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Stay-at-home Fathers in Contemporary Urban China

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<https://doi.org/10.34737/w7xv9>

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STAY-AT-HOME FATHERS IN CONTEMPORARY URBAN CHINA

FEI HUANG

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Westminster
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

June 2023

Thesis Abstract

This research investigates stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs) as an emerging gendered identity in contemporary urban China. Being a SAHF constitutes an unconventional gender role in China, which has been marginalised by longstanding prejudice against men who are not the main wage-earners in the family unit. My scrutiny of the discourse surrounding this new role contributes to existing literature on the social production of gender difference and hierarchy in urban China. This research is particularly significant now, at a time when gender inequalities in China coexist with an increasingly individualistic culture, and yet these inequalities remain largely unaddressed by government discourse and often reinforced through popular discourse.

This research seeks to answer three questions: What motivates men to become SAHFs? How do they perceive, experience, and enact their role as SAHFs? How does the construction of SAHF masculinity intersect with changing representations of urban family life and masculinity in contemporary urban China? To address these three interrelated questions, I examine three sources of data about SAHFs – TV dramas, social media articles, and interviews – focusing on how SAHFs' perceptions, experiences, and practices are understood both by SAHFs themselves and wider society.

Current research on SAHFs has been predominantly focused on the Global North to the extent that this is the first research on SAHFs in mainland China that focuses on how multiple discourses contribute to the construction and reconstruction of familial masculinity and wider family relations. By highlighting the plurality and ongoing reconfiguration of masculinity that has emerged from my three data sources, I show how discourse produced by and about SAHFs not only sustains but also sometimes transforms conventional notions of gender. In doing so, my research adds new perspectives to existing literature on Chinese masculinities and family life, as well as studies of SAHFs and the family in other countries.

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Acknowledgements

This doctoral project is a search to give form to what I always pondered since I was a kid but did not know in written language. I could not have done this without the unwavering support and encouragement from my mother, Zhiwen Lu, who raised me to question social norms, has unconditionally trusted me on this unconventional path and always pushed me to go further. Your life is a constant source of inspiration, and your kindness and sacrifice are immeasurable. This is a small acknowledgement of the immense foundation of support you have provided me throughout my entire life.

Enormous gratitude to my wonderful supervisors, Paul Kendall, How Wee Ng, and Gerda Wielander, who have been a pillar of support in numerous ways. None of this would be possible without your steadfast support from day one. Reading your insightful comments on my countless drafts has been the highlights throughout my four-year journey. Your breadth of knowledge kept me engaged in reading and thinking throughout the creation of this thesis. I could not have wished a better PhD experience, and if I could, I would do it all over again. Even before embarking on this journey, Paul, thank you for planting the inspiration in me during my MA year and believing that I could do this.

I also wish to thank Globally Engaged Research (GER) for funding my conference in Athens. Although my fieldwork did not take place due to Covid-19 restrictions, I am very grateful that Universities' China Committee in London (UCCL) for offering me funding. A special thank you goes to editors at British Journal of Chinese Studies, Gerda Wielander, Heather Inwood, and Hannah Theaker, who provided valuable suggestions for my article Stay-at-home Fathers in Contemporary Chinese TV Dramas.

My heartfelt gratitude goes to all those who have befriended and supported me at different times of my journey, including Cissy Cai, Lulu Zheng, Maggie Go, and so many more. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Tim Pringle; you have always so generously spared your time to enlighten me intellectually and support me in various ways. Thank you for always being there to share my joy and listen to me when I was at my lowest, and for helping me laugh and carry on regardless. I am honoured to have you as my close friend and mentor. Special thanks also go to Xiao Ma; you have been a part of this journey from day one and always listened to my

impractical ideas, talking to me until the ideas make sense. Your enthusiasm, warmth, and generosity have been my inspiration in life and have made me feel at home in London.

I am indebted to all the stay-at-home fathers who have participated in this research. This thesis would have been truly impossible without your voices. I am extremely grateful that you generously spared your time to be part of multiple interviews throughout the years, sharing your lived experiences with me. I hope this thesis represents how you perceive and experience your lives as truthfully as possible.

Statement of Authorship

I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Setting the scene: personal motivations

My interest in gender roles within the family stems from my own childhood. I come from a double-income family, for which I am still very grateful, as my parents strived to provide the best financial circumstances for me that they possibly could. However, this also meant that they could not be as present in my day-to-day life as I would have liked. Before being sent to primary boarding school, I remember spending most of my time with my grandparents during the weekdays, and my mother coming to pick me up on weekends and after work. I hardly saw my father, since he was always either on business trips or had to accompany his clients until very late. To this day, I still wonder how my experiences may have been different had my father been more involved in my life. And I also wonder, if my father had been given a chance to choose between being the breadwinner but physically and emotionally distant from the family, or a stay-at-home father (SAHF) who could take care of household duties and spend more time with me and my mother, which would he choose? I posed this question because, as his daughter, I wish I could have had a closer relationship with my father, given that I barely felt his influence in my formative years. He once said to me, “If I did not work hard to provide for our family, I would be laughable to others and also to myself – I would not be a responsible father to you.” Being more involved in the family than his work was ostensibly at odds with how he recognised himself and his expectations of how others recognised him as a man and a father.

What brought me back to the topic of fatherhood in recent years are the conversations I had with my Chinese classmates during my MA year. I found that having a hardworking, distant father was a common childhood experience among my peers.¹ Realising that my personal experiences could be situated within a wider societal context serves as the most important motivation for me to pursue my PhD in exploring how family life and masculinities shape fatherhood in contemporary urban China. The common narratives I gathered from my peers was that either the mother was the primary caregiver even though she also had a full-time job (similar to my experience), or the father was the sole breadwinner for the family, as the mother quit her job to become a stay-at-home mother (SAHM) after the child was born.

¹ Mostly men and women who were born between 1990 and 1997, with cosmopolitan, middle-class family backgrounds.

These observations led me to reconsider phenomena that I had previously assumed to be “natural” and “common” while growing up. The questions I raised include: Why were women naturally perceived as the primary caregiver, even when they had a job? Why did retreating to the domestic sphere seem like a default option exclusively for women, and how much has this changed in recent years? Why was being a SAHF not recognised as a masculine role? And if being a SAHF was a financially viable option for the family and could receive the same recognition, say, as being a businessman, would more men choose to assume the role?

All these unanswered questions prompted me to embark on this fulfilling PhD journey, in the hope of answering, or at least gaining a deeper understanding of, the changing perceptions and representations of SAHFs – an emergent gendered identity – in contemporary China. This research is particularly significant at a time when gender inequities in China coexist with an increasingly individualistic culture, yet issues of hierarchy and injustice in gendered practices remain unaddressed by government and tend to be reinforced through popular discourse. SAHFs constitute an unconventional and underrepresented gender role in China, marginalised by longstanding social stigma and prejudice against men who are not the main wage-earners in the family unit. By investigating SAHFs, this thesis contributes significant new perspectives to the discursive and subjective production of gender difference and hierarchy in China. To understand how I examine SAHFs from an interdisciplinary perspective, I first provide a brief overview of how I structured the chapters in this thesis.

1.2 Thesis structure

Chapter two sets out the main theoretical background of this thesis through a critical literature review of three keywords: family, masculinities, and SAHFs. This review incorporates various disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, gender studies, and Chinese cultural studies. I begin with an outline of the gender dynamics within the family in modern and contemporary China, as family is an essential part of SAHFs’ everyday life. In particular, I explore academic writings that discuss the interplay between state policies and long-standing patriarchy in shaping family relations in contemporary China. I then turn my attention to the literature on masculinities. To situate Chinese masculinity within a global context and establish a theoretical foundation for further scholarly discussion on the experiences of SAHFs, I begin by introducing R.W. Connell’s (1987, 1995) concept of

hegemonic masculinity and its ongoing evolution (Wetherell & Edley, 1999; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Seidler, 2006; Hanlon, 2012). This concept provides a framework for understanding the dominant form of masculinity and its constant reconfigurations. Furthermore, it is important to note that Niall Hanlon, in his critique of Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, emphasises the interconnection between male power and men's emotional experiences in shaping different forms of masculinities. This perspective has significantly influenced my analytical approach to studying SAHFs in this thesis. Subsequently, I conduct a comprehensive review of previous studies on Chinese masculinity, focusing on its transformation in the contemporary era. Moving on to studies of Chinese masculinity in post-Mao era, I delve into anthropological research that explores the lived experiences of men, as well as cultural studies works that examine the evolving representations of Chinese masculinity. Within this context, I investigate key elements that shape Chinese men's understanding of masculinity by examining works on elite masculinity in the contemporary globalised era (e.g., Farrer, 2002; Hinsch, 2013; Osburg, 2013; Song & Hird, 2014; Uretsky, 2016), which all stress the role of material wealth in constructing an ideal Chinese masculinity. I further explore how the significance of material wealth is embodied in the self-perception of SAHFs as men in subsequent chapters, drawing from data gathered through TV dramas, and social media articles, and interviews. Finally, I examine existing research on SAHFs, predominantly situated in the Global North, with the exception of one study conducted in Hong Kong (Liong, 2017a). These works provide valuable theoretical foundations for my research, which I adapt to suit my specific focus on the representations of Chinese SAHFs. I also examine the relationship between SAHFs and aspects of hegemonic masculinity, considering how they either embody or transform these aspects, in line with ongoing debates in relevant literature on the conceptualisation of masculinity.

Informed by this preliminary examination on existing literature, chapter three presents the research methodology. I outline the research questions that guide my study and provide detailed explanations of three key theoretical concepts that shape my analysis. Given that most existing studies on SAHFs are primarily based in the Global North, I employ Edward Said's concept of "Travelling Theory" (1982; 1994) and its critiques by James Clifford (2010) and Ivan Karp (1997). This approach ensures that I examine SAHFs from a bi-directional, transcultural, and transhistorical perspective, avoiding essentialisation of Chinese SAHFs or SAHFs in general. It highlights the plurality of masculinities that have emerged in

my research. Furthermore, I introduce certain aspects of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1980, p. 12; Schwandt, 1994; Charmaz, 2006) and argue for the adoption of a modified version of the constructivist branch for analysing the three sources of data: TV dramas, social media materials, and interview transcripts. Additionally, I draw on Norman Fairclough's (1992) theorisation of intertextuality in discourse analysis to examine the relationship between these three sources of data. These three key concepts, along with their critiques, serve as the overarching theoretical framework for the subsequent chapters. Next, I describe my two main methods of data collection and analysis, namely, textual research and semi-structured interviews. I provide an overview of how these methods were utilised to gather and analyse data. I also address the modifications and reflections on my research methods that were necessitated by the unprecedented Covid-19 restrictions. Overall, chapter three establishes a clear research methodology, incorporating theoretical frameworks, data collection methods, and adjustments made during the research process. This chapter lays the foundation for the subsequent chapters where the empirical findings and analysis will be presented.

The subsequent five chapters focus on thematic discourse analysis, specifically examining the representations of SAHFs in TV drama series, social media materials, and interviews. Chapter four centres on the discourse of masculinity as portrayed by SAHFs in three prominent TV drama series: *Marriage Battle* (*hunyin baoweizhan* 婚姻保卫战, 2010), *A Little Reunion* (*xiao huanxi* 小欢喜, 2019), and *Super Dad & Super Kids* (*xiongba xionghaizi* 熊爸熊孩子, 2017). Among these series, *Marriage Battle*, being the earliest and most widely recognised Chinese family drama that explores the lives of different types of SAHFs, serves as a prototype for understanding the masculinities depicted in the other two series. While *A Little Reunion* features only one SAHF, it extends beyond spousal relationships and delves into parent-child dynamics and differing parenting philosophies, which expands the thematic scope beyond what is depicted in *Marriage Battle*. Similarly, *Super Dad & Super Kids* delineates the father-son relationship and highlights the male character's self-reflection – a significant theme emerging from my interviews with SAHFs. By analysing plotlines and dialogue in these dramas, four recurring features in the construction of SAHFs' masculinities and their familial relationships are identified, namely, the importance of work, class specificity, the absence of intergenerational impact, and the presence of a happy ending. Through the examination of these four common themes, the argument is made that male

characters in these dramas seemingly embody a new form of caring masculinity within the family. However, it is observed that underlying patriarchal views persist as these characters navigate family matters. The paradoxical representations of SAHFs in the selected dramas illustrate how patriarchal ideologies endure despite ongoing redefinitions and renegotiations of gender roles and masculinities in contemporary urban China.

Chapter five explores how online users, including SAHFs themselves, engage in discussions about the emerging gendered identity of SAHFs through various online platforms such as feature articles and forums. In this chapter, I identify four key themes that emerge from these social media materials. The first two themes overlap with the portrayals of SAHFs in TV dramas, which are the class specificity of SAHFs and the centrality of work to men's sense of masculinity. The other two themes are the emergence of "working-from-home SAHFs" and the increasing attention given to child development in stay-at-home fathering practices. By analysing these themes, the chapter sheds light on how this emerging identity is represented in ways that indicate both significant changes and continuities in traditional gender roles and values on social media.

From chapters six to eight, I utilise my interview data and employ key theoretical concepts to explore different aspects of SAHFs. In chapter six, I first present the theoretical framework that I adopt and modify, namely Erving Goffman's (1959) theory on self-presentation. Building on Goffman's dramaturgical perspective on identity and its critique by Anthony Giddens (2009), this chapter examines how two groups of SAHFs perceive and position their SAHF identity in relation to their other identities as men, fathers, and husbands across various contexts, including online and offline interactions, and interactions with different individuals at different times. Essentially, the first group prioritises their part-time or freelance work identity over their SAHF identity in both self-perception and how they present themselves to others. On the other hand, the second group takes pride in their SAHF identity more than their work identity. The chapter also delves into how men reflect on their decisions and experiences of being a SAHF after assuming the role. I argue that men's reflexivity is just as important as their initial motivations for becoming SAHFs, as these reflections contribute to their evolving perceptions of masculine ideals. By challenging the binary categorisation of "SAHFs by choice" versus "SAHFs by circumstances/necessity", which has been commonly used in previous studies, this chapter further demonstrates the complexity of

men's experiences. Lastly, I emphasise the significance of spousal support and appreciation as crucial factors in men's sense of security and fulfilment in their roles as SAHFs.

In chapter seven, I explore the attitudes of SAHFs toward seeking childrearing and emotional support within female-dominated caregiving communities. This exploration is relevant to but also surpasses the scope of examining work identity that was discussed in the previous chapter and contributes to their self-understanding as SAHFs. This theme – emerging from the interviews – aligns with existing literature on SAHFs, and yet largely unmentioned in both TV dramas and social media materials. To facilitate a comprehensive understanding of men's internal struggles in their ongoing process of identity formation as SAHFs, I begin by presenting an overview of the intersection between power and the emotional lives of men as discussed in relevant literature. This theoretical foundation sets the stage for examining the identity-making of SAHFs as it emerges from the interview data, characterised by tension, contradiction, and dilemma. In this chapter, I categorise the interviewees into two groups of men based on their attitudes toward seeking help and networking with other primary caregivers. The first group of SAHFs who were reluctant to seek childcare and emotional support from others, while the second group actively sought solidarity and social connections within the childcare community. Through my analysis of these two groups and their narratives, I demonstrate how men have constructed their identity as SAHFs in relation to their perceptions of women and femininity. This chapter also highlights the role of reflexivity during moments of crisis. It becomes evident that significant life changes have served as triggers for some men to engage in active reflection. This introspection has provided them with an opportunity to reassess their understanding of masculinity in relation to femininity, leading to changes in their attitudes toward seeking help within a female-dominated caregiving community and confronting their emotional vulnerability.

Chapter eight delves into how men navigate their role as SAHFs within broader family dynamics, shedding light on another aspect of the identity-making process of SAHFs. Through an analysis of SAHFs' narratives surrounding their understanding and practices of childcare and parenting, their approaches to balancing domestic and caregiving responsibilities with their partners, and their attitudes toward intergenerational childcare, this chapter offers a comprehensive understanding of the construction of nurturing fatherhood and familial masculinity. To contextualise the continuities and transformations of hegemonic masculinity in the construction of contemporary nurturing masculinities and fathering

practices, I first provide an overview of perspectives found in relevant academic literature. This serves as a theoretical framework for the subsequent analysis. Moving forward, I conduct a detailed examination of two distinct groups of SAHFs, based on their parenting philosophies and the division of labour within their households. The first group of SAHFs emphasises adult-oriented courses aimed at facilitating child development and selectively engages in specific household chores. On the other hand, the second group prioritises their children's interests and willingly takes on a broader range of household tasks. While neither group seeks assistance from their own parents or in-laws, the first group, driven by their desire for full control over childrearing, displays more resistance toward intergenerational help due to disagreements over childrearing methods. The analysis contributes to the ongoing debate within existing literature regarding the implications of child-centredness in Chinese fathering practices and masculinities. It also sheds light on the reconstruction and perpetuation of unequal power dynamics in the division of housework and caregiving responsibilities between husbands and wives, as well as between different generations.

In the conclusion of the thesis, I provide a thematic summary that uncovers how men's motivations, perceptions, and experiences as SAHFs contribute to the construction and reconstruction of the image of SAHFs across various discourses emerging from TV dramas, social media materials, and interviews. I begin by highlighting three overarching themes that are present in all discourses, namely, the importance of paid work to men and masculinity, the glorification of fathering practices over mothering, and the influence of class specificity. Within each theme, I delve into the derived themes that emerge from different discourses, offering a more nuanced understanding of SAHFs as an identity that encompasses both progressive and transformative possibilities for achieving a more equal gender dynamic, while still retaining certain aspects of conventional masculinity that uphold and perpetuate patriarchal ideologies. I then summarise how my research contributes to existing knowledge about SAHFs within the context of Chinese family life and masculinities. Finally, I underline areas of future research that can further enhance the comprehensive representation of SAHFs in contemporary China.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I set out the main theoretical framework of the thesis through a critical literature review of three keywords – family, masculinities, and SAHFs. Drawing upon disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, gender studies, and Chinese cultural studies, I prepare the groundwork for the subsequent chapters that explore specific themes related to SAHFs as portrayed in TV drama series, social media materials, and interviewee accounts. Additionally, this chapter outlines the scope of the thesis, which revolves around the evolving representations of family life and masculinities in contemporary China.

The first keyword is family, which is an essential part of SAHFs' everyday life. I first present the interplay between state policies and entrenched patriarchal norms, highlighting how these factors have influenced and transformed gender dynamics in modern and contemporary China. I argue that state policies serve as fundamental forces in shaping the landscape of family life in China. Moving forward, I focus on the paradoxical relationship between the emerging culture of individualism and the persistent gender inequality observed among the single-child generation. This exploration allows for a deeper understanding of the shifting dynamics of gender relations since the era of economic reform. To illustrate these paradoxes, I review studies that investigate the decline of patriarchy in certain aspects of family life, attributed to strong conjugal ties and the pursuit of emotional intimacy within the single-child generation. I then explore literature that highlights the ongoing influence of parental authority and the persistence of patriarchal ideologies within seemingly harmonious family relationships in contemporary China. This challenges the realisation of “the pure relationship” proposed by sociologist Anthony Giddens (1992) in family practices.

Following the theoretical discussion on family life in China, the focus shifts to the exploration of masculinities in academic literature. The concept of hegemonic masculinity, as introduced by R.W. Connell (1987, 1995), along with its critique (Wetherell & Edley, 1999; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Seidler, 2006; Hanlon, 2012), serves as a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamic and evolving nature of masculinities. By situating Chinese masculinity within a global context and examining its constant reformulations, I lay the groundwork for analysing the perceptions and experiences of SAHFs in subsequent chapters. These chapters explore the pressures and expectations faced by SAHFs in their

daily practices, which can be understood as stemming from different manifestations of hegemonic masculinity. Moving on to literature on Chinese masculinity, I review historical constructions of Chinese masculinity through an examination of Kam Louie's (2002) *wen/wu* dyad and its critiques. I then delve into relevant studies that focus on post-Mao China, including both anthropological research and cultural studies, to gain a better understanding of men's lived experiences in the post-Mao era and to explore the changing representations of masculinities in Chinese cultural production. These works reveal that many Chinese men aspire to a form of masculinity that emphasises strength and virility in various ways.

Finally, I examine existing research on SAHFs. I justify my adoption of Mario Liang's (2017a) broad definition of the term SAHFs by comparing it to common definitions found in various relevant studies. I then analyse studies that touch upon motivations for being a SAHF, which is a key focus of my research. Additionally, I present and analyse the ongoing debate within academic studies on whether SAHFs embody hegemonic masculinity or any other conceptualisations of masculinity in their daily practices, as another important theme of investigation within the thesis.

2.1 Studies of family life in China

2.1.1 Family life and state policy

Scholars commonly contend that party-state policies implemented during the Mao era, seemingly aimed at liberating women and promoting gender equality, yielded positive outcomes in certain areas but made minimal progress in many aspects of individuals' lives (Johnson, 1983; Croll, 2000; Manning, 2007; Yan, 2010; Evans, 1997, 2013). On the positive side, the establishment of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) in 1949 and the enactment of the Marriage Law in 1950, along with legislation partially intended to ensure equal pay for equal work and maternal healthcare, provided support for female urban workers (Manning, 2007). Nevertheless, Maoist reforms failed to substantially alter the persistent patriarchal authority within individual family units, particularly in rural households (Manning, 2007; Johnson, 1983). As argued by Kay Ann Johnson (1983), the reformers did not adequately consider the impact of kinship structures on women's positions within the family and community, which is an issue that Marxist theory, in general, failed to address. However, anthropologist Yan Yunxiang (2010) and William Jankowiak & Robert Moore (2017) suggest that the *danwei* (work unit 单位) system during the Mao China allowed a

certain degree of individualisation by challenging former kinship structures within many urban households. Yan (2010, p. 492-499) further suggests that joining rural collectives and urban work units as members of the new socialist society signified the first stage of a Chinese collective path to individualisation, as individuals were mobilised to break away from the previous all-encompassing social categories of the extended family, kinship organisation, and local community.

However, the entry of women into the labour force and the attempt to make the nuclear family a key building block of socialist society did not aim to tackle the issues of gender inequality within the urban Chinese family (Manning, 2007; Evans, 2013). While women were encouraged to go out to work, the party leadership continued to stress the importance of women fulfilling their primary responsibility in the domestic sphere, i.e., childcare and housework (Manning, 2007). This unequal division of domestic labour in the nuclear family persisted in post-Mao China. Furthermore, both Harriet Evans (2013) and Judith Stacey (1983, p. 261-3) elucidate the secondary status of gender revolution in a socialist society where class struggle took precedence. In other words, women's liberation in the Chinese history was not led by women themselves for their own interests but was instead imposed by the non-gendered authority which stood outside and above women. This point aligns with Yan's perspective that the individual in China remained secondary to the party-state interest. As Yan states, "What happened under Maoist socialism is that the ancestors' shadow was mostly replaced by that of the party-state" (2010, p. 493).

In post-Mao China, the party-state continues to exert significant influence in shaping and transforming Chinese family life. As noted by Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell (1993), "state power and policies have been the creator, not the creations, of a transformed society" (p. 5). Therefore, William Goode's (1963) pioneering model of modernisation, which posits urbanisation and industrialisation as two primary forces in shaping family dynamics, is not entirely applicable to urban China. In other words, state policies, conceptualised by Goode as consequences of social development such as urbanisation and industrialisation, tend to be the drivers of change in China. This perspective is shared by many other scholars who recognise the pivotal force of state influence in reconfiguring both family and broader society during the post-Mao era. For instance, focusing on the family planning policy, commonly known as the "one-child policy", ethnographer Vanessa Fong (2004) highlights that the Chinese state has used this policy as a means to accelerate modernisation, rather than waiting for

modernisation to lower the fertility rate. As a consequence of this direct and coercive intervention in urban Chinese households, children have become the recipients of intensive parental investment and have become “First World people too quickly for their families and society to keep up” (Fong, 2004, p. 3).

Fong’s analysis reveals the hegemonic nature of the cultural model of modernisation in the capitalist world. She argues that the implementation of the family planning policy serves as a means for China to develop a modern economy, and ultimately elevate its position to the top of the global capitalist system. This point coincides with anthropologist Ted Lewellen’s (2002) view on postmodern globalisation, in which he acknowledges the hegemonic nature of the Western model of modernisation imposed on developing countries. Lewellen (2002, p. 23) asserts that “the standardized image of modernity provided by sociologists and economists is based on the Western experience”. However, acknowledging that globalisation is always intertwined with specific social, cultural, historical, and local contexts, Lewellen proposes a theory of globalisation-as-context. He argues that globalisation should be seen as context rather than as the sole determinant of changes in different societies. Similarly, in their examination of contemporary Chinese men and masculinities, Derek Hird & Song Geng (2018) point out the interactional relationship between China and globalisation. They put forward a transnational perspective, suggesting that not only have Chinese masculinity and Chinese men been part of today’s globalising world, but also that “the ongoing integration of post-Mao China into global capitalist markets has led in turn to the increasing influence of Chinese men and masculinities across the world” (p. 1). These studies indicate that while the party-state plays a highly coercive role in shaping family and broader social values in China, the policy-making process in post-Mao China has also been influenced by global capitalist processes. Moreover, the influence is bidirectional, as China has also played a substantial role in shaping contemporary globalisation.

With a global context in mind, Yan (2010) argues in his examination of the Chinese path to individualisation that individualisation is a global process that necessitates an understanding of the differences and similarities between China and Western Europe. Yan concurs that romantic love and intimacy, marriage freedom, and independence are the outcomes of individualisation in both the Chinese and Western European contexts. However, Yan asserts that the concept of individualisation needs to be expanded beyond its original European framework to encompass other countries. In the case of China, Yan contends that

individualisation has been employed as a specific strategy by the party-state in its pursuit of modernity. Consequently, the post-Mao Chinese family continues to be profoundly influenced by the party-state, albeit through the strategy of individualisation. Davis (1993) encapsulates this notion by stating that “the prototypical urban households under Deng, as under Mao, could best be described as a supplicant to a socialist state” (p. 76).

It is worth noting that scholars hold divergent views on whether the retreat of the Maoist policies during the reform era had an impact on the gender division of labour within the family and wider societal context. On one hand, Jankowiak & Moore (2017) argue that the retreat of the Maoist policies in the reform era did not diminish the rising status of women in and outside the home, considering the indispensable role they played during the Maoist era. Additionally, the implementation of the family planning policy since 1979 further bolstered women’s employment rates. On the other hand, other scholars argue that the removal of Maoist policies, such as the retreat of the work unit system, has led to the reassertion of patriarchal structures and gender inequality. Ji Yingchun (2015), for example, asserts that patriarchal traditions continue to shape gender dynamics in post-reform Chinese families. According to Ji, the work unit system played a role in obscuring gendered notions in dual-income families during the pre-reform era, as it provided comprehensive social services such as housing and childcare. However, with the shift towards a market economy during the reform era, patriarchal norms regained prominence both in the market and in families (also see Cao & Hu, 2007; Cohen & Wang, 2008; Zhang, 2002; Zhang *et al.*, 2008). In a similar vein, sociologist Li Yinhe (2001) points to the increase of discriminatory hiring system since the 1980s. Companies in the market economy preferred male employees and even refused to hire females, to avoid potential maternal leave which might cost companies more money and time to fill temporary vacancies. Li explains that the decline in women’s status immediately following the Mao era indicates that Maoist policies did not completely eradicate patriarchal structures. Rather, these policies facilitated a shift from male-dominated kinship feudalism to male-dominated socialism, which explains the resurgence of conventional gendered ideologies in post-Mao China. Similarly, Yan (2003) points out that scholars have shed light on family changes and women’s liberation since the 1980s (e.g., Stacey, 1983; Davis & Harrell, 1993), and many of them share the same view that the party-state failed to achieve gender equality due to the powerful nature of patriarchal structures.

However, Yan (2003) also criticises Stacey's work in 1983 and argues that it, along with other studies that relied on the corporate model, neglected individual experiences and internal dynamics within family life. According to Yan (2003), understanding the changes that have occurred in the everyday lives of individuals is crucial, as it is inaccurate to assume that individuals always prioritise family interests over personal desires for intimacy and privacy within various Chinese households. In response to Yan's perspective, Harrell and Santos (2017) acknowledge the significance of the emerging individualisation in Chinese society but argue that Yan may exaggerate the extent of detachment between individuals and their families and other social and cultural ties. They suggest that even in an age of individualism, people's lives continue to be influenced by broader social networks, norms, and expectations. Harrell and Santos highlight the paradoxical relationship between the emergent individualistic culture and the continuing parental influence on their adult children's marriage choice due to lingering classic patriarchal configurations and societal pressures.

2.1.2 Family relations among the single-child generation

The existence of an actual decline in male authority within marital relationships in contemporary China is an ongoing topic of debate among researchers. Fong's (2004) pioneering research on the subjectivities and lived experiences of only children highlights the elevated status of daughters in many urban households. Fong observes that only children, regardless of their gender, often receive undivided and intensive parental investment. This unintended outcome of the policy has led to a diminishing preference for sons over daughters in urban areas since the 1980s, resulting in greater gender equality in terms of access to resources such as education and job opportunities. Similarly, William Jankowiak and Xuan Li's (2014) surveys on gender stereotype indicate a transformation of gender notions among the single-child generation. By comparing lexical descriptions of maleness and femaleness among Chinese urban dwellers in the 1980s and 2000s, they conclude that adherence to patriarchal notions has decreased among the single-child generation. Additionally, Jankowiak and Moore (2017) discuss conjugal love and female marital power, proposing a shift within marital relationships from the "dutiful spouse" model to the "emotionally involved model" among the single-child generation. They observe that more Chinese youth express their need for emotional intimacy, indicating a departure from the traditional emphasis on reproduction and production within the patriarchal structure. Jankowiak and Moore argue that the idea of romantic love and intimacy in marital relationships has always been present in Chinese

families but remained relatively underdeveloped. The increase in marrying for love among the single-child generation suggests a decline in traditional patriarchal structures, reaching a point where young people seize the opportunity to marry those to whom they are strongly attracted. These studies collectively suggest the presence of strong conjugal ties and indicate a decline in patriarchy within the family context. This perspective aligns with sociologist Anthony Giddens's (1992) theory, which posits that the transformation of romantic love and intimacy among heterosexual couples leads to a more equal and democratic relationship, characterised by what he calls "the pure relationship" (this concept will be further explored later in this section).

Furthermore, Davis and Friedman's (2014) point out that the reduced parental control and the proliferation of love-based marriage have granted couples greater autonomy within their marriages. An analysis of late marriage by Wang Feng and Cai Yong (2014) provides evidence supporting this claim. Wang and Cai suggest that the most recent upturn in the age at marriage is driven by individual choices. They establish a direct correlation between education and voluntary late marriage, as children who receive intensive parental investment are encouraged to prioritise their higher education over marriage. Sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995, p. 8-9) argue that equal access to education empowers women by granting them earning power, which strengthens their position within marriage and liberates them from the necessity of marrying solely for economic reasons. Wang and Cai (2014) also note that an increasing number of independent-minded men and women choose to wait for their ideal spouse or aspire to build up their careers before getting married. The pursuit of romantic relationships and personal fulfilment has replaced the duty to carry on the family lineage as one of the primary reasons for marriage for both genders. This perspective resonates with the "emotionally involved model" proposed by Jankowiak & Moore (2017). The above-mentioned literature sheds light on how the pursuit of romantic love and personal fulfilment among the single-child generation, for both men and women, has led to increased marital freedom and reduced pressure to fulfil reproductive family obligations to a certain extent.

However, Susanne Brandstädter (2009) argues that kinship continues to sustain male dominance in certain ways. In her ethnographic research conducted in mainland China and Taiwan, Brandstädter pinpoints the significance of combining economic value with *ganqing*

(sentiment 感情) in gendered labour and its correlation with Chinese kinship practices. She suggests that achievements in the workplace are still considered a way for both sons and daughters to demonstrate love and filial piety towards their parents in China. However, Brandstädter asserts that women's work in post-Mao China is less valued within the context of kinship compared to men's work. This valuation is influenced by highly gendered dichotomies, such as heavy/light, or skilled/unskilled, in which men tend to be perceived as achieving more. Consequently, gender equality is called into question within the framework of enduring kinship-based patriarchal norms, as "female work in the economy of *ganqing* was rendered invisible to sustain corporate boundaries and build up male kinship value" (2009, p. 173).

Scholars raise important points regarding the limitations of assuming that increased intimacy and egalitarianism within relationships signal the end of patriarchy or gender inequality in everyday life. Lynn Jamieson (1999), drawing on David Morgan's (1996) work on family practices and interpersonal relations, critiques Giddens's (1999) "pure relationship" theory for lacking comprehensive empirical validation and overlooking ongoing informal gendered inequalities in daily interactions. According to Jamieson, gender inequality persists even among couples who claim to have intimate and equal relationships, with individuals finding ways to justify and disguise these inequalities. Harrell & Santos (2017) and Song & Hird (2014) further emphasise the paradoxes between emerging egalitarian family practices, individualism, and the persistence of patriarchal ideologies, such as the unequal division of housework and the continued influence of elders on adult children's marriage choices. The perspective of Jamieson is associated by Song and Hird (2014) with Kathrine P. Ewing's (1990) theory of inconsistent and contextual self-representation. They argue that husbands and wives can present a façade of harmonious equality in their family relationships, while male dominance continues to exist in various aspects of family practices. This suggests that the realisation of a truly "pure relationship" has not yet been achieved. Similarly, Morgan (1996) and Connell (1987, 1995) argue that the attainment of gender equality within one setting does not signify the successful transition to an equal, non-patriarchal society. Morgan (1996) cautions against focusing solely on rare instances of "the pure relationship", as doing so may obscure the pervasive influence of patriarchal structures.

