Original Research Article

Constructing Stay-at-Home Fathers' Work-Care Identities in China

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Abstract
This article examines how stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs) position their primary caregiving identity in relation to paid work that they either used to have or currently have part-time/freelance. The aim is to understand how their sense of masculinity is shaped by and/or rebelled against normative gender expectations. 22 Chinese SAHFs participated in this qualitative research, involving one-to-one repeat structured interviews over a year. Four fathering identities emerged from the data: "Ambivalent SAHFs", "Reluctant SAHFs", "Proud SAHFs", and "Reflective SAHFs". The juxtaposition of these subject positions indicates the tensions between assuming the primary caregiving role and conforming to normative gendered expectations for men. However, the findings also demonstrate that stay-at-home fathering identity is not fixed, but subject to change over time, with spousal support being crucial to their transition. This constant evolution challenges oversimplified categorizations of SAHFs as purely choice-driven or circumstantial.

This article examines how stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs) position their primary caregiving identity in relation to paid work that they either used to have or currently have part-time/freelance. The aim is to understand how their sense of masculinity is

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shaped by the normative gender expectations that "real" men prioritize paid work over caring in contemporary urban China. Additionally, it explores how these narratives evolve over time as they assume the SAHF role.

SAHFs represent an unconventional gender role in China, marginalized by historical prejudice against men who are not the main wage-earners in the family. Understanding their identity formation process is particularly significant at a time when gender inequality in China coexists with an increasingly individualistic culture. Issues of hierarchy and injustice in gendered practices remain unaddressed by the government and are reinforced through popular discourse. My scrutiny of the discourse surrounding this emergent role contributes to existing literature on caring masculinities and engaged fatherhood in contemporary urban China, furthering our understanding of the social production of gender difference and hierarchy in urban China.

Below I begin with a review of literature on caring masculinities and engaged fatherhood in China, followed by descriptions of my use of a gender performativity and modified self-presentation theoretical framework, along with a modified version of the constructivist branch of grounded theory and discourse analysis methodology. I then present the results and discussions elucidating how SAHFs took on four dominant subject positions constituting their fathering identities in relation to their perceptions of paid work.

Engaged Fatherhood and Masculinities in China

There has been a notable emergence of caring and emotionally expressive husbands and fathers, marking a departure from the traditional archetype of the distant or disciplinarian figure prevalent in previous generations in contemporary China. This shift has garnered significant attention in academic research over the past two decades (Liong, 2017a, 2017b; Song & Hird, 2014; Xu & O'Brien, 2014). This trend aligns with the growing discourse on engaged fatherhood in Western research (Dermott, 2008; Doucet, 2006; Miller, 2011). However, the emergence of engaged fatherhood and caring masculinities does not necessarily imply a linear transformation in fathering practices and spousal dynamics (Santos & Harrell, 2017; Jamieson, 1999).

Alongside the rise of engaged fathering practices and emotionally sensitive husbands, there is a noticeable presence of besuited entrepreneurs and businessmen who embody materialistic aspirations (Song & Hird, 2014). This represents a departure from the traditional ideal of selfless, macho, working-class Maoist heroes, which were once seen as the epitome of Chinese manhood. This shift reflects a historical continuation and mutation of the prevailing gendered notion that "men rule the outside while women rule the inside" (*nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei* 男主外,女主内), which continues to reinforce gendered roles and poses a threat to men's career prospects when women challenge these norms (Fincher, 2014; Song & Hird, 2014). Geng Song and Derek Hird (Song & Hird, 2014) describe the phenomenon as the "anxious breadwinner" (pp. 216–217), referring to men who feel threatened by highly educated women with successful careers, as their sense of identity and masculinity is primarily defined by their work.

Research has also highlighted men's decision-making power regarding the division of housework and caring labor as indicative of the persistence of men's dominant position, despite the increasing popularity of the emotionally expressive and caring family man (Cao, 2019; Liong, 2017b). As a result, contemporary Chinese societies exhibit a coexistence of traditional and hybrid forms of masculinity (Song & Hird, 2014; Tam & Kwan, 2024), but the extent to which the idea of equality is manifested in men's everyday practices as caring husbands and fathers remains a question that requires further exploration (Coltrane, 2000; Jamieson, 1999; Song & Hird, 2014). While previous studies emphasize how their career status and decision-making power, continue to uphold men's dominant position in and outside the family by reproducing the gendered labor division, there remains a dearth of research on how men when stripped of their full-time careers by assuming the primary caregiving role, affect this power dynamic in Chinese families. In other words, how does the phenomenon of the "anxious breadwinner" sustain and/or transform when men are no longer the breadwinner of the family in contemporary urban China? After all, men's perceptions of fatherhood and manhood are constantly reshaped by multifaceted factors, including ongoing negotiations within the family, access to flexible work arrangements, and individuals' reflexivity, rather than being fixed and solely dependent on the Chinese cultural ideals (Doucet, 2016; Liong, 2017b).

