 2019). ‘Tiger mom’ (*huma* 虎妈) refers to mothers with a very strict or demanding parenting style, who pressure their children to attain high academic achievement. In contrast to the concept of the tiger mom, fathers who are emotionally sensitive and relaxed about rules and discipline are called ‘cat dads’ (*maoba* 猫爸) in Chinese; this is also opposed to the quality of fierce independence often associated with cats in English. The disciplinarian or absent father role versus the caring, domestic mother role (*yanfu cimu* 严父慈母) as a family model is legitimised and valued by Confucian constructions of fatherhood and motherhood (Ho, 1987; Xu & O’Brien, 2014; Liang, 2017b). Therefore, the concepts of tiger mom versus cat dad as represented in the drama refers to the reconstructed parental roles in the Chinese family. Although strict, disciplinarian mothers existed much earlier on in Chinese history,⁶ the term tiger mom only became a dominant part of Chinese- and English-language discourse in 2011 with the publication of *Battle Hymn of Tiger Mother*, a parenting memoir written by Amy Chua. This piece ignited a debate about different parenting techniques and cultural attitudes in (overseas) East Asian (notably Chinese) communities. While cat dad may not be as well-known as tiger mom in both Chinese and English, the term has been around in the Chinese media since the last decade, one famous example being the Chinese businessman and nurturing father Chang Zhitao (Dong, 2015). Chang went head-to-head in a debate with Chua, asserting his belief that giving children choices and being sensitive to their feelings is better for their growth than taking a tough-love approach.

Beyond *A Little Reunion*, the theme of lovable good fathers (cat dads) versus strict disciplinarian mothers (tiger moms) has also featured in many other popular Chinese family dramas in recent years, including *Over the Sea I Come to You* (*Daizhe baba qu liuxue* 带着爸爸去留学, 2019), *Unbeatable You* (*Ni liu er shang de ni* 逆流而上的你, 2019), and *Growing Pains* (*Shaonian pai* 少年派, 2019), *Tiger Mom, Cat Dad* (*Huma maoba* 虎妈猫爸, 2015). It appears that images of fathers on the Chinese screen have shifted from the distant and stoic parent, such as Wang Zitao 王子涛 (Lan Tianye 蓝天野) as seen in *Yearning* (1990), to the hero-like almighty dads who care for their children and even help their children when they need to deal with their mothers (Xunlei, 2019). The growth of this theme is not only due to the relevance of this theme to lived experience of certain individuals, but also the intriguing dramatic effects bestowed by the portrayal of opposite personality traits for male and female characters. Both reasons will be further demonstrated as follows.

On the one hand, it seems to suggest that the reversed impression on the parental roles is, to a certain degree, due to a genuine change taking place in the dynamics of spousal relations and parenting philosophies in contemporary China, which is the reason why many viewers can

⁶ One of the most well-known examples is Ni Guizhen 倪桂珍 - the mother of Soong Mei-ling 宋美龄 the former First Lady of the Republic of China.

relate to the plotline. Indeed, the portrayal of tiger moms echoes the intensive mothering ideology proposed by Sharon Hays. Her theory indicates that mothers tend to “expend tremendous amount of time, energy and money in raising their children” due to their entrenched traditional belief that caring work is a moral and social imperative for women (Hays, 1996: x). Drawing on this theory, I argue that some women have grown into their role as intensive tiger moms because of their reluctance to relinquish domestic responsibility. Even though their partner might be available to take care of their children, some women still tend to do all the work themselves. As for the changes taken place in the paternal role, the representation of cat dads resonates with the concept of a masculine way for childcare as proposed by Berit Brandth & Elin Kvande (1999), wherein fathers prefer to befriend their children and engage in physical activities with them as their way of performing caregiving work. The masculine way of childcare, as Brandth and Kvande argue, is an attempt to distinguish their caregiving activities from conventional maternal practice. On the other hand, rather than giving an authentic portrayal of parental roles and spousal relationships within the ordinary Chinese family, the representation of ‘tiger mom vs. cat dad’ has its dramatic implications. It seems that the concept of modern participatory fatherhood cannot be depicted on TV without adjustments also being made to the way women are represented. Arguably, it is more entertaining for the viewers to watch two characters who hold contradictory values and views on screen. Conflicts are bound to happen frequently within the family when men and women fall into such simple binary categories, which helps produce dramatic plotlines.