Additionally, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) assert that gender inequality is presupposed by market economics and that achieving economic independence for both men and women is hindered by the persistence of traditional nuclear family structures. In the context of China, the analysis of “leftover women” (*Sheng nü* 剩女) resonates with this perspective, as unmarried women with successful careers face stigmatisation due to the enduring gendered division of labour. The societal belief that “men rule the outside and women rule the inside” (*nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei* 男主外, 女主内) reinforces gendered roles and presents a threat to men’s career prospects when women challenge these norms (Ji, 2015; Fincher, 2014; To, 2013; Zhang & Sun, 2014). Song and Hird (2014, p. 216-17) use the term “anxious breadwinner” to describe middle-class men who feel threatened by highly educated women with successful careers, as their masculine identity is primarily defined in relation to their work. Similarly, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) suggest that SAHFs in other countries who challenge traditional gendered divisions of labour still consider work outside the home as fundamental to their self-esteem and masculinity. The strong connection to the public sphere in SAHFs’ lives illustrated by different scholars in the last section of this chapter certainly resonate with this point to varying extents.

Given the fundamental basis of work in men’s masculine identity, instead of stigmatising single men who delay their marriage age, men are positively labelled as “golden bachelors” (*huangjin danshen han* 黄金单身汉) or “diamond single men” (*zuanshi wanglaowu* 钻石王老五) in China if they are wealthy and have a decent job. The unequal perception reflects ongoing tensions between women’s success in the home and the workplace (Zhang & Sun, 2014). Harrell and Santos (2017) argue that patriarchal power manifests more in issues of gender inequality than in kinship structures in contemporary China. The body of work presented suggests that love and intimacy within personal relationships do not automatically lead to gender equality or a non-patriarchal society. Structures inequalities and gendered divisions persist, particularly in relation to work and gender identity.

In this section, I have examined academic writings on the interplay between state policies and long-standing patriarchy in shaping family relations in contemporary China. Without downplaying the fluidity and multiplicity of femininities, I have concluded this section by foregrounding studies that indicate women are often assigned more responsibility for caregiving and housework compared to their male counterparts. For men, work and material

wealth continue to play crucial roles in shaping their sense of masculinity in contemporary China. In the following section, I will further investigate this phenomenon by examining the concept of hegemony and its correlation with studies of men and masculinities in China.

2.2 Studies of men and masculinities

Before I provide a detailed analysis of previous accounts of Chinese masculinity and its transition during the contemporary era, I would like to take a step back and examine studies of men and masculinities in more general terms. In particular, I will explore the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Lee, 1985; Connell, 1987, 1995), which will serve as a theoretical foundation for the scholarly discussion on the correlation between SAHFs and hegemonic masculinity in the next section. To begin, I will use the concept of *wen/wu* masculinity (Louie & Edwards, 1994) as a starting point for this preliminary analysis. However, I will also move beyond this dichotomy by adopting a more historically nuanced and pluralistic perspective. It is important not to view the world solely in binary terms of China/West or *wen/wu*, but to consider a wider range of masculinities. I conclude this section with a brief discussion of the masculine ideal of the “moneyed elite” and its emerging attributes among the middle-to-upper class men. This concept has been explored in the works of many scholars studying post-reform China.

2.2.1 Hegemonic masculinity and its reformulations

The concept of hegemonic masculinity was introduced by Tim Carrigan, R.W. Connell and John Lee in their co-authored article titled *Towards a New Sociology of Masculinity* in 1985. In this article, they proposed the idea of multiple masculinities and discussed the hierarchical structure of masculinities. Connell further developed this concept in subsequent articles and books, including *Gender and Power* (1987) and *Masculinities* (1995). According to Connell’s framework, hegemonic masculinity is a cultural practice that legitimises the dominant position of powerful men while marginalising women and men who embody alternative forms of masculinities. It represents an idealised set of social norms and ideals that are often unattainable for most men in their everyday lives. Connell (1987, 1995) argues that although most men cannot fully embody hegemonic masculinity, they still contribute to its perpetuation by supporting its concepts and benefiting from the “patriarchal dividend”, which grants them privileges over women in maintaining and reproducing the dominant form of masculinity.

However, Wetherell and Edley (1999) argue against Connell's binary distinction between complicit and resistant masculinities, stating that it would be more analytically useful to see complicity and resistance as existing on a continuum rather than as strict *either/or* categories for individual men. Connell herself later acknowledged that the limitations of the early formulation of hegemonic masculinity in her work, recognising its oversimplification (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In their reformulation of the concept, Connell and James W. Messerschmidt (2005) emphasise the recognition that both the incorporation and oppression of different patterns of masculinity can coexist. They highlight that hegemonic masculinity is not a static position or ideal but is contingent upon the current social constructions that continue to uphold patriarchy and afford power to certain men. They also incorporate Wetherell and Edley's (1999) emphasis on the role of men's psychological activities in the construction of masculinities. They demonstrate how constructions of masculinity can vary among individuals in different local contexts and highlight the dynamic nature of hegemonic masculinity, by acknowledging "the layering, the potential internal contradiction, within all practices that construct masculinities" (2005, p. 852).

Even with Connell's later conceptualisations, sociologist Victor Seidler (2006) argues that they remain too rigid to fully capture the complexities of men's subjective experiences and emotions, thus limiting the possibilities for men's transformative change. Building on both Connell and Seidler's views, Niall Hanlon (2012) highlight the importance of considering both power and vulnerability in understanding masculinities. Hanlon asserts that an appreciation of masculinities requires an understanding of power dynamics and dominances, but it also necessitates an examination of men's emotional lives. He further argues that deconstructing male power cannot occur without reconstructing the emotional experiences of men. In line with Hanlon's theory, the subsequent chapters of my discourse analysis will delve into the nuances of SAHFs' transition to the role of primary caregiver. Through this analysis, I aim to understand the potential reconstruction of their emotional lives and the deconstruction or reformulation of previous notions of masculinity. By exploring the emotional aspects of men's experiences, this research gains insight into the dynamics of power and vulnerability, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary masculinities.

2.2.2 *Wen masculinity and wu masculinity in Chinese history*

Even though ancient China did not have an equivalent linguistic term for “masculinity”, the concept of manhood, that is, what it meant to be a man, has been reflected in many literary works. Literary works not only play an essential role in representing a certain gender discourse but also shed light on the ongoing process of gender construction (Song, 2004). In Chinese history, different terms have been used to portray manhood, including *caizi* (talented scholar 才子) in the Confucian classic Spring and Autumn annals (*Zuozhuan* 《左传》), and *yingxiong* (hero 英雄) during the Three Kingdoms period, as well as *haohan* (good man 好汉) in *Water Margin* (*Shuihuzhuan* 《水浒传》) (Louie, 2002; Song, 2004; Song & Hird, 2014; Hird, 2019). These historical notions of masculinity helped shape the masculine ideal in Chinese literary culture, which fit well into the renowned *wen-wu* (cultural attainment – martial prowess) analytical dyad proposed by Kam Louie and Louise Edwards (1994), to conceptualise gendered identities, particularly masculinity, in Chinese culture.

Louie (2002) highlights the conceptual difference of maleness by pointing out that the construction of ideal masculinity in China often favours *wen* over *wu* throughout the history. In contrast, the dominant conception of masculinity in “the West” predominantly focuses on physical strength, which resembles *wu* feature in the *wen-wu* dyad. Louie’s view on the desirable masculinity in Chinese history is supported by various literary sources. Chinese literature, particularly works written since the Ming dynasty, exhibits a clear preference for a “soft, scholarly masculinity”. Louie and Morris Low (2003, p. 25-27) elaborate on this point by analysing the fictional character Jia Baoyu in *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 《红楼梦》), who is irresistible to all female characters in the novel. Baoyu represents a romantic figure of refined, handsome young men from the privileged literati class, and stories between him and different beautiful female characters fully demonstrate the theme of *caizi jiaren* (“scholar-beauty” 才子佳人) romances, which is used by many other literary works. As Louie and Low (2003) state, this theme “is skilfully utilised by modern writers to promote themselves as desirable beings” (p. 6).

Similarly, anthropologist Avron Boretz (2011) and Wang Yiyan (2003) argue that “effeminate” male scholars (*caizi* 才子) have always represented the ideal male figure who appealed to women, while tough, righteous men (*haohan* 好汉) typically referred to working-class men, long-time bachelors, and bandits in Chinese society, who were less desirable to

women throughout Chinese history. According to Wang, the preference for either *wen* or *wu* in Chinese history is not static; instead, it is closely related to social and political changes. She further explains this view by pointing out that between the 1930s and the 1970s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) attempted to highlight the values of workers and peasants who typically embodied *wu* masculinity in arts and literature, aiming to promote agricultural and industrial development. However, Wang (2003) maintains the view that this did not alter the dominant value of scholarly masculinity in China, “as soldiers and Party secretaries with a communist education played dominant roles in the political, sexual, and literary discourses over the “crude” masses of workers, peasants tamed by communist education or simply talented scholars in the setting of modern China” (p. 46). Therefore, the *wen-wu* dyad not only effectively summarises the recurring model of masculinity in Chinese literature but also sheds light on the understanding of the plural nature of contemporary masculinities.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the binary nature of *wen/wu* downplays the multiplicities of masculinities in both China and other countries. Scholars such as Raewyn Connell (2000) and John Beynon (2002) point to the fluidity and evolution of masculinities across cultures and historical periods. Beynon (2002) highlights that manifestations of hegemonic masculinity can vary among social classes, with middle-class professionals exerting power through means such as email and memos, while working-class men may express it more physically. Beynon (2002, p. 17) also notes the changing nature of hegemonic masculinity over time, suggesting that contemporary versions may incorporate elements of “new man-ism”, characterised by qualities such as care, sensitivity, domesticity, and emotional expression. This perspective on evolving masculinities will be further explored in the subsequent section on SAHFs.

Other scholars challenge the notion that the preference for *wen* qualities in Chinese masculinity is universally accurate. Song Geng (2004, p. 3) argues that the discourse surrounding *caizi* represents the cultural fantasy of the gentry class in late imperial China, while illiterate peasants and urban commoners may have different interpretations of masculinity. Song suggests that both *wen* and *wu* are multifaceted concepts, and dividing masculine identities into these categories can be misleading. For example, the expressions of sexuality within both categories differ significantly, and the *wen/wu* dyad fails to adequately explain the various types of masculinity portrayed in representations of love and sexuality. Song (2004, p. 14) highlights the coexistence of the self-restrained *junzi* (cultivated

gentleman 君子) and the amorous *caizi* within the *wen* category, as well as the presence of macho *wu* figures who are unattractive to women (e.g., Zhang Fei and Li Kui), and handsome *wu* heroes (e.g., Guan Yu and Yan Qing) who are restrained from sexual desire.

The critique of the *wen-wu* dyad highlights the hybridity of *wen* and *wu* masculinity in premodern Chinese literary culture. Understanding this complexity contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Chinese masculinities. In my study on SAHFs, I explore the evolving and sometimes contradictory components of masculinities, taking into account the changing dynamics of *wen* and *wu* qualities in their masculine ideals. Furthermore, scholars such as Yao Souchou (2002) and Martin Huang (2006) argue that the *wen-wu* dyad may overlook the influence of the “feminine other” in the construction of masculinity. Huang suggests that gender should be understood as a relational concept, and this perspective is employed as a theoretical framework in my research on SAHFs, to better understand the construction and reshaping of masculinity in relation to women and femininity. The dynamic relationship between *wen* and *wu* masculinities in the post-Mao era is further discussed in the following sub-section on contemporary Chinese masculinity.

2.2.3 Chinese masculinity in post-Mao China

The significance of anthropological studies on Chinese masculinities is highlighted in Avron Boretz’s (2011) research. Boretz argues that existing literature based on conventional expectations of Chinese men fails to capture the inner lived experiences of men in Chinese society. Similarly, sociologist James Farrer (2002, p. 10-11) highlights that state institutions alone cannot fully encompass people’s lived realities. Although anthropological studies on Chinese masculinities, particularly in the post-Mao era, are relatively scarce, they have been gaining momentum in recent decades. Researchers such as Boretz (2011) and Song & Hird (2014) provide insights into Chinese masculinities through their fieldwork. They cover specific groups of men in their work: Boretz focuses on socially marginalised working-classes and gangsters in Taiwan and Yunnan, while Song and Hird investigate the experiences of white-collar men in Beijing. Both studies shed light on the gendered power dynamics of hegemonic masculinity in business socialising activities (*yingchou* 应酬) in post-Mao China, such as drinking, Karaoke singing and spas, where men are typically accompanied by attractive women. Hird (2019, p. 305-366) further argues that men’s bonding through the consumption of women’s bodies in these homosocial *yingchou* activities not only

reflects their desire to exert power over women, but also echoes the affective relations of *haohan* brotherhoods in the historical *wen-wu* dyad (cf. Osburg, 2013). While Boretz explores martial rituals, violence, and manhood, emphasising the conflicts between fathers and sons within patrilineal families, Song and Hird examine the hybridity and multiplicities of masculinities in contemporary China. They explore the lived experiences of white-collar men in various domains such as work, leisure, and family, as well as analyse representations of men and masculinities in mass media. Their work serves as a valuable reference for my research on SAHFs, providing an updated and comprehensive understanding of Chinese white-collar masculinities and how they negotiate between “tradition” and “globality” in China. Inspired by these studies, I conducted my research by exploring men’s narratives on their everyday practices as SAHFs, to understand their perceptions, experiences, and enactments of their roles within and outside the home in contemporary urban China. Through this research, I provide insights on how conventional masculine ideals sustain, reproduce, and/or transform different aspects of SAHFs’ lives.

In addition to the aforementioned studies, Lin Xiaodong (2013) and Choi & Peng (2016) focus on a different social and economic group: rural-to-urban migrant male workers in post-Mao southern China who have been affected by modernisation. Both studies examine the construction of masculinity among these migrant workers and shed light on the changes in their family lives and intimate relationships, particularly with their left-behind children and wives. Lin’s research highlights rural-urban migration as a significant factor in shaping a new work-based masculinity among migrant workers. Choi and Peng, on the other hand, discuss the coexistence of patriarchal ideology and adjusted caregiving practices among migrant fathers, who face challenges related to migration. These studies contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities and transformations of masculinities in the context of rural-urban migration in China.

Stepping away from anthropological studies, a wider pool of works further contributes to the understanding of contemporary Chinese masculinity. Zhong Xueping (2000) and Nimrod Baranovitch (2003) examine representations of “masculinity in crisis” in literature and popular music respectively in post-Mao China. Zhong focuses on the changing sense of masculinity among Chinese male intellectuals in response to the rise of modernity. Her analysis centres on the discourse of *yinsheng yangshuai* (women rise, and men decline 阴盛

阳衰) during the 1980s. Zhong argues that the discourse of *yinsheng* primarily portrays women with “masculine” traits, rather than signifying women’s actual empowerment. This discourse is rooted in the persistent patriarchal ideology embedded in the CCP’s policies and entrenched gender expectations of women in China. *Yangshuai*, as Zhong contends, is the real issue at hand. It reflects the anxiety and disappointment felt by men regarding their weakened and feminised positions compared to Western and Japanese men (Zhong, 2000, p. 51).

Both Zhong and Baranovitch suggest that the urgency to address the masculinity crisis in the 1980s was influenced by domestic political and cultural oppressions, as well as the internalisation of hegemonic Western gender norms. Interestingly, there is an ironic correlation between the Chinese self-portrayal of effeminate men during the 1980s and the Orientalist image of China in Western Europe and North America. As Song (2004, p. 9) suggests, “both discourses overlooked the hegemonic nature of the ‘normative masculinity’”. In his chapter on reconstructing manhood through Chinese rock music, Baranovitch (2003, p. 114-44) elaborates on the attempts made by repressed Chinese rockers to construct and assert masculinity in their music production. These attempts include expressing a desire to reclaim the manhood of their forefathers in rap songs through aggressive rock style and rough vocal delivery, specifying the height of band members in photographs, and objectifying women as desirable sex objects. Baranovitch argues that these efforts serve as a way for men to compensate for their own sense of loss of masculinity through chauvinistic and misogynistic discourse (p. 120). These studies highlight some Chinese men aspire to maintain a form of masculinity that emphasises strength and virility. In my research, I explore whether and how this feature is embodied in the self-perception of SAHFs.

Moving forward to the 1990s in China, Baranovitch (2003, p. 132-44) introduces the concept of neotraditional manhood, which involves a re-embrace of refined and gentle qualities associated with *wen* in the *wen-wu* dyad. He notes that explicit physical desire and reference became less prominent in mainstream Chinese pop songs during the 1990s, while themes of implicit, spiritual yearnings for love regained popularity. This suggests a resurgence of a soft and delicate form of manhood in 1990s China. However, Song and Hird (2004, p. 10) caution against oversimplifying the construction of manhood in post-reform China by solely focusing on a return to traditional scholarly masculinity. While they acknowledge changes that have

occurred after the 1989 crackdown, they argue that it is important to recognise the coexistence of different conceptions of masculinity among different races, social classes, and age groups. Moreover, they emphasise that male anxiety and criticism over emasculation persist in post-reform China. In essence, there is a dominant image of ideal masculinity at different points of history, but it coexists with diverse notions of masculinity (Song, 2004; Song & Hird, 2014). This point is further explored in my research, particularly in the analysis of TV dramas and social media representations of SAHFs in chapters four and five.

Since market reforms gathered speed in 1992, there has been an encouragement for individuals to embrace self-interest and self-advancement in order to become cosmopolitan citizens of the world (Rofel, 2007). Against this backdrop, the emergence of new-rich entrepreneurs as an identity in the market economy has redefined the notions of success and masculinity in contemporary China. Both John Osburg (2013) and Bret Hinsch (2013) argue that elite masculinity, characterised by wealth and career success, has become a desirable masculinity for urban men in post-reform China. As Hinsch (2013) puts it, “money represents the essence of masculinity” and “businessmen assume the new standard for heroic Chinese masculinity” (p. 63). Moreover, in the market-oriented society where masculinity is tied to earnings and career success, Farrer (2002) found that Shanghai men, who are stereotypically seen as weak and effeminate, aspire to resolve their crises of masculinity through the pursuits of wealth. Louie (2015) accords with this view, by demonstrating how the ideal image of masculinity has shifted from educated scholars and intellectuals to the moneyed elite who view money as a currency for power and social respectability at the turn of the twentieth-first century. According to Louie (2015), this change is due to “China’s improved financial situation” and the “accumulation of immense personal wealth by some individual Chinese” (p. 89). This new transnational business masculinity represents the “new *junzi*” masculinity, which embodies the continued existence of *wen* ideals derived from “Confucian merchant” identity (Louie, 2002, 2011, 2015; Hird, 2019). As Hird (2019) argues, Chinese businessmen and professionals legitimise their desire for material wealth “by reinterpreting Confucianism as an ethical system compatible with doing business” (p. 358).

These studies highlight the significance of material wealth in the construction of the ideal Chinese masculinity in the new millennium. However, Song and Hird (2014) argue that this does not imply a direct correlation between desirable masculinity and the amount of money one possesses. Rather, men’s sense of masculinity is more influenced by the rural/urban

divide and social class divisions. Song & Hird propose that a desirable masculinity is associated with a finely developed taste (*pinwei* 品味) and “high quality” (*gao suzhi* 高素质) for middle-class Chinese men. This serves to distinguish them from the notorious “explosive rich” (*baofahu* 暴发户), a disdainful term to describe those *nouveau riche* are extremely rich but poorly educated. The connection between taste and manhood, as Hinsch (2013) suggests, has existed since at least the Song Dynasty, representing a historical form of hegemonic masculinity known as the “educated and tasteful connoisseur (p. 94). Similarly, Elanah Uretsky (2016, p. 73-77) argues that *suzhi* (personal quality; 素质) and *mianzi* (the ability to maintain one’s social status and fulfil promises; 面子) are more important than material wealth for maintaining one’s social status in contemporary China.

Hird (2019, p. 362) emphasises that while forms and understandings of masculine practices may change over time, their underlying functions persist, as evident in the historical *wen-wu* dyad. As illustrated earlier, middle-class business masculinities reflect *junzi* characteristics such as taste and quality; while *yingchou* activities resonate with characteristics of *haohan* brotherhood associated with *wu* masculinity. Additionally, Song and Hird (2014) highlight the emergence of a new form of masculinity in today’s technological era known as *zhainan* (nerdy home guy 宅男). *Zhainan* represents a contemporary rendering of obsessive scholarly masculinity derived from the Japanese term *otaku* (Song & Hird, 2014, p. 79-119; cf. Hird, 2019). Similarly, pop stars in the market-driven entertainment world can be seen as modern manifestations of *caizi* within the *wen* masculinity framework (Baranovitch, 2003; Hird, 2019). Furthermore, according to Louie (2015), many contemporary works of fiction, such as Jin Yong’s chivalric novels, and films such as Zhang Yimou’s *Hero*, depict and reinforce the ideals of *wen/wu* masculinity by presenting mythical portrayals of what a real man should embody. These depictions continue to captivate the imagination of many Chinese men today, perpetuating the enduring appeal of the *wen/wu* masculine ideal.

The above selection of works demonstrate that Chinese masculinities are dynamic and responsive to changing social contexts. While there might be one particular masculinity that is viewed as a desirable or preferable masculinity by a dominant group of people at different points of history, masculinities are nevertheless always plural and diverse. I bring this conceptualisation of masculinities to bear on TV dramas, social media materials, and interview data presented in subsequent chapters. Particularly, I identify how the crisis of

masculinity persists and evolves when confronted with the role of a breadwinning wife in cultural production (chapter four and five). I also explore the influence of material wealth and success on the self-perception and masculinity of SAHFs, as portrayed in media representations and their own self-representations (chapter four to chapter seven). Additionally, I investigate how SAHFs' ideals of masculinity, including their preference for *wen/wu* qualities and the significance of *pinwei* and *gao suzhi*, manifest in their parenting philosophies and fathering practices (chapter eight).

2.3 Stay-at-home Fathers (SAHFs)

2.3.1 Definition

The term “stay-at-home fathers” (SAHFs) is more commonly used in English academic literature than “househusbands” to describe men who take on the primary caregiving responsibilities in the home. This preference for SAHFs stems from its explicit reference to child-rearing responsibilities. Research by Diane Wentworth and Robert Chell (2001) on how college students perceive the roles of househusbands and housewives found that both roles were only considered valuable when individuals stayed home to assume child-rearing responsibilities. Similarly, Mario Liong (2017a) notes that in Chinese media, the term “full-time fathers” (*quanzhi baba/quanzhi naiba* 全职爸爸/全职奶爸) is more frequently used than “househusband” (*jiating zhu fu* 家庭主夫) because it portrays men as professional parents who give up their careers to actively contribute to the family and society in another way. Additionally, the term “househusband” implies a legal marital status, excluding gay, single, divorced, or cohabitating primary caregivers. To avoid confusion and encompass a broader range of individuals, I use the term SAHFs as an analytical term throughout my thesis. By exploring how men construct and/or reconstruct their sense of masculinity in relation to paid work and care work, my research findings also complicate this term by incorporating full-time fathers who maintain connections to paid work through freelance work, as well as those who may not always identify with the SAHF label in certain contexts (chapter five and chapter six).

SAHFs have been defined variously in statistical analyses and qualitative research. The most common, albeit limited, definition refers to fathers who have a married partner as the sole breadwinner and have children under a certain age (Zimmerman, 2000; Rochlen *et al.*, 2008; Chesley, 2011; Stevens, 2015; Kramer *et al.*, 2015). While this definition may seem helpful

for studying married men who are full-time caregivers, it has drawbacks. As pointed out by Beth Latshaw (2011), this definition is underpinned by men's marital status and a binary concept of paid work versus caregiving, which excludes many primary caregiving fathers, including gay, single, divorced, cohabiting fathers, and fathers who can engage in any type of work while assuming the primary caregiving role. To avoid excluding potentially qualified participants from diverse backgrounds, recent studies have adopted a broader definition of SAHFs, focusing more on fathers' primary caregiving role rather than their employment or marital status (Doucet, 2004; Merla, 2008; Rochlen, *et al.*, 2010; Latshaw, 2011; Hunter, *et al.*, 2017; Liong, 2017a; Lee & Lee, 2018). Liong (2017a) argues that men's marital status or engagement in the labour market should not disqualify them from being recognised as primary caregivers in the family. Given that my research centres around fathers' varying perceptions and experiences of being primary caregivers, adopting a broader definition of SAHFs helps me avoid narrowing the diversity of participants. Thus, I employ Liong's definition to define the parameters of my research.

2.3.2 Determinants of men's decision to become stay-at-home fathers

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 (Zimmerman, 2000; Doucet & Merla, 2007; Merla, 2008; Chesley, 2011; Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Kramer *et al.*, 2015; Lee & Lee, 2018). Some studies (e.g., Chesley, 2011; Kramer *et al.*, 2015) categorise SAHFs into two distinct groups: those who assume the primary caregiving role by choice and those who are unable to work due to circumstances. However, as Andrea Doucet (2016) argues, this distinction is premised on a work/care binary that oversimplifies SAHFs' decision-making. According to Doucet (2016, p. 11), "fathers' choices to be at home or to opt-out of the labour market [...] reveal a complex tapestry of decision-making moments across time, ongoing family negotiations, children's changing needs, and increases in non-standardized work arrangement in the context of ongoing neoliberal restructuring". While couples' employment situations and financial prospects can certainly influence fathers' decision to stay home or not, they are not necessarily the decisive or sole reasons. In fact, in a particular study conducted in North America, out of five reasons

for fathers' decision to stay at home and care for their children, couples' respective earning potential was considered the least decisive, with 85.7% of participants stating the belief that one parent should be at home for their children as the most important reason (Rochlen *et al.*, 2008).

Similarly, Laura Merla's (2008) study on Belgian SAHFs suggests that, apart from work-related factors, child-rearing values, the rejection of dominant gender roles, and considerations of time and quality of life are significant determinants. Some research indicates that parents' own childhood experience with uninvolved fathers plays a role in shaping their own child-rearing values and influencing their decision to actively engage in childcare (Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Coles, 2002; Merla, 2008; Liong, 2017a). As Brandth & Kvande (1998) argue, a lack of paternal involvement made these parents realise the importance of paternal love and intimacy for a child. However, studies by Linda Haas (1992) on Swedish SAHFs and Norma Radin (1982) on American SAHFs did not find a direct correlation between personal childhood experiences and couples' own values. Additionally, Merla (2008) and Jessica Fischer & Veanne Anderson (2012) point to the decisive role that the female partner plays in a father's decision to become the primary caregiver. Merla concludes that, in addition to the female partner's better earning potential and career prospects, her willingness to work and insistence on greater paternal childcare involvement can also be decisive factors.

Notably, all the aforementioned studies from the Global North focus on the decision-making process among two-parent families. In contrast, Liong's (2017a) research on SAHFs in Hong Kong sheds light on single fathers who are forced to assume the full-time caregiving role. Liong finds that the guilt of not being able to provide an intact family for their children and the desire to break away from the distant, uninvolved fathers of their own upbringing are the two key reasons for single fathers to be fully involved in their children's lives. These findings align with Roberta Coles's (2002) study on the motivations of African American single fathers who choose to become full-time caregivers. In addition to these two reasons, Coles also highlights that for most single African American fathers, their main motives revolve around the eagerness to be a role model for their children and to strengthen the parent-child bond. Both Coles' and Liong's pioneering research on SAHFs provide insights into stay-at-home fatherhood in African American community and China respectively. However, the small sample size is the major limitation for both studies (ten informants in Coles's and six in

Liong's study). As Liong points out, given the small sample size of interview data in the study, the findings cannot be considered representative even for SAHFs in Hong Kong, let alone China as a whole. To address this gap in the current literature on SAHFs in China, my research continues to explore the motivating factors for SAHFs in mainland China.

2.3.3 Stay-at-home fatherhood: hegemonic masculinity or caring masculinity?

There are two main scholarly positions regarding the association between SAHFs and hegemonic masculinity in existing research. Some scholars consider the emergence of SAHFs as a refashioning of hegemonic masculinity (e.g., Johansson, 2011; Latshaw & Hale, 2016; Liong, 2017a; Snitker, 2018). Others challenge this idea by arguing that SAHFs represent a new form of caring masculinity, given that they actively reconstruct their sense of masculinity by incorporating aspects of traditionally feminine characteristics in different aspects and in different contexts (e.g., Doucet, 2006; Hanlon, 2012; Elliott, 2016). These two positions are further elaborated as follows.

The research conducted by Berit Brandth and Elin Kvande (1999) focuses on men's fathering practices during paternal leave and highlights the concept of the "masculine way of childcare". This concept refers to a pattern where men primarily engage in outdoor activities without actively participating in housework or other caregiving tasks traditionally associated with childcare. Brandth and Kvande's research emphasises fathers' strong connection to the labour market even when they are staying at home to care for their children. The notion of the "masculine way of childcare" suggests that men's caregiving practices during paternal leave are influenced by their desire to differentiate themselves from maternal practices and maintain a sense of masculinity rooted in traditional gender roles. This finding supports the idea that hegemonic masculinity can adapt and incorporate new elements such as childcare while still upholding patriarchal power dynamics. In their book on men and masculinities in contemporary China, Song and Hird (2014, p. 211-253) explore the concept of "family men" and shed light on the conflicted familial masculine practices that exist in everyday life in China. They argue that although many Chinese men express a desire to be modern and more involved husbands and fathers, their perceptions of masculinity and daily practices are still influenced by traditional notions related to being the breadwinner and achieving material success. Additionally, the gendered division of labour within and outside the home continues to shape their understanding of masculinity and their roles within the family.

Although the research above does not directly focus on SAHFs, most research on SAHFs – a new manifestation of familial masculinity, reveals similar patterns. Aundrea Sntiker’s (2018) research on SAHFs in the US suggests that despite challenging traditional gender expectations by assuming the primary caregiving role, SAHFs still affirm the power and privilege associated with hegemonic masculinity in their daily practices. They strive to distinguish their childcare and parenting activities from mothering, aiming to demonstrate that their caregiving practices align with masculine ideals. This echoes the concept of “masculine way of childcare” proposed by Brandth and Kvande (1999).

Furthermore, the research consistently indicates that SAHFs maintain a connection with the labour market, often through part-time or freelance work, in order to preserve their masculine identity linked to the breadwinning role. This behaviour serves as a way for SAHFs to convince themselves and others that their caregiving role does not compromise their sense of masculinity (Doucet, 2004; Doucet & Merla, 2007; Latshaw, 2011; Johansson, 2011; Chesley, 2011; Latshaw & Hale, 2016; Medved, 2016; Liong, 2017a; Hunter, *et al.*, 2017). The studies conducted by Thomas Johansson (2011) and Beth Latshaw & Stephanie Hale (2016) argue that the increased interest and involvement of SAHFs in childcare represents changes occurring within the framework of hegemonic masculinity rather than a radical shift towards a new form of caring masculinity. In the negotiation of domestic responsibilities between SAHFs and breadwinning mothers, Latshaw and Hale (2016) suggest that SAHFs often perform gendered behaviour by taking on leisure pursuits or work-related activities when their wives return from work, leaving the “double burden” of childcare and household chores on their wives. This behaviour perpetuates the unequal division of housework within the family. SAHFs’ involvement in part-time or freelance paid work can also grant them bargaining power within the household, enabling them to avoid or reduce their share of housework (Greenstein, 2000; Latshaw & Hale, 2016; Kolpashnikova, 2017). As Kamila Kolpashnikova (2017) points out, once SAHFs have more resources in their hands, they have more power to bargain themselves out of doing housework.

Additionally, the research by Liong (2017) on Hong Kong SAHFs highlights the role of social class in shaping their performance. Middle-to-upper class SAHFs often perceive their primary caregiving role as temporary because they expect to eventually go back to their paid work. On the other hand, unemployed working-class fathers may be more accepting of their

nurturing role due to the lack of capital and resources. While Liong's study provides valuable insights, the small sample size and the absence of a gender relational perspective limit a comprehensive exploration of the factors influencing the masculine practices of SAHFs across different social classes. As Connell's (1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) gender relational concepts suggest, masculinities are constructed in relation to femininities. Taking a gender relational perspective, scholars such as Merla (2018) and Fischer & Anderson (2012) argue that women's gendered beliefs play a role in shaping the gendered practices within SAHFs' households and influence men's caregiving decisions and practices. This perspective echoes Sharon Hays's (1996) concept of "ideology of intensive mothering", which suggests that mothers often experience guilt and stress due to the societal expectation that caring work is a moral and social imperative for women. This ideology not only places a "double burden" on mothers, but also discourages or limits fathers' involvement in domestic duties.