Stay-at-Home Fathers: Overview of Research

The term "SAHFs" is more commonly used in English academic literature than "househusbands" to describe men who take on the primary caregiving responsibilities (see Doucet, 2016; Lee & Lee, 2018; Lui & Chou, 2019; Medved, 2016). Scholars prefer "SAHFs" because it explicitly indicates childrearing responsibilities, a notion that resonates with SAHFs themselves and others (Liong, 2017a; Wentworth & Chell, 2001). Moreover, the term "househusband" implies men's marital status, potentially excluding gay, single, separated, divorced, or cohabitating primary caregivers. In contrast, using "SAHFs" shifts the focus to caregiving responsibilities, making it more inclusive and appropriate term for all fathers who assume the primary caregiving role, irrespective of their marital status.[1]

A significant number of studies have adopted a broader definition of SAHFs that emphasizes men's primary caregiving role rather than their employment status, aiming to avoid the binary distinction of caregiving versus work (Doucet, 2006; Hunter et al., 2017; Lee & Lee, 2018; Liong, 2017a; Merla, 2008). This inclusive approach recognizes that men's marital status or engagement in the labor market should not disqualify them as primary caregivers. Therefore, this research adopted this definition to ensure diversity and inclusivity in exploring men's perceptions and experiences as primary caregivers.

The decision of SAHFs to take on caregiving and homemaking duties traditionally associated with women suggests a departure from the conventional heteronormative model of men as breadwinners and women as caregivers, signaling the emergence of a

more emotionally engaged form of caring masculinities. During the past three decades, research on SAHFs has predominantly been conducted in the Global North, examining a variety of interconnected factors that contribute to men's decision to become the primary caregiver within the family. A consistent pattern among most studies is the consideration of couples' respective employment and financial conditions, such as men's job instability or dissatisfaction, in contrast to their spouses' higher incomes or career prospects (Chesley, 2011; Doucet & Merla, 2007; Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Kramer et al., 2015; Lee & Lee, 2018; Merla, 2008). Some studies categorize SAHFs into two distinct groups: those who assume the role by choice and those who are unable to work due to circumstances (e.g., Chesley, 2011; Kramer et al., 2015). However, as Andrea Doucet (2016) argues, this distinction is premised on a work/care binary that oversimplifies SAHFs' decision-making. While men's employment situations and financial prospects can certainly influence their decision to stay home or not, they are not necessarily the decisive or sole reasons.

Alongside the growing significance of children's development and the eagerness to strengthen the father-child bond, there is a desire to break away from the distant, uninvolved fathers of previous generations, as observed in Liong's (2017a) research on Chinese single fathers and Roberta Coles' (2002) study on African American single fathers. Despite this, there remains a gap in research exploring the increasing accessibility of flexible work arrangements, as highlighted earlier by Doucet (2016). This gap pertains to understanding how flexible work arrangements influence men's perceptions of their roles as a full-time caregiver and homemaker, especially when navigating the dual identities of a full-time father and part-time worker. I argue that SAHFs actively reconstruct their sense of masculinity based on their changing experience of childrearing, in relation to their evolving perception of paid work. My research findings highlight how men make sense of their SAHF identity and what contributes to levels of satisfaction for different individuals when enacting the role, to demonstrate how narratives concerning their role as a SAHF evolve over time, rather than only focusing their initial motivation when transitioning into the role.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework employed in this article is situated within two interrelated strands of theory: Judith Butler's (2006) notion of gender performativity and Anthony Giddens' (2009) modified version of Erving Goffman's (1956, 1963) theory of self-presentation. These two strands of theory were drawn upon because of their complementary capacity to foreground SAHFs' performance and the maintenance and/or transformation of culturally constructed gender identity through social interactions. This framework has the potential to facilitate the analysis of how men's narratives of their own perceptions and experiences of their full-time involvement in traditionally feminine roles, such as childcare and household chores, in relation to their continued engagement in paid work, reproduce and/or contest social norms and expectations surrounding the gendered division of labor.

Butler (2006) challenges the understanding of a "self" that exists independently of language, linking linguistic performativity to gender identity. She asserts that gender identities are constructed by language, meaning that there is no gender identity that precedes language (see p. 159). Drawing from this theory, rather than viewing narratives of SAHFs provided in interviews as mere descriptions of their lived experiences, it is imperative to understand how language functions as a social practice that both reflects and contributes to the shaping and reshaping of social structures and identities.

Moreover, Butler's (2006) concept of "discontinuous" (p. 23) gendered beings in gender performativity theory guided the analysis of my research findings. I explored not only how gender identity is conventionally perceived and performed through stable concepts such as sex, gender, and sexuality, but also delineated how some aspects of individuals, termed "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings by Butler, challenge these boundaries, while reproducing such stable concepts in other aspects. This provided insights into the ongoing process of constructing a sense of masculinity and navigating societal expectations of men in relation to care work.