The theme of ‘tiger mom vs. cat dad’ presented in the drama seemingly reverses traditional stereotypes by portraying the emergent caring family men and empowering women both within the household and at the workplace. However, the reception of this theme appears to further entrench gendered hierarchies by imposing double standards on men and women. Mothers depicted as such have been criticised on the Internet because of their strict parenting methods, while the images of fathers have been received favourably by both the fictional children in these dramas and by viewers on account of their caring and emotional traits. It seems that fathers who embody a more intimate and emotionally expressive masculinity by assuming the role of carer in the family tend to benefit from a ‘hero-like’ status on the screen, while mothers who show the equivalent amount of (or more) care for their children are naturalised. This sustains the traditional notion that women are expected to be natural nurturers even when they have a full-time career, while putting caring men on a pedestal.

The importance of white collar work in the construction of masculinity

When Fang finally tells the truth about his unemployment, he receives understanding and support from his family. After that, Fang officially assumes the role of a SAHF to support his son and his breadwinning wife, while searching for his next job. His character has reportedly served as an inspiration for some men in Hangzhou who subsequently decided to become SAHFs (Huang, 2019). However, the drama itself focuses more on Fang’s job-hunting than any portrayal of his life as SAHF. The following exchange occurs between Fang and his wife Dong when he decides to take up a job as a taxi driver to supplement the family income:

董：你从中国政法大学毕业，如今你选择做出租车司机？即使你愿意做，我也不想要让你做。你可想清楚了，方圆。

方：当然，我也不是完全想当个司机。但我不能只选择做我愿意做的事情啊。现在对于咱们家来说是特殊时期，我不能把全家的经济负担都让你来承担。

Dong: You graduated from University of Political Science and Law, now you are willing to be a driver? Even if you are willing to do that, I do not want you to do it. You think it through, Fang Yuan.

Fang: Of course, I am not entirely willing to just be a driver. But I cannot only do the thing that I am willing to do. Now it is a special time for our family, and I cannot put all the financial burden of our entire family on you.

The above dialogue suggests that Dong does not like the idea of Fang being a taxi driver because she thinks that his elite educational background and social standing are not in alignment with this job. In Dong's eyes, corporate jobs (such as that Fang used to have) are more respectable (*timian* 体面) for men. The depiction of the wife's preference for white-collar corporate jobs for her husband suggests that class division is one of the salient divisions in the social imaginary of personal identity markers in contemporary urban China (Hird, 2009; Song & Hird, 2014). In this case, class divisions are manifested more in career choice than material gain, with career choice particularly acting as a marker of men's capabilities and achievements. Only when financial stability cannot be guaranteed can there be a temporary compromise over the preferences for career choice. This explains why Dong eventually acquiesces to her husband accepting a job as a taxi driver after she suffers an incident of sexual harassment at work and retreats into the domestic realm, given the financial crisis in the household now that she is unemployed.

Reflexivity in Crisis: *Super Dad & Super Kids*

While *Super Dad & Super Kids* is lesser known compared with the above two dramas in terms of commercial success, it is worth examining due both to its similarities and differences. On the one hand, it notably reproduces the theme where middle-class corporate men are forced to stay at home due to a personal crisis rather than by their own volition, and the clichéd happy ending of a return-to-work man with a happy marriage. On the other hand, the father character in this drama chooses to embrace his new status following his reflection during the time of being a SAHF, rather than being perennially frustrated by his attempts to return to work like the male characters in the other two series. Moreover, as the name suggests, the children are more involved in the daily life within the family as compared with *Marriage Battle*. The drama mainly depicts how good communication, interaction, and trust gradually develops between the SAHF and his children, instead of only focusing on couple relationships.

The story of the drama revolves around the everyday life of a “clumsy” SAHF (*gouxiong baba* 狗熊爸爸) Xiong Xiong 熊熊 (played by Sha Yi 沙溢) with his son Xiong Weini 熊维尼 (Liu Junzhe 刘峻喆). 35-year-old Xiong Xiong is a general manager of an investment company. Just as he is about to be promoted, his assistant sets him up and causes him to lose the job. Meanwhile, given that Xiong has been distant both as a husband and a father, his wife Tao Jinzi 陶金子 (Hu Ke 胡可) walks out on him after a huge fight, leaving their rebellious son and little daughter under his care. As mentioned earlier, class privilege continues to be demonstrated in this series, which offers escapist entertainment for viewers. The family lives in a big house in Beijing and the son goes to an international private school. Yet as an unemployed father who has to cover the expenses of childrearing and household maintenance by himself when his spouse is absent, Xiong still does not feel the need to earn money until he loses some of his savings on the stock market (episode 10).

With the wife/mother Tao being (temporarily) absent for most of the episodes, this series focuses on delineating how a single SAHF deals with childcare, that is, with a category of SAHFs that the previous two drama series fail to cover. With the mother absent, the single SAHF Xiong is forced to be more attentive and caring towards his children, but he is far from a cat dad—Xiong befriends his son, as fathers in *A Little Reunion* do, but he is also strict and demanding when his son does something wrong. However, spending more time with his son and his little daughter makes Xiong realise the value of the family and consequently, he changes his perceptions of caregiving as well as toward his wife; he eventually makes up with his wife and returns to work as a man with a new perspective on life.