Consequently, the gendered ideology of intensive mothering may reinforce the gendered division of labour and widens the leisure gap between breadwinning mothers and SAHFs (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Doucet, 2006; Wall & Arnold, 2007; Chesley, 2011; Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Latshaw & Hale, 2016). It may explain the shifting of domestic responsibilities when mothers return from work, observed by Latshaw & Hale (2016) and Graeme Russell (1987). However, Fischer and Anderson (2012) note the possibility of changes in mothers' notions of gender, arguing that "increased paternal involvement may result in the development of a more positive attitude in the mother, which in turn can result in more time spent in childcare by the father" (p. 26). In short, the influence of the "feminine other" needs to be taken into account to better understand the everyday practices of SAHFs.

Other researchers challenge the notion that SAHFs represent a hegemonic form of masculinity. Drawing on Connell's (2000, 2005) emphasis on the dynamics of masculinities, Doucet (2006) argues that SAHFs do not fit neatly into any specific category of masculinity, whether hegemonic, subordinated, marginalised, or complicit. Instead, they actively reconstruct masculinities by incorporating aspects of traditionally feminine characteristics and navigating between different forms of masculinity in various contexts. Doucet (2006) suggests that SAHFs' strong ties to paid work stem from personal and social adjustments to the role of being a SAHF. This aligns with Connell's (2000, 2005) recognition of the internal complexities and contradictions involved in the ongoing reconstruction of masculinities. Doucet argues that SAHFs who have spent a significant amount of time as primary caregivers are uniquely positioned to create new forms of masculinity. Niall Hanlon (2012) and Karla

Elliott (2016) also view men's engagement in care work as a form of emotional labour and resistance to hegemonic masculinity. Men who take on childcare and domestic responsibilities challenge the traditional gendered division of labour, and the process of adapting to this role involves negotiation and contestation, which in itself challenges hegemonic masculinity. Hanlon and Elliott argue that men with caring masculinities can find emotional, psychological, and physical fulfilment, compensating for the loss of power that they might have derived from work. A study by Xu and Zhang (2009) on Shanghai men's subjective perceptions and experiences of paternal involvement supports this perspective, highlighting the fulfilment and happiness they derived from being primary caregivers for their children.

The above selection of works sheds some light on the relationship between the concept of hegemonic masculinity and the role of SAHFs. However, there remains a gap in the literature regarding a more nuanced analysis of how men's emotional journeys as SAHFs contribute to their changing sense of masculinity and perceptions of familial relations. In chapter seven, I investigate the identity-making of SAHFs when faced with their own emotional vulnerability, aiming to bring in a new perspective to the debate on whether SAHFs represent hegemonic masculinity or any other key masculinities.

Before moving on to the analysis of SAHFs presented in TV dramas, social media materials, and interviews that encompasses and extends the notions of family life, masculinities, and SAHFs, examined in this chapter, I first outline the research methodology which I used to structure this thesis in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I describe how my research project evolved into printed form during my four-year PhD journey. Informed by the interdisciplinary review of key literature from the previous chapter, I first outline the research questions that guided this doctoral research. Subsequently, I set out some of the key theoretical concepts which I employed and modified throughout the thesis. These concepts include Edward Said's "Travelling Theory", certain aspects of grounded theory, and Norman Fairclough's theory on intertextuality in discourse analysis. Next, I delve into the two main research methods employed in my study: textual research and semi-structured interviewing. I explain how these methods were utilised to select and collect data from three distinct source, namely, TV drama series, social media materials, and interviews with SAHFs. These data sets are subjected to discourse analysis in subsequent chapters to explore the themes and patterns emerging from the texts. Furthermore, I proceed to demonstrate how I adapted my research methods in response to the unprecedented Covid-19 lockdown in both China and the UK, which prompted significant changes to the research structure and a shift from a primarily fieldwork-framed approach with media materials serving as secondary sources, to a more text-based analysis of multiple data types. Finally, I provide a summary of how these research methods were employed and adapted to effectively address the research questions.

3.1 Research intentions

As summarised in the last chapter, a great deal of scholarship on gender roles predominantly focuses on women (e.g., Johnson, 1983; Liu, 2007; Manning, 2007; Evans, 2008; Ji, 2015) and Chinese society in general (e.g., Stacey, 1983; Croll, 2000; Yan, 2010; Evans, 2013). However, there has been a growing body of research on men and masculinities in recent decades (e.g., Zhong, 2000; Wang, 2003; Song, 2004; Song & Hird, 2014, 2018; Wong, 2016; Choi & Peng, 2016). While these studies primarily discuss men who work, no formal academic research has been done on the masculine gendering of primary caregiving fathers in China. My research therefore provides a new perspective to ongoing debates about gender difference and hierarchy within the changing social and cultural context of China, by examining SAHFs as an emerging gendered role in contemporary China. To build up an image of SAHF's sense of themselves as men, my research was guided by three main interconnected questions:

- a) What motivates men to become SAHFs?
- b) How do they perceive, experience, and enact their role as SAHFs?
- c) How does the construction of SAHF masculinity intersect with changing representations of urban family life and masculinity in contemporary urban China?

3.2 Theoretical framework

Before embarking on a more detailed elaboration of the research methods employed for data collection and analysis, it is first necessary to outline some of the key theoretical concepts that have been adopted and modified throughout the thesis. The subsequent discussion of research methods in the following section also draws references from these key concepts.

3.2.1 “Travelling Theory”

Edward Said’s “Travelling Theory” (1982, 1994) and its critiques (Karp, 1997; Clifford, 2010) have served as a fundamental conceptual framework for me to approach relevant theories in existing literature. Said argues that theories not only traverse geographical space but also evolve over time, continuously shaped and reshaped by the local conditions of production, reception, transmission, and resistance. While acknowledging how Said’s essay on “Travelling Theory” challenges the propensity of Western theory to seek a stable place across the world, James Clifford (2010) points out that modifications are necessary when applying it to a postcolonial context, as it reads like an “all-too-familiar story of immigration and acculturation” (p. 4). Clifford argues that Said’s delineation of the “stages” of travel – origin, distance covered, conditions for acceptance or rejection, and incorporation into a new time and space – represents a linear path that fails to capture the feedback loops, ambivalent appropriations, and resistances characterising the travel of theories and theorists between places in the “First” and “Third” worlds. Anthropologist Ivan Karp (1997) further expanded Said’s theory by highlighting the nature of “plurality”, even within a single time and place, as the foundation for intra-cultural and cross-cultural understanding. According to Karp (1997, p. 284), the availability of multiple ways of being and modes of understanding within a specific context facilitates such understanding. Therefore, rather than viewing theories as exclusively applicable to their original contexts, I have approached the study of SAHFs from a bi-directional, transcultural and transhistorical perspective. I draw upon theories derived from research conducted in China as well as other countries, particularly in North America

and Western Europe. The approach allows me to focus on the plurality of masculinities that emerge from the interview transcripts and media materials of SAHFs, thus avoiding essentialising Chinese SAHFs or SAHFs as a homogeneous group.

3.2.2 Modified version of grounded theory

For the analysis of my three sets of data, namely TV dramas, social media articles, and interviews, I incorporated a modified version of the constructivist branch of grounded theory, rather than positivist, objectivist branch. I therefore understand theories as emerging from the constant comparison and analysis of different sets of data, rather than as pre-existing knowledge waiting to be discovered (Strauss & Corbin, 1980, p. 12; Schwandt, 1994; Charmaz, 2006). In line with Anselm Strauss & Juliet Corbin's (1990) work on grounded theory, the analysis of both media materials and interview data is an ongoing process. I initially collected and analysed TV dramas and social media materials related to SAHFs to gain a general understanding of how SAHFs are portrayed in wider society. This informed the modification of interview questions for subsequent interviews. During the interview stage, the analysis of media materials continued to guide the questioning and interpretation of interview data. Finally, after completing all the interviews, I conducted further analysis to examine how the interview data resonates with or diverges from the representations of SAHFs in TV dramas and social media articles.

However, I share little with grounded theory in my approach to the background reading of existing literature on SAHFs and relevant themes. The earliest publication on grounded theory suggested that researchers should ignore the academic literature, to avoid contaminating concepts derived from interviews or fieldwork (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). While agreeing that interview data should not be guided by preconceived theoretical models, I consider relevant literature as background knowledge that requires ongoing modification based on the analysis of my interview data. As Charmaz (2006, p. 166) suggests, relevant literature can be used wisely to help researchers see how their work relates to – and extends – existing theories. For example, in the previous chapter, I discussed Kam Louie and Louise Edwards's (1994) concept of the *wen-wu* dyad and its critiques, which provides a perspective for exploring the masculine traits of SAHFs. Existing scholarship on SAHFs, such as studies examining the impact of previous employment and spousal support on men's decisions and experiences as SAHFs, also offered an initial framework for the interviews. However, this

framework was continuously revised throughout the interview process to reflect the emerging themes. Additionally, I adopted Mario Liong's (2017a) definition of SAHFs, which prioritises the primary caregiver role over fathers' marital status or involvement in the labour market. Adopting this definition enabled me to explore the varied perceptions and experiences of being a primary caregiver among participants from different backgrounds.

3.2.3 Intertextuality

I drew on Norman Fairclough's (1992) theory of discourse analysis to analyse my three sets of data. I regard language use in TV drama series, social media articles, and by my interviewees during our conversations as a form of social practice which both reflects and contributes to the shaping and reshaping of social structures and identities, "rather than a purely individual activity or a reflex of situational variables" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 63). This has helped me formulate and address one of my key research questions, namely, how does the construction of SAHF masculinity intersect with changing representations of urban family life and masculinity in urban China?

To address this question, I borrowed Norman Fairclough's (1992, p.130-133) theory of intertextuality to examine commonalities and heterogeneities of texts used in my three sources of data. Exploring the diverse and sometimes contradictory elements within these texts enables me to highlight the multifaceted nature of the image of SAHFs in contemporary China. Specifically, I focused on words and narratives that contribute to the ideological constitution of SAHFs in the TV dramas, social media materials, and interview data. This analysis involved observing intertextuality between the TV dramas and social media materials to understand the processes of contestation and restriction in the discourse surrounding SAHFs. Additionally, I compared the media discourses with the self-representations of SAHFs in the interview data, identifying both similarities and disparities. In my analysis, I employed Fairclough's (1992, p. 130-133) notions of an "intertextual chain" and its relationship with the concept of hegemony for each data type. The intertextual chain in the context of my analysis refers to the overlapping themes and the incorporation of phrases, idioms, and concepts from texts outside each data type. The outline of these interconnections and their implications are highlighted in the thesis conclusion.

3.3 Research methods

To form the “intertextual chain”, I employed textual research and discourse analysis to collect and analyse my three data sets, namely, TV dramas, social media articles, and interviews. Additionally, I conducted semi-structured interviews for data collection. In the paragraphs below, I first describe how I selected and conducted my analysis on TV drama series, and then move on to social media articles. Lastly, I elaborate on how I recruited my interviewees and approached the interview data. In particular, I describe how I adapted all interviews from in-person to (multiple) online interviews due to Covid-19 travel restrictions and what my research has gained from this unexpected change.

3.3.1 TV dramas

The intention of conducting discourse analysis on TV drama series, same as my analysis on social media articles analysed below, was to understand the changing media representations of SAHFs and wider masculinity in contemporary Chinese popular culture. I selected three dramas for my analysis, namely, *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). These dramas were chosen due to their similarities and differences. While family dramas have gained popularity in recent years, these three were the only ones featuring SAHFs at the time of my analysis in 2020.² Each drama focuses on different aspects of SAHFs’ lives: *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. For in-depth understanding of these three crucial aspects in the lives of SAHFs, I drew upon the interconnections of these three aspects in social media and interview materials in subsequent chapters (chapter five to eight).

My reading of SAHF images in TV dramas was inspired by Martin Huang’s (2006) perception of gender as a relational concept. Huang’s critical analysis of male images in late imperial literature emphasises the importance of not only exploring how different men strive for dominance in constructing masculinity but also understanding “how different models of masculinity were proposed and negotiated in relation to the feminine” (Huang, 2006, p. 8). Regarding gender as a socially constructed notion, I analysed and interpreted the

² Modern Marriage (*Wo’men de hunyin* 我们的婚姻, 2022) is another notable drama dealing with SAHFs that has subsequently been broadcast.

representations 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.

3.3.2 Social media materials

Social media materials that I selected and analysed include articles written about and sometimes by SAHFs themselves on WeChat subscription accounts (*weixin dingyuehao* 微信订阅号) and Zhihu (知乎) posts. The selection was based on their wide appeal and reception, as indicated by ratings and circulation/readership figures, and their significance in shaping the construction of masculinity and fatherhood in China. These materials included texts that associated the role of SAHFs with masculinity and fatherhood, featured experiences and insights from actual SAHFs, and were referenced by other articles/posts in different contexts. I particularly focused on a period of five years, extending from 2016, when discussions on SAHFs began to have a greater presence on Chinese social media, up to 2021, when I finished my collection of online data.

WeChat articles were chosen as the primary source for several reasons. Firstly, WeChat holds a dominant position in contemporary China, making it a rich platform for accessing relevant textual materials. Secondly, SAHF-related content appeared most frequently on subscription accounts, with cross-references being made on other platforms. Lastly, different types of subscription accounts showcased various forms of public discourse, as elaborated in chapter five. In addition to analysing WeChat articles, I also incorporated data from Zhihu, a Chinese question-and-answer forum, to further enhance my understanding of how individual users perceive and present their ideas and assumptions about SAHFs in a less formal context. On Zhihu, questions are created, answered, and organised by the community of users, providing valuable insights into diverse perspectives. I collected and examined top-rated answers on Zhihu, which are often contributed by influencers in the field of parenting and childcare, as well as individuals with direct experiences in stay-at-home fathering or mothering. These answers offered a range of viewpoints and personal stories that shed light on the topic of SAHFs. By analysing the dominant and sometimes contradictory key themes that emerged from all the social media materials, including WeChat articles and Zhihu answers, I structured my analysis in a way that captured the various perspectives and discourses

surrounding SAHFs. This allowed me to identify commonalities and divergences, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the topic within the social media landscape.

3.3.3 Interviews with SAHFs

The number of (visible) SAHFs in today's China is still very small, given the emerging nature of this concept and the persistent social stigma against them. Additionally, I did not have personal connections with SAHFs, making it quite difficult to locate interviewees. To address this, I established contacts with potential participants primarily through various social media platforms, including Zhihu, Douban (a Chinese social networking website with forums focusing on specific topics), Weibo (a Chinese microblogging website), and WeChat (a Chinese instant messaging, social media, and mobile payment app).

To recruit participants, I posted concise recruitment messages (in Chinese) on these platforms, stating that I was looking for SAHFs as my interviewees for my PhD research and assuring them that any personal information they provided would be exclusively used for research purposes. Interested individuals could leave me a message with their contact number for further communication. I also searched for keywords on Zhihu and Douban to approach users who used these keywords to describe themselves on their profile pages. The keywords I used included full-time fathers (*quanzhi baba/naiba* 全职爸爸/奶爸) and househusbands (*jiating funan/zhufu* 家庭妇男/煮夫). Additionally, I contacted the authors of relevant articles and used the same keyword strategy to search for articles on various official WeChat accounts (*weixin gongzhonghao* 微信公众号), such as The Paper (*Paike* 《湃客》). Through the account manager of *Paike*, I obtained the personal WeChat IDs of the article authors, who then kindly provided me with the contact details of their former participants (with their consent). Lastly, once I established a connection with my interviewees, I employed snowball sampling to recruit those who were less active on social media (see Atkinson & Flint, 2001). As a result of these efforts, I successfully established contacts with twenty-two interviewees.

For data collection, I used the semi-structured interviewing method. Drawing on Jennifer Mason's (2002, p. 69-70) guide to assembling interview questions, I broke down my three 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

talk about their own ideas and experiences, and enabling the discussion to extend beyond the prepared questions. Documenting individuals' narratives of their lived experiences helped me understand how they perceive their subjective experiences. As Sandra Kouritzin (2000, p. 4) puts it, "It is not the events themselves that are of greatest importance, but the participants' understandings of the events and their later impact on, or resolution in, the participants' lives." In my case, for example, asking the men about their relationships with their own fathers when they were younger could shed light on why they became primary caregivers and how they perceived notions of masculinity and fatherhood. Similarly, discussing their previous career history and relationship with their spouse could help me understand their decisions to stay at home, given that men's career prospects and spousal support are critical factors in SAHFs' decision-making process according to existing literature (see chapter 2.3).

As with my approach to TV dramas and social media materials, I treat the interview data as "text" for analysis, revealing how interviewees make sense of themselves as gendered subjects. As mentioned in the previous section, in keeping with a commitment to a modified version of the constructivist branch of grounded theory, I interpret the data as something which comes into existence as a result of interactions between researcher and participant within a particular situated context, rather than as a pre-existing object of knowledge awaiting discovery by the researcher. Given that my interviews with SAHFs constituted a much smaller data set compared with TV dramas and social media materials, I decided to adopt Kathy Charmaz's line-by-line coding as my initial data analysis method to help me understand and interpret the interview transcripts. As Charmaz (2006, p. 53) suggests, using line-by-line coding can largely prevent the researcher from imposing their preconceived notions on the data. Charmaz also points out that line-by-line coding gives the researcher leads to pursue, and if important leads or new research questions emerge, the researcher can return to earlier participants with more questions and modify the interview questions accordingly for future participants. In so doing, the data collection and coding process become more focused and efficient.

Anthropologist Russell Bernard (2006, p. 168) suggests that conducting a follow-up interview allows the researcher to see the complexity of a given participant's identity, as answers might differ across time and space (cf. Goodley, *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, I conducted interviews twice with the same individuals in the span of one year (2021-2022, see more in the following section), additionally bearing in mind that there is no linear process in data

collection, analysis, and write-up in grounded theory. The intertwining of these three stages requires analysis to start from the beginning, as it directs the next interviews and observations (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 6). Instead of waiting to start the data analysis process after conducting all the interviews, I transcribed and analysed the interview materials by incorporating Charmaz's (2006) coding approach right after each individual interview. This allowed me to direct the subsequent data-gathering process by developing more nuanced questions for follow-up interviews with the same individuals and continually modifying the questions for interviews with other participants.

My original plan was to let the in-person interviews during my fieldwork shape the thesis, with TV dramas and social media materials serving as secondary sources subordinate to my fieldwork experience. However, due to Covid-19 travel restrictions, I was unable to travel back to different cities in China, making it necessary to conduct all my interviews online. Surprisingly, my online interviews with the participants reshaped my preconceptions regarding the correlation between "real-life experiences" and in-person interviews. Firstly, conducting online interviews reduced the geographical and temporal constraints associated with in-person interviews, enabling a more cyclical relationship between the interviewees and myself. Secondly, during the online interview process, especially during the follow-up interviews with the same individuals, I began to see the interviews in a different light. Instead of considering interviews as representing the "truth" of SAHFs in contrast to fictional dramas and social media articles written by others, I realised that interviews were one form of SAHFs' self-representation that existed alongside the other two.

Fortunately, most of my potential interviewees (19 out of 21) not only agreed to participate online but were also happy to be interviewed again within a year. This unexpected change of plan turned out to be a silver lining, as conducting follow-up (in-person) interviews would have been nearly impossible if I had stuck to my original plan due to time constraints in each city. In keeping with a commitment to certain aspects of grounded theory, I allowed my interaction with my interviewees and the analysis of media materials to shape and reconstruct my thesis. Conducting multiple interviews with the same individuals in a year span revealed changes in my interviewees' subjective experiences and perceptions resulting from their self-reflections during the Covid-19 lockdown. Themes and arguments emerged as a result of the comparisons I made between my initial encounters and follow-up conversations with the

interviewees (see, for example, the section on self-reflection during the pandemic in chapter seven)

The subsequent chapters examine the changes, including shifts in SAHFs' responses to the same questions, discrepancies between their narratives in our conversations and those of other interviewees, and inconsistencies between their social media identities and the self-image they presented in our conversations. This has led to a shift in my initial intention of comparing the *realities* of SAHFs' lives that I would observe during my fieldwork with their media portrayals. The self-selective nature of SAHFs' narratives made me realise that the purpose of interviews was not to explore the "real-life" version of SAHFs, but rather how they chose to *represent* themselves based on their perceptions and experiences as SAHFs. In this regard, I employed Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory and its critique to understand the changes, discrepancies, and inconsistencies in SAHFs' self-identification in different contexts (chapter six). Goffman (1959) perceived social life as grounded in the distinction between the front stage, where individuals tend to present a socially perceived favourable persona, and the backstage, where hidden identities are revealed. While Goffman's dramaturgical theory holds relevance in today's digital world, Anthony Giddens (2009) point to its lack of systematic discussion of how the context of interaction is structured, as well as its lack of attention to resistance and reflexivity. Building on Anthony Giddens's (2009) critique, I highlight the multiple, interconnected layers of SAHFs' identities that are revealed and concealed depending on the context of interaction, as well as the reflexivity that emerges from SAHFs' narratives.

3.4 Summary

This chapter has provided an explanation of the theoretical and disciplinary understanding of how I incorporated the research methods and relevant theories to achieve my research objectives. By conducting and comparing discourse analysis on media materials and semi-structured interviews with SAHFs with the focus on their lived experiences as SAHFs, the research answers three research questions – motivations of becoming a SAHF; perceiving, experiencing, and performing their role as a SAHF; and intersectionality of SAHFs' representations among TV dramas, social media, and interviews.

Additionally, the methodology was reformulated to include multiple online interviews with the same individuals and the integration of Goffman's dramaturgical theory and its critique. This approach allowed for a deeper exploration of the complex and evolving nature of the self and the ongoing reconstruction of masculinity among different individuals, addressing a gap in both social media and TV drama portrayals of SAHFs. The multiple virtual encounters fostered a closer, two-way relationship where I was able to gain a better understanding of SAHFs' perceptions and experiences, and my interviewees were able to locate a meaningful connection to the study. This aspect of the methodology proved to be one of the most valuable assets in the research process, as it allowed my interviewees to take a personal ownership over a project centred around their lives. In the next chapter, I examine the first set of data in the discourse analysis of SAHFs – how SAHFs are represented in three TV drama series in contemporary China.

Chapter 4: SAHFs in Contemporary Chinese TV Dramas

This chapter investigates discourses of masculinity in contemporary Chinese popular culture by focusing on the representations of SAHFs in several TV dramas shown on prime-time national channels in recent years. The cultural impact of TV dramas is significant: the name 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. 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, *et al.*, 2008; Kong, 2008; Zhong, 2010), and studies of TV drama from a gendered perspective are particularly scarce (Zhong, 2000; Song, 2010, 2022; Song & Hird, 2014, p. 29-54; Zhao, 2023). In this chapter, 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 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.

Since the advent of the socialist market economy and the PRC's integration into global capitalism in the 1990s, themes of Chinese TV dramas have been more diverse, as a result of the complex interplay between the state and the market in mass media, which include depictions of more private concerns such as romantic love, marriage, and family (Lu, 2000; Wang, 2005; Zhu, Keane & Bai, 2008; Song & Hird, 2014). As Sheldon Lu (2000) indicates, the triumph of the (re-)emergence of portrayals of individual lives in TV drama production also implies a gradual acceptance by the state. 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 (Zhang, 2011; Wen, 2013; Kong, 2014; Fumian, 2016). 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), the first large-scale (fifty-episode) Chinese family drama released in 1990, is one such example – it signified a symbolic shift in how the media responded to thematic preferences among Chinese viewers, putting emphasis on 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, p. 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, p. 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, p. 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 emerging 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 & Lee, 2012; Song & Hird, 2014; Wong, 2016), in-depth TV drama discourse analysis of this model remains a gap to be filled. My TV drama analysis on SAHFs—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 analysis 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 when I started my analysis in 2020.³ 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. Among the three chosen serials, *Marriage Battle*, as the earliest and arguably most well-known Chinese family drama which revolves around the 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.

4.1 Four main themes

As the three dramas depict different aspects of SAHFs' lives, different themes emerge from their plotlines and dialogue, such as homosociality and gendered division of labour in *Marriage Battle*, different parenting styles between men and women in *A Little Reunion*, and reflexivity in crisis in *Super Dad & Super Kids*, which are further examined in the forthcoming sections. However, all three dramas reveal four consistent features in the construction of on-screen 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

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

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 (2002) puts it, "the media representation process plays an integral part in extending, constraining, and promoting particular ideals as appropriately masculine" (p. 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 (Hird, 2009; Song & Hird, 2014; Fumian, 2016).

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

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

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" (*shehui wending* 社会稳定) and building a "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会)⁵.

4.2 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.

⁵ The CCP's strategic goal is to maintain social stability and foster a harmonious society as a means to advance its economic agenda. The party believes that without sustained social stability, economic development will be disrupted, potentially squandering the decades of hard work and progress achieved since the implementation of the Reform and Opening-up policy in the 1980s (Qiu & Liu, 2018).

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 马伊琍), 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 like SAHMs on the Chinese screen, which inevitably delegitimises the experiences 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.⁶ Lao Chang is typical of media depictions of men born in 1960s China, as someone who firmly believes that "men rule the outside and

⁶ The 4S here is short for sales, spare parts, and surveying in the car-buying market.

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, p. 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.

4.2.1 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 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, 2010; Song & Hird, 2014). 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.

4.2.2 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 noted 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, p. 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 itself in his following exchange with Chen Meng, who does not consider the domestic sphere to be where her imagined happiness resides (episode 3):

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 learnt to be content with what you have.

Although Xu tries to make Chen see that 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?

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!”

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 is mostly manifested in his conversations 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.

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 the 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, p. 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." 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." 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." 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 put forward by this female character further reinforces the gendered notion of labour division in and outside the home.

4.2.3 The importance of work to men and masculinity

From the dialogue 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!" 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." 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 character 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:

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 try to find joy amidst the suffering (*ku zhong zuo le* 苦中作乐) (emphasis mine).

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.” 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 when they do, they are always well-behaved and quiet. They exist in the drama 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*.

4.3 Tiger mom 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 concern 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 things out on his own while pretending to be at work by going out every weekday. Work is 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 breadwinners in their households. 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* says to his wife after his unemployment, “You can certainly express affection and talk about daily stuff with your wife, but as a man, some things 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.

4.3.1 *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 reconstructed parental roles in the

Chinese family. Although strict, disciplinarian mothers have long existed in Chinese history,⁷ the term tiger mom only became a dominant part of Chinese- and English-language discourse in 2011 with the publication of *Battle Hymn of the 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 relate to the plotline. Indeed, the portrayal of tiger moms echoes the intensive mothering ideology proposed by Sharon Hays (1996). 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, p. x). Drawing on this theory, I argue that some women have grown into their

⁷ One of the most well-known examples is Ni Gui Zhen 倪桂珍 – the mother of Soong Mei-ling 宋美龄 the former First Lady of the Republic of China

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 and 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.

4.3.2 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:

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.

4.4 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, p. 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 Modleski, 1991, p. 86-8; Vavrus, 2002, p. 365). As Liong (2017b, p. 172) 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."



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

4.5 Summary

In this chapter, I have concentrated on plotlines and dialogue 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 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 trait of a character or power dynamic between a couple, I have briefly touched upon other elements, such as a choice of clothing and pitch of voice for certain characters.

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 coverage, of TV drama representations of Chinese masculinity, but they do showcase one emergent type of the “new man” on the Chinese

screen. To further understand the discourse of SAHF masculinity in contemporary Chinese popular culture, I turn my attention to the representations of this gender role on social media in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: SAHFs on Chinese Social Media

Similar to TV dramas, as discussed in the previous chapter, social media platforms also feature narratives of social change and public events as their predominant content. However, a key distinction is that social media allows for a more interactive and participatory role for both content producers and consumers. Platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Zhihu have become integral parts of China's media and communications landscape, enabling the creation and sharing of user-generated content, including contributions from SAHFs themselves.

In this chapter, I analyse the representations of SAHFs on social media in contemporary China, to explore how online users, including SAHFs themselves, engage in conversations about this emerging gender role. My analysis draws from a wide range of materials written about SAHFs and, in some cases, by SAHFs themselves. However, for close reading and analysis, I primarily focus on articles from WeChat subscription accounts and Zhihu posts, which I selected based on their quantifiable widespread appeal and reception (as confirmed through ratings and circulation/readership figures) and particular significance for the construction of masculinity and fatherhood (e.g., texts associating the role of SAHFs with masculinity and fatherhood in China, featuring experiences and insights from actual SAHFs and/or were referred by different articles/posts in other contexts). WeChat is the largest social media platform in China, with over 1.2 billion active users in 2020 reading an average of five articles a day on different subscription accounts (Chen, 2020; Lix, 2020). The dominant position of WeChat in today's China does not mean that it has replaced other types of social media, with individual users tending to switch between social media platforms to gather different sources of information and satisfy their different needs (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). On the topic of SAHFs, however, relevant textual materials appeared the most on WeChat subscription accounts, with cross references being made on other platforms such as Weibo. Furthermore, multiple forms of public discourse are displayed in different types of WeChat subscription accounts, including state-owned accounts, digital news accounts, company-owned accounts, and individual content creators' accounts. The WeChat accounts analysed in this chapter include, but are not limited to, articles presented by *Southern Metropolis Weekly* (*nandu zhoukan* 《南都周刊》), a weekly magazine focusing on exploring topics relating urban life and current trends through storytelling; *New Weekly* (*xinzhoukan* 《新周刊》), a lifestyle magazine that aims to cover a wide range of topics

relating to current social events; *The Paper* (*pengpai xinwen* 《澎湃新闻》), a Chinese digital newspaper dedicated to critically analysing current political news and events, and aimed at young adults; *Paikē* (《湃客》), the platform affiliated with *The Paper* which is dedicated to creating contents based on lived realities of different individuals via interviews; and *Fokī* (*fūjī* 福基) a company that promotes baby products. In addition to articles and news on WeChat, I used Zhihu, a Chinese question-and-answer forum where questions are created, answered, and organised by the community of its users, as a complementary source to understand how individual users perceive and present their ideas and/or assumptions about SAHFs in a less formal context. I examined various top-rated answers posted by parenting and childcare influencers or individuals with personal experiences in stay-at-home fathering/mothering.

The aim of my analysis is not to assess the accuracy of these articles in portraying the everyday life of SAHFs. Rather, I focus on the underlying structures of knowledge conveyed through the statements in these articles and posts, as they form a discourse in their correlation with each other and broader ideologies. In the following pages, I highlight and explore three dominant themes that I identified from social media materials. These themes include the class specificity of SAHFs and the significance of work for their masculinity, the emergence of a dual identity where men are both full-time fathers and part-time workers, and the growing recognition of child development as a crucial aspect for men assuming the role of SAHFs. Throughout this analysis, I acknowledge the presence of contradictions within these themes.

5.1 Three main themes

On social media, two dominant portrayals of SAHFs emerge: one depicts them as men who are financially well-off, relying on either a partner with significant income and career prospects or their own accumulated wealth as prerequisites for assuming the role. The other portrayal presents SAHFs as individuals who view their role as an involuntary career break. This discourse aligns with the image of SAHFs depicted in the analysed TV drama series from the previous chapter. However, there are also articles, particularly those featuring actual SAHFs' experiences, that offer a counter discourse, expanding beyond the TV drama representation. These articles highlight SAHFs who combine their role with part-time or freelance jobs, prioritising childcare in their lives. This portrayal challenges the emphasis on economic privileges and the involuntary nature of retreating to the domestic sphere. A third

discourse concerning SAHFs centres around child development, particularly education, as a significant motivation for men to take on the SAHF role. The identities of these education-conscious SAHFs can be categorised within the two previous discourses, either relying on a partner with promising career prospects or assuming a dual identity as full-time fathers and part-time workers. The analysis of these three themes sheds light on the complex and multifaceted nature of SAHF representations on social media. It expands the understanding of the motivations, perceptions, and experiences of SAHFs and provides a more comprehensive picture of SAHFs within the online space.

5.2 “Super-rich” dads who can permanently leave the job versus “medium rich” dads who take a break from work

Similar to the TV drama discourse examined in the last chapter, SAHFs from upper middle-class families continue to be the dominant social group represented on Chinese social media platforms. While the privileged position of SAHFs on television is implied, it is explicitly highlighted on social media, with most articles and comments stating that economic privilege is a prerequisite for men assuming this gender role in the long term.

A prominent example is an article in *New Weekly* (Li, 2019) entitled “If you do not have family properties worth millions, you cannot be a househusband” (*meiyou baiwanjiachan, dang shenme jiating funan* 没有百万家产，当什么家庭妇男). The title itself suggests that being a SAHF is an option only accessible to men of economic privilege. The main text of the article subsequently offers contradictory views on this gender role. At first glance, it sets a seemingly positive tone by sharing the story of a popular SAHF figure who has raised an extremely talented 8-year-old teaching adults about computer programming online, with the instructional video going viral and gaining millions of views. Several other articles also refer to this particular story as an example to demonstrate the benefits of having a SAHF in terms of children’s development (Tian, 2018; Qi, 2019; Wu, 2020). Similarly, the article concludes with a call for gender equality, by criticising the gendered notion of labour division in traditional Chinese families –“men control the outside, while women rule the inside”. As it states, “full-time fathers as a reversed gender role should not be discriminated against, as they are only taking family responsibilities in their own way.”