To put the debate further in understanding how SAHFs navigate their gender identity, I incorporated Giddens' adaptation of Goffman's theory of self-presentation into my theoretical framework. Expanding upon Goffman's (1956, 1963) theory, which highlights the selective nature of individuals' self-presentation—wherein they present their favorable selves on the "front stage" while concealing hidden identities on the "back stage"—Giddens' critique is twofold that offers a more dynamic view of identity formation that incorporates both the performative aspects highlighted by Goffman and the active agency of individuals in shaping their own identities.

Giddens critiques Goffman's lack of systematic discussions on power dynamics in different contexts of interaction. Giddens emphasizes the importance of furthering Goffman's argument regarding the language of "actors," "performances," and "audiences," by addressing why interactions take the forms they do and their implications in broader societal and cultural contexts. Invisible systems of power are not only perpetuated but also reproduced through everyday interactions, particularly through language. Furthermore, Giddens (2009, p. 294) highlights the significance of reflexivity in shaping narratives of individuals' self-presentation. He contends that individuals possess the capacity to continuously reflect on their actions, influenced by broader societal changes.

Informed by Giddens' (2009) critique, my research on SAHFs involves conducting repeated interviews with the same individuals over a year, which has yielded findings that further challenge Goffman's (1956) concept of "front stage" and "back stage" personas (p. 132). Discrepancies in narratives provided by participants over the course of a year reveal diverse layers contingent upon the interaction context and their level of reflexivity, particularly evident during moments of unexpected life changes. These findings complicate the binary notion that individuals only perform in front of others while presenting their authentic selves solely in private.

Employing a theoretical framework informed by gender performativity and Giddens' modification of Goffman's theory of self-presentation, this article effectively

addresses two interconnected questions central to its intervention: (1) How do SAHFs perceive and negotiate their masculinities as primary caregivers, particularly concerning their attitudes toward paid work in their self-representations?; and (2) In what ways do their narratives reinforce or challenge conventional gender role norms over time? This investigation involved analyzing SAHFs' practical responses to my inquiries about their motivations, perceptions, and experiences in their primary caregiving roles, particularly in relation to paid work they either used to have or currently have part-time/freelance.

Methods

Data Collection

The visibility of SAHFs in contemporary China is hindered by both the emerging nature of this concept and enduring social stigma. Overcoming the challenge of finding interviewees required a strategic approach due to a lack of personal connections with SAHFs. Leveraging various Chinese social media platforms, including Zhihu (a forum website where Q&A are created and organized by its users), Douban (a social networking website with topic-specific forums), Weibo (a microblogging website), and WeChat (an instant messaging, social media, and mobile payment app), ensuring anonymity and confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms. Additionally, I conducted Chinese keyword searches on Zhihu and Douban to identify potential participants who self-identified with the SAHF role. Reaching out to authors of relevant articles further facilitated access to former participants. Employing snowball sampling, I recruited two participants who were less active social media users from existing participants. Through these efforts, I established contact with twenty-two Chinese SAHFs.

I utilized the semi-structured interviewing method, drawing on Jennifer Mason's (2002, see pp. 69–70) guide to assembling interview questions. I broke down my two aforementioned research questions into mini-questions and prepared an interview guide. The questions focused on the recent lives of SAHFs, with occasional references to their past experiences. Most of the questions were open-ended, giving the interviewees more space to articulate their own ideas and experiences, thereby enabling the discussion to extend beyond the prepared questions.

The decision to conduct follow-up interviews with all participants was driven by the aim to explore the complexity of each participant's identity over time, recognizing that responses may vary across different contexts. Initially planned as in-person interviews, with only a few possible follow-up interviews that some participants agreed upon, COVID-19 travel restrictions in both the UK and China during the research period (2021–2022) necessitated online interviews, which incidentally reduced geographical and temporal constraints, allowing me to conduct multiple interviews with all participants. This adjustment in my research plan fostered a more cyclical relationship between participants and myself.

Participants

The study involved 22 fathers aged between 29 and 55, with the majority in their thirties and one participant in his fifties. Participants had varying durations of heterosexual marriage, with the majority married between 2 and 8 years, while one participant had been married for 20 years. They were predominantly from middle-class backgrounds and located in various cities across China, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chongqing, and Hangzhou. Many had relocated from other regions of China to these major cities with their partners, either for their own job opportunities in the past, for their wives' careers, or to be closer to their wives' families. The majority held a college degree, with two having studied abroad. Ten participants had two children, while the remaining had one child. At the time of the interviews, all identified themselves as the primary caregivers of their families, with 19 of them engaged in freelance/part-time work closely related to their SAHF role. This included occupations such as dad vlogger, writer specializing in romantic relationships and families, or roles involved in early childhood education.

Analysis

I employed a modified version of the constructivist branch of grounded theory for data analysis, where theories emerge from constant comparison and analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Schwandt, 1994). Additionally, I applied Norman Fairclough's (1992) theory of discourse analysis to explore how interviewees construct their gendered identities through language use as a social practice. This approach aligns with the theoretical framework of Butler's (2006) theory, linking linguistic performativity to gender identity. The data analysis process commenced after each interview, utilizing Charmaz's coding approach (2006), which informed subsequent interviews and observations.