The shift in Xiong's attitude and behaviour towards his children and his wife after his unemployment echoes Mario Liong's assertion that crises in men's lives, such as financial crises and prolonged marital conflict, tend to be "opportunities for them to reflect upon their taken-for-granted duties", and thus help them develop closer relationships with both their children and spouses (Liong, 2017b: 176). As Liong explains, the loss of a job is likely to shift men's focus from their career and monetary rewards to the pursuit of building a closer relationship with his family, and prolonged marital conflict usually leads them to become more involved with their children to compensate for the loss of their spouse by satisfying their own sentimental needs. Marital relationships are closely linked with men's fathering practices (Kwok *et al.*, 2013), and thus they tend to improve once men have become more committed to the family, just as presented in the drama.

However, the representation of the father character seems to suggest that only external crises can lead men to connect with their emotional selves and develop an emotionally sensitive and more caring personality. To put it another way, why has no man been represented as voluntarily quitting the job and retreating to the domestic realm? The need to justify men's actions in retreating to the domestic realm indicates the hegemony of breadwinning in masculinity and entrenches the gendered notion of labour division by implying that men are not expected to be natural nurturers. Indeed, the representation of stay-at-home fatherhood and masculinity in the drama is based on the premise of the three-month absence of the mother. The story resembles the enormously popular American film *Three Men and a Baby* released in 1987, in the sense that the fathers' successful attempt to demonstrate their capability in taking up caregiving responsibilities only happens when the mother is not around. Both works treat the role of SAHFs as incredibly unconventional and adventurous, rather than as a natural obligation, by highlighting hilarious mishaps as the characters attempt to adapt their lives to nurturing fatherhood. The fact that fathers as primary caregivers serve as a source of humour in the representational process implies that their role deviates from what is typical for men in the family. In other words, given that they are not considered as the natural nurturers of the domestic sphere, hilarious mishaps are most likely to occur (see Vavrus, 2002: 365; Modleski, 1991: 86-8). As Liong summarises it, "As caregiving is widely considered the maternal duty, it is only when the mother is absent that the father's caregiving can appear natural in the media representation" (Liong, 2017b: 172).



Figure 2: Xiong Xiong in Super Dad & Super Kids (screenshot from episode 3 [30:06])

Conclusion

In this article, I have concentrated on plotlines and dialogues to reveal the different gender images and familial power relations that feature in Chinese dramas that feature SAHFs. In doing so, I have extracted four common themes in understanding the representations of SAHFs—an emergent gendered identity—in the contemporary Chinese family from three dramas, namely, class specificity, the importance of work in the construction of masculinity, the expectation of keeping the marriage and family intact as a happy ending for the story, and the absence of intergenerational impact on the nuclear family. As a complementary source to showcase the personality traits of a character or power dynamic between a couple, I have briefly touched upon other elements, such as choice of clothing and pitch of voice for certain characters, and these could potentially be explored further in future research, along with visuals (e.g., camera and lighting) and sound.

While TV dramas are considered as a trigger for social emotions and a site for viewers to shape a variety of potentially conflicting ideas, they have their own aesthetic and dramatic implications, offering as they do both escapism and entertainment. Although they do not necessarily reflect ‘reality’, the male images depicted in these dramas are a product of social changes that contribute to the construction of masculinity and perceptions of gender roles in contemporary Chinese popular culture. By focusing on the portrayal of SAHFs and their relationships with their partners, the construction of masculinity in relation to femininity in these dramas serves as a salient example of the hybridity of masculine discourse on the Chinese screen, in ways that suggest both gradual shifts and continuities in ‘conventional’ gender notions within the family context. I am aware that these three case studies only offer indicative, and not encyclopaedic converge, of TV drama representations of Chinese masculinity, but they do showcase one emergent type of the ‘new man’ on the Chinese screen. However, the influences posed by the interactional relationship between China and globalisation cannot be ruled out in analysing changing concepts of masculinity in contemporary China (Song & Hird, 2018). Therefore, to situate Chinese men and masculinity within a more globalised context, future research on representations of SAHFs could usefully focus on more cross-cultural aspects of the issue, by comparing Chinese SAHFs, as the Chinese variant of the ‘new man’, with SAHFs’ portrayal in TV dramas/films from other countries.

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been a math tutor for his son while talking good care of household chores; and lately something happened unexpectedly), *Dushikuaibao*, available at https://h5.newaircloud.com/detailArticle/8995171_32645_hzxw.html?mobile=1&source=1 (accessed 02,02, 2022).

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