However, stereotypes about SAHFs are legitimised and reinforced in the main text of this article. The article explicitly states that being “well-educated” and coming from at least a “middle-class family background” are prerequisites for men to assume the SAHF role, thereby illustrating the economic privilege that SAHFs must possess. To support this argument, the article provides an example of a popular figure, Huang Ren, a former Goldman Sachs executive, who became a SAHF to spend more time with his eight-month-old son. The choice of this example implies that Huang chose this role solely because he could afford to do so, given his social standing and economic power. Furthermore, the article suggests that high incomes of men’s partners are another condition for men to leave their jobs, citing the example of Qi Wei (戚薇) and Li Chengxuan (李承铉), a famous Chinese couple in show business. The article argues that “in certain industries such as show business and makeup, it is common for there to be a “a strong woman with a weaker man (*nüqiang nanruo* 女强男弱) dynamic (in contrast to most male-dominated industries). Qi was extremely busy as an actress who went straight back to work after her childbirth, whereas her husband Li had a less successful career prospect in acting, and thus he became a full-time father.” This narrative highlights the correlation between men and their work identity, suggesting that without work, men are seen as “weak”.

The pattern of affluent men and/or partners with desirable incomes or career prospects aligns with many studies conducted in North America and Western Europe that identify this as one of the most important determinants in men’s decision-making process (e.g., Zimmerman, 2000; Chesley, 2011; Doucet & Merla, 2007; Merla, 2008; Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Kramer *et al.*, 2015; Lee & Lee, 2018). Similar discussions have also taken place in China, as seen in the hit debate programme *Qipa Shuo* (literal meaning: weirdos’ talk 奇葩说) in 2021, where the topic of “if my wife earns millions a year, should I become a full-time father?” generated heated discussions on Zhihu (with 531 answers and over 665,000 viewers of the topic by the end of March 2021) (Zhihu, 2021). However, the majority of the answers on Zhihu revealed other factors that influence men’s decision to become a SAHF, beyond economic power. Personal values, preferences, and the desire to care for children full-time are mentioned as essential considerations. As one of the most popular answers states, “I think, when deciding whether to become a full-time father, a man should not only consider his partner’s income. It also depends on whether he is willing to give up his job and wants to take care of his children full time – both factors are indispensable in the decision-making

process.” Another answer from a father with a one-year-old child also indicates that being a full-time father is more about personal values and the consensus reached between him and his wife on this role, rather than incredibly high incomes. As Doucet (2016, p. 11) argues, “fathers’ choices to be at home or to opt-out of the labour market [...] reveal a complex tapestry of decision-making moments across time, ongoing family negotiations, children’s changing needs, and increases in non-standardized work arrangement in the context of ongoing liberal restructuring.” Thus, the argument in this *New Weekly* article (Li, 2019) oversimplifies the complexities of SAHFs’ decision-making process by assuming that financial situations are the only determinant. Moreover, this kind of discourse leads to the marginalisation of men who assume the same role under other circumstances.

The article (Li, 2019) also presents the belief that an involuntary job crisis is the only reason for “men from a family with ‘average’ incomes (*shouru putong* 收入普通) to assume the role of SAHF.” Referring to a report from the Economic Policy Institute (Wething, 2014), the article claims that more men became unemployed than women during the economic recession in 2008 due to the major impact posed on many male-dominated industries; meanwhile, the number of SAHFs increased and reached its highest level since 1989. The article subsequently argues that if men from families with “average incomes” assume the role of SAHF, it is mainly due to their involuntary job loss. However, the article fails to mention that the same report also indicates that men experienced stronger job growth than women in various industries after the recession. By omitting this information, the article’s argument that men assume the SAHF role primarily due to job loss becomes questionable.

The article (Li, 2019) takes the famous director Ang Lee as an example to further substantiate the point that unemployment is the main reason for men to assume the role of SAHFs. But it also emphasises that career prospects of Lee’s partner, stating that “even though” (*jiu suan* 就算) Ang Lee was temporarily unemployed, his wife Lin Huijia is a doctor – which is not an average-income job.” The conjunction “even though” in this sentence implies that a partner’s career and income are still prerequisites for men to assume the role of SAHF. This contradicts the earlier argument that involuntary job loss is the only reason for men from families with average incomes to become SAHFs. Additionally, the article highlights Lee’s subsequent career success – “his wife supported the family and having KFC was considered as an incredible feast to the family, until Lee wrote the screenplays for *The Wedding Banquet*

(*Xi Yan* 喜宴) and *Pushing Hands* (*Tui Shou* 推手) after 6-year of being a full-time husband/father.” This implies that being a SAHF was just a temporary stage in his life to endure hardship and revive his career, rather than his personal preference or the outcome of his consideration for the family. Li’s two successful films with multiple awards and nominations after six years of staying at home seemingly justify his act of retreating to the domestic realm and validate his masculinity as closely associated with career and social standing. Moreover, the absence of depiction of Lee’s life as a full-time father/husband, apart from highlighting his career outcomes, implies a belief in the secondary nature of caregiving and household chores for men. This portrayal reinforces gender stereotypes and undermines the significance of caregiving and household responsibilities for men. It overlooks the complexities of men’s motivations for becoming SAHFs and perpetuates the idea that career success and societal recognition are the primary factors driving men’s decision-making process.

Interviews with SAHFs’ wives and in-laws, as depicted in other articles, contribute to the reinforcement of prejudices against SAHFs and extend beyond the TV drama discourse discussed in the previous chapter. These narratives introduce the dynamics of the wider family and intergenerational conflicts, further shaping societal perceptions of SAHFs. For example, an article from another subscription account named *Renjian gushi pu* (a stall for life stories 人间故事铺) (Qi, 2019) highlights the disputes between the SAHF and his in-laws regarding gender roles. The SAHF’s mother-in-law criticises his unemployed status. Her comments include: “It is ridiculous for a man to spend the entire day at home only for the kid and household chores. You work so hard and yet he is so chilled – he is always on his phone once the kid is asleep!” and “not only does he not earn money, but also dares to argue with you. He is useless as a man.” As the SAHF Xiong Jun from another article (Hu, 2019) states, “...the values that SAHFs create are rested on the domestic responsibilities they have taken, rather than on how much money they can earn. But unfortunately, in contemporary society, only work in the public sphere is valuable, whereas domestic work is considered as free labour with no particular significance.” On this point, the New Weekly article (Li, 2019) further associates men’s masculinity with work by suggesting that being a SAHF is a temporary role, as the intention is to return to work once the child reaches school age. This portrayal reinforces the idea that childcare and domestic work are inferior to traditional employment, aligning with the depictions of SAHFs in the analysed TV dramas and the

choices made by most middle-class participants in Liong's (2017a) study on SAHFs in Hong Kong.

These depictions of SAHFs increasingly define masculinity in terms of work, consequently downplaying the significance of childcare and other domestic responsibilities. This perspective marginalises alternative experiences of men who view caregiving as an integral and ongoing part of their lives, rather than a temporary departure from traditional work practices, as another type of SAHFs that is presented in the counter-discourse elaborated below.

5.3 Full-time father, part-time worker

This section explores the second very common narrative about SAHFs on social media, which characterises SAHFs as simultaneously assuming the roles of full-time father *and* part-time worker. In other words, this discourse shows how paid work is intertwined with men's lives as SAHFs. Although the articles examined in this section came out around the same time as the ones in the last section (between 2018 and 2020), they offer a counter-discourse to the first discourse about SAHFs analysed in the last section (i.e., SAHFs are men who are involuntarily and temporarily unemployed or extremely wealthy). However, the articles described in this section feature more input from actual SAHFs via interviews with them, whereas articles from the previous section gather the image of SAHFs from other online sources and other people (e.g., SAHFs' partner/in-laws). Instead of emphasising external conditions as the prerequisites for men to assume the role, as these latter articles do, the articles described here shed light on SAHFs' changing perceptions of their relationship between paid work and family life.

The term digital nomad (*shuzi youmin* 数字游民) is introduced in two recent articles on *Paiké* (Hu, 2019; Zhang, *et. al.*, 2019) to refer to people who work remotely and online. They argue that some SAHFs have already realised this “nomadic” lifestyle, which presents the possibility of altering gender dynamics in and outside the home. The increasing availability of mobile and flexible job opportunities has allowed men to be more involved in their families without severing their connection to the labour market. As emphasised by the author in one of the above-mentioned articles (Hu, 2019):

The SAHF La Rou has become a start-up entrepreneur whose career focuses on family education; (another SAHF) Qi Xiansheng started his blogging career on relationships and family on Weibo...The contrast [between the traditional conception of SAHFs and these fathers' image] helps readers to better understand this social group and leaves them some room to reflect on the social prejudices and stereotypes against this particular group of men – *Do SAHFs who assume the dual identity as primary caregiver and part-time worker belong to a special social group?* [After interviewing with SAHFs], my understanding and perception on SAHFs have completely changed – our society believes that men have to work outside the home in order to support the family, but in fact, full-time fathers also have their own career (emphasis mine).

The question highlighted in the narrative above – “Do SAHFs who assume the dual identity as a primary caregiver and a part-time worker belong to a special social group?” – indicates that the lives that these SAHFs challenge the assumed boundaries between work and family life. This article substantiates this point by bringing in two particular aspects of SAHF life, namely a shift in their priorities and their choice of work.

While working from home is arguably another form of maintaining a connection with the public sphere to preserve the sense of masculinity for SAHFs (Hanlon, 2012, p. 208), the second strand of social media discourse emphasises a shift in their priorities towards the family sphere, where work comes after childcare. Throughout the article, the term “full-time father” (*quanzhi baba* 全职爸爸) is used to describe these men's primary identity, even though they have a job. While acknowledging the fact that raising children needs money, the author makes it clear that the purpose of this article is to understand the role of SAHFs and condemn the stereotypical conception that “men have to earn money”. Unlike the article (Li, 2019) analysed in the last section, this article focuses on the emotional experience of being a SAHF rather than solely on the family's financial capability. As the author Hu Yating (2019) states, “their fundamental identity is ‘father’”. The experience of SAHF Qi as a part-time writer is also discussed in an article (Zhang, *et. al.*, 2019) entitled “From a workaholic to a full-time father: family is my other workplace” (*cong gongzuo kuang dao quanzhi baba: jiating shi wode lingyige zhichang* 从工作狂到全职爸爸：家庭是我的另一个职场). In the author's words, during the interval (*jianxi* 间隙) between cooking and cleaning the house, Qi

wrote millions of words of stories and published four books about food and romantic relationships. The term “interval” suggests the secondary status of Qi’s job as a writer. This article also shows another SAHF’s (Xiong Jun) daily timetable, which revolves entirely around his son; the only time for Xiong to take a break and do his own work is when his son takes a daytime nap or falls asleep at around 11pm. This timetable is to substantiate the point that being a SAHF is a full-day job without significant breaks. Similarly, the other two articles (Wu, 2020; Tu, 2020) compare the typical time schedules from 7am to midnight for a working father and a full-time father, demonstrating that the time for a full-time father himself is usually after 10pm every day without a day off. Such narratives suggest that the priority of SAHFs’ lives is still taking care of the family, and that their paid work is organised according to the everyday rhythms of being a full-time father.

Furthermore, the examples provided above highlight the blending of childcare, marriage life, and professional identity for SAHFs. This representation underscores the way in which some men draw inspiration from their experiences in caregiving and family life as SAHFs. This seamless integration of intimate life and paid work resonates with Katariina Mäkinen’s (2020) study on stay-at-home mom blogging as a form of freelance work in the digital economy in Finland. Similar to Qi’s transition from a full-time advertiser to a SAHF/content producer on Weibo and WeChat, Yu Ba (Foki, 2020) left his full-time job when his son turned two and started vlogging about parenting on social media. He has since become a successful childcare and parenting influencer with 764,000 followers on Weibo, 14,000 on Douyin and 20,000 on RED (*xiao hong shu*, a social media and e-commerce platform for people to share their stories and/or sell products 小红书). It is evident that social media has become an important medium for the professionalisation and monetisation of family life for some SAHFs, enabling them to combine intimate family life with professional life in a way that challenges the assumed boundaries between paid work and private family life. As expressed by SAHF La Rou (Zhang, *et. al.*, 2019), “The increase of creative job opportunities that embrace mobility and flexibility offers a new area for full-time fathers/mothers to balance family and individual careers.” These men all demonstrate a long-term commitment to their dual identity, with being a SAHF as their primary role. Qi, for example, states that, “my understanding of being a SAHF is a lifestyle. My future career will continue to revolve around my lifestyle as a SAHF, because I love it and it is comfortable. Moreover, I found

myself and achieved a sense of self-worth during the process.” Similarly, La Rou expresses the belief that he will have new career ideas related to family education as his son grows up.

However, it is important to note that not all SAHFs choose to integrate their lives as a father/husband into their paid work. For some SAHFs, they choose to continue working in a similar field as their former full-time job but on a part-time or freelance basis. This allows them to maintain a connection to their professional background while also dedicating time and energy to their family responsibilities. By shifting to part-time or freelance work, these SAHFs can have more flexibility in their schedules and have the freedom to be actively involved in their children's lives. For example, in an article (Tian, 2018) on *The Paper* entitled “Full-time father Zhou Huajuan: busy with taking care of two kids, got no time to hang out” (*quanzhi baba Zhou Huajuan: dai liawa henmang, bu yue* 全职爸爸周花卷：带俩娃很忙，不约), the iconic SAHF figure Zhou Huajuan, whose successful parenting has been featured in many articles and news reports (mentioned earlier), has been working as a part-time editor, software developer, and translator in different companies while taking care of two children and household chores. Zhou explains that working as an editor provides him with a relatively light workload, and his passion for translating books derives his involvement in that field. Additionally, his connections from his previous job in a consulting company lead to him taking on software development projects. However, Zhou emphasises that since the birth of his daughter, he has been selective about the jobs he takes on, prioritising his family responsibilities. Despite his choices, Zhou acknowledges the mental pressure he faces as a full-time father. He describes feeling more pressure at home compared to his previous job as a full-time office worker, stating that “I feel more pressured at home...I do not allow myself to take a nap when my kids are asleep even if I want to, because it will be a waste of time (if I do not use this spare time to work).” Zhou also states in another article (Xuehao, 2018) that “given that I, as a full-time father, do not earn as much as a full-time worker, I sometimes feel anxious and pressured. I always feel that I need to do more stuff, as if I cannot waste any time. I will feel guilty if I take a nap!” These statements highlight the self-imposed pressure and uncertainty SAHFs may face in navigating the new boundaries between work and family life, as well as the challenges associated with transitioning from a traditional breadwinner identity.

Given Zhou's busy life, as described by Tian Chunling, an interviewer and author of the article, it was challenging to schedule an interview with him. Zhou's packed schedule and responsibilities as a SAHF made it difficult to find a convenient time for the interview. Additionally, Zhou's wife was also working, which meant he had to bring his daughter along with him to the interview. This situation highlights the juggling act that many SAHFs face as they balance their caregiving responsibilities with other commitments:

When I was chatting with Huajuan while we were having lunch, he did not even have time to take a break for one second: he was feeding his daughter food and water, and then he needed to stand up and hold his daughter to walk around. In the meantime, he used the sensitive sense of smell that only parents with new-born babies would have to immediately notice when she took a poop. Then he told his daughter to stand while holding the chair, and skilfully changed the diaper for her within 30 seconds. When talking about his two kids, he could talk non-stop about them - when they learnt to walk, when they started to have supplementary food, when they knew how to talk, their sleeping and eating habits, as well as differences in personalities. Whether it was his son's every important moment in life or his daughter's cute little facial expressions when she wanted him to help her with something, Zhou cannot help but keep smiling and radiating with love for both of them (Tian, 2018).

This narrative resonates with the experiences shared by other SAHFs, as it highlights the demanding nature of being a full-time SAHF without any breaks. While other articles and news reports about Zhou often emphasise his success as a father who nurtures a talented child and his ability to manage multiple jobs while prioritising his role as a full-time father and homemaker (Li, 2019; Xiaota, 2020; Yuyan jie, 2020), this specific article by Tian Chunling (2018) provides a deeper insight into Zhou's emotional journey as both a father and a part-time worker. It offers a more nuanced understanding of his complex and multifaceted identity, showcasing both the rewards and challenges he faces in his dual role.

This textual representation of the dual identity of SAHFs challenges and redefines the assumed boundaries between work and life. It counters the prevailing notion in the first strand of social media discourse that emphasise the prioritisation of work over family life. By highlighting the busy and demanding nature of SAHFs' responsibilities in both the home and their part-time careers, this second discourse on SAHFs challenges the stereotypes of the

home as a place of passivity, laziness, and financial dependency on their partners (also see Hays, 1996; Johnstone & Swanson, 2003; Merla, 2008). Instead, it showcases the active and productive role that SAHFs play in managing both their family and work responsibilities.

5.4 Child development

Social media articles, in contrast to the TV dramas analysed in the previous chapter, present child development as a determinant factor for men to take up the primary caregiving role. This section focuses on the narratives surrounding education-conscious SAHFs that emerge on social media platforms. It is worth noting that SAHFs depicted in this section do not represent a completely new and distinct identity. Instead, they align with the categories established in the previous two discourses – either having a partner with promising career prospects or adopting a dual identity as a full-time father and part-time worker.

In many articles, the disagreement and dissatisfaction towards men's own parents' or in-laws' child-rearing practices are presented as the primary motivation for men to choose the role of SAHF (Tian, 2018; Hu, 2019; Zhang, *et. al*, 2019). They express concerns about the potential negative impact of grandparents spoiling the children and hindering their development. According to SAHF Chen (Tian, 2018), allowing children to become independent is crucial, and he does not want his son's grandparents to interfere with childcare because they tend to unconditionally indulge his son's demands, undermining the habits and discipline his wife and he have worked hard to instil. These concerns about skipped-generational parenting seem to be widespread among Chinese families. As SAHF Zhou (Tian, 2018) briefly states when he was asked the reason for him to be a SAHF, "I think we all know the issues and concerns raised by skipped-generational childcare." Liu Heng (Zhang, *et.al.*, 2019) assumed the SAHF role for the same reason – "in addition to not wanting to be absent in his daughter's formative years, the concerns of grandparents spoiling her has made Liu Heng decide to take care of his daughter full-time."

The discourse presented above suggests two discursive but interrelated trends in the modern transition of childrearing as depicted in some SAHFs' households: changing power dynamics between generations and increased awareness of parental involvement in children's development. While forming nuclear family units has partially liberated Chinese individuals from traditionally extended family networks, the involvement of grandparents and parents as

joint caregivers remains prevalent in urban Chinese families, driven by traditional family values and economic practicalities (Chen, 2006; Goh & Kuczynski, 2010; Xiao, 2016). However, there is a growing trend where young parents take on the role of “managers” of the childrearing project, while grandparents primarily serve as marginalised childminders, indicating a gradual shift in power dynamics between the two generations (Xiao, 2016). Tensions and differences in child-rearing philosophies and methods have been observed between these generations, leading to difficulties in coordinating disciplinary measures (Goh & Kuczynski, 2010; Xiao, 2016). The decision of men to give up their careers and become full-time caregivers can be seen as an attempt to address these intergenerational disagreements and assert full control over the upbringing of their own children. It suggests that the importance of being actively involved in children’s education outweighs their own career pursuits.

Stress on the “quality” of childrearing and education, that the children’s grandparents are perceived as unable to fulfil, is an unintended result of the family planning policy. With the policy allowing families to have only one child, whether male or female, there is a greater opportunity for single children to receive undivided and intensive parental investment (see Yip, 2002; Fong, 2004; Greenhalgh, 1990, 2008). This investment encompasses various aspects, including time, labour, emotion, intellect, and financial resources. The pressure on parents to provide the best possible upbringing for their children has made childrearing a complex task. SAHF Chen, in an interview with *The Paper* (Tian, 2018), mentions that one of the reasons for him to become a full-time father is the need to prepare his son for the private school entrance exam. As he stated, “I heard that the examiners value the company of parents quite a lot during the entrance interview.” Another article (Tu, 2020) highlights the stress faced by SAHF Chen and his partner Mao Li in securing admission to a good primary school in Shanghai for their son. Despite starting their preparations one year in advance, researching different schools and providing home schooling, they still had to compete with families who had been preparing their children for a much longer period. After successfully passing the entrance exam, Mao Li expressed gratitude to Chen for managing all the stress and anxieties associated with the process, stating that “whenever other parents ask me how we managed to do that, I would tell them that I do not have a clue – all I did was being anxious and stressed out, thank god I have Chen to manage all these things for our son.”

A parallel can be drawn between the depiction of parental anxiety regarding securing entry to elite educational institutions in China and the construction of a “good” childhood through primary education in England which has been referred as the “scholarisation” (Cambridge Primary Review, 2010), and “corporealisation” of childhood (Evans & Davies, 2010). SAHFs appear to be presented as a role who fully dedicate themselves to understanding and navigating the complexities of their children’s education. They are seen as professionals in their roles as fathers, actively involved in shaping their children’s educational experiences. This mindset reflects the belief that childrearing practices, particularly education, should be approached with the same level of dedication and perfectionism as a profession. Chinese parents’ obsession with their children’s education has also been depicted in recent family dramas, such as *A Little Reunion* (*Xiao Huan Xi* 《小欢喜》, 2019), and *A Little Dilemma* (*Xiao She De* 《小舍得》, 2021). These dramas depict the high stakes and intense competition surrounding education, highlighting the pressure felt by parents to ensure their children’s success.

The indispensable contribution of men in child-rearing emerges as a significant theme when defining the SAHF role. Social media articles commonly employ terms such as “independence”, “adventurous”, “knowledgeable”, and “creative” to portray the advantages associated with men taking on the SAHF role. The following extract from an article (Sohu, 2022) entitled “When you are absent in childcare and leaving your children to your partner, men are now assuming the role as a full-time father in some families” (*ni haizai sang’oushi yu’er, bieren jia laogong yijing kaishi zuo quanzhi baba le* 你还在丧偶式育儿，别人家老公已经开始做全职爸爸了) is a prominent example:

For boys, fathers are their role models to imitate; for girls, fathers are their role models to choose a partner in the future...*Boys would lack aggressiveness and become feminine if they lose their fathers before they turn 4; girls would become anxious, shy or uncomfortable when they start to date during their adolescence years if they lose their fathers before they turn 5.* Fathers play an irreplaceable role in their children’s personality and cognitive development. They often do not do everything for their children. Instead, they encourage their children to deal with their problems *independently*. They use tools to fix and make toys with their children to develop their children’s *adventurous spirit* and manual skills. As their kids’ buddies, fathers use

creative ways to conduct activities, so as to guide their children in taking up responsibilities for a better future. On this point, the German philosopher Erich Fromm once stated in his famous work *The Art of Love* that “while father does not represent the natural world, he represents the other pole of human existence, *the world of thought, of man-made things, of law and order, of discipline, of travel and adventure. Father is the one who teaches the child, who shows him the road into the world*” (emphasis mine).

The statement above points to the significant effect that a dedicated full-time father can have on his children. It draws a parallel to the representation of “cat dads” in the TV drama series *A Little Reunion*, portraying fathers as their children’s “buddies” who engage in physical activities as their unique approach to parenting. While it is progressive to recognise the crucial role of fathers in their children’s formative years, this discourse builds on gendered stereotypes where men are expected to be adventurous, creative, independent, and even aggressive, as admirable qualities that should be passed on to their children. It also implies that women are inherently more protective and nurturing than their male counterparts.

Quoting from a chapter about fatherly love written by Erich Fromm in the mid-twentieth century, the article places fathers on a pedestal, implying a modified version of the common childcare pattern in traditional China – *yan fu ci mu* (a stern father and a compassionate mother 严父慈母). The implication of this term is that mothers were responsible for nurturing the child by performing daily caregiving tasks, while fathers were associated with more important tasks in the child’s moral, behavioural, and intellectual development. The main differences in this discourse lie in men’s increased involvement in daily childcare and a reduction in sternness, as they are encouraged to engage in outdoor activities and befriend their children. However, this attempt to differentiate SAHFs’ caregiving activities from maternal practices by highlighting the assumed qualities and characteristics that men are expected to have perpetuates traditional notions of masculinity. It overlooks the fluidity and multiplicity of masculinities and femininities and disregards the fact that knowledge required to teach children is possessed by well-educated parents, irrespective of gender. Moreover,

this discourse further resonates with the proposal raised in the 2021 Two Sessions which sought to make boys more “manly”.⁸

Several other social media articles similarly promote the importance of SAHFs’ role as a man in their children’s lives by highlighting supposed innate gender qualities. For instance, one article (Foki, 2020) asserts that “fathers have a sense of purpose in educating the children; when it comes to helping them form good habits, they are more likely to teach them to become more independent, decisive, brave and adventurous.” Thus, this discourse sustains and reinforces binary gender roles, legitimising the SAHF role only based on men’s assumed qualities, while marginalising men who may not possess these expected qualities and undervaluing the significance of their female counterparts in the children’s lives.

5.5 Summary

The digital world has created new possibilities for gender performance and has the potential to challenge people’s perceptions and behaviours in the real world. The image of SAHFs is rapidly being represented and circulated through online conversations, articles, and forums, in ways that suggest both radical shifts and continuities in traditional gender roles and values. This chapter has examined three key themes about SAHFs depicted on social media, namely, the class specificity and the centrality of work to men’s masculinity, the emergence of “working-from-home SAHFs”, and growing attention to child development.

The media materials show an overlap with the portrayal of SAHFs in the analysed TV dramas from the previous chapter, including class specificity and the importance of work. However, I do not take these materials as in any way “representative” of the “realities” of SAHFs, given that “more attention needs to be given to ‘minor practices’ which escape the dominant discursive trends” (Rabinow, 1996, p. 7), especially when the gap between media representation and people’s everyday lived experience is often large in China (Zhang, 2007, p. 237). Therefore, the analysis of textual sources in this chapter serves to demonstrate how language reflects and reproduces ideologies about SAHFs and their connections to evolving concepts of masculinities and Chinese family life. In the next chapter, the focus shifts to the

⁸ China’s education ministry notice stirred controversy by suggesting young Chinese men had become too “feminine”, urging schools to revamp physical education and enhance teacher recruitment. It recommended bringing in retired athletes and sports enthusiasts while emphasising the development of sports like football to nurture students’ masculinity (Allen, 2021).

self-representations of SAHFs and their multiple identities emerging from our conversations during interviews.

Chapter 6: Constructing SAHF Masculinity: Paid Work vs. Unpaid Care Work

In this chapter, I investigate how men reflect on their decision to become a SAHF and how they choose to present themselves to others. The goal is to gain insights into how these men perceive and position their SAHF identity within their multiple identities as a man, a father, and a husband. The process of identity formation for SAHFs emerges as a recurring theme in subsequent chapters, as it consistently arose in conversations with my interviewees regarding their experiences as SAHFs in various aspects, including their emotional well-being and parenting practices. However, this chapter specifically focuses on how assuming the role of a SAHF affects men's perceptions of paid work in relation to unpaid care work and their relationships with their spouses. Drawing on in-depth interviews with SAHFs, this chapter sheds light on how these men articulate their experiences as SAHFs in their own words, highlighting both similarities and differences with the portrayals of SAHFs found in previous chapters on TV dramas and social media.

Studies have shown how the workplace is a site for the construction of hegemonic masculinity (Morgan, 1992; Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Connell, 1995) and that the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity underpins the social categorisation of certain types of work as more masculine than others (Carrigan *et. al.*, 1985). 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, signalling the emergence of a more emotionally engaged form of familial masculinity. However, while this model may be evolving, its integration into the everyday lives of SAHFs is not necessarily seamless, and these “new men” do not represent a singular type of masculinity. I argue that SAHFs actively reconstruct their sense of masculinity throughout different stages of childrearing, rather than simply embodying either hegemonic or familial masculinity. My research findings highlight how men make sense of their SAHF identity in both online and offline contexts, and what contributes to levels of satisfaction for different individuals when assuming the role. To lay the groundwork for the analysis, I begin the discussion by introducing the theoretical framework employed in this chapter – Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory of self-presentation and its subsequent developments.

6.1 Modifying Goffman's dramaturgical perspective on identity

I employ a modified version of Erving Goffman's self-presentation theory, with reference to Anthony Giddens's (2009) critique, as the theoretical framework for all my interview data-informed chapters. In this specific chapter, I use this framework to examine how my interviewees perceive and present themselves. I then extend and reformulate theories on SAHF masculinity that have originated from existing studies conducted in North America, Western European countries, and Hong Kong. By exploring the similarities and variations that have surfaced from my interview data, I aim to contribute new insights to the understanding of SAHF masculinity.

In his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), Goffman conceptualised life as a stage, where individuals continuously engage in performances to present themselves in a favourable light on the "front stage", while keeping their hidden identities concealed on the "back stage" when they are not in the presence of others. Goffman (1963) further expanded on the selective nature of self-presentation in his work on managing stigma, noting that individuals often construct public images by selectively emphasising certain facts about themselves, which are then inflated and sensationalised, ultimately forming the basis of how they are perceived by others. Drawing from Goffman's (1956, 1963) idea, I argue that SAHFs also engage in selective self-presentation, particularly when introducing themselves, as they choose whether to emphasise their roles as caregivers and homemakers or their work-related roles. I posit that identity, at its core, serves as a tool for SAHFs to present themselves and potentially transform themselves into images that align with the expectations of their social, cultural, and work contexts. In other words, SAHFs may adopt different practices and subscribe to contradictory discourses in various contexts to align their homemaker and caregiver roles with societal norms of "what it means to be a man".

While Goffman's dramaturgical perspective holds relevance in explaining online participation, its binary framework of "front stage" and "back stage" encounters challenges and complexities when applied to the diverse and multifaceted identities presented on social media. The nature of online practices on social media platforms is varied, encompassing anonymous or pseudonymous users, as well as individuals with public or private accounts. This challenges the notion of a fixed "front/back stage" dichotomy. One key argument in existing studies (Hogan, 2010; Bullingham & Vaconcelos, 2013; Kerrigan & Hart, 2016) is

that social media functions as a “front stage” for many online users, where individuals consciously choose to project specific identities. This can involve either recreating their offline self with an emphasis on certain aspects or adopting a new persona that may deviate from their offline identity. While this argument applies to some of the interviewees in my research, such as dad vloggers and bloggers, my findings suggest that social media can also serve as a “back stage” in certain circumstances. This is particularly true for anonymous or pseudonymous users who seek to connect with aspects of themselves and like-minded individuals, which they may not necessarily reveal offline. However, this does not imply that the offline realm is automatically their “front stage”, where they consistently present a socially perceived favourable persona. As Anthony Giddens (2009) points out, the context of interaction determines the dynamics of self-presentation. This point is further illustrated in the following section.

Giddens’s critique of the lack of systematic discussions regarding the context of interaction in Goffman’s work is highly pertinent to my research on SAHFs. Through conducting interviews with the same individuals on two occasions within a year, I gained first-hand insights that challenge the simplistic notion of “front stage” and “back stage” personas as mere impression management. Instead, I observed that individuals present different aspects of themselves in different contexts, to different people, and at different times. For example, during my interviews, each interviewee exhibited unique mannerisms and shared information with me as a researcher they had met twice. These interactions may differ from the conversations they had with other interviewers who possessed different professional backgrounds and interview objectives. This suggests that individuals do not simply perform in front of others while revealing their authentic self only in private. Rather, I argue that individuals possess multiple intertwined layers of identities that are selectively revealed and concealed based on the specific context of interaction.

Furthermore, Giddens (2009) and other social scientists have pointed out the need for a greater emphasis on the resistance and reflexivity within Goffman’s work.⁹ Giddens (2009) specifically highlights the potential for change in individuals’ action and the importance of reflexivity as a learning process. He emphasises that all social actors have the capacity to reflect upon and alter the conditions of their actions. In the case of SAHFs, my research

⁹ See the diversity of critical appraisals offered in Fine, Manning, and Smith (2000).

findings align with Giddens's perspective. While some of my interviewees conformed to gendered norms and societal expectations when presenting themselves to me, another group actively challenged social norms by adopting the SAHF label both online and offline, and taking pride in their role as primary caregivers. Despite being aware of the social stigma associated with being a SAHF, these men chose to embrace this marginalised identity, which contrasts with Goffman's notion that individuals primarily present their "front stage" persona to conform to social expectations and gender norms. For this group of men, shifting their focus from work to family and embracing their SAHF identity indicates a conscious decision to challenge traditional roles and a higher level of reflexivity.

6.2 Two groups of SAHFs

In this chapter, I categorise my interviewees into two main groups based on their attitudes toward their SAHF identity. The first group of men framed their part-time or freelance career as their primary identity, while the second group prioritised their SAHF identity. However, it is worth noting that both groups identified themselves as SAHFs online. The discrepancy between their self-representations on social media and the identities they presented during interviews with me primarily existed within the first group.