Results and Discussions

The analysis is grounded in the interview data with 22 participants, revealing four dominant subject positions constituting stay-at-home fathering identities: (1) Ambivalence about their SAHF identity in self-presentation, as they categorized being a SAHF solely as their domestic identity; (2) Reluctance to admit their SAHF identity was apparent, with one participant, La Rou, stating, "Men cannot be jobless", suggesting that the SAHF role is only tolerated when it is temporary; (3) Proud fathers actively embrace the SAHF label as their social identity, many of whom did not base their sense of identity on their previous full-time careers before assuming the role; and (4) Reflective SAHFs adapt their career ambitions to family-related freelance careers and find joy and fulfillment in their full-time fathering role, with spousal support being crucial to their transition. All participants reflected on their SAHF role in their narratives, acknowledging the patriarchal dividend[2] that they have compared to female primary caregivers, which will be further discussed at the end of this section.

The juxtaposition of these four themes sheds light on the importance of ac-knowledging the tensions that exist in SAHFs' self-presentations, especially when all participants explicitly self-identified as SAHFs online. Analyzing these themes con-tributes to understanding how men navigate their SAHF identity in relation to their work identity differently through their self-presentations, whether by reproducing and/ or actively challenging the social stigma and prejudice against men who are not the main wage-earner in the family in China. This social stigma and prejudice may manifest in either portraying a glorified image of nurturing men with strong financial foundations or a wealthy wife or expressing feelings of inadequacy as a man (Huang, 2023; Liong, 2017a).

Moving beyond investigating SAHFs that mainly focus on their initial motivations and experiences, as most existing research has done (Chesley, 2011; Kramer et al., 2015; Liong, 2017a; Merla, 2008), my analysis points to the evolving nature of SAHFs' perceptions of their self-image in relation to their masculine ideals. It focuses on delineating reasons behind similarities and differences in their self-presentations, unveiling the ongoing process of identity formation.

Ambivalent SAHFs

A few participants presented their SAHF identity confidently online, yet felt uncertain or concealed it in face-to-face contexts due to feelings of illegitimacy. Interestingly, they often emphasized their long-term career ambitions or entertained the possibility of returning to the workplace. While I initially assumed that those who labeled themselves as SAHFs online would strongly identify with this role, my interviews revealed otherwise. Two participants displayed uncertainty about positioning themselves as SAHFs at the start of our conversations, highlighting a discrepancy between their online persona and offline interactions. This realization prompted me to explore further how individuals perceive and present themselves differently in various contexts, a theme that also emerged in subsequent conversations with some other participants.

Prior to my first interview with SAHF John, he had agreed to participate as a SAHF. However, when I began the conversation by asking the question, "When did you start assuming the role of a SAHF and how old was your son?", he responded hesitantly:

> Since 2014…. How old…? Wait, I am not sure if I fit in your definition of SAHFs. How do you define SAHFs? Because I have a career and I work from home—does that count as a SAHF?

John embraced his identity as a SAHF within an exclusive online forum dedicated to such individuals. However, when discussing his SAHF role, he had ambivalent feelings, indicative of a defense mechanism against recognition as a SAHF. In response to my question about whether he would introduce himself as a SAHF to others offline, he asserted, "No", suggesting that he would highlight his paid work, as "it would be more interesting for others". Another participant, Colin, echoed this view, expressing a

preference for presenting himself as a business starter rather than disclosing his SAHF identity. He perceived his SAHF identity as irrelevant to others in offline settings, emphasizing the familial nature of this role. Colin believed that his job, albeit a freelance one, can define his public identity more effectively. He expressed, "It would be quite awkward to bring childcare up if I was not in an event specifically for fatherhood or childcare, wouldn't it? Because people would assume that I got a job."

Unveiling their SAHF identity only in specific circumstances, such as social media platforms where they can choose to be anonymous, highlights the multidimensional and context-dependent nature of identities, which can be revealed differently based on the interaction context rather than solely the audience present (Giddens, 2009). The main reason for the discrepancy between these participants' online, chat-based identity and public persona, as indicated in the above narratives, is that online platforms provide a "safe private outlet" to share their caregiving and homemaking experiences with like-minded individuals, shielded from potential judgment in their offline interactions where adherence to conventional masculine images tied to paid work is prioritized. The participants internalized this gendered notion, which made them feel illegitimate when introducing themselves as a SAHF, including during interviews with me.

Reluctant SAHFs

Several other participants also concealed their SAHF identity when interacting with others offline. However, rather than only feeling illegitimate and ambivalent about their SAHF identity, they expressed stronger views on men doing care work, with more gender-biased tones and expressions.

La Rou, who recently started his own business in early childhood education for other parents, shared that before starting his business, he would downplay his primary caregiver role when interacting with others, by saying "I am not doing anything in particular." He then simply introduced his career in family education as his identity, omitting his role as a caregiver. When discussing the motivations for pursuing a part-time career while remaining a SAHF, La Rou provided further insights into his perception of masculinity:

> I didn't plan to simply stay at home and do nothing when I quit my job. So, I am not sure if I fit in your research category. Men cannot be completely out of touch with society. You cannot assume the SAHF role in the very traditional sense that your partner provides money, and you do nothing. After all, men cannot be jobless.