I argue that the inconsistency in self-presentation among the first group of men is rooted in their perception of what they *should* do and what they *actually* do as a man across different situations. While these men felt comfortable presenting themselves as SAHFs publicly online, possibly due to the anonymity of the internet or the fact that their online interactions were with individuals outside of their daily offline social circles, their narratives during interviews revealed a strong conceptual link between paid work and their perception of "being a man". During the interviews, these men emphasised their part-time careers as the only or primary identity that they wanted others to recognise in everyday life outside of social media. This pattern is in line with one of the strategies that men used to manage the identity mismatch presented in Ben Lupton's (2000) research on men who do "women's work". In order to manage the perceived mismatch between their SAHF identity and societal expectations, this group of men either presented themselves as temporarily taking a break from work to care for their children or as being stuck in the role of SAHF due to circumstances such as health issues or unemployment. By adopting these strategies, these

men attempted to reconcile the perceived tension between their SAHF identity and conventional notions of masculinity associated with work.

The second group, in contrast, actively challenged and fought against the social stigma surrounding SAHFs. They embraced the SAHF identity both online (including during interviews with me) and offline, even if becoming a SAHF was not their initial choice. What was consistent among this group was their emphasis on the satisfaction they derived from treating caregiving and homemaking as meaningful and valuable work. They view their role as a SAHF not as a compromise or a temporary situation but as a genuine and fulfilling job. Furthermore, these men highlighted the importance of supportive spousal relationships as a motivating factor in fully embracing their SAHF identity. The presence of a supportive partner encouraged them to prioritise their family and shift their focus from work to caregiving and homemaking. The shift in priorities and the subsequent reconstruction of their sense of self as SAHFs (and as attentive husbands) demonstrated their capacity for self-reflection. This observation aligns with Giddens's (2009) perspective on individuals' ability to change their actions upon reflection. It also resonates with Mario Liong's (2017b) theory of men's reflexivity in crisis and the shifting behaviour of fathers in the analysed TV drama series *Super Dad & Super kids*.

By examining the interplay between men's perceptions of unpaid care work and paid work, I have gained a nuanced understanding of how subjective factors shaped the ways in which they perceived and presented themselves as SAHFs. This research has uncovered particular aspects that are often overlooked in existing academic literature, TV dramas, and social media discourses, which largely categorise SAHFs as either "by choice" or "by circumstances/necessity". These particularities include a sense of illegitimacy or embarrassment associated with SAHF identity for some individuals, even when being a SAHF was a voluntary choice (as observed in the first group), and an embracing of the SAHF identity for others, even though they sometimes initially enacted the role out of necessity (as seen in the second group). This chapter therefore contributes to academic knowledge on how masculine ideals and senses of "self" are always in flux, in accordance with an individual's subjective experiences and reflection.

6.3 A first group of SAHFs: Paid work over unpaid care work

This section explores the narratives of those men who only presented themselves as SAHF online while feeling uncertain or concealing their SAHF identity in face-to-face contexts due to feelings of illegitimacy. As mentioned in the last section, this group of men either highlighted their long-term career ambitions or entertained the possibility of returning to the workplace. Their attachment to paid work symbolised their conflicted feelings and uncertainty surrounding their SAHF identity. Initially, I had not included the question “how do you define SAHFs?” in my interviews. Although I was aware that perception and presentation of the self are not always aligned, I had not considered this to be the case for my interviewees, as they had already presented themselves as SAHFs on social media platforms.¹⁰ Presumably, they must feel a sense of affinity to the SAHF identity since they labelled themselves as SAHFs online. However, two of my interviewees’ uncertain attitudes about positioning themselves as SAHFs at the beginning of our conversations pointed me towards inconsistencies between perception and presentation of the self in different contexts.

The first interviewee was John, a SAHF based in Shijiazhuang whom I discovered in a forum called househusband (*jiating zhufu* 家庭煮夫) on Douban. Prior to our conversation, John had agreed to be interviewed as a SAHF. However, when I began the interview by asking the ice-breaking question, “When did you start assuming the role of a SAHF and how old was your son?”, he responded hesitantly:

Since 2014...How old...? I need a second to recall...Wait, I am sorry to interrupt you...I am just 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 identified himself as a SAHF and shared his fathering experience with other members in an online forum exclusively for SAHFs, and yet had ambivalent feelings about his SAHF identity when talking to me. The discrepancy between his online chat-based identity and public persona presented to me in the above statement appears to constitute his defence mechanism to being recognised as a SAHF in a face-to-face context. I subsequently asked, “I

¹⁰ I established contacts with my interviewees through keywords search on different Chinese social media platforms (e.g., Zhihu, Douban, and Weibo). Keywords include full-time father (*quanzhi baba/naiba*), and househusband (*jiating funan/zhufu*). See more in chapter three on the research methodology.

noticed that you label yourself as a SAHF and are willing to share your life with others online, so does it mean that you would also introduce yourself as a SAHF to people offline?” “No”, came the response, “I would introduce my job aspect, as I work part-time from home,” then after a pause, “but I am very introverted, so I do not socialise much anyway; now that I need to take care of my son, I rarely go out to meet new people.” Similarly, Colin, a Hangzhou-based SAHF, told me that he would rather tell people that he is starting up his own business than reveal his SAHF identity. Curious about this inconsistency, I asked Colin the same question I asked John, “how come you are willing to label yourself as a full-time father online but not offline?” Colin answered, “Because others might not be interested in my identity as a SAHF, and it might be irrelevant to bring it up. I see it as a family role, while my job is my public identity. Unless I am attending an event that is exclusively for SAHFs, then I would introduce myself as a SAHF.” It appears that online social media space served as a “safe private outlet” for both John and Colin to share their identity as SAHF and relevant stories with other online users who share common experiences in child-rearing but are not part of their offline social circles. Their offline circles, where presenting their “favourable” self mattered more, prioritised alignment with the dominant conception of masculinity associated with paid work and social status. Consequently, they preferred to present only their (part-time) work identity in the presence of people who did not share the SAHF identity. Being a SAHF, on the other hand, was considered as a role that only belonged to the domestic sphere, and as irrelevant or even a potential source of embarrassment in the public sphere.

The behaviour of John and Colin can be partially understood within the framework of Goffman’s (1956, 1963) theory on the selective nature of self-presentations. According to Goffman (1963), individuals choose which aspects of themselves to present in different situations, emphasising certain attributes while withholding others. In the case of John and Colin, their part-time careers served as the “newsworthy appearance” that they highlighted, while they concealed their SAHF identity due to potential judgement from those who did not share the same role. However, highlighting their SAHF identity online is also a way of “editing” the self, this does not automatically mean that they chose to present their “favourable self” – the “front stage” persona – on social media. Rather, their choice to highlight their SAHF identity online may have been influenced by their comfort in confiding in online forums and groups or seeking support from individuals who have similar interests and experiences in childrearing, as noted by other interviewees. This suggested that context

plays a significant role for this group of SAHFs, and they were selective and strategic about the spaces in which they revealed aspects of their identity. Therefore, the decision to unveil their SAHF identity in certain circumstances, such as online platforms where they could choose to be anonymous or pseudonymous, did not necessarily align with Goffman's (1956) concept of "front stage" or "back stage" behaviour. Instead, it highlighted the multidimensional and interwoven nature of identities, which could be revealed differently depending on the context of interaction rather than solely based on the audience present.

The illegitimacy of doing care work was also evident in my interview with La Rou, a Chengdu-based SAHF who recently started his own business in family education for other parents. During our conversation, he shared that prior to starting his business, he would downplay his role as a caregiver when interacting with others face-to-face, by saying "I am not doing anything in particular". Now, however, he would simply introduce his part-time career in family education as his primary identity, omitting his role as a SAHF. 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 am interested in education because my parents and my wife are all teachers. And I did not plan to *simply stay at home and do nothing* (*zai jiali dun* 在家里混) when I quit my job. So, I am not sure if I fit in your research category. I always believe that you can be jobless, but you cannot be completely *out of touch* with society. What I am saying is that *you cannot assume the role of a SAHF in the very traditional sense that your partner provides money, and you muddle along* (*xia hun* 瞎混) *and do nothing in the house* (emphasis mine).

La Rou's narrative highlighted the notion that unpaid childcare was often perceived as lacking legitimacy or value. He initially described it as "simply stay at home and do nothing", even though he later acknowledged in our interview that "taking care of children is a difficult task". This view revealed an acute sense of both superiority *and* inferiority, as it undervalued care work while highlighting careers relating to the public sphere as the only type of meaningful work, otherwise people would be "out of touch with society". La Rou's employment-based identity suggested that his subjectivity was understood and shaped within a framework of hegemonic and dominant hierarchies of masculinity where paid work was

central (see Connell, 2005; Miller, 2011). I began to wonder whether it was the provider role that La Rou was trying to assume, or the role of a career man who is publicly visible and “useful”. I therefore 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.” It appears that his focus was more on affiliating with the notion of being a provider in a broader societal context rather than solely providing for his own family’s financial needs.

The fact that La Rou created an environment to allow himself to frequently interact with other parents who potentially shared similar caregiving experiences made me wonder whether this experience has made it possible for him to build rapport with other SAHFs and reshape his initial thoughts. After all, individuals tend to reveal different aspects of themselves depending on the context of interaction, as suggested by Giddens (2009), and this was something mentioned by other interviewees. Additionally, masculine ideals are not fixed but subject to change based on individuals’ subjective experiences (Newman, 1988; Lane, 2009; Berderman, 1995). I therefore asked La Rou, “have you built connections with other SAHFs through the early education workshop you hosted?” His response, on the contrary, suggested that the model of masculinity associated with the provider identity continued to strongly influence how he saw himself, how he expected to be seen by others, and how he saw other men. In particular, La Rou’s perception that “men have to work” manifested itself in the way he viewed other SAHFs, as he believed that being fully involved in children’s education constituted their attempt to develop it as a career:

Yes, I have; as a matter of fact, I have met a lot of SAHFs who are also trying to build their career in children’s education. I feel that men, including myself, do not have *the pure intention as most mothers* do when it comes to childcare and education. We send our children to early childhood education because some part of us wants our children to learn and improve but being fully involved in our children’s education might mean that we want to start a career in it since we become an expert in the field. That is probably the primary reason for men to do that. I have not thought this through [nervous laugh] ...but I want to say that it is not that simple for men. We want to be part of children’s education, because we recognise *huge commercial potential* in this field. *I even wonder whether being fully involved in their children’s education is just*

an excuse for men. I mean, after all, traditionally speaking, men should not be jobless (emphasis mine).

Being a male primary caregiver without maintaining connections with the public sphere appeared incomprehensible to La Rou. In his view, men engaging in childcare were attempting to recreate the provider identity and adapt to the “new normal” of being a SAHF. His belief that other SAHFs were attracted to children’s education due to its “huge commercial potential” contradicted his earlier statement about limited potential profitability in the same field. Moreover, his assumption that most women have “the pure intention” when it came to children reflected a patriarchal and sexist belief that women primarily grounded their identity and self-worth from the domestic sphere, and that unemployment did not provoke similar anxieties for women who were previously employed full-time.

This point, however, did not apply to other interviewees. For example, SAHF William from Shanghai and former SAHF Bob from Foshan, shared that their wives were more career-driven than themselves, and that this was one of the main reasons why they chose to take up more domestic duties. This phenomenon was in line with Carrie Lane’s (2009) research on how changing models of career and gender are reshaping the experience of unemployment for men and women in the US. In her research, Lane suggests that unemployment is more discomfiting for middle-class married women than married men. Having to overcome more obstacles and inequalities at the workplace than their male counterparts, the stakes are higher for women to be professionally successful. Any career advancement would potentially have greater significance for women, who would have to work harder to recover from unemployment or demotion. Similarly, a recent study (Hou, *et. al.*, 2020) on gender differences in depression and anxiety during the Covid outbreak in China found that unemployment caused more stress and anxiety for females compared to their male counterparts, who displayed greater resilience to stress. Therefore, while La Rou’s perception may have been partially reinforced by his experience of interacting with other parents, the binary conceptions of fatherhood and motherhood that emerged from his narrative may overly generalise subjective experiences of different individuals, overlooking possibilities beyond gendered divisions of labour for both men and women.

Another interviewee, Chen, a SAHF based in Guangzhou, offered a different perspective on his decision to sell baby products through blogging about his daily life as a SAHF. While coinciding with La Rou's view on seeing the commercial potential in childcare-related business, Chen put more emphasis on three interconnected factors that influenced his choice. First, he highlighted the advantage of having time flexibility as a SAHF, which allowed him to dedicate time to his blogging activities and business endeavours. Second, he mentioned the sense of achievement he derived from sharing his caregiving activities with other first-time parents and providing them with valuable insights and advice through his blog. Finally, Chen acknowledged that applying for traditional jobs was no longer a feasible option for him after taking a two-year career break, considering the competitiveness of the job market. As he elaborated:

I just wanted to give it [being a dad blogger] a try for several reasons. Firstly, my daughter has not gone to the kindergarten yet, so if I get a full-time job, it is not convenient for me to take care of her. A freelance job, on the other hand, can be organised according to the rhythms of my daily life as a primary caregiver for my daughter. Secondly, I am good at taking care of her and I have really enjoyed these two years [of being a SAHF], so I would love to share my childcare stories and experience online to help many other first-time parents. Finally, I tried to apply for jobs last year, and many HRs directly declined to interview me after knowing that I have not worked for 2 years. So, for me, it does not make a big difference if I get back to the market now or a year later, and it might be better for me to make something out of my two-year experience as a SAHF. I see a lot of stay-at-home mothers have made it as a career for themselves. I'd love that if it turns out to be a career for me too, as I would imagine myself enjoying it more than a nine-to-five job. If it does not pan out, I will try looking for a job when I become less busy with taking care of my daughter – no rush and no stress.

The Hangzhou-based SAHF Colin shared this relatively relaxed attitude towards developing a new passion in childcare-related business while assuming the role of a SAHF, after having reached a bottleneck (*ping jing* 瓶颈) in his previous career:

I was already the product director in my previous job. I basically reached my bottleneck in my industry – it would have been difficult for me to get promoted, especially considering my age. So, I intend to try something new and being a SAHF might have

opened a new door for me. Who knows? I plan to start blogging about my daily life as a SAHF on Weibo and see how it goes this year. I am not in a rush to get back out there anyway, so if this turns out to be something great, then I do not have to go out to work for someone else.

In this group of men, the significance of care work was presented as less socially recognised compared to paid work, as unpaid care work undermined their sense of masculinity (also see Hanlon & Lynch, 2011; Hanlon, 2012). However, it is important to acknowledge a distinction within this group of interviewees. John and Colin, for instance, ultimately prioritised caregiving and expressed feelings of illegitimacy and ambivalence about their SAHF identity, which only arose in face-to-face interactions. On the other hand, La Rou perceived paid work as central to every man's identity and self-worth, while considering care work as a natural role for women, despite himself assuming the socially marginalised position of a primary caregiver. The disconnect between La Rou's association of masculinity with career and his role as a SAHF led me to further explore how he navigated and made sense of his identity prior to starting his side business.

6.3.1 SAHF as a temporary role

“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 as long as the role was temporary, I did not care that much.” His framing of stay-at-home fatherhood as a sacrifice was in line with Liong's (2017a) research on SAHFs in Hong Kong, where media representations of SAHFs tend to reinforce conventional notions of masculinity. According to Liong, by glorifying men who give up their career to perform childcare, the media implies that men's careers and economic power are superior to the childcare and housework that are conventionally associated with women. Moreover, from La Rou's narrative, it became evident that the *temporary* nature of the SAHF role allowed him 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.

Similarly, former SAHF Bob made it clear that being a SAHF had never been his long-term lifestyle choice. In his words, “I viewed those three years of being a SAHF as a transitional period of my life – I did not intend to assume the role of a SAHF like a stay-at-home mom.”

The attempt to differentiate his identity as a SAHF from SAHMs, by stressing the temporary nature of the role, once again evinced a sense of superiority, in that being a primary caregiver was expected to be a temporary choice for men, but not for women. This statement therefore naturalised the gendered division of labour (i.e., *nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei* 男主外, 女主内). I pointedly asked if he could clarify the difference between being a SAHF and a SAHM. Bob seemed to struggle to offer a further explanation for his previous statement. After a pause, he responded:

Being a SAHM is more difficult and tiring (*xin ku* 辛苦), because they not only need to breast feed the baby, but also might go through postpartum recovery which often comes with depression that men cannot imagine. I decided to become the primary caregiver for our son so that my wife could have more energy to deal with the physical and mental stress after giving birth. My wife did not ask me to quit my job and do it, I suggested it and she also thought it was a good idea for our family.

A few other interviewees, such as Sherlock, a Beijing SAHF based in Manchester, UK, and Qi, a Qingdao-based SAHF and blogger, also shared similar experiences. They mentioned that their decision to become primary caregivers was driven by their consideration for their partners' well-being after childbirth. These men voluntarily put their career on hold and voluntarily assumed the role in order to empathise with and share the physical and psychological burdens faced by their partners. This narrative indicated an increase in emotional support provided by caring and attentive men during the transition to parenthood. Indeed, research suggests that the presence of such emotional support from husbands is crucial for wives when coping with drastic changes in life associated with the postpartum period (Zhu & Zhang, 2016).

Another interesting point that I discovered from my conversation with Bob is that he did not see quitting his previous job as a sacrifice for his child in the way La Rou had suggested, even though they both emphasised the temporality of being a SAHF. Instead, Bob highlighted the rewarding moments of being with his son for those two years:

I do not think I made any sacrifices. You gain some, you lose some – working men would not experience the daily joy of being with their children. I think those two years were fun to me. Working men might gain a sense of achievement from their job; although taking care of my son does not give me the same feeling, I was happy to care

for him and be with him 24/7, and that's what counts. Even if I am working full-time now, I am still very much involved with my children. I do respect men who make a career out of their life as a SAHF. If they are happy, then why not? But I can't do that, I need to have something going on for myself apart from caring for my son.

While Bob's idea of labour division was profoundly gendered, he viewed his decision and practices of being a SAHF as legitimate, given his partner's well-being, and that he wanted to be more involved in his child's growth. This suggested a gradual shift from a traditionally distant father and husband figure to a more emotionally engaged and nurturing model for men who subscribe to a more egalitarian, power-sharing, companionate spousal relationship. The temporary nature of the role and the ability to return to the workplace after a 2-year career break seemed to offer reassurance to Bob that he could fully enjoy and invest in caregiving and other domestic duties without having to worry about the loss of his masculine self-worth in relation to paid work. This pattern coincides with Doucet and Merla's (2007) work on Canadian and Belgium stay-at-home fathers, in which their participants engaged in hybrid forms of masculinities, sharing, rejecting, and transforming traditional key components of hegemonic masculinity.

6.3.2 SAHF as the last option when there are no better alternatives

Similar to the SAHFs analysed above, Liu, a 50-year-old SAHF from Beijing, only revealed his identity as a SAHF primarily online. However, there was a significant difference in Liu's case – his role as a SAHF was not temporary but rather a long-term arrangement. Liu reluctantly took on the role of a SAHF due to a health crisis, and despite having a successful 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 interesting to note the nuances between Liu's self-representation in our interview and his portrayal on social media, as depicted in his interview with *Paiké* (see chapter five). In the *Paiké* article (Zhang *et. al.*, 2019), Liu is depicted as a man who willingly gave up his career to care for his daughter in consideration of the potential issues brought by skipped-generational childcare. While Liu stressed care for his daughter's well-

being and education in the conversation with me, his following narrative at the start of our interview painted a different picture, creating a contrasting impression compared to his “front stage” social media representation:

Me: What was the main reason for you to decide to assume the role of a SAHF?

Liu: At the beginning, I retreated to the family because of my health issues. I think the term “full-time fathers/SAHFs” only appeared in the last couple of years, but I had been staying at home way before that, 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. *For me, being called SAHF is not a compliment, I think it represents my helplessness (wu nai 无奈).*

Me: I remember that you told me you were not happy with your previous start-up business, but now you are investing in the stock market while taking care of the family. So, aren't you satisfied with your current life as a SAHF? You can care for the family, while doing the stuff you enjoy?

Liu: I am not satisfied, but you can say I accepted this lifestyle. I do not enjoy it, and I did not pursue this role. You can say that I was forced by life circumstances to take up the role of a SAHF. *If I were younger, I would definitely go out there and build a great career (zai waimian chuangdang 在外面闯荡).* 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. If I wanted to find a job, I would need to learn something new for four to five years (emphasis mine)

Rather than presenting himself as a caring father who voluntarily quit his job to be fully involved in caregiving activities, as depicted in the *Paiké* article, Liu indicated that he felt permanently stuck in the role of a SAHF and expressed frustration at himself for being in a situation that he could not escape due to his age. I then asked if he talked about this in his interview with *Paiké*. “Only briefly”, he responded, “I do not think that I mentioned too much about my state of mind, but rather focused on how I went on with my day as a homemaker and a carer for my daughter, which were all true. After all, they were going to publish it on *Paiké* which has many readers, so I did not feel comfortable to go on with these

details with them. Plus, the interview was rather short.” Liu’s response coincides with Goffman’s theory (1959, 1963) on the selective nature of one’s self-representation at the “front stage”, as he withheld the information for fear of judgement by whoever read the story on his life as a SAHF on *Paiké*. As a result, along with a few other SAHFs’ stories, Liu is portrayed by the writer of *Paiké* as a role model, i.e., a loving husband and attentive father who is secure in his SAHF identity and happy with his family life. Conversing with me was, of course, yet another “front stage” for Liu but he chose to reveal more information about himself, again pointed to Giddens’ critique as to Goffman’s lack of consideration for the context of interaction. Indeed, even though both my research and Liu’s previous interview with *Paiké* were conducted online, the information that he chose to reveal was different. Elements, such as the length of interview, and the anonymous nature of my research, made Liu feel more comfortable in revealing another layer of his sense of self.

Given Liu’s notions on how men *should* behave, and the importance attached to differing forms of labour/work emerging from his earlier statement, it did not come as a surprise that Liu told me of his unwillingness to mention his SAHF status when introducing himself to others:

I would definitely not say I am a full-time father or a househusband, right? ‘What do you do?’ ‘I am a full-time dad’, that would be so emasculating and embarrassing and would never happen. If I met new friends, I would just say that I do not have much to do at home, just take care of the kid. Or I would say that I am interested in investment and the stock market.”

During the interview, Liu’s circumstances and narrative reminded me of Lao Chang, a character from the analysed TV drama series *Marriage Battle*. Lao Chang, similar in age to Liu, temporarily becomes a househusband due to a health crisis and embodies explicit and aggressive notions of gender. Both Liu and Lao Chang experienced feelings of insecurity and illegitimacy without their breadwinner identities. However, the main difference between Liu and the fictional character Lao Chang is that Lao Chang eventually returns to the workplace and undergoes self-reflection during his time at home leading to an improved relationship with his wife.

Following my train of thought on spousal relationships portrayed in *Marriage Battle* and the other TV dramas on SAHFs, I asked if Liu's partner was happy that he was more attentive to the family after assuming the role. His response pointed to a different direction compared to the couple dynamic depicted in TV dramas:

No. She wants me to go out and look for jobs as she also does not want me to stay at home. But if I go out and try to look for a job, no one is going to do domestic chores, and hiring a cleaner is pricey. So, as I told you earlier, there is no other way for me but to stay at home, but I am not happy about this lifestyle.

Liu's statement provided an interesting contrast between the "idealistic" image portrayed in all three analysed dramas (i.e., the fictional characters have the best of both worlds – family and career) and the pragmatic realities of returning to the workplace after a career break. Furthermore, a great number of studies on SAHFs in the Global North indicate how spousal support plays a decisive role in men's involvement in childcare, influencing their decision to become a SAHF and their subsequent experiences (e.g., Haas, 1992; Merla, 2008; Fischer & Anderson, 2012). As Merla (2008) concludes from her research on Belgium SAHFs, women's better earning potential and/or career prospects, their willingness to work and their insistence on more fathers' childcare involvement serve as strong incentives for their partners to take up the SAHF role. Liu's case aligns with this theory – while his partner's earning ability and willingness to assume the provider role allowed him to fully invest in the domestic duties, the lack of spousal support for his SAHF role discouraged him from valuing his own contribution to the family and led him to constantly feel illegitimate in his role. This suggests that some women have also internalised gender roles and labour divisions associated with hegemonic masculinity, contributing to the devaluation of men's affective labour. Moreover, this also highlights how spousal expectations and perceptions shape men's sense of self and influence how they present themselves in different contexts.

When asking Liu about whether he agreed on the social media article about SAHFs on *New Weekly* (Li, 2019) entitled "if you do not have family properties worth millions, you cannot be a househusband", Liu indicated that he thought the statement was accurate, saying that "without economic foundation, it is impossible to be a SAHF. Even if your wife can support you fully, how is she going to introduce you to others? Plus, I do not have the face (*lian mian* 脸面) to ask for money monthly from my wife as a man." Liu subsequently made another

point about family dynamics in relation to the importance of men's earning power. As he demonstrated, men's family status cannot be guaranteed if they are financially dependent on their partner, as they would have less right to speak on matters (*huayu quan* 话语权). This viewpoint differs from the experiences shared by other SAHFs, who highlighted their authority and decision-making power in matters of childcare and domestic duties as primary caregivers. I therefore subsequently asked, "Wouldn't you have more say when it comes to childcare given that you are the one who spends most time with your daughter?" Liu responded:

No, I understand that is what is supposed to be in theory, but based on my experience as a SAHF in these six years, my wife used to quantify our contributions for the family in economic terms when we had arguments. It was difficult to convince her of my duties at home without making any financial contributions, such as doing laundry or cleaning the floor – they are worth almost nothing. Now that I have my side income in the stock market, meaning that I am at least financially independent, then I can speak up more confidently.

Liu's statement confirms the pervasive social stigma relating to certain professions, as household chores were considered as low-skilled jobs which are poorly remunerated and often undertaken by migrant labour (if they were to engage a helper or nanny) (Fu, *et.al.*, 2018). Furthermore, Liu informed me that he was not as involved in childcare as his wife until his daughter turned seven – the time he started to assume the role of SAHF. This sets him apart from other interviewees who claimed to have more say in childcare issues. As both Ben and Ervin (from the second group) told me in our conversations, it is important for them to be fully involved in childcare since the day their children were born, in order to understand how to raise and bond with them, especially in the early days when a higher intensity of childcare involvement is required from parents. Therefore, the combination of prioritising financial contribution and potential lack of early involvement in the early stages of his daughter's childhood may have undermined Liu's perceived authority in childcare, both from his own perspective and that of his wife.

6.4 A second group of SAHFs: Unpaid care work over paid work

Contrary to the first group of men analysed in the last section, the second group of men embraced and presented their identity as SAHF both online and offline, offering a counterargument to Goffman's dramaturgical theory of front/back stage behaviour. Rather than stressing their career plan or feeling frustrated at not being able to return to the workplace, this second group felt secure in their contributions to the family as homemakers and primary caregivers. This group of men showed higher levels of reflexivity as to their sense of self and priorities in life when faced with the transition from career man to family man. They also placed more emphasis on how crucial supportive spousal relationships are in helping them embrace their SAHF identities and enjoy their homemaking experiences.

6.4.1 Claiming the SAHF label

In this subsection, I explore how this group of men actively resisted hegemonic masculinity in their narratives, constructing the "self" in a way which highlights the distinction between individual self-value and societal expectation.

"I am a full-time father, and this is my social identity", is how Beijing-based SAHF Terry answered my question – "how do you introduce yourself to others offline?". Terry elaborated, "If someone asked a SAHM what she is doing, she would say taking care of the children. So likewise, if someone asked me this question, I would say the same. I have also been writing articles on my WeChat Subscription account to share my childcare experience online, but that is not the priority of my daily life. I consider being a SAHF as an idiosyncrasy of mine, and I will just introduce myself as that." "Wouldn't you want to mention your part-time writing job as well?", I asked, to understand what made Terry different from the first group of SAHFs. In his response, Terry continued to compare himself with SAHMs:

A lot of SAHMs use their spare time to earn money too. For example, I know a lot of them who write really well, and they would do that at nights when their children have gone to sleep. I have also met some who sell fruit and vegetables, baby diapers and all kinds of stuff online. But as I said, these are their part-time hustles. It's the same with me - taking care of my son is my main responsibility and what I do most of the day - I would just introduce myself as a SAHF. If they are interested in what I write, then of course I would tell them.

According to psychologist Francine Deutsch (2007), social interactions are a site of change as “the language we use shapes what our minds are drawn to” (p. 122). The “doing gender” approach was proposed by Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman’s (1987), referring to social interactions that reproduce gendered behaviour and the perception of gender difference. Building on this concept, Deutsch (2007) argues that “undoing gender” should be a phrase that refers to social interactions that reduce gender differences, to shift the focus to gender deconstruction and the possibility of achieving gender equality. Applying Deutsch’s theory to my interview with Terry, it can be observed that his language use aligns with the concept of “undoing gender”. The way that Terry articulated his role by equating himself with SAHMs and taking pride in what he did as a SAHF potentially redefines hegemonic gender relations of care work and paid work. Intrigued by whether Terry had gone through a transitional phase to shift his sense of masculinity from paid work to unpaid childcare, I subsequently asked about his previous job situation. He responded, “I was never a career-oriented man, and I was not content with my salary. Since my wife earns more than me and we need someone to take care of our son, I happily quit my job to do that for our family.” Another interviewee, a Chongqing-based SAHF named Tan, concurred with this view. As Tan stated:

My satisfaction did not come from my previous job anyway, as I am certainly not a corporate-ladder-riding guy. My wife loves her job as an interior designer and it is going well, so I decided to become a full-time father to take care of our two children. It has been working out for us, because I enjoy being with my kids while having time to do my own stuff 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 self-identity was not deeply rooted in their previous paid jobs in the public sphere. Their narratives reflected a departure from the traditional expectations associated with masculinity and demonstrate a readiness to embrace caregiving roles, highlighting the importance of personal fulfilment and family dynamics in their decision-making process.

In addition to Terry and Tan, other interviewees, such as Qi from Qingdao, Yu from Beijing, and Li from Huizhou (Guangdong), also expressed that they publicly identify themselves as a

SAHF to others in both online and offline settings, despite engaging in some paid work from home. Although they maintained a sense of identity attached to masculine ideals of paid work, as the first group of SAHFs, this attachment became different after experiences of caregiving for this group of men. As they assumed the role of SAHFs, these men adapted their career ambitions as a homemaker and primary caregiver, drawing inspiration from their lives as caring fathers and loving husbands. Both Yu and Qi suggested to me that their identity as a SAHF and a dad vlogger (for Yu) / a relationship blogger (for Qi) were inseparable, so it was difficult to mention one identity but not the other, but sometimes they would just introduce their SAHF identity for convenience. As Qi explained, “If some people such as the elderly in my neighbourhood asked what I do, I would not be bothered to say that I am a relationship blogger, because then I would have to explain what it is. I would just tell them that I do not have a job and I have been staying at home to take care of my kid.” Moreover, these “working-from-home” dads’ daily schedule appears to be in line with the image of “full-time father, part-time worker” depicted on social media in chapter five, as they all suggested that their paid work is organised according to the rhythms of their everyday life as a full-time father. As Li explained, “I work from home as a parenting coach for first-time parents, but my working schedule comes after my children - I take care of them whenever they need me.”

The sense of security in their identity as a SAHF among these men made me wonder if staying at home while working part-time was their long-term goal, given that the nature of temporality of the role provided reassurance to some SAHFs in the first group. From their narratives, however, I gathered a sense that time grounded in care allowed the development of a new sense of self in relation to paid work. As Li elaborated:

I have no desire to go back to the job market. For one thing, the Internet has made working from home so easy and commuting to and from work is just a waste of time to me. For another, being there for my two children is my priority, at least when they are still in their formative years. Working 9 to 5 prevents me from spending time with my children.

Li’s life as a full-time father and part-time worker aligns with the representation of the “digital nomad” lifestyle, as examined in chapter five, in contemporary China. Li and many other SAHFs’ transitions showed how the increase of remote job opportunities has made it

easier for them to be more involved in the family without cutting off their connection to the labour market. This phenomenon also suggests the possibility of a gradual shift in gender dynamics regarding child raising and labour division in a rapidly digitising society.

For Chen, a Guangzhou-based SAHF, his resistance to hegemonic discourse became apparent when facing pressure from other family members. As he said:

I do not care about what others think about what I do. I am a full-time father, and I said that to all my family members and relatives. But to my parents and in-laws, they think that it is awkward to say that to others. I just directly told them that ‘you tell them what I do’. Other people around me, such as my close friends, are all on board with my decision or at least very understanding, though.

When asked if he would feel better if his family members were more supportive of his SAHF role, Chen responded, “Maybe...but I don't really care because they are from a different generation and ultimately it is a decision made between my wife and me for our family – it is not their business.” Chen produced an account of himself as unembarrassed by claiming the SAHF identity and unconcerned by the disapproval of his extended family. Views from family members and relatives rarely came up in my conversations with other interviewees. Whenever it did come up, most of them, similarly to Chen’s narrative, emphasised that being a SAHF was a decision between their partner and them, while their family and in-laws did not interfere that much. “My wife and I are not living with our parents/in-laws. We only visit them once every month, which certainly avoids a lot of unnecessary interference from them”, another interviewee Tan commented.

“I genuinely believe that being a full-time father to my son is harder than having a full-time job because being a father is 24/7 without a break”, shared Ervin from Shanghai during our conversation. “I am proud of myself, especially when I see how much my son has grown in a short span of time and how I make my wife happy by doing what I do.” To make sense of his identity, Ervin constructed care not only as hard work, but also as an important and fulfilling job. He explained that he not only would he introduce himself as a SAHF to others, but he would also want his son to be proud of what he did and inherit nurturing qualities as a man in the future. Ervin recounted an instance with pride:

My son asked about my profession. I remember his primary school required a self and family introduction. I simply told him, “Your father is a full-time father.” At first, he didn't understand because everyone else in his class has a father with a full-time career. However, as he observed what I do for our family, he gradually gained a deeper understanding of this role. He once told me that he thinks it is necessary to open a school for fathers to teach men how to be good fathers. Now he believes that being a full-time father is a real profession because that's what his father is doing, and it would be okay if he also wants to be a SAHF to be more attentive to his family when he grows up.

For Ervin, being the role model through embodied practices as a SAHF legitimises SAHF as a masculine identity and resists societal expectations that link men to the breadwinning role. Striving to be a role model for his son also echoes the father's role in traditional Chinese culture, as responsible for *yang* (raise/feed 养) and *jiao* (educate/cultivate 教), with more emphasis placed on the latter (Ho, 1987). As the Three Character Classics (*San Zi Jing* 《三字经》) reads, “to feed without teaching is the father's fault”. However, Ervin's narrative also reflects the shifting meanings of masculinity in contemporary Chinese fatherhood, particularly in the context of stay-at-home fatherhood. For Ervin, the notion of *jiao* has evolved to include imparting knowledge and values related to the domestic sphere, emphasising his role as a nurturing father. Ervin's sense of identity is grounded in the sense of achievement and fulfilment derived from his role as a father, showcasing how conventional gendered assumptions and notions of masculinity require constant negotiation and reinterpretation in contemporary society. These assumptions are no longer rigidly applied as a means of constructing masculinity and fatherhood for certain men.

Ervin's case, although representative of some SAHFs, does not reflect the perspectives of all the interviewees in the second group. Zhang from Qingdao, for example, stated that he would prefer his son to find a decent job and support his family in the future, in order to align with social norms and expectations: “I am happy being a SAHF for my family, but if my son's dream is assuming the same role as me, then it would be a bit weird – I do not want him to seem ‘special’ among his peers.” Zhang's statement made me wonder if this idea was specifically attached to gender, so I asked, “If you had a daughter, would you feel the same?”

Or being a SAHM would be more acceptable than a SAHF?”. “I think it would be the same”, Zhang responded without hesitation. Therefore, the parental hope that Zhang had for his child still succumbed to the societal attitude that deems a homemaker and caregiver as less successful than a career-driven person, regardless of gender.

Similar to Ervin, Ben from Beijing also identified himself as a homemaker and primary caregiver, publicly embracing these roles and taking pride in them. Even before starting a family and having a child, Ben had established a Douban group called *jiating zhufu* (house husbands/stay-at-home male cook 家庭煮夫) where men could share their homemade cuisines and experiences as caregivers. Ben told me that he thoroughly enjoyed the experience of being a SAHF to his child. As he stated, “of course it is not always rainbows and sunshine. But I cherish every moment of being with my daughter. I wish there were more platforms for people to know the value of being a stay-at-home parent – it has been wonderful for me, and I do not regret it.”

These men’s construction of identity again highlighted the discrepancies between individual self-value and societal expectations. By actively making their unconventional role as SAHF visible and showcasing the value of what they did, they aimed to raise others’ consciousness as to possibilities that exist outside of conventional gender norms. Their ownership of the SAHF label as a form of resistance against hegemonic discourse set them apart from interviewees who were more ambivalent about their SAHF identity. Through follow-up interviews, a correlation emerged between their sense of self-worth and their domestic responsibilities, as explored in the following subsection.

6.4.2 Knowing self-worth in a supportive spousal relationship

As psychologist Toni Zimmerman (2000) puts it, “an important question in terms of marital equality and individual well-being is how stay-at-home mother or father families view their marital equality since one spouse is financially dependent on the other” (p. 339). Indeed, earning power is one main reason that triggers insecurity for the group of SAHFs examined in the first section of this chapter. As Beijing SAHF Liu from the first group informed me, childcare and household chores were not easily quantifiable for him or his spouse. I therefore probed into this perception in follow-up interviews with interviewees who identified as SAHF in public, to gain a more nuanced understanding of how the relationship between paid

work and unpaid care work shaped their sense of masculinity and affected their spousal relationship. I asked, “how do you see your contribution to the family as SAHF, compared to your working wife? And do you think that your contribution is harder to be quantified?” Interviewees’ answers were varied due to their different subjective experiences and levels of reflexivity, but two key terms repeatedly emerged, namely self-worth (*ziwo jiazhi* 自我价值) and spousal relationships (*fuqi guanxi* 夫妻关系).

“I guess some SAHFs feel devalued and powerless because their self-worth stems from their social status and income,” as Chongqing-based SAHF Tan elaborated, “but I think performing domestic duties is just as significant and challenging, and I treat childcare, parenting, and household chores as a profession.” Many other interviewees accorded with Tan’s view of the SAHF role as a profession that required dedication. In other words, their sense of accomplishment was grounded in something that they could invest themselves in rather than something they did for remuneration (Beynon, 2001). When I subsequently asked Tan, “What are the most challenging tasks on a daily basis as a SAHF?”, he pointed to parenting and education:

It is hard work when it comes to parenting and education. This is the first time for us to be a parent for two kids, so I needed to do a lot of research on schools, education, and parenting while my wife is at work, because I do not want to be lazy about it – *it is my job to spend time and effort on providing the best environment for them to grow up*. I do not expect them to be the best in school, but at least I will provide the environment for them to learn and grow. Other than that, trivial things such as arranging their daily meals, schedule, and checking up on their homework also require time and energy. I write down everything that I need to get done for my children, so I know that taking care of them is not easy work. *If men themselves do not think what they are doing as a SAHF is actual contributions to the family, then of course others would not think it’s a big deal* (emphasis mine).

For Tan, writing down his daily caring practices served as a reminder and a way to quantify his contribution, making him feel competent and accomplished as a primary caregiver. As previously discussed, Tan had not constructed his identity based on conventional masculinity rooted in paid work, and thus he did not feel the need to sacrifice or compromise his sense of masculinity when he became a primary caregiver. He viewed parenting and education as a

full-time job and felt morally and emotionally obligated to invest time and effort in seeking out information for his children. This professional and task-oriented approach to caregiving aligns with Hanlon's (2012) concept of "nothing to lose" carers in care-full masculinities (p. 202-203), who profess a strong commitment to caregiving responsibilities and experience emotional fulfilment. However, there is a difference between Tan and Hanlon's interviewees. While Hanlon's interviewees expressed an intention to establish a path to paid work, Tan did not share the same aspiration, despite recognising that his caregiving experience could potentially lead to new career opportunities in today's emergent digital economy. "I simply do not have time and energy for that – I have two children." Tan explained, "And I am quite satisfied with my life now. Plus, money is not an issue for our family for now because my wife's career is going well."

In a similar vein, Shanghai-based SAHF William suggested that knowing his own worth as a SAHF was the key to maintaining a sense of security and achieving fulfilment in his day-to-day life. On the point of quantifying his contribution to the family as a SAHF, William suggested a coping method recognised by some of my other interviewees such as Yu from Beijing, Zhang from Qingdao, and Li from Huizhou:

If other SAHFs or their wives think care work and household chores are not as valuable as paid work, then financially quantifying the domestic work according to market prices might be an efficient way. If you hired a nanny and a cleaner, how much does providing three meals a day, tidying up the house, and looking after the children cost per month? When your children are older, you also need to find a personal tutor for education. List all these down and make a spreadsheet, then you will see how valuable the role is from a financial point of view. More importantly, outsiders that you hired might not do an equally good job as you do as a SAHF. However, I do not quantify my contribution like that, because my wife and I believe that we are a team. In this team, both of us have different roles and contribute to the family in different ways and are equally valuable.

The equal sense of eligibility for caring and earning that emerged from this group of interviewees led me to inquire about what made them feel secure and fulfilled in their role; all of them responded that a loving and supportive spousal relationship was the key. As Tan emphasised throughout our conversation, "No matter what I do for our family, the relationship with my wife is the foundation. We are a team, so any challenge in life we face,

we tackle together.” William, along the same lines, expressed the belief that a good spousal relationship was the key to a healthy family dynamic and individuals’ mental health in our second interview in the summer 2022. This was a stark contrast to his narrative from the previous year when he expressed dissatisfaction and stress during the transition from workplace to home, leading me to categorise him in the first group of SAHFs.

“I learnt this through my own experience,” William further explained, “last year my mental health was not ideal, especially during the Covid-19 lockdown, so I did a lot of self-reflection and consulted many philosophical books. I have realised that a harmonious spousal relationship holds our family together, rather than the children. Therefore, instead of holding negative emotions inside like I used to do, I started to communicate with my wife – I’d say having a supportive wife is the key to feeling good in my role as a SAHF.” William’s change of mindset in our second encounter again accords with Giddens’s (2009) argument that the presentation of self goes beyond Goffman’s concept of “front/back stage”. Instead of only presenting aspects of themselves as their “newsworthy appearance” to fit into wider society, individuals’ reflexivity plays a part in how they perceive and present themselves in front of others, and whether to conform or rebel against social expectations.

Both Tan and William’s emphasis on the significance of spousal relationships to the sense of legitimacy and fulfilment in their role coincides with the results drawn from a study on Chinese marriages, which highlight the importance of daily communication and mutual emotional support for marital satisfaction and individual fulfilment (Li, *et.al.*, 2018). This phenomenon also points to the notion of “couple self-sufficiency” raised by Nicholas Townsend (2002, p. 10; cf. Lane, 2009). In his research on fatherhood, Townsend (2002) indicates that communication between couples and agreements reached within marriages provide emotional support for men. Indeed, treating marriage as an egalitarian partnership, suggests a reconceptualisation 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 this group of men. The 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. Several interviewees 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.

Bai from Beijing, for example, told me that both his wife and he knew the value of the role as a stay-at-home parent, given that his wife had been a SAHM for several years when their first child was born. Bai explained:

She knows how difficult it was to take care of our first born, not to mention that we now have two children. Our roles now are just reversed – I quit my job and she went back to work. If the woman never had experience of being a full-time carer for her children, then she would probably find it hard to understand how trivial but energy consuming it is as a full-time parent – just as a father would not empathise with the hard work if he had never had a SAHF experience. Then the man would feel devalued and illegitimate because his wife does not appreciate his work. Thank God we do not have this problem.

Similarly, Yu from Beijing informed me that both he and his wife were stay-at-home parents while working from home, with him taking the primary caregiver role. This arrangement provided him with a sense of comfort because his wife understood and empathised with everything he did as a caregiver. The mutual understanding of the equal importance of care work and paid work in their marriages reshaped these men's perception of depending on their wives' income and their sense of self-worth and masculinity in relation to their domestic contributions. This belief parallels an argument that feminist advocates have long made regarding women's domestic labour (Gimenez, 1990); assuming the role of a SAHF enables men to identify with women's domestic burdens and appreciate how difficult, complex, and underappreciated care work can be.

All men in this group assumed that the feelings of devaluation might be more common among SAHMs. "I cannot imagine working mothers not empathising with caregiving work, as they went through childbirth themselves," as Tan claimed, "I guess that's the benefit of being a SAHF. Breadwinning men might not appreciate their stay-at-home wives as they innately cannot relate to the experience." Other interviewees, such as Yu and Li, similarly expressed the belief that sense of self-worth for SAHFs stemmed from their own approval as

well as reassurance and support from their wives. In contrast, breadwinning men tended to value socially perceived work and underappreciated housework and childcare. Yu explained:

As a dad vlogger, I often receive messages from SAHMs who complain that they feel neglected by their husbands. My advice to them is to ask their husbands to assume the full-time parent and homemaker role for a few weeks to understand the complexities and difficulties of their day-to-day lives. As a SAHF, on the other hand, my work is appreciated by my wife and people around me, because it is not seen as a social norm. In fact, it sometimes is glorified because many people might think it is a big deal for a man to full-time care for the family.

The narratives presented above demonstrate that these SAHFs were aware that the indirect patriarchal benefits 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 the underlying gender norms that contribute to it.

The belief that mothers naturally understand the challenges of caregiving due to their experience of childbirth is a common perspective shared by the SAHFs. This perspective attributes caregiving abilities to biological factors such as the ability to give birth, without fully recognising that caregiving is a multifaceted role that involves various skills, emotions, and experiences beyond childbirth. Having said that, these men appreciated the demanding nature of caregiving and articulated empathy for women who assume the same role, indicating a raised consciousness of gender equality. Constructing their sense of self-worth in relation to a more egalitarian and communicative partnership within marriage is indeed a positive step towards fostering gender flexibility and redefining gendered divisions of labour.

6.5 Summary

This chapter has examined how men reflect upon their decisions to become SAHFs, how they want to be perceived by others both online and offline, and how they view their contributions to the family. In doing so, it has advanced a more nuanced understanding of how SAHFs construct or reconstruct their masculinity according to their perceptions of paid work and unpaid care work as primary caregivers.

My conversations with SAHFs have revealed two distinct categories, with the first group facing the feelings of illegitimacy and ambivalence towards their SAHF identity, and the second taking pride in doing care work. The common theme I gathered from the narratives of the second group of men was that emotional support provided by their partners greatly contributed to their sense of security and fulfilment in the role. Liu from the first group, on the other hand, suggested that his working wife wanted him to also go out to work, which did not motivate him to appreciate his own contribution for the family as a SAHF. This does not necessarily mean that all other men in the first group had less emotional support from their partners. However, the gratitude for their significant others who support their decision and life as SAHF was certainly more emphasised in the narratives of the second group.

Through multiple interviews conducted within a one-year span involving two distinct groups of SAHFs, I have also contributed to the expansion and critique of Goffman's dramaturgical theory, particularly in its applicability to Chinese SAHFs in today's digital landscape.

Firstly, I have demonstrated that social media platforms serve as both "front stage" and "back stage" spaces for users. The settings on these platforms, such as anonymous/pseudonymous as well as public and private account configurations, allow individuals to reveal various facets of their identities depending on the context.

Secondly, it became apparent that identities are multifaceted and intertwined, shaped by the context of interaction. Repeated interactions with the same individuals provided insights into the layers of identity, challenging the notion of a fixed "front stage" performance, as a standard reading of Goffman (1956) might imply.

Thirdly, SAHFs' different levels of reflexivity play a crucial part in their changing sense of identity, which has thus far been overlooked in academic research, in which the distinct categories of "SAHFs by choice" and "SAHFs by circumstance" have been the dominant focus (e.g., Chesley, 2011; Kramer *et al.*, 2015; Liong, 2017a). In contrast to these studies, I have argued that the ways in which men perceive the role and experience of SAHF is just as important as their reasons for taking up the role. After all, the perception of masculine ideals is in flux, following an individual's subjective experience and self-reflection (Newman, 1988; Berderman, 1995; Lane, 2009; Liong, 2017b).

While the first group of SAHFs were more selective and strategic about the spaces in which they presented aspects of the “self” than the second group, their self-representations could be altered due to their changing sense of self upon reflections, as reflexivity is an ongoing learning process (see Table 1 below). The transition from the first group of SAHFs to the second group did not exhibit any discernible patterns in terms of their personal or family backgrounds, a trend that continued into the subsequent chapter. However, a common thread that repeatedly emerged during follow-up interviews was the significant influence of spousal relationships and unexpected life changes as key factors contributing to their transformation over the course of the year. The changing nature of “the self” coincides with Giddens’s criticism of Goffman’s theory on self-presentation – the absence of systematic analysis on the role of reflexivity.

Additionally, both SAHF groups, to different extents, acknowledged their male privilege, contrasting it with the potentially vulnerable position that SAHMs may find themselves in. Continuing along the trajectory of perceptions of women and femininity in the construction of masculinity for SAHFs, I focus on SAHFs’ attitudes towards help seeking in female-dominated caregiving communities in the following chapter.

First Group: Paid work identity > care work identity	Second Group: Care work identity > paid work identity
Liu (Beijing) John (Shijiazhuang) Colin (Hangzhou) Bob (Foshan) La Rou (Chengdu) Sherlock (Manchester) Tim (Beijing)	Tan (Chongqing) Jim (Beijing) Li (Huizhou) Yu (Beijing) Terry (Beijing) Bai (Beijing) Chen (Guangzhou) Ervin (Shanghai) Magnus (Qingdao) Qi (Qingdao)
Tom (Qingdao) Alvin (Shanghai) William (Shanghai)	
Follow-up interviews →	

Table 1: Categorisation of SAHFs’ Paid Work and Care Work Identities

Chapter 7: Lone Wolf – SAHFs’ Attitudes toward Seeking Childcare and Emotional Support

In this chapter, I turn to SAHFs’ attitudes toward seeking childcare and emotional support, as part of their self-understanding of masculinity as a SAHF. This connects with but also goes beyond SAHFs’ identity-making in relation to paid work versus care work as examined in the previous chapter, with a strong theme of emotional vulnerability having emerged from my interview data. Specifically, this chapter documents the practical responses of SAHFs to questions such as “what difficulties do you face when assuming the primary caregiving role?” and “to what extent do you need support and want to widen your social circles?”.

According to my interviewees’ responses to these questions, I divided them into two groups that correspond quite closely with the two groups of men analysed in the previous chapter. Those men who put their worker identity before their carer identity tended to be more insistent in treating childrearing as a solitary activity, and less likely to articulate their emotional vulnerability, even to their close friends and spouses. Even if social media can act as a “back stage” due to its digital anonymity/pseudonymity, as discussed in the previous chapter, sharing and asking for support in these settings can create peer pressure, as a result of fixed beliefs about fatherhood and masculinity in contrast to motherhood and femininity. On the other hand, those men who took pride in their SAHF identity were more receptive to the idea of seeking help. While not all of them initially sought childrearing or emotional support from those close to them or the caregiving community, they exhibited higher levels of reflexivity regarding their sense of self, well-being, and spousal relationship during follow-up interviews. For this group of men, there was no distinct differentiation between their “front stage” and “back stage” behaviours when it came to seeking help, both online and offline. Through analysing narratives provided by these two groups of men, I aim to provide the understandings of masculinity that underpin subjective experiences of being a SAHF in contemporary China. Specifically, I show how SAHFs have positioned themselves in relation to conventional notions of masculinity and femininity, as evident in their coping mechanisms and attitudes toward seeking help and support.

To help make sense of men’s internal struggles of self-assessment and identification, my discussion here begins with an outline of the intersection between power and the emotional

life of men in the existing literature. I then move on to the identity-making of SAHFs as it emerged from my interview data, as infused with tension, contradiction, and dilemma.

7.1 Power and vulnerability

As examined in the literature review chapter (section 2.2.1), many scholars have challenged R.W. Connell's (1987) early formulation of hegemonic masculinity for its binary distinction between complicit and resistant masculinities, as well as a lack of nuance in relation to men's subjective experiences and emotions (Wetherell & Edley, 1999; Seidler, 2006; Hanlon, 2012). Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) later reformulated the concept of hegemonic masculinity by acknowledging Wetherell and Edley's emphasis on men's psychological activities in the construction of masculinities and acknowledging the diversities in different settings. However, Connell has not given men's emotional complexity the same attention that she has given to the socio-political aspects of gender relations. Moreover, there is still a lack of empirical data in her latest research (1995, 2005) to justify her arguments about how hegemonic masculinity is enacted by individuals. On this point, Niall Hanlon (2012) criticises the central position of power in Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, arguing that emotional vulnerability – and its relationship with power – is equally important to understandings of masculinity. As Hanlon (p. 88) argues, the key to perceiving the operation of power in practice is through men's behaviour when faced with the intersection of multiple identities. Building on this theory, in the previous chapter, I examined men's vulnerability when they are associated with affective relations and nurturing roles, as the intimacies of care relations are at odds with men's dominant social identity of being powerful and invulnerable. In this chapter, I proceed to demonstrate how some men's vulnerability can be exposed in ways that make them find it difficult to seek support, as needing help from others means admitting vulnerability and dependence in a way that contradicts their vision of the self.

Men's reticence in acknowledging the need for support is one of the core themes in existing literature on caring men. Men often convey the expectation that they must be independent, invulnerable, and self-reliant, believing that asking for emotional support is synonymous with feminine behaviour (e.g., Horrocks, 1994; Clare, 2000; Jakupcak *et al.*, 2003; hooks, 2004; Cleary, 2005). This attitude reflects the "naturalist" view, which sees masculinity and femininity as based on biological differences between men and women. According to this perspective, women are "naturally" inclined towards emotional, caring, and expressive

behaviour, while men are predisposed to rational, emotionally detached actions. Even though the existence of nurturing men in recent decades has challenged the rigid gendered division of labour, men's perception of masculinity, in relation to femininity, is still often shaped by notions of biological determinism (Miller, 2011). Consequently, many men attempt to retain a sense of power during social interactions, by, for instance, concealing emotions such as shame, fear, or sadness that may arise from factors beyond their control, as they wish to avoid appearing powerless and vulnerable (Horrocks, 1994; Jakupcak *et al.*, 2003). However, if a negative event is caused by factors within their control, these men are more likely to express their emotions, especially if they involve anger or contempt, which they consider emotions of "power" (Timmer, Fischer & Manstead, 1998). This argument is further explored in the case of Chinese SAHFs in this chapter.

This gendered division of emotional identity, however, can also be understood as an unconscious pattern of thoughts or behaviour produced by men as a consequence of socialisation, rather than biology (Horrocks, 1994). Many men simply perceive it as "natural" that women are expected to be more emotionally expressive and sensitive, while men are expected to be more practical and independent, without realising that they are conforming to a system of social practice. In other words, stepping outside this fixed gendered expectation is not something that men can easily comprehend or envision as a possibility for themselves. Even if some men might be aware of their gendered emotional identity, it would still be a challenge for them to act. As Roger Horrocks (1994, p.123) argues, the acquisition of awareness of gender can lead to a fear of ridicule and rejection, both from others and from oneself.

Similarly, the control of emotional expression is particularly encouraged by Confucian ideas within Chinese parenting practices, including stress on the importance of maintaining group harmony and status hierarchies (Bond, 1993; Uba, 1994; Wu, 1996). Sharing and expressing tender emotions may imply weakness and vulnerability for Chinese men, as they are expected to live up to cultural expectations and become head of the household (*yijia zhizhu* 一家之主) (Hibbins, 2005; Lin, 2013; Yeung, *et al.*, 2015). Cultural ideals for Chinese men, including 男儿有泪不轻弹 ("*nan er you lei bu qing tan*," i.e., "a man should not easily shed his tears and 大丈夫流血不流泪 ("*da zhang fu liu xue bu liu lei*," i.e., "Real men would rather bleed than weep"), highlight the value placed on emotional restraint and vulnerability avoidance

within traditional masculine norms. Furthermore, research (Levant & Pollack, 1995; Yeung, *et.al.*, 2015) suggests that a socialisation process, which involves everyday interactions, tend to reaffirm these masculine norms, whereby men refer to what most other men are doing. Considering the potential influence of both traditional cultural expectations and the socialisation of men, this chapter aims to explore the correlation between interviewees' endorsing of emotional-control-based masculine norms and their own identity formation.

Finally, it is important to note that my attempt in critiquing this gendered classification is not to advocate for "gender sameness" or to suggest that the perception on gender differences is entirely socially and culturally constructed (Chodorow, 1978; Frosh, 1994; Doyle, 1995; Baron-Cohen, 2003; Adenzato, *et. al.*, 2017). Instead, the existing studies above have provided an understanding of the behaviour and emotional complexity of my interviewees from the perspective of whether they challenge or further reinforce the dichotomous, hierarchical thinking of "sex" and "gender" in their everyday practices.

7.2 A first group of SAHFs: Caregiving as a solitary activity

In line with these analyses, the sense that men feel compelled to adhere to a gendered division of emotionality in their masculinity that denies their socially perceived "feminine" side persists in my research on a first group of SAHFs. This group aligns closely, though not exactly, with the first group described in the previous chapter. The fragility of masculinity became evident in the constant worry exhibited by this group of SAHFs about appearing unmasculine if they seek help or emotional support. Their narratives emphasised the importance of independence, serving as a key reason for their reluctance to ask for assistance from other full-time parents through online group chats or forums. They all, either explicitly or implicitly, tried to distinguish themselves from women/mothers whom they assumed rely on other caregivers for advice and emotional support. In other words, their assertion that men do not require external support stems from their need to defend themselves against accusations of exhibiting "feminine" characteristics and their discomfort with the stigmatisation associated with their identity as SAHFs. These points are further illustrated with examples in the following pages.

I was taken aback when I asked the question, "Do you want to meet other SAHFs via online groups?" and several interviewees immediately diverted the conversation towards discussing

their distinct approaches to childcare in comparison to women. They used this as a justification for not feeling the need to join any support groups, unlike mothers who might seek such communities. In their responses, I sensed a certain superiority as they portrayed their childrearing methods as straightforward and efficient, contrasting them with what they perceived as anxious and overly protective approaches displayed by mothers they had encountered online. They characterised the methods used by these mothers as unnecessarily complex. As the SAHF Chen from Guangzhou stated:

Parenting/childcare-related group chats are mostly dominated by female caregivers. I don't mind asking questions in these groups but there is an *innate gender difference between men and women (nan nü tiansheng jiu bu yiyang)*: men are more *rational and less emotionally sensitive* than their female counterparts. Women are more likely to feel anxious when it comes to childrearing. I have come across a lot of anxious mothers on Douyin (Chinese version of TikTok), for example, many mothers are very worried when their 10-month-old children do not have teeth, or their 2-month-olds cannot speak yet. *Men, on the other hand, tend not to be so extreme and are more likely to look for answers in books rather than resorting to others for help* (emphasis mine).

Chen's statement echoes the media portrayal of the "tiger mum, cat dad" dynamic discussed in the TV drama analysis (chapter four). Female characters in the analysed TV dramas are portrayed as mothers who put every ounce of their time and energy into catering for their children's everyday needs, whereas male characters are depicted as nurturing fathers who adopt a more relaxed parenting style. Chen's comment about mothers being more anxious and overprotective of their children was a sentiment I encountered from several other interviewees as well. However, all my interviewees were more invested in their children's development than the "cat dad" presented in the TV dramas. Instead of seeking support from the predominantly female caregiving community when they had questions about childrearing, they turned to books and experts for guidance. Thus, for this group of SAHFs, treating caregiving as a solitary activity was largely due to their disagreements with what they perceived as the childrearing approaches of female caregivers, rather than feeling illegitimate as caregivers in the female-dominated community, as suggested by studies on SAHFs in the Global North (e.g., Allen & Hawkin, 1999; Gallais, 2019). Another interviewee, William, a freelance post-production editor and full-time father based in Shanghai, highlighted his

preference for consulting a book called *Caring for Your Baby and Young Child* by the American Academy of Paediatrics when he has questions about childrearing, rather than discussing the issue with others. Although he expressed a desire to meet other SAHFs or men with similar interests through online or offline events to expand his social circle, he mentioned that he stopped short of engaging with childcare-related topics in any online parenting groups that are mostly dominated by female caregivers, due to a few previous disagreements about child-rearing approaches. William provided an example of how his approach to handling his children's bruises differed from most mothers in a group chat. The mothers in the online group thought his method of giving his children a bag of ice to alleviate the pain was too careless, as they believed the coldness could harm their health. William insisted that these mothers' worries were unnecessary and unscientific, attributing them to mothers' tendency to be overly anxious and protective of their children, in contrast to his parenting philosophies. Intrigued by his philosophies, I inquired further about why he considered information provided in childcare books to be more scientific than insights from individuals with hands-on experience. He responded:

I believe a good piece of information requires my own reflective thinking. Asking other caregivers, whether online or offline, is certainly the fastest way to get an answer, but their views are second-hand information which might not be suitable for my situation. So, even if reading books takes longer, I still prefer this way. Of course, when it comes to urgent childcare-related situations, I would Google to look for a solution, rather than asking other caregivers for help.

The underlying assumption in this statement was that childrearing knowledge acquired from books and online sources, such as Google, holds more authority than the knowledge gained through caregivers' own experiences. Additionally, William appeared to reject the possibility of engaging in reflective thinking after seeking advice from other caregivers. Li, a freelance writer/blogger, also expressed a similar view, saying that "I do not join any kind of parenting/childcare groups, because I do not want to be affected by unnecessary external pressure and anxiety spread by many female caregivers. Plus, I can handle my own family issues very well on my own."

While these perceptions may be influenced or reinforced by SAHFs' past experiences in online parenting groups, the binary assumption that "women are anxious and overprotective

of their children, whereas men are the opposite” oversimplifies and generalises the subjective experiences of different individuals, disregarding the potential for diverse perspectives outside of fixed gender norms. Moreover, citing their consultation of childcare-related books as the main difference from their female counterparts implies that female caregivers do not seek information from such sources before seeking help from others. In fact, several of them later gave contradictory responses to my follow-up question – “is your wife also very anxious and overly protective, but do not consult childrearing books then?”, saying that “no, my wife reads, and she is fairly rational when it comes to childcare” (direct quote from interviewees William, Chen, and Yu). Maintaining a belief in “innate gender difference” even when it contradicted their lived experience seemed to serve as a coping mechanism for some SAFHs to retain a sense of emotional detachment and rationality, aligning with their perception of masculine childcare practices.

The conversations about the “innate difference between men and women” continued in my interview with Yu, a dad vlogger in Beijing. Before the interview, I asked Yu if he wanted to join the WeChat group that I had created for SAHFs¹¹ so he could interact with other men who were doing similar things to him. “No”, came the response, “men only need group chats to discuss common interests or where to eat and drink, not childcare issues of life as a SAHF.” This initial comment prompted me to ask during the interview, “what made you think that and why do you believe that childcare cannot be one of the topics that men also talk about with one another?” In response, Yu further elaborated:

I have joined online groups for SAHFs before and I found them to be very boring. Groups for stay-at-home mothers normally talk about everything: recommendations for where to eat and travel with family and discussions on other trivial stuff, whereas no one really talks about any of these in men’s groups. Men only advertised the articles that they wrote in the groups...*This is the innate difference between men and women (zhe shi nanren he nü ren benzhi shang de qubie* 这是男人和女人本质上的区别). Men think more *independently* than women and are generally more *rational* than women. It might be stubborn, but every man thinks he is

¹¹ I established the group chat with dual aims: one was to facilitate connections among my participants to foster a sense of community, and the second was to observe their conversations within the chat for discourse analysis. However, the group has not been very active. The only notable interaction occurred when one SAHF posed a child-rearing question and received advice from other SAHFs. I subsequently followed up with some members, including Tan, who mentioned that they added others’ contacts through the group but haven’t been very active themselves.

right - I would hardly seek advice from others. I would not think or say, for example, “oh you are right, so I will learn from you.” Every man has his own ways of thinking and knowledge, he would hardly listen to others. On the other hand, women might be more open to suggestions (emphasis mine).

From Yu’s point of view, women seemed to be more open-minded and willing to share their daily lives with people online, whereas men tended to have ulterior motives if they join any group chat, and talking about their personal lives as a SAHF was not a topic that interested them. In light of Goffman’s dramaturgical theory, Yu appeared to understand social media as a “front stage” for this group of SAHFs, but as a “back stage” for female caregivers. Moreover, it seemed to Yu that there was no point discussing child-rearing with other men, as according to him, men were divided by the belief that only their child-rearing method was the rational one. Although Yu was fully aware of the stubbornness that many men, including himself, might possess, he did not think it a trait that men needed to change. Instead, he ascribed it to the innate dispositional differences between men and women.

“Men and women are not supposed to be the same”, Yu further explained, “after all, our focuses when it comes to childcare are different: women are more attentive to detail, which might make their care work more tiring; whereas men tend to focus on *bigger things*, or so to say, the result of an event. For example, if the children had fun on a day out, even if minor accidents happened, the father would still consider it to be a successful day, without thinking much about the minute details as the mother might do.” Yu’s view corroborated with Berit Brandth & Elin Kvande’s (1998) article on “masculine care”, in which they argue that fathers shape their care-work differently from mothers; fathers focus on teaching the child independence, in contrast to mothers’ closeness and intimacy to the child. The SAHF Yu considered this division as a biological maleness that every man embodies, rather than seeing it as an attribute of masculine gender stemming from an entrenched gender belief system. Focusing on “bigger things” as a primary caregiving man suggested that Yu gave higher status to masculine care than maternal practice. Although being a nurturing caregiver requires high emotional sensitivity, characteristics such as being “independent” and “rational” needed to be demonstrated and emphasised by a man when practising care work.