At first, La Rou dismissed the idea of stay-at-home caregiving as "simply stay at home and do nothing". However, he later acknowledged that "taking care of children is a difficult task", a sentiment shared by all participants in interviews. This shift in perspective reflects a dual sense of superiority and inferiority. La Rou's statement devalues care work, elevating careers in the public sphere as the only meaningful endeavors, suggesting that anything else would render one "out of touch with society".

La Rou's employment-based identity suggested that his subjectivity was understood and shaped within a framework of dominant hierarchies of masculinity where paid work was central (Connell, 1995; Miller, 2011). However, I began to wonder whether he sought to regain the breadwinning identity through his paid work or aimed to be perceived as a career man who is publicly visible and "useful". Therefore, I rephrased my previous question: "Would you say that your intention is to make your business profitable for your family?" His response indicated that he leaned towards the latter category: "Before I started my business, I already knew that it might not bring me much money. I just wanted to reach a balance between the ideal state and real life." This emphasis on men's capability to engage in the public sphere, rather than becoming breadwinners with significant earnings and career accomplishments—commonly referred to as the "money elite" (Farrer, 2002; cf. Song & Hird, 2014)—diverges from the prevailing ideal of middle-class Chinese masculinity.

Informed by Giddens' (2009) notion that individuals often reveal different aspects of themselves based on the context of interaction, a point echoed by other interviewees, coupled with the concept that masculine ideals are not fixed but subject to change based on subjective experiences (Lane, 2009), I asked whether the fact that La Rou created an environment to frequently interact with other parents who potentially shared similar caregiving experiences reshaped his initial thoughts. "Have you built connections with other SAHFs through the early education workshop you hosted?" His response suggested that the model of masculinity associated with the "useful career-oriented man" continued to strongly influence how he perceived himself, expected to be seen by others, and viewed other caregiving men. As he elaborated:

> It is not that simple for men—they don't seem to have pure intentions like women. I can't help but wonder if their full-time involvement in their children's education is a pretext for something else, like dealing with being laid off from work

Being a male primary caregiver without maintaining connections with the public sphere appeared incomprehensible to La Rou, even though he assumed such role voluntarily. His belief that most women have a "pure intention" when it comes to children reflected patriarchal views, assuming that women primarily derive their identity and self-worth from the domestic sphere, with unemployment not provoking similar anxieties for women who were previously employed full-time. La Rou's perspective did not apply to all participants. For example, William shared that his wife was more career-driven than himself, and that's why he took up more domestic duties. This aligns with Carrie Lane's argument (2009, see p. 698) that unemployment is more discomfiting for middle-class married women than married men due to higher stakes for their professional success than men, stemming from entrenched gender-specific norms and fewer opportunities. A recent study (Hou, et al., 2020) on gender differences during the Covid outbreak in China also found that unemployment caused more stress for women compared to men for similar reasons.

This disconnection in La Rou's association of masculinity with a career and his role as a SAHF prompted further exploration into how he made sense of his identity before starting his side business. "How was your experience as a SAHF for those two years without your side business?" I subsequently asked La Rou. His response was direct and clear: "I never thought about sacrificing myself for my son. So, if the role was temporary, I did not care that much." The temporary nature of the SAHF role allowed La Rou to accept the transition from being a full-time career man to a SAHF. In other words, if the role of being a SAHF without a job were to become permanent, it would potentially put his sense of masculinity in crisis.

Liu, a 55-year-old SAHF who also only revealed his SAHF identity online. However, Liu's role as a SAHF was not temporary but rather a long-term arrangement. Despite having a side career in the stock market, he expressed dissatisfaction with his life as a full-time caregiver. For Liu, the social status associated with having a full-time job held equal significance to his sense of masculinity, along with the ability to financially provide for this family.

While Liu was the only SAHF in my research who presented himself as permanently stuck in this role, it is rewarding to observe the disparities between Liu's self-representation in our conversations and his portrayal on social media, particularly in his interview with *Paike*, a Chinese digital newspaper through which I initially connected with him. In the article (Zhang et al., 2019), Liu is depicted as a man who willingly abandoned his career to care for his daughter, considering the potential challenges of skipped-generational childcare. While Liu stressed care for his daughter in both interviews with me, his following narrative painted a different picture, creating a contrasting impression compared to his "front stage" social media persona:

> I had been staying at home long before the term "SAHF", which only started to appear in the last couple of years in China. So, you can describe me as a SAHF because it is indeed the status of my everyday life, but I am not proud of it and would never introduce myself to others as that. Being called SAHF is not a compliment, it represents my helplessness and it's so emasculating and embarrassing. If I were 30 something, I would definitely go out there and build a career. Now, my age does not allow me to do that, given that my knowledge and skills are already obsolete in this extremely competitive job market in Beijing. You know … my wife also does not want me to stay at home. But even if I can get a decent job, which I highly doubt, no one is going to do domestic chores, and hiring a cleaner is pricey. So, there is no other way for me but to stay at home, but I am not happy about this lifestyle.

Liu's belief in how men *should* behave, attached to paid work, was pertinent throughout our conversations. Liu's reference to his wife's role in shaping his self-presentation echoes findings from studies on SAHFs in the Global North that highlight the importance of spousal support in men's navigation of challenges associated with assuming this unconventional and marginalized gender role (Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Merla, 2008). As Merla (2008) concludes from her research on Belgian SAHFs, women's better earning potential and their willingness to work, as well as their

insistence on increased father involvement in childcare serve as strong incentives for their partners to take on the SAHF role. Liu's case mirrors this theory, as his partner's earning ability and willingness to assume the provider role enabled him to fully invest in domestic duties. However, Liu's stay-at-home experience was marked by a lack of spousal support, contributing to a persistent feeling of devaluation and illegitimacy. The impact of spousal expectations of men's self-perception becomes evident, shedding light on how women can internalize traditional gender roles, i.e., "men (should) rule the outside", further undervaluing men's emotional labor.

Proud SAHFs

Several other participants, however, represented their sense of "self" in a way that underscored the distinction between individual self-value and societal expectations of men associated with the breadwinner identity in their narratives.

When asked how he introduces himself to others, SAHF Terry responded with a clear assertion: "I am a full-time father, and this is my social identity." Terry further explained:

> If someone were to ask about my daily activities, much like a stay-at-home mother (SAHM) who would mention caring for her children, I would respond in a similar fashion—I am a SAHF! I am also a freelance writer—Just as many SAHMs who use their spare time to generate additional income. I've observed several housewives in my neighborhood who engage in different paid work such as selling products like baby diapers online during their spare time. However, these jobs are part-time hustles. Similarly, I spend most of my time is taking care of my son. If someone expressed interest in my writing, then of course, I'd be happy to share that aspect of my life with them.

Intrigued by whether Terry underwent a transitional phase in shifting his perception of masculinity from paid work to childcare, I inquired about his previous full-time job. In response, Terry shared, "I was never career oriented. Since my wife earned more than me, and we needed someone for our son, I happily quit my job." SAHF Tan expressed a similar sentiment, saying,

> My happiness never came from my career. Not being a corporate ladder climber, I became a full-time father to care for our two children. It works for our family — I enjoy time with my kids and pursue personal interests like reading, writing, and going to the gym.

For both Terry and Tan, the transition to becoming a SAHF did not involve a significant shift in their sense of identity, as their identity was not deeply rooted in their previous careers. Their narratives reflected a departure from the traditional expectations of masculinity associated with work and demonstrated a readiness to embrace caregiving roles, highlighting the importance of personal fulfilment and family dynamics in their narratives.

Reflective SAHFs

Most participants, however, indicated that they had experienced a significant priority shift from their careers to caregiving at home, leading to a transformation in their sense of identity. While some maintained a sense of identity attached to masculine ideals of paid work, this attachment evolved after experiences of caregiving. Embracing their roles as homemakers and primary caregivers, these men adjusted their career ambitions, finding inspiration in their lives as nurturing fathers and loving husbands.

Yu and Qi, for instance, emphasized the inseparability of their identities as fathers and, respectively, a dad vlogger and a relationship blogger. While they found it challenging to mention one role without the other, they only introduced their SAHF identity for convenience. As Qi explained:

> When people, like the elderly in my neighborhood, ask what I do, I find it easier to say I am a SAHF, as explaining being a relationship blogger would take more time. I simply tell them I don't have a job and have been staying at home to take care of my kid.

Furthermore, these "working-from-home" dads indicated that their paid work aligns with the rhythms of their daily lives as full-time fathers. Li, a parenting coach, highlighted in our interview: "I work from home, but my schedule revolves around my children—I prioritize taking care of them whenever they need me." The sense of security in their SAHF identity led to the question of whether staying at home while working part-time was their long-term goal, given the reassurance the role's temporality provided to some SAHFs in the first group. However, it became apparent that the time devoted to caregiving allowed for the development of a new sense of self in relation to paid work. As Li elaborated:

> The internet has made working from home easy, and commuting is a waste of time. Being there for my two children is my priority, especially during their formative years. I would not have enough time to be there for them if I worked 9 to 5.

These SAHFs' transitions illustrate how the increase in remote job opportunities allows them to be more involved in their families without disconnecting from the labor market, suggesting a gradual shift in gender dynamics regarding childrearing and labor division in a rapidly digitizing society.

For another participant, Chen, his rebellion towards expectations of men associated with work from others became evident:

> I don't care about what others think—I am a full-time father, and I have said that to all my family members and relatives. To my parents and in-laws, they find it awkward to explain to others. I have simply told them that 'you tell them what I do. My close friends are very supportive or at least understanding, though.