To further support the argument of the innate division between men and women, Yu used the popular stereotype of women being less skilled at driving than men as an allegory. He added that “it is very difficult for people to achieve things in life if we use the same standards for

both genders.” This statement aligns with the unitary model of sexual character proposed by R.W. Connell (1987, p. 271). According to this model, there is only one set of traits that characterises men and women in general, and these traits define masculinity and femininity. These traits encompass various aspects such as temperaments, characters, outlooks, opinions, abilities, and even the overall structure of personality. The unitary model suggests that these traits differ between genders and contribute to the construction of gender identities. In the context of Yu’s perspective on men’s stubbornness, it became evident that seeking help from others was a form of weakness that contradicts his fixed gender expectations and the construction of his self-image as a man. As an interviewer, I couldn’t help but wonder how Yu, and other interviewees, would shape their narratives if I were a fellow man or a female caregiver. In other words, would their fixed notion of gender be exacerbated or lessened when talking to different people, under different circumstances? Drawing on Goffman’s dramaturgical theory, it’s important to consider that SAHFs may engage in impression management, presenting different versions of themselves to different audiences in order to influence how they are perceived. This raises the possibility that interviewees may adapt their narratives based on their perception of my gender role.

The homogeneous and universalised account of masculinity (and femininity) indicated by the assertion that men do not need help/support from others, as women might do, prompted me to ask the follow-up question, “Some answers about child-rearing and parenting perhaps can be found in books, but how do you deal with mental stress and difficulties (possibly caused by daily childcare work and your own identity as a SAHF)?”. Coming up with self-adjusting systems was the most common response I received from my interviewees.

Sherlock, a Beijing SAHF who was studying in Manchester for his PhD, shared that he would “unplug” himself from his surroundings after taking care of his daughter when he felt stressed, to prioritise his mental well-being. This practice of detachment from reality demonstrated Sherlock’s approach to emotional self-regulation and corroborated with the aforementioned literature on men’s resistance to displays of emotional vulnerability (e.g., Horrocks, 1994; Jakupcak *et al.*, 2003). Li, a blogger and organiser of early parenting events based in Huizhou, Guangdong, insisted that every SAHF should have a self-adjusting system. As Li further elaborated:

It is a big transition for men from wearing a suit and tie to go to work, to being in pyjamas all day to take care of kids at home, and therefore sometimes we need to be

self-delusional like *Ah Q*;¹² but fundamentally, we should fully accept the role of SAHF, or we would be experiencing perennial internal conflicts and stress.

The reference to *Ah Q* made me wonder if Li perceived being a SAHF as inferior to being a career man. While Li talked about how men should fully embrace the role, he also believed that this process of embracing the role was “self-delusional”. I therefore asked, “What exactly do you do when you feel stressed about your identity as a SAHF?” He summarised his techniques into two parts:

As a father, I am able to witness the formative years of my children, which makes me feel satisfied and grateful about my choice; as a man and for my public identity, I earn more money than my peers and my job can fundamentally promote positive changes for our society.

These two factors served as constant reminders for Li and helped him manage the occasional mental stress or negative thoughts associated with his life as a SAHF. It became evident that Li’s career status and monetary yield played essential role in maintaining his sense of masculinity as a SAHF. In other words, completely abandoning the financially valued forms of work to care for his children would threaten his sense of self-worth masculinity. I then decided to probe further, by asking Li why the SAHF identity caused him stress if taking care of his children brings him joy and fulfilment. Li explained:

I am fully aware that attaching my self-value largely to career and monetary yield fits in with the fixed socioeconomic evaluation system, which is the root cause for inequality in our society. But this social value is so entrenched that I found it very difficult to escape from it. Even though my job is about raising awareness of childcare and providing support for full-time mothers, and I have been doing a lot of self-reflection in this aspect, I still have moments of discontentment when assuming the role of a SAHF because I am still somewhat attached to old, gendered beliefs. But I would quickly realise this and talk myself out of it. However, this evaluation system is so deep within my subconscious. Even I, as an advocate for gender equality, feel like this, so imagine how entrenched and influential this fixed evaluation system is to the entire society in China. Likewise, I believe if the child’s grandparents are the ones

¹² *Ah Q* is a fictional character in *The True Story of Ah Q*, written by Lu Xun who used this character as a euphemism for self-talk and self-deception even when faced with extreme defeat or humiliation.

who are managing childcare and domestic duties, they would probably think that they are not creating much value.

Li's constant internal battle revealed the intricate interplay between the increasing awareness of feminism and the aspiration to be a nurturing father and husband, while contending with a hegemonic prescription of masculinity that links manhood to wealth and social status. His emphasis on financial success and the positive impact of his job on society as essential factors in maintaining his sense of masculinity signified the influence of hegemonic masculine ideals. Moreover, Li's projection of devaluation onto other primary caregivers, such as the child's grandparents, may stem from his own preoccupation with monetary yield and social status as indicators of self-worth. He perceived their role as devalued, possibly because it did not align with the dominant masculine norm that he himself is grappling with.

"Being a SAHF is not easy, and I do not recommend every man to assume this role, due to the mental stress it might cause them", Yu, the Beijing dad vlogger, told me at the end of our interview. As he stated, "the most important thing that I learnt from my experience is that men have to learn how to get along with themselves." I raised this point in the following interviews with other SAHFs and they all agreed to varying extents.

As the interviewer and an outsider, I recognised the challenges that men faced when transitioning into the role of primary caregivers. Engaging in caregiving responsibilities may have contradicted their preconceived notions of masculinity, making it difficult for them to navigate this new territory. Rather than being driven solely by the fear of societal stigma surrounding their identity as SAHFs, as suggested in other studies (e.g., Rochlen, *et. al.*, 2010; Chesley, 2011; Medved, 2016), my interviews revealed that many men tend to withdraw from society as a means of affirming their adherence to certain aspects of hegemonic masculinity, such as rationality, independence, and competitiveness. However, their refusal to ask for support and fear of emotional intimacy, which can be seen as defensive reactions to avoid association with femininity and retreat into the comfort zone of societally determined gender stereotypes, left many of them in a state of dilemma and isolation.

To explore the belief in inherent differences between men and women expressed by Yu and many other interviewees, it is relevant to consider several psychological theories that support this claim by suggesting that these differences are not solely influenced by socialisation (e.g.,

Klein, 1921; Geary, 1996; Baron-Cohen, 2003). These theories include the empathising/systemising theory proposed by psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen and object relations theory, which is a component of the evolutionary perspective of Freudian psychoanalytic theory.

According to Baron-Cohen's empathising/systemising theory, neurological differences between males and females contribute to variations in thinking and behaviour. Females are believed to have a greater inclination towards empathy, affection, and interpersonal understanding, while males are thought to be more oriented towards systematic thinking and are often associated with strengths in fields such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). Object relations theory, on the other hand, posits the construction of masculinity in relation to early psychic separation from mothers (Klein, 1921). Mothers perceive their sons as distinct and different from themselves, initiating and encouraging the process of psychic separation. This separation prompts boys to strive for differentiation and individualisation, often unconsciously repressing or distancing themselves from characteristics associated with femininity. In contrast, female infants tend to be seen by mothers as extensions of themselves, resulting in intense merging and a strong emotional connection. This may lead girls to develop heightened sensitivity, empathy, and capacity for intimacy but potentially struggle with establishing an independent sense of self and autonomy (Chodorow, 1978; Frosh, 1994; Doyle, 1995; Hanlon, 2012). These theories shed light on potential underlying factors contributing to the behaviour and attitudes of my interviewees in their caregiving roles and their resistance to seeking support. They highlight the influence of unconscious factors rooted in the upbringing and formation of masculinity, which can shape men's perceptions and behaviours in care work.

However, both empathising/systemising theory and object relations theory have faced significant criticism for their biological determinism, phallocentrism, as well as a methodological individualism that reduces social life to individual psychology without sufficient empirical support (Stockard & Johnson, 1992; Zaretsky, 1994; Nash & Grossi, 2007; Segal, 2007; Hanlon, 2012; Fine, 2013; Rippon, 2016). Critics argue that these theories overlook the complex interplay of socialisation and various other factors that contribute to individual differences. Factors such as societal expectations, differential treatment based on gender during upbringing, and peer pressure all play a role in shaping individuals' abilities and emotional experiences (Nash & Grossi, 2007).

Furthermore, even if there were biological differences between sexes in terms of abilities and emotionality (despite their lack of rigor and sufficient empirical evidence), the binary concept of masculinity and femininity put forth by these theories runs the risk of legitimising gender divisions and reinforcing male domination and patriarchy. By attributing rationality and systematic thinking to men and emphasising their need for independence through isolation, these theories may inadvertently support gendered division of labour. However, in the case of my study, where men are taking on the unconventional role of primary caregivers, this challenges the notion that these roles are predetermined by biological factors. It is important to recognise that identities and perceptions are constantly constructed and reconstructed through individuals' socio-cultural experiences and socialisation practices. The binary understanding of femininity and masculinity should not be treated as rigid opposites; rather, they can coexist in individuals to varying degrees. This argument is elaborated through the examples in the following section.

7.3 A second group of SAHFs: Caregiving as teamwork

7.3.1 "I am happy to connect and ask for support, but where are all the men?"

In this section, I explore a second group of SAHFs who exhibited different perceptions of their masculinity in relation to femininity, as evident in their attitudes toward seeking support and expanding social networks. Contrary to the interviewees examined in the last section who did not reach out for help, this group expressed a desire for solidarity within the caregiving community and were open to discussing their emotions with others, albeit to varying extents. However, their sense of self and coping mechanisms varied due to their subjective experiences.

Terry, a SAHF based in Beijing, stood out by expressing a preference for female caregivers as confidants, rather than seeing female caregivers as anxious and overprotective of their children. Terry claimed to be the only father who regularly hangs out with female caregivers in his neighbourhood:

I feel that it is easier to bond with stay-at-home moms, or mothers in general, over childcare-related topics. I do know two other SAHFs in my neighbourhood, but I have a much closer relationship with their wives. Men bond with similar interests or

hobbies, and yet childcare is not one of them, even when they are full-time dads. It is hard for me to initiate conversations with them because I do not know their strengths or interests apart from caring for children. As much as I want to meet other SAHFs, I found that I have nothing to talk about with them - it is difficult for me to discuss childcare issues in the group you created: I tried to talk in the group once but my topic about early education did not seem to be considered as necessary or important to other SAHFs in the group. I seem to be too attentive to detail when it comes to childcare and parenting compared to other fathers that I know.

A sense of marginalisation can be seen in Terry's statement, as he desired to discuss childcare issues that may not be of concern to many other SAHFs, making him an exception as a man, even within the online community that I aimed to create for SAHFs. His experience validates the notion that caregiving often remains a solitary activity for many men. However, Terry found support from the women in his life and embraced perceived feminine qualities, such as attentiveness to detail and emotional expressiveness.

Terry also told me that he actively engaged in female-dominated childcare online groups and forums, seeking knowledge and advice from other mothers while sharing his own childcare stories with them. As we delved deeper into the conversation about his social circle, Terry further elaborated, "being a SAHF inevitably affects my social circle, as I have no work colleagues and less time to socialise, but I always try to find opportunities to meet and talk to new people. Even though some full-time mothers are not that sociable either, I always try my best to initiate conversations." I subsequently asked if he knew what contributed to this particular trait of his, and Terry immediately pointed to his upbringing, describing how the local culture and environment in his hometown Inner Mongolia had shaped his personality and way of thinking:

I grew up in Inner Mongolia as a herdsman. In my region, people are generally very optimistic and enthusiastic about life. We do not meet new people very often, given that it is a remote area, so it would be a special occasion for us to have guests who come from other places. We would bring everything out, such as food and drinks, to welcome and entertain our guests - it makes us feel warm and happy. This trait has become a part of me, so I am still delighted to meet new people after assuming the role of SAHF in Beijing, whether online or in real life. For example, I would talk to

other parents when my son is playing on the playground or in a park. I think communicating with others is important in our daily lives, and I want my son to have this quality as well.

Terry's statement above highlighted the influence of the upbringing environment, as the primary socialisation process, in shaping individuals' sense of self. When I subsequently asked about the differences between men that he encountered in Beijing and in Inner Mongolia, Terry argued that men in Inner Mongolia were more "genuine" in conversations as they were less "competitive and egotistic" than men in Beijing:

These might be my own generalisation – based on my interactions with men in Beijing, I found that Beijing men are sociable and conversational, but they tend to show off their finance or knowledge, or they have their own agendas when talking to people. On the other hand, men from my local area in Inner Mongolia are more likely to be conversational without having ulterior motives because people there are not that competitive about social status or financial situation – you can have more genuine conversations.

Terry's perception of feeling like a "deviant" in Beijing due to the differences in values and behaviours resonate with George Herbert Mead's (1913) social behaviourism theory, which suggests that the sense of self is developed through social experiences rather than being biologically determined. In Terry's case, the cultural norms and values he acquired during his formative years in Inner Mongolia served as a reference point for evaluating others in the context of Beijing, where societal and economic values differed. Intrigued by the regional differences in values and behaviours that Terry mentioned, I posed the question – "How do men that you encountered in Inner Mongolia feel about the norm 'men rule the outside while women rule the inside?'" He laughed, then looked serious, and replied: "herdsmen are quite lazy in my area. They hang out with others and get drunk very often, whilst women do most of the work in and outside the home, such as cooking and milking cows. I do not think they care much about this particular gender norm." Terry's observation of herdsmen in his hometown further challenged the empathising/systemising theory and object relations theory examined earlier, as it suggested that socially perceived masculine traits such as independence, rationality, and competitiveness were not universally ingrained in men but could vary based on cultural and social contexts.

However, in addition to Terry's direct social experience, his conception of the differences between ethnic minorities and Han urbanities was also informed by wider discourses of "internal orientalism" (Schein, 1997). These discourses often romanticise ethnic minorities as "exotic" and "innocent", while essentialising Han Chinese as "sophisticated" and "civilised" (Gladney, 1994; Kendall, 2019). While this conception often puts ethnic minorities in a marginalised position, representing minorities in Inner Mongolia as more genuine, simpler, and liberated than Han urbanities in Beijing also cast Terry in a better light. Despite his awareness of the limitation of his social experience, he continued to internalise this binary conception of ethnic minorities versus urban Han Chinese.

Colin, a Hangzhou-based SAHF, concurred with the view that seeking help and advice about childcare issues online was beneficial, as he had received helpful responses in my WeChat group for SAHFs. However, despite this positive experience, Colin still perceived childcare work as a solitary activity for most men, including himself. As he stated, "generally speaking, fathers, unlike most mothers, do not have the tendency to seek out others who are also doing caregiving, you can see after I asked that question in your group chat, no one asks other questions or actively interacts with one another." When asked if he knew any other SAHFs in his neighbourhood, Colin mentioned having seen a few men regularly taking care of their children during weekdays but was unsure if they were SAHFs like him. He noted that there seemed to be an unspoken understanding among them to avoid interaction, suggesting that men prefer not to engage with others while performing caregiving duties. Colin felt pressure to conform to the "mainstream" norm, which discouraged him from initiating conversations or posting questions when others were not doing the same.

This mindset corroborates with existing research that examines how social factors, including peer pressure, can exacerbate men's reticence in acknowledging the need for emotional support (Nash & Grossi, 2007). Collin's view showed how the sense of himself as a SAHF was constructed and reconstructed due to socialisation. Colin's fear of experiencing peer pressure also reflected his parenting priorities. Answering my question as to whether he thought getting good grades in school was important for his son, Colin's stressed how he did not want his kids to face peer pressure:

I do not expect my kid to be the best, given that we, as parents, were not the most outstanding students when we were in school. But my son at least should keep up with the average pace in class to not feel excluded. In this social environment, a lot of

parents send their children to learn a lot of other stuff (e.g., music instruments and sports) after class, and therefore I will do the same with my son in future. This is because I do not want him to feel left out and inferior when he sees all the other children in class are versatile.

His response prompted me to ask, “What if you did not consider the possible peer pressure for your son? Would you do the same?” “Yes”, came the response after a pause, “I hope he can learn something to enrich his personal life outside of school. I do not want him to be like us when we were kids only focusing on study and did not know what to do during holidays without classes and homework.”

Another interviewee, Jim, was a SAHF based in Beijing whom I connected with through a Douban forum called *jiating zhufu* (家庭煮夫 house husbands). Jim established the forum back in 2014, even before officially taking on the role of SAHF. The forum now has over 6000 members, consisting of nurturing men and caring women, although it was originally intended exclusively for SAHFs. Jim told me that he took inspiration from the TV drama series *Marriage Battle*, in which the term “*jiating zhufu*” was introduced for the first time on the Chinese screen. In our interview, Jim shared his perception of help-seeking in the caregiving community based on his experience as a SAHF and observation of his own forum and my WeChat group for SAHFs:

It is very useful to ask for help when I have childcare issues. I once asked in a group about my daughter’s insomnia issue. A female primary caregiver told me that to cut both ends off a lemon and place it on top of her bed would help, and it worked amazingly. Who would tell you this if they personally do not have this experience? And I remember very well that in your group last time, the SAHF Colin asked a question about what to do when the child cannot stop crying when the mother goes to work. I do not have this experience so I did not answer but I was very interested in other people’s answers, so that I can be prepared when similar situations arise in future. As you can tell, I am willing to share my childcare-related issues with anyone who might have similar experience and can potentially offer me a solution; and I would be happy to do the same for others.

By the time I interviewed Jim, I had noticed a recurring theme mentioned by several interviewees, suggesting that “men tend to find solutions in books or rely on ‘authorities’

such as doctors and childcare experts, rather than reaching out to others for support”. With this in mind, I asked Jim if he agreed with this perspective. “No”, came the response, and then he further elaborated:

Books are also written by people who have experience in childcare, and the so-called authorities, such as experts and doctors, require you to spend a large amount of time and money. We, too, had issues in childcare that were considered to be private, and we were not willing to share with others online, so we resorted to an expert in a hospital. It was not a serious issue but before seeing the doctor, we already spent more than 4000 RMB to book the appointment. I think it was unnecessary, but I understand parents tend to resort to professionals, especially when the issue is urgent. However, it is extremely difficult to book appointments with experts at hospitals in first-tier cities such as Beijing - it is a lot of hassle. So, to prevent our daughter from getting ill, I would love to hear other parents’ experiences and opinions in online groups when their children are sick. Other than that, I am also interested in hearing suggestions from others for daily childcare. After all, “authorities” cannot guarantee everything. For example, I bought sunscreen which was supposed to be the best for kids for a day trip to the beach, but my daughter was allergic to it. I therefore do not see the harm of asking other parents - there are always people who have more experience in child-rearing or used to have similar issues in the same aspect as I do.

According to Jim, consulting books or relying on experts was not the sole approach to seeking help. He believed that asking for assistance from other caregivers through online groups was often more efficient and cost-effective, unless the matter is urgent. “It all depends on if you are willing to share your issues,” Jim stated, “as some men know it would be useful to reach out, but are still not willing to do so due to their perception of their role within the family, or they have this common perception that information shared in groups is mostly spam and advertisements, but it is always helpful to get a second opinion from others.”

As our conversation progressed, I delved deeper into Jim’s perspective on the participation of female caregivers in childcare-related groups compared to their male counterparts. Interestingly, Jim’s viewpoint echoed the responses from the first group of interviewees who believed that women tended to display more interest in joining such groups. However, Jim refrained from attributing this phenomenon to innate differences between men and women.

Instead, he offered an alternative explanation, suggesting that mothers' anxiety and protectiveness towards their children stemmed from the immense physical and emotional pain they had endured during pregnancy and childbirth. As Jim stated, "After carrying the child for more than eight months and experiencing the physical separation by going through so much pain that men cannot even imagine, mothers naturally become more protective of their child; likewise, the anxiety, such as postpartum depression, is also completely understandable."

Moreover, Jim also coincided with the view that men were more rational and tended to think more independently. As he elaborated, "From what I have encountered, most women tend to ask more questions and have stronger sentiments when it comes to childrearing issues, but I cannot say this is entirely the case for everyone. On the other hand, men are more likely to only ask practical stuff in groups, such as 'when did the issue start and how to solve the issue'." Nevertheless, the differences between men and women that Jim observed did not stop him from joining groups and asking for help and support when needed. Rather, he considered it to be a necessary quality if men were to be genuinely "rational"; as he explained, "if that's the case, men tend to be straight to the point when asking questions, and the advice coming from male caregivers would be the same – short and concise."

7.3.2 Self-reflection during the pandemic

Having the opportunity to conduct interviews twice with the same individuals in the span of a year helped me appreciate that identity formation for my interviewees was an ongoing process, evolving within the context of their current life situations. One particular example of this is my interaction with William, a SAHF based in Shanghai. In our first interview in 2021, William mentioned that he did not have a specific way of dealing with his negative emotions. He expressed his stress about re-entering the workplace after years of staying at home and the resulting psychological imbalance in his social circle, as all his friends were his wife's friends. When I asked if he would talk to his wife or others about his feelings or keep them to himself, he responded with a brief "keep them inside." William went on to explain that being a SAHF had not brought much positive impact on his mental health, and he looked forward to returning to the workplace. Despite being aware that not reaching out for support worsened the negative impact on his mental well-being, he felt constrained by gendered expectations

that men should be more independent and less emotionally expressive. These expectations limited his ability to change this dynamic.

However, when I asked the same question during a second interview in 2022 – “how do you deal with stress and other negative emotions?” – William gave me a completely different response:

The best solution is to talk to someone, like my wife or a friend. I think a good spousal relationship is the key to a healthy family dynamic. The other day I listened to a podcast hosted by Kevin Tsai,¹³ and he said many couples consider children as the glue that holds them together. But this is inappropriate and unreasonable, as you cannot expect children to have this responsibility. Spousal relationships should be the “glue”. If we as parents were happy, the children would naturally follow suit. I completely agree with his view, because I feel that having children is never the end, but the beginning. Having two children sometimes means double the challenge for us. But if my relationship with my partner is good, then we will have the motivation to conquer whatever comes our way.

I was quite surprised by the extent to which William’s perceptions toward seeking help and communication had shifted since our last conversation. Curious to explore this further, I asked him, “What has changed in your life since last year and how do you feel compared to the last time we spoke?” William paused for a moment, and then responded,

I think the Covid situation has negatively impacted everyone’s mental health. But on the flip side, it pushed us to make changes in our lives as we might have reached our breaking point during this unprecedented time. I have been reading different philosophy books because I wanted to find more answers to life and to understand myself better, including my past and the way I think. If I had to summarise what I have gained from this self-discovery journey, I would say that the key to everything is acceptance, and this applies to everything. For example, I realised that there is no need to bottle up feelings or argue with my wife when we have disagreements - we

¹³ Kevin Tsai (Cai Kangyong) is a Taiwanese television host and writer. He co-hosts Chung T'ien Television's Kangsi Coming with hostess Dee Hsu and has written seven different books and many of them became Taiwan's bestsellers as well as writing comedy material in his popular talk show.

are not here to compete to see whose opinion matters, as partnerships mean teamwork. We are together because we want to make our lives better together.

William's shift in his self-understanding and sense of masculinity aligns with Michael J. Diamond's (2005) argument that male's gendered identity formation is continually being reworked throughout one's life. William's self-reflection was triggered by the repercussions of the global pandemic (Covid-19), and this is in line with Mario Liong's (2017b) point that crisis in men's lives can provide an opportunity for them to reflect upon their taken-for-granted duties and potentially help them develop closer relationships with their partner and children. This mirrors the theme of reflexivity in crisis depicted in the analysed TV drama *Super Dad & Super Kids*, where the father embraces his role as a SAHF after reflecting during a time of unemployment rather than remaining perennially frustrated in his attempts to return to work.

From the first interaction we had in 2021, William struck me as a nurturing father who voluntarily decided to assume the role of a SAHF since his first child was born. He candidly shared with me that both of his children had closer relationships with him than their mother because he spent more time with them, a sentiment echoed by many other interviewees. However, it took time and effort for William to unlearn conventional gender beliefs and reflect on his thought processes. Through reading and self-reflection, he gradually became more open with his spouse, rather than suppressing his emotions as he had done in the past. This behaviour aligns with the importance of reflexivity in the construction of the "self" proposed by Giddens (2009) and supports Magdalena Wong's hypothesis (2016) that the speed of adaptation to the "new man" masculinity¹⁴ varies for Chinese men in relation to father-child relations and spousal relations. Wong proposes that men are more adaptive to the changing expectations of the father-child relationship, whereas spousal relations may have changed more on an ideological level than in daily practice. Developing an egalitarian and communicative spousal relationship requires men to step outside of their old, gendered beliefs in order to transform their understanding of their sense of masculinity in relation to femininity. Doing so would create greater uncertainties and meet with great resistance along the way (Boratav et al., 2014). On this point, I wanted to see if William's perception of help-

¹⁴ The concept of "new man" which has emerged in popular culture and masculinity studies, refers to the phenomenon of men becoming more egalitarian and communicative husbands, and more nurturing and involved fathers at the same time.

seeking in a female-dominated community had also changed accordingly. William replied, “I think it has more to do with individuals’ preferences than gender differences. People tend to seek information by asking others, watching short videos on Douyin, or reading short articles on WeChat due to easy access and timesaving. Reading books, on the other hand, takes more time and effort, but I personally prefer this way.”

By the end of the second interview, I could not help but comment on how much William had transformed over the span of a year, noting his changed way of thinking and increased expressiveness during our conversation compared to the previous year. He laughed, and then replied, “I realised that my mental state last year was indeed terrible. I feel that my relationship with my wife is better now, too. Maintaining relationships requires work. After talking about this with you, I realised that my mindset has changed a lot this year.”

7.4 Summary

In this chapter, I have analysed how men make sense of their identity as SAHFs in relation to their perceptions of women and femininity. The SAHFs were divided into two groups based on their attitudes towards seeking help and networking with other primary caregivers: those who were unwilling to seek childcare and emotional support from others; and those who wanted solidarity and social connections within caregiving communities. Through analysing their responses, a clearer understanding emerged regarding why and how the interviewees adopted, resisted, or were complicit with certain subject positions in their daily practices. The construction and reconstruction of their sense of self as men were influenced by several factors, including their understanding of femininity, their personality shaped by upbringing, and societal pressure to conform to mainstream gender norms. These factors played a crucial role in shaping their attitudes and behaviours as SAHFs.

Additionally, the theme of differences between men and women as represented in the analysed TV drama (chapter four) emerged in conversations with almost all my interviewees. This element, however, shaped their attitudes and behaviours differently: some perceived it as a reason to isolate themselves, while others viewed them as an opportunity to gain different perspective from both men and women. Men who refused to seek help within female-dominated childcare communities also showed reluctance towards solidarity with other men, which is at odds with the concept of “homosociality” depicted in *Marriage Battle*,

where male characters form close bonds and support to each other. However, the development of sense of self and masculinity as a SAHF is an ongoing process based on different individuals' subjective experiences and levels of reflexivity. Several interviewees underwent transformative experiences triggered by unexpected changes in their lives (see Table 2 below). This experience led him to actively reflect upon himself, providing an opportunity to adjust his understanding of masculinity in relation to femininity. In the next chapter, I focus on another aspect of SAHFs' identity-making process, by examining how SAHFs negotiate their fathering practices within the broader context of family relations.

First Group: Caregiving as a solitary activity	Second Group: Caregiving as teamwork
Liu (Beijing) John (Shijiazhuang) Bob (Foshan) La Rou (Chengdu) Chen (Guangzhou) Yu (Beijing) Qi (Qingdao)	Tan (Chongqing) Jim (Beijing) Terry (Beijing) Bai (Beijing) Colin (Hangzhou) [ambivalent] Ervin (Shanghai) Alvin (Shanghai)
Tom (Qingdao) Sherlock (Manchester) William (Shanghai) Tim (Beijing) Magnus (Qingdao) Li (Huizhou)	

} Follow-up interviews →

Table 2: Categorisation of SAHFs' Caregiving Attitudes

Chapter 8: Fathering within the Broader Family Context: Parenting, Spousal and Intergenerational Relations

My discussion in previous chapters has primarily focused on the identity-making process of SAHFs in relation to their work identity and emotional vulnerability. In this final interview-informed chapter, I explore another aspect of this process by examining how men make sense of their stay-at-home fathering practices in the context of childrearing philosophies and broader family dynamics, including their relationships with their partners, parents, and parents-in-law. In so doing, this chapter offers an understanding of the construction of nurturing fatherhood and familial masculinity against the background of changing family dynamics in contemporary urban China. Building on existing literature on contemporary fatherhood and familial masculinity, I examine my interviewees' narratives about their parenting philosophies and practices, their ways of negotiating housework and caring labour with their partners, and their attitudes toward intergenerational childrearing.

8.1 Father-child dynamic: Education and child development

The caring and engaged Chinese father has emerged as a prominent figure in recent years, particularly within the middle-class context, and has been extensively discussed in academic literature over the past two decades. This emergent figure is in line with the growing discourse on parenting and involved fatherhood in Western research (e.g., Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Lareau, 2003; Doucet, 2004; Wall & Arnold, 2007; Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011). However, as outlined in chapter two, the emergence of familial masculinity does not necessarily suggest a linear transformation in fathering practices and spousal dynamics (Jamieson, 1999; Song & Hird, 2014; Liong, 2014; 2017a, 2017b; Harrell & Santos, 2017). In other words, the incorporation of widespread ideas about egalitarian and companionate marriage, as well as caring fatherhood, into men's subjectivities and everyday practices is a non-linear, ongoing process. Men's responses include embracing, adapting, reformulating, and rejecting these ideas.

In his research on Chinese fatherhood in Hong Kong, Liong (2014, 2017a, 2017b) argues that increased engagement in childcare and parenting does not stem from an egalitarian motive to address unequal power dynamics in intimate relationships. Rather, he suggests that it is often driven by life crises (e.g., health issues, absence of the child's mother, and/or job loss) or a

cultural shift towards child-centredness and intensive parenting. Liong therefore concludes that involved fatherhood in Hong Kong is another way to sustain conventional gender ideology, and thus does little to resolve issues of gender inequality.

Liong's observation regarding the influence of life crises on men's involvement in childcare is consistent with the portrayal of SAHFs in all three analysed TV dramas (chapter four) and similar cases reported in studies on SAHFs in the Global North (e.g., Doucet, 2006, 2016; Merla, 2008; Lane, 2009; Latshaw, 2011). However, men's perceptions of fatherhood and manhood are constantly shaped and reshaped by multifaceted factors, including ongoing negotiations within the family, changing needs of the children, and access to flexible work arrangements (Doucet, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to conduct further research on how assuming the role of a SAHF influences individuals' subjective experiences and sense of masculinity, rather than solely categorising fathers as either choosing to be at home or not (Doucet, 2016, p. 11). Along this line, Liong (2017b) briefly touches on the theory of men's reflexivity in crisis in his book on Chinese fatherhood, suggesting that marital breakdown could trigger some fathers to reflect on the way they see and practise fatherhood and marriage (p. 145). As Cao Siyang (2017, p. 209) proposes, "the reflexive and relational feature of intimate practices leaves a creative space for future negotiation towards more equality, especially for those loosely adhering to gender conventions". I have demonstrated how SAHFs' reflexivity affects their sense of self and emotionality in the foregoing chapters. Here, I proceed to explore the impact of SAHFs' reflexivity on their fathering practices within the broader context of family relations.

On Liong's second point about the child-centredness of Chinese fatherhood, other research has also confirmed its importance (Kipnis, 2011; Li & Jankowiak, 2016; Xu, 2016; Li, 2018; Cao & Lin, 2019; Liu, 2019). Conventionally, the ideal Chinese father was primarily seen as a provider (*yang* 养) and educator (*jiao* 教) for their children, with more emphasis on *jiao* than *yang* (Ho, 1987). This vision was rooted in Confucian values of parenthood and masculinity (David & Friedman, 2014). As *Three Character Classics* (*San Zi Jing* 《三字经》) reads, "to feed without teaching is the father's fault" (*yangbujiao, fuzhiguo* 养不教, 父之过). However, as more women entered the workforce and birth control regulations were implemented, fathers are now expected to still fulfil their breadwinning responsibilities while also being more involved in their children's lives. Several studies suggest that the ideal of

participatory fatherhood is triggered by the aspiration to cultivate “successful” children with traits such as independence, competitiveness, and self-governance, which are defined and shaped by the market, government policy, and other social forces (Naftali, 2014; Cao & Lin, 2019). The redefinition of the roles of *jiao* and *yang* in everyday practices of middle-class urban fathers is influenced by the growing commercialisation of children’s education,¹⁵ and the emergence of a more autonomous parenting style in contemporary China triggered by global neoliberalism (Lareau, 2003; Irwin & Elly, 2013; Cao & Lin, 2019). To further contribute to the ongoing debates on the changing notions of *yang* and *jiao* in contemporary China, this chapter examines SAHFs’ narratives on early childhood education (*zaojiao* 早教) before kindergarten, their expectations of their children, and their parenting practices.

I first lay out several key findings to understand how the notion of child-centredness and growing significance of parenting and child development affect men’s decision to partake in primary caregiving duties. I then divide my interviewees into two groups in order to understand some of the similarities and differences of parenting philosophy that exist among SAHFs. Lastly, I investigate a common thread among SAHFs in their parenting philosophies, namely their focus on cultivating desirable qualities and attitudinal values in their children.