When asked if he would appreciate more support from family members, Chen responded, "Maybe … but I don't really care. It's a decision between my wife and me for our family—It's not their business." Chen depicted himself as unashamed of claiming the SAHF identity and unaffected by any disapproval from extended family. Similarly, Tan stated, "My wife and I don't live with our parents/in-laws. We only visit them once a month, avoiding unnecessary interference." Views from family members seldom emerged in my discussions with all participants, but when they did, they stressed that being a SAHF was a decision between them and their partners, with minimal interference from family or in-laws. A few other participants similarly expressed that being understood and appreciated by their wives provided them with a sense of security, surpassing the need for approval from other family members, friends, or society. This phenomenon underlines the increased significance of spousal relationships in terms of decision-making and overall well-being, while also pointing to the diminishing influence of extended family dynamics. In other words, there is a growing individual freedom of choice within the nuclear family unit that continues to liberate Chinese individuals from traditionally extended family units. This sensitivity to individual freedom is influenced by the reciprocal and dynamic interactions between changing values within the nuclear family and broader societal changes since the post-Mao era (Davis & Harrell, 1993; Yan, 2003). While a few SAHFs' narratives reflect the continued involvement of grandparents and parents as joint caregivers, which remains prevalent in urban Chinese families due to traditional family values and economic practicalities (Goh & Kuczynski, 2010; Xiao, 2016), grandparents primarily serve as occasional childminders in these participants' families, indicating a further shift in power dynamics between the two generations in contemporary urban China.

Understanding the reasons behind their rebellion against the dominant ideology of masculinities associated with the breadwinner identity in China is especially pertinent, considering that earning power and work identity are primary sources of insecurity, as shown in several other participants' narratives examined earlier. My aim was to garner a nuanced understanding of how the interplay between paid work and unpaid care work influenced their sense of masculinity and impacted their spousal relationships. I posed questions such as, "How do you perceive your contribution to the family as a SAHF compared to your working wife? Do you find your contribution harder to quantify?" The interviewees' responses varied due to their distinct subjective experiences and levels of reflexivity. However, two recurring themes surfaced—self-worth and spousal relationships.

"Some SAHFs may feel devalued due to their self-worth being tied to social status and income," explained Tan. "However, I consider childcare and household chores as a profession, just as important and challenging." Many others shared Tan's perspective, viewing their role as a dedicated profession providing a sense of accomplishment beyond monetary rewards (Beynon, 2001). Tan shared that he documents daily caregiving practices to enhance his sense of productivity as a full-time father, which serves as a tangible way to quantify his contribution. This helped him foster and reaffirm a sense of competence and accomplishment as a primary caregiver. Viewing

parenting and education as a full-time job, he feels morally and emotionally obliged to invest time and effort. Despite potential career opportunities in the digital economy, Tan doesn't aspire to establish a path to paid work. "I simply don't have the time and energy for that—I have two children," he explained. "I am quite satisfied with my life now. Plus, my wife's career is going well so there's no immediate need for me to find ways to make money."

Along similar lines, notably William, who expressed dissatisfaction and stress during the transition from the workplace to home in 2021, exhibited a departure from his previous mindset in our second encounter a year later. He highlighted that knowing his own worth as a SAHF was the key to maintaining a sense of security and achieving fulfillment in his day-to-day life, a sentiment he did not express a year ago. This suggests a coping method recognized by some of my other interviewees:

> I suggest that if SAHFs or their spouses undervalue care work and household chores, a practical strategy would be to assess the financial worth by quantifying these tasks based on market prices. Consider expenses such as hiring a nanny, a cleaner, and a personal tutor for the children's education. By listing these costs in a spreadsheet, they can start to understand the financial value of the role. It's also important to note that the contributions of a SAHF might not be replicated as effectively by hired outsiders, but it is an effective way to show how valuable the contribution that SAHFs are making to the family.

To understand William's change within a year, I asked about what contributes to his newfound sense of fulfillment in the role of a SAHF. In response, William highlighted the key role of a supportive spousal relationship. His realization stemmed from a period of extensive reflection during the COVID-19 lockdown, where he recognized that a harmonious spousal relationship was foundational to the family's well-being, surpassing even his relationship with the children. Instead of internalizing negative emotions, he adopted a more communicative approach with his wife. William's shift in mindset aligns with Giddens's (2009) argument that the presentation of self goes beyond Goffman's concept of "front/back stage," as individual reflexivity plays a crucial role in shaping how William perceived and presented himself as a father, husband, and a man.

The importance of spousal support, as highlighted by William and a few other participants mentioned earlier, echoed findings from a study (Li et al., 2018) on Chinese marriages, emphasizing the role of daily communication and mutual emotional support in marital satisfaction and individual fulfilment. This phenomenon also points to the notion of "couple self-sufficiency" raised by Nicholas Townsend (2002, p. 10). Townsend (2002) indicates that communication between couples and agreements reached within marriages provide emotional support for men in their fathering practices. Treating marriage as an egalitarian partnership, suggests a reconceptualization of some interviewees' sense of self in relation to their wives, in contrast to doing things according to their own yardstick for success and happiness. Father-child relationships and other domestic responsibilities could not be described or thought of as independent

of their spousal relationships in my conversations with most participants. An equal appreciation and understanding between SAHFs and their wives appeared to not only strengthen their relationships, but also enhance their self-worth and passion for doing care work.

On the point of feelings of devaluation as a primary caregiver, however, all the SAHFs in this study conveyed the idea that it might be more prevalent among SAHMs. As Tan asserted,

> I cannot imagine mothers not empathizing with caregiving work, as they went through childbirth themselves. I guess that's the benefit of being a SAHF. Breadwinning men tend not to appreciate their wives as they innately cannot relate to the experience.

Other participants shared a similar belief that the sense of self-worth for SAHFs originated from their own approval, along with reassurance and support from their wives; in contrast, most men focused on their careers tended to value paid work and often undervalued housework and childcare. This perspective demonstrate that participants were aware of the indirect patriarchal dividend they received, as their role was understood and appreciated by their wives and often admired by others. This recognition inadvertently boosted their self-worth and sense of masculinity.

However, it is necessary to critically examine this dynamic and underlying gender norms that contribute to it. The shared belief that mothers naturally understand challenges of caregiving due to their experience of childbirth attributes caregiving abilities to biological factors such as the ability to give birth, without fully recognizing that caregiving is a multifaceted role that involves various skills, emotions, and experiences beyond childbirth. Having said that, all participants appreciated the demanding nature of caregiving and articulated empathy for women who assume the same role, which indicates a raised consciousness of gender equality. Constructing their sense of self in relation to a more egalitarian and communicative partnership within marriage is indeed a positive step towards fostering gender flexibility and redefining gendered division of labor.

Conclusion

This is the first study on SAHFs in mainland China that investigates their caregiving identity in relation to paid work through their self-presentations in interviews. The findings demonstrate that stay-at-home fathering identities are organized around multiple paradoxical, yet at times overlapping models of fatherhood. Although SAHFs are understood as an emerging manifestation of engaged fatherhood and caring masculinities, the notions of these are broad. While most participants identified as SAHFs in certain contexts (e.g., on social media platforms) and voluntarily took up the primary caregiving role, they assumed various other subject positions. This highlights the multidimensional and fluid nature of fathering identities and the partial and contradictory nature of changing norms of fatherhood. Societal expectations of men

also appeared contradictory and multiple, clinging onto different aspects of gendered notions. These expectations shaped understandings of men as either full-time workers or, if not, their choices were either celebrated as unconventional or questioned their capability as men. Some participants internalized these expectations in their self-presentations.

While all the accounts about doing care work acknowledged its challenges and showed a certain degree of awareness of the patriarchal dividend as male caregivers, the self-positioning of SAHF role varied depending on which fathering model the men most identified with. Although many pointed to the inconsistency in self-presentations between online and offline interactions, subject positions varied. Some chose to hide their SAHF identity offline and adhered to normative gender norms about "men rule the outside" due to feelings of ambivalence about whether others would be interested in their SAHF role. Others devalued their SAHF role and extended their judgment to other men in similar positions. On the other hand, some men actively claimed their SAHF label and rebelled against judgment of their identity from others. Among them, a few highlighted that their transition to full-time fatherhood was relatively easy as their sense of masculinity was never tied to career, and having children gave them a sense of fulfilment that they took pride in; others emphasized their adaptability when enacting the role, adjusting their career ambitions to both childcare responsibilities and freelance careers revolving around childcare.

The number of fathers who identified as ambivalent and/or reluctant in their identity were more than those who actively claimed the SAHF label and challenged normative gender norms. However, there was evidence that the role of reflexivity played in their evolving identities. Some reinforced their gendered notions over time, whereas others adopted more gender-neutral and reflective tones in our follow-up interviews, with spousal relationships and unexpected life changes highlighted as catalysts influencing their transition from full-time career to the domestic sphere and (re)shaping their sense of self-worth. This temporal aspect is often overlooked in existing research that predominantly focuses on the categories of "SAHFs by choice" and "SAHFs by circumstance" (e.g., Chesley, 2011; Kramer et al., 2015; Liong, 2017a). The article elucidates how men's changing perceptions and experiences as SAHFs are crucial in understanding the shifting landscape of masculine ideals.

While this research has contributed to our understanding of how Chinese men identify as SAHFs and how this role continuously shapes men's perceptions of care work, it has some limitations: the participants all identified as cisgender heterosexual men and urban, well-educated middle-class fathers. Future research would benefit from exploring SAHFs' experiences from a broader range of gender and sexual identities and across different socioeconomic statuses. Such exploration could offer wider implications for men and masculinities in relation to structural barriers and inequality in Chinese society.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. Similarly, in Chinese, *quanzhi baba/naiba* (全职爸爸, full-time father) carries a similar connotation of caregiving, whereas the term "househusband", or *jiating funan* (家庭妇男) implies men's marital status.
2. "Patriarchal dividend" argues that while most men may not entirely embody hegemonic masculinity, they still contribute to its perpetuation by endorsing its concepts and benefiting from the privileges it grants them over women. This phenomenon plays a role in maintaining and reproducing the dominant form of masculinity (Connell, 1995).

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