8.1.1 Co-learning and screening social groups with the child

Education has been traditionally valued as a decisive factor for upward social mobility (Chen, *et al.*, 2010). This, coupled with the limited number of children per family due to the family planning policy, has made Chinese parents inclined to invest in their children’s education emotionally and financially from a very young age (Fong, 2004). In the case of SAHFs, many of my interviewees highlighted their deep involvement in their children’s early education as a primary focus of their fathering practices. This is in line with Liong’s (2017b) research on Chinese fatherhood, echoing the notion of *wen* (cultural attainment) in Chinese masculinity. While the decision to become a SAHF for my interviewees was influenced by various factors such as job loss, work dissatisfaction, or health issues, the primary determinant that stood out was their commitment to being actively present in their children’s education. As Magnus, a Qingdao-based SAHF, told me:

¹⁵ According to my interviewees, China’s crackdown on school tutoring (implemented since 2021) has not significantly affected their need to send their children for classes after school. As many put it, “there will always have counter-measures from below against policies from above” [*shang you zheng ce, xia you dui ce* 上有政策, 下有对策].

Whether or not to decide to assume the SAHF role depends on how much the father cares about their children's education. If they really cared about their children's education and growth, they would not have time and energy to focus on a full-time career. For me, the most important thing for at least the next ten years is to take care and educate my child. My part-time work is just to maintain a regular income for our family.

Similar to Magnus, many other interviewees expressed a shift in their self-perception, where they began to identify themselves primarily as fathers rather than white-collar workers following the birth of their children. Their increased involvement in childcare and parenting brought them a sense of fulfilment and purpose. In this new role, they regarded their part-time jobs as a means to supplement the family income rather than the defining locus and vehicle of their sense of masculinity. This attests to the transformative effect of fatherhood on their understanding of themselves and their priorities in life. As SAHF/dad vlogger Yu from Beijing said in our interview,

The main change in my life is shift in priorities. Whether it is to help my son with his schoolwork or to be his playmate, I feel morally and emotionally obligated to be there for him. My social life comes after my son and my work is inspired by my time spent with my son. I think this priority shift is very natural for any responsible father - it does not matter if he is a SAHF or not.

Yu's attitude towards the shift in priorities and decision of merging his intimate life as a father/husband with paid work is consistent with what I gathered from his previous interview with *Foki* (see chapter five). This phenomenon indicates a reconstruction of masculinity for SAHFs. Although most SAHFs maintain their employment, by switching to part-time or establishing a new freelance career, the changes in how they perceive their relationship between career and family life suggest a shift in their sense of identity and fulfilment towards fathering practices.

While educating (*jiao*) children has always been emphasised as a father's responsibility, co-learning with children in early childhood education institutions (*zaojiao ban* 早教班) emerged as a recurring theme in my conversations with SAHFs. For the fathers who chose to send their children to *zaojiao ban* before kindergarten, these institutions not only served as a space for their children to socialise, but also as a place for them to learn about parenting skills

as first-time parents. *Zaojiao ban* falls under the category of “professional help” (e.g., books and experts in childrearing) that this group of men deemed more important than seeking advice from other caregivers, as examined in the previous chapter. Contrary to the traditional Chinese father role of being a disciplinarian and educator, these fathers relinquished paternal authority to their children’s tutors in these institutions, describing their involvement as a routine practice of “being there” to support their children. This routine generally involved attending early childhood education classes and activities, organising and participating in outdoor activities, engaging in conversations about school, and assisting with schoolwork. This observation is inconsistent with previous research on Chinese parental involvement that showed a relatively higher level of home-based parental involvement in comparison to school-based activities (Lau, *et al.*, 2011; Xia, *et al.*, 2020). To understand this change in parenting style, I inquired whether my interviewees thought that sending their children to early childhood education institutions was more effective than home-schooling before kindergarten. Most of their responses aligned with Beijing-based SAHF Jim’s point of view:

I think it is good for me to attend *zaojiao* with our 2-year-old daughter, because as a first-time parent, I am also learning alongside our daughter from the professionals, so that I know how to guide her to form better habits when we were at home. Plus, the institution offers an organised environment for her to socialise with other kids, which can help her better adapt to the kindergarten environment.

Attending classes with their children, taught by professionally trained tutors, allowed these SAHFs to acquire knowledge about childrearing and education while building confidence and rapport in their transition to first-time fatherhood. They believed that exposing their children to a peer-oriented environment in *zaojiao ban* helped them develop crucial social skills necessary for school. When I questioned whether these sessions were primarily overpriced socialisation opportunities, Jim vehemently disagreed, stating that “Our family was not even wealthy when our kid was 2, but we signed up for *zaojiao* anyway. If it is for our kids, then it is worth it no matter how much it costs.” This view corroborated with existing research on how some Chinese middle-class parents are willing to spend a small fortune in creating an external environment for their children to receive quality education, as well as pass on their cultural and symbolic capital to their children (Liong, 2017b, p. 118; Ponzini, 2020).

However, another group of SAHFs held an opposite view, considering *zaojiao ban* a waste of money. Both Shanghai SAHF William and Chongqing SAHF Tan argued that exposing their

children to other types of social environments, such as their *xiaoqu* (community/neighbourhood 小区) and playgrounds, could have the same socialisation effect without the additional expenses. “The trend of early education is purely due to the pressure of *neijuan* (involution 内卷),¹⁶ especially for parents in big cities who face competition with other families – it is just not worth the money, in my opinion”, said Tan in our interview. Similarly, Guangzhou-based SAHF Chen expressed scepticism about the socialisation effect of *zaojiao ban*, pointing out that children at such a young age do not retain much from their experiences. As Chen explained, “Before children turn three years old, they seem to be playing with each other, but in truth, they do not understand or remember much. I think that’s why children normally go to kindergarten when they turn three, as they enter the stage in life for them to be ready to experience group activities and learn different skills.” Chen’s viewpoint resonates with several studies on the learning effectiveness of early childhood education, indicating that older children tend to benefit more from adult-directed and structured activities due to their greater cognitive development (Gray, 2013; Li, *et. al.*, 2021).

Following this train of thought, I held follow-up conversations with the first group of SAHFs who were positive about their children’s *zaojiao* experience, intending to probe into their perspectives of young children’s learning effectiveness. Surprisingly, their focus was not on the educational content but rather on two main motives for enrolling their children: *zaojiao* as an effective motivator for SAHFs to be fully engaged with their children, and *zaojiao* as an indicator of class hierarchy for securing their middle-class status.

On the first point of *zaojiao* as a motivator for being fully engaged in childcare and parenting, Yu made a comparison between signing up for *zaojiao* and joining the gym:

Of course, you can certainly exercise in your neighbourhood, but if you signed up for a gym, you would tell yourself that you pay and come here for an hour to work out, so you would probably concentrate and work harder because you invest your money in it. Likewise, I signed up for classes for my son when he was 2 and I was there with him. I told myself that this one hour at the institution is entirely dedicated to my son. The result does not matter, what matters is that I was there wholeheartedly being and learning with him. So, you can’t say that it was a waste of time and money. I think

¹⁶ “It [*neijuan*] refers to the fierce competition in labour markets and in the education system and is a central part of the debate around China’s hyper-competitive culture” (Kladensky, 2021).

signing up for *zaojiao* was a great way to motivate myself as a responsible father. Plus, my son is quite familiar with our neighbourhood, but *zaojiao ban* offered him a new social environment, which was more stimulating for him. I do not necessarily think *zaojiao* made a drastic difference in my son's development, but I do think that it was a positive experience.

Similar to Yu, other SAHFs in this group tended to consider being there at the *zaojiao ban* with their children as a rewarding task in which they could invest themselves as primary caregivers. Beijing SAHF Bai recalled his own experience with delight:

Whether *zaojiao* for my younger daughter or extracurricular courses for my elder son, I am always there with them. Their classes are mostly one hour - I do not look at my phone and be there wholeheartedly with them. Even though, for example, they dance under the guidance of the teacher, which looks cute and silly, I am there to dance with them for every moment. I consider it as an efficient and quality father-child bonding time. Sitting around at home with my children can certainly be bonding time, *but I might feel like I am not doing much*. These courses are organised by professionals and more structured for both my children and I - I feel more motivated to concentrate and 100% be there for them without any distractions (emphasis mine).

Bai's perspective resonated with many other interviewees, highlighting the notion of children as a planned object that necessitates continuous emotional and financial investment, as proposed by Lupton and Barclay (1997). Participating in structured and task-oriented childcare through attending classes with their children provided these SAHFs with a sense of accomplishment in their caregiving role. Self-regulated time at home with their children, in contrast, seemed to be less productive (i.e., "not doing much") to them. This way of thinking implies that courses guided by professionals enhanced their confidence as first-time parents. Moreover, the attempt to draw parallels between going out to complete tasks with their children and going to work as a full-time worker indicated their constant adjustment and reconstruction of the sense of self and masculinity in relation to work.

On the second point of *zaojiao* being a way to secure middle-class status, Beijing SAHF Bai, along with many other interviewees, shared the belief that attending *zaojiao* served as an effective method for screening social groups, both for their children and themselves as parents:

I sent my two children to *zaojiao ban* when they were 7 months old. These institutions allow my children to play with their peers under the guidance of tutors who are experienced in child-rearing and education. In the meantime, we as parents are also able to socialise with other parents who have a similar childrearing mindset and similar household spending power, as attending early childhood education sessions is very expensive. Our kids can therefore be friends and play together in the future.

Magnus, who moved with his family from Beijing back to his hometown Qingdao, also stressed the necessity of social screening. While Magnus was not positive about the hyper-competitive parenting culture in Beijing, he much preferred his son to receive education in Beijing rather than in Qingdao:

We couldn't get a Beijing *hukou* (household registration), so we moved back to Qingdao after I quit my job. My son interacted with a different group of people in Beijing through his *zaojiao ban*, which affects the quality of his education. When we were living in Beijing, his friends' parents were very elite in society. For instance, one of his friend's mothers is a college professor, and the father is a director from CCTV. Another friend's mother is a full-time mother, and the father is a vice president of an international IT corporation. *This is so-called elite education (jingying jiaoyu 精英教育). The level of people in Qingdao is relatively lower. Parents in Qingdao have lower suzhi (literal translation: quality 素质). Moreover, there are a lot more children's grandparents who assume the role of primary caregivers in Qingdao than Beijing. In Beijing, if the father had enough income to support the family, the mother would simply quit and become a full-time mother. But in Qingdao, most fathers do not have the financial capacity to allow their wives to retreat to the family. I therefore think the social environment is important for children's growth and education. If my children were surrounded by high-quality (gao suzhi 高素质) intellectuals, then I think it would positively affect his personality.*

For Magnus, a good *zaojiao* institution not only has qualified teachers, but also has a "quality" source of students. The quality of the institution not only impacts children's learning outcomes, but also influences their learning behaviour and character-building through interaction with teachers and peers (Li & Qiu, 2018). The narratives of Bai and

Magnus explicitly convey class privilege and social elitism. For these fathers, providing quality education for their children involved the accumulation of cultural, social, and economic capital. Economic capital was necessary to afford overpriced early childhood education classes, and entry into these classes was, in turn, used as a marker to actively select social groups for their children and themselves. Magnus's reference to individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and weaker members of the middle class, such as children's grandparents, as "lower level" indicates his desire to use children's education as a means to establish a stronger symbolic boundary between his middle-class group and other classes (Bourdieu, 1984; Ponzini, 2020).

In Chinese society, social distinction is deeply intertwined with the concept of *suzhi* (Kipnis, 2011; Song & Hird, 2014; Ponzini, 2020). Anthropologist Andrew Kipnis (2011, p. 290) explains that "reference to *suzhi* justifies social and political hierarchies of all sorts, with those of 'high' quality being seen as deserving more income, power, and status than those of 'low' quality." This first group of SAHFs enrolled their children in early childhood education sessions because they wanted their children to be surrounded by peers from financially advantaged families with high educational levels. This emphasis on educational background shows how the Bourdieusian concept of capital convertibility comes into play: economic and social capital do not create *suzhi*, or individual qualitative value, but cultural capital does (Bourdieu, 1984; Anagnost, 2004; Ponzini, 2020).¹⁷ As scholars (Li, 2010; Hong & Zhao, 2015) argue, a high level of education is one of the four criteria for the new cultured middle-class, alongside a high and stable income, engagement in professional or managerial occupations, and the ability to maintain a comfortable standard of living. These SAHFs believed that creating an external environment where their children can exclusively socialise and learn with other cultured middle-class families would result in a consequential increase in their degree of *suzhi*. This phenomenon aligns with Bourdieu's theory of habitus stratification (1984). In Bourdieu's view, no one can escape class distinction; and both capital (material resources) and habitus (subjective dispositions and attitudes) are key elements in educational reproduction (Bourdieu, 1984). Capital plays a greater role in building social boundaries between different classes, while habitus is related to the construction of intra-class boundaries

¹⁷ For example, terms such as "new rich" (*baofahu* 暴发户) and "second-generation new rich" have been viewed negatively due to the lack of cultural capital, whereas the (cultured) middle-class has been seen as someone who is well-educated and has good mannerism and taste (*pinwei* 品味) (see Osburg, 2014; Song & Hird, 2014; Ponzini, 2020).

(Bourdieu, 1984, 1990; Fan, 2012). It appears that this group of SAHFs felt the need to maximise their time and financial investment in their children's education in order to actively demarcate both intra-class and inter-class differences.

Therefore, while being present to accompany and co-learn with their children was considered as crucial to all SAHFs in their fathering practice, two different approaches emerged from two different groups of SAHFs during interviews. The first group of SAHFs emphasised securing and strengthening their middle-class status through the creation of a privileged learning environment where their children could socialise with peers from families of the same or upper socioeconomic status. The second group of SAHFs, on the other hand, believed that being there to play and learn with the children in the home environment until they reached school starting age was sufficient for their early development. In the following two subsections, I turn my attention to parenting philosophies for these two groups of men, to further explore their similarities and differences.

8.1.2 All-round development vs. skilled in a certain field

The cultural notion of *wen* in Chinese masculinity pushes fathers to place great significance on their children's academic performance (Liong, 2017b). Checking homework and guiding children to study were daily tasks for all my interviewees. However, they did not necessarily prioritise their children's academic performance as the only crucial aspect of parenting. Instead, they held different expectations for their children that extended beyond their school grades.

“Gaining high grades in school is certainly a good thing, but entering a good university is not the only path to success anymore,” as SAHF Yu explained. By analysing the interview data, I identified two distinct patterns among the two groups of men discussed in the previous subsection. The SAHFs advocating for *zaojiao* emphasised fostering their children's all-round development (*quanmian fazhan* 全面发展) in their parenting philosophies. They aimed to make their children more competitive in seeking better schooling, which would lead to higher-paying jobs and better prospects. On the other hand, the second group of SAHFs expressed that they would be content if their children discovered their passion and became proficient in a specific field (*yiji zhichang* 一技之长) that would enable them to make a good living.

I asked the first group of SAHFs what “all-round development” meant to them. Beijing SAHF Nick provided me with an answer that correlated closely with the answers of most other SAHFs in this group:

I hope both of my children can be involved in various activities beyond school, such as sports, languages, and other pursuits that contribute to their cognitive and social-emotional development in a comprehensive manner. While I am uncertain about their specific interests at this age, I aim to create opportunities for them to explore a wide range of experiences, provided our resources allow for it.

To achieve all-round development, this group of SAHFs continued to enrol their children in various extracurricular courses. They dedicated their children’s holiday breaks, weekends, and even weekday evenings to attending different classes. When discussing the reasons behind the approach, Beijing SAHF Yu expressed, “I hope my child can develop in an all-round way, because having various skills will never be burden (*ji duo bu ya shen* 技多不压身)”. I asked Yu how many classes he chose for his son, he responded: “A lot! English, football, baseball, swimming, Sanda (Chinese kickboxing 散打), computer programming and chess. I teach him basketball too.” The number of extracurricular classes chosen by Yu and many other SAHFs in this group surprised me. Therefore, I further asked Yu, “Aren’t you worried that your kids would be overburdened by all these classes?” Yu responded,

I do not expect him to stick to all these classes for the long term. I see them more as experiments to gauge my son’s interest. So far, as long as I support and accompany him during these classes, he rarely gets bored or tired, and it seems like he genuinely enjoys them. At his age of 7, he has a lot of curiosity and is interested in many things. However, if he decides not to continue with some of these activities or becomes too busy with schoolwork in the future, that’s perfectly fine. Even if he ended up sticking with only two or three out of ten activities we’ve tried, I would still consider it a success.

“Experiment” was a recurring keyword for the SAHFs in this first group. Magnus mentioned that if his son faced challenges in balancing schoolwork and extracurricular activities, he would encourage his son to choose one or two activities and commit to them. According to Magnus:

I think that children are like blank canvases with numerous possibilities and potentials. As parents, we should provide them with as many opportunities as possible to explore, and then respect their decisions whether they want to continue or not. It's like conducting an experiment.

Creating an environment for their children to participate in various activities and acquire diverse skills was the priority for these SAHFs. A sense of parental autonomy can be found when they all emphasised the importance of allowing their children to explore their own passions. As Beijing SAHF Nick explained, "These classes are simply my suggestions for my kids, rather than an attempt to enforce them. They are supposed to be enjoyable while my children learn something new."

For this first group of SAHFs, the responsibility of choosing extracurricular courses mainly fell on the parents, as their children were too young to make such decisions. While the courses selected by SAHFs were diverse and not specifically gendered, boys were generally encouraged more to participate in sports activities compared to girls. As Yu reflected in our conversation, "If I had a daughter who wanted to learn to play football, I would certainly support her. But I guess signing up my son for football class was my instinct, as it seemed natural for boys to learn some sports." For the first group of SAHFs, their decisions were largely based on the following three considerations.

Firstly, they believed that the chosen courses would benefit their children's intellectual development, such as chess and computer programming. As Yu explained, "Even though chess is not directly related to my son's grades in school, the analytical and logical thinking skills that he is able to develop from learning chess can hopefully benefit his schoolwork and overall development." Yu's view aligns with the existing scholarship on extracurricular activities that indicates the positive correlation between participation in a wider variety of extracurricular activities and improved academic performance among adolescents (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Rose-Krasnor, Busseri, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2006; Denault & Poulin, 2009). Seeing extracurricular activities as a way to foster skills that can promote better academic results implies that children's academic performance remained the priority for this group of SAHFs, even though they may no longer be the only focal point for their children's development. As Yu told me about his expectations of his son, "My son does not have to be the best in his class, but just make sure that he can at least get into a first-tier university (*yiben daxue* 一本大学) – I don't think that's too much to ask."

Secondly, joining extracurricular activities served as an extension of socialisation experiences for SAHF's children after *zaojiao*. As Shanghai SAHF Alvin shared, "I enrolled my daughter up in fencing class because she told me that many of her peers in school had joined and she did not want to be left behind. After talking to other parents in her class, I figured that it would be an opportunity for her to get along with her peers. Same for me with other parents." Alvin's position resonates with research indicating the positive correlation between structured leisure activities with schoolmates and student's sense of identity and confidence in school (Barber *et al.*, 2001; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002).

Finally, some SAHFs made decisions about their children's courses based on their own interests or the skills that they never had the chance to learn when they were young. For instance, Yu wanted his son to learn football because he is an avid fan and enjoys playing it with his friends. Yu expressed, "If he happened to like it, it would be nice, as we can form our own team together. It would be one of our father-son bonding activities." Similarly, Magnus from Qingdao chose the violin as his son's instrument to learn because it was his own unfulfilled dream. As Magnus stated:

The violin has always been my favourite instrument, but my family could not afford music lessons for me. So, I thought that it would be nice if my son could learn it now and hopefully, he would like it. If the violin did not become his passion, that would be completely fine too, but it is still worth a try.

Magnus's statement suggested that parents' own childhood experiences play a role in shaping their own child-rearing values (Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Coles, 2002; Merla, 2008; Liong, 2017b). By transferring his unfulfilled ambitions onto his son, Magnus saw his son as an extension of himself, providing an opportunity to fulfil his own regrets. This behaviour echoes parenting literature that suggests that parents often reframe their unfulfilled ambitions through their children.¹⁸

While there is a long-standing psychological tradition that individuals often incorporate close others, especially their children, into their self-concept (Allport, 1943), Magnus's statement that it would be "completely fine" if the violin was not his son's passion, and Yu's mention of his son "happening to like" playing football, indicate a sense of parental autonomy. Both fathers had preferences when selecting extracurricular courses based on their own interests

¹⁸ See, for example, Freud, 1957; Aron, *et al.*, 2004; Grolnick, *et al.*, 2007; Brummelman, *et al.*, 2013.

and the idea of taking pride in their children's achievement. However, they made sure that their expectations did not hinder their children from pursuing their own passions.

In contrast to the first group of SAHFs, the second group adopted a more relaxed parenting approach and did not place as much emphasis on the benefits of *zaojiao*. Their approach was primarily driven by their own personal experiences and the belief that children should be given the freedom to discover their own passions. They enrolled their children in either no extracurricular courses or a smaller number of courses unless their children expressed specific interest in a particular activity. For example, Chongqing SAHF Tan described himself as the kind of father who had no expectations for his children's academic achievement:

I was not academically inclined when I was a child, and my wife also did not pursue higher education. She attended an art college and is now a successful interior designer who supports our family financially. Because of our personal experiences, we share the belief that if our children do not have a strong desire to study, it is acceptable for them to leave school. We understand the pain that can arise from forcing children to pursue something they dislike. I have even told my son that if he does not want to go through the high school entrance exam, he has the option to quit and explore other opportunities. We believe that if he can find something he loves and can make a living out of it, it would be worth it.

For Tan, based on his and his partner's experiences, academic qualifications were not necessarily linked to future living standards. I subsequently asked if he focused on seeking ways to cultivate his children's interests by enrolling them in various extracurricular courses, as many other SAHFs did. He responded:

I did try to follow the parenting trend online by taking my elder son to a Lego course and a computer programming course, because many people said that it is good for children's intellectual development. And my wife tried to get him into drawing as that is her specialty, but he did not seem to be interested in any of them. Since then, we realised that we need to just let him figure out what he likes. Our job is to observe what our two children show interest in and see how we can help them from there.

Tan's narrative shows his process of reflection on his parenting approach and how he adapted it for both of his children. As he added, "it might be a long way to go. After all, not everyone

is as lucky as my wife, who found her passion in drawing very early on in her life. But I am sure that both my children will find something that they love.” Tan’s different parenting style made me wonder about his attitude towards using *zaojiao* and extracurricular classes as a means to make fatherhood more rewarding and productive, as suggested by the first group of SAHFs. Tan noted:

Being a SAHF is already a full-time job, which comes with endless housework chores and caregiving responsibilities, including preparing meals for the entire family, doing laundry, and helping my sons with their homework. If I could manage all these tasks well, I would certainly feel a sense of achievement – signing up for courses for the child just to make yourself feel good is so unnecessary.

Tan’s view coincides with other SAHFs in the second group, which made me realise how these two groups of SAHFs redefine work in different ways, despite both considering being a SAHF as demanding as a full-time profession. The first group of SAHFs found a sense of accomplishment and productivity through public engagement. Without involving their children in *zaojiao* and adult-oriented extracurricular activities, they perceived domestic chores – housework and caregiving – as tedious and unproductive. Beijing SAHF Bai, for instance, suggested, sitting around at home with his children made him feel like he is “not doing much”, implying a devaluation of domestic work. On the other hand, going to *zaojiao* and extracurricular courses with their children created a sense of routine for these SAHFs to maintain social interaction with others. In contrast, Tan and other SAHFs in the second group derived a sense of achievement from managing all the domestic tasks. They prioritised fulfilling their responsibilities within the household, and social engagement through their children was not a necessity for them.

Just as Tan’s parenting values stemmed from his personal experiences, Qingdao SAHF Tom also described how his own life had taught him that there was to life than excelling in school. Tom recalled his passion and career choice:

I never worked in the office. I have always pursued my passion for writing because I discovered my love for reading and writing on my own, without attending any extracurricular courses. What I learnt from reading extensively has honed my critical thinking abilities and my ability to provide valuable advice. As a result, I worked as a consultant in an advertising agency and eventually started my own advertising

company. I am not too worried about my son. I do not expect him to share the same interests as me. He will find something he truly enjoys and can make a living out of.

Both Tom and Tan demonstrated a relaxed approach toward their children's academic performance. This led me to question whether their class habitus influenced their parenting practices. I asked Tom, "What if your son can't find his passion in life?" "He will, eventually. It is his own journey of self-discovery. We, as parents, will of course provide him with guidance and resources, if necessary," Tom answered. Tom's response suggests that he did not feel the need to equip his child with qualifications to protect the child from poverty and hardship. He held cultural legitimacy and had the resources to allow his child the time to explore and figure out his own path in life.

On the other hand, fathers who were not as resourceful and educated as Tom, such as many of the SAHFs I interviewed, may rely heavily on the formal education system to develop their children's intellectual abilities and pave the way for a better future through *gaokao* (college entrance exams 高考)¹⁹. Beijing-based SAHF Terry, for example, explained that his family's financial situation was not as comfortable as some other families in his child's school. He mentioned that he did not save much when he worked as an agent in an advertising agency, and his wife was now the sole earner for the family. Terry made it clear that *gaokao* was currently the only viable path for his child. He said, "I don't expect my son to be the top student in his class, but hopefully his grade can at least get him into a first-tier university, as it is a steppingstone for his future. We do not have many connections (*guanxi* 关系) in Beijing and can't yet afford him to go to a foreign country to study." These contrasting perspectives highlight how the class background and available resources of SAHFs play a role in shaping their attitudes towards their children's education and prospects.

However, it is worth noting that there were also nuanced differences in parenting philosophy and fathering practice within this second group of men. An example of this is seen in the case of Shanghai SAHF William, who, like others in the group, did not see the benefits of *zaojiao*. However, William took a slightly different stand regarding children's academic performance. He believed that his children's academic performance in school symbolised whether they were willing to work hard enough to achieve goals in life. As William demonstrated,

¹⁹ See more about the working-class counterparts examined in Liong's Cultural Parent section (2017b, p. 116-125).

I care about their progress more than anything else – they can be the last one in class but if they work hard and reach the middle at the end of the academic year, then that is excellent. Striving to make progress in school shows their learning initiative and studiousness, which are the important attitudinal values that I want my children to have in their lives.

While SAHFs have different attitudes towards their children’s academic performance both within the group and among these two groups of men, William’s emphasis on developing his children’s learning initiative and studiousness as key attitudinal values suggests a common ground for all SAHFs – the importance of cultivating personal qualities and attitudinal values in their fathering practices.

8.1.3 Cultivating desirable qualities and attitudinal values

As mentioned above, providing guidance to children in developing ideological and attitudinal values was a key aspect of all SAHFs’ understanding of *jiao*. However, the two groups of men analysed above did not exhibit a distinct, linear pattern in this aspect of fathering. Some SAHFs tended to exert more parental authority, whereas others encouraged more autonomy when cultivating their children’s interests. The difference in their parenting approaches was mainly influenced by the specific values they wished their children to develop, which largely stemmed from their (and their spouses’) life experiences and lessons.

SAHFs’ emphasis on cultivating children’s qualities and values falls into the realm of “education for quality” (*suzhi jiaoyu* 素质教育) discussed earlier in the chapter. These desirable values and qualities include, but are not limited to, learning initiative, independent-thinking, patience, perseverance, self-confidence, and a sense of responsibility. For Qingdao SAHF Magnus, for example, self-confidence and a sense of curiosity were prioritised in his parenting philosophy due to his experience at the previous workplace. Observing the lack of confidence and sense of curiosity in others at work made Magnus realise the importance of fostering these qualities. As he elaborated,

During my time as a manager in my previous company in Beijing, I had the opportunity to oversee the hiring and training of new employees. It became apparent to me that many individuals with excellent academic degrees lacked essential interpersonal skills. Some of them displayed arrogance, thinking they knew everything, while others struggled with social interactions and lacked self-confidence.

This experience led me to believe that personal qualities hold greater importance than school grades alone. After all, exam preparation is only a small part of one's life. I believe that my son's confidence, curiosity for knowledge, and willingness to learn are crucial qualities that will benefit him not only in school but also in the future workplace. Witnessing the impact of these qualities first-hand, I am convinced that they contribute significantly to success in professional settings. Academic achievement should not overshadow the development of these essential life skills.

“How do you help him develop these qualities?” I subsequently asked Magnus.

“Encouragement” and “learning with the child” came as two main approaches not only for Magnus, but also for many other SAHFs in their fathering practices. As Magnus demonstrated,

To develop my son's sense of curiosity, I would not discourage him from asking any questions. I know a lot of parents do not like their children to ask questions, maybe because they do not know the answer or think the questions are stupid. I would not do that - if my son asked me something that I do not know, I would say that *“I am not sure either, but let's find out the answer together”*. I would also actively share what I saw or learnt recently with my son, to allow him to see the joy and excitement of learning new knowledge. When he did not know or struggled to learn something, *I would not put pressure on him either - encouragement is the key for him to gain confidence and maintain curiosity in learning* (emphasis mine).

Learning with the child suggests that Magnus treated his child as an equal, independent individual from a very young age, which was also a preferred approach for Guangzhou-based SAHF Chen. In contrast to coercive behaviour, Chen's parenting approach encouraged his daughter's autonomy, as Chen illustrated in our interview:

Whether it is choosing extracurricular courses or clothes to wear, I respect my daughter's decision. Even though she is only three years old, I treat her as a very independent individual. I inform her of what I plan to do, and she can choose whether she wants to come or not. For example, I would tell her that her mother and I are going to see relatives, and it would be polite to say hello to the elderly. But if she does not want to come or does not want to say hello, I would not force her to do so. My wife and my own parents have an opposite view, but I insist my way of raising my

daughter because I believe it is important to treat children as individuals and respect them. They should not be treated as someone who does not know anything. In fact, they know a lot and are very sensitive.

The parenting philosophies of these SAHFs reflect a recognition and appreciation for individual freedom of choice. This sensitivity to individual freedom is influenced by the reciprocal and dynamic interactions between changing values within the nuclear family and the broader societal changes since the post-Mao era (Davis & Harrell, 1993; Yan, 2003). Additionally, the influence of global trends promoting autonomy and self-reliance can be observed in their parenting approaches (Lareau, 2003; Irwin & Elley, 2013).

While some SAHFs lean towards an authoritative parenting style, it is important to differentiate it from an authoritarian style, as indicated by existing research on parenting styles (Quoss & Zhao, 1995; Peterson *et al.*, 2005; Li & Jankowiak, 2016). The authoritative style, which these fathers adopted, involves the use of inductive disciplinary methods, and emphasises rule-establishing as a means for the child's learning and development. In contrast, the authoritarian style relies on strict and coercive techniques to enforce obedience and maintain the father's dominant position within the family. SAHFs who followed an authoritative parenting style perceive themselves as mentors and educators, guiding their children's education while imparting values and qualities. Beijing SAHF Nick, for instance, stressed the importance of qualities such as patience and perseverance in his parenting philosophy. As Nick illustrated,

*My wife and I both agreed that patience and perseverance are the key qualities for our son, regardless of what he decides to learn. All parents think their children are smart, which is true. Children are like a piece of blank paper, so they have remarkable memories. However, in order to stand out among other children, it is crucial for them to learn the importance of patience and perseverance. Kids are generally curious about a lot of things, but they often lose interest quickly (referred to as “three minutes heat”; *san fenzhong redu* 三分钟热度). This trait is not beneficial in the long run, as they may not accomplish anything substantial. Therefore, *our responsibility* is to provide him with various [extracurricular courses] options and observe which one he shows passion for. Once he chooses a path, we encourage him to stick with it, even when he encounters difficulties. This process requires negotiation and guidance from us. Ultimately, we do not really care what he chooses in the end because we believe that*

as long as he can be patient and persistent in learning a certain skill, he will eventually reap the benefits, regardless of the specific path he takes (emphasis mine).

Nick use of phrases such as “my wife and I”, “we as parents”, “negotiation”, and “guidance” highlights the difference between his parenting approach and a more authoritarian style. Nick portrayed his decision-making as a joint effort with his wife, reflecting the image of a postmillennial “new man” who believes in egalitarian, power-sharing, and companionate spousal relationships (Song & Hird, 2014). A certain level of autonomy and flexibility could be found in his parenting technique, as he was open to negotiation, rather than imposing his expectations without considering his child’s preference. However, Nick also displayed paternal authority in his statement. Unlike Magnus and Chen’s approach of “learning with the children” and “treating them as individuals”, Nick adopted a more structured approach to ensure that his child would achieve what he considered valuable.

Along the same lines, SAHF William had a “reward mechanism” in place to teach his children responsibility with money and gratitude for others’ hard work. When discussing his attitude towards whether the wife should quantify SAHFs’ domestic contribution (see more in chapter six), William pointed me to a different direction by informing me that he used a mechanism to quantify everyone’s contribution to the family for his two children to see. As he said,

I don’t particularly need to quantify my domestic contribution to my wife because she already knows and appreciates it, but I do this with my children. For example, I ask both to pay for the meals that we prepare for them, and they can earn money through being productive like reading, practising the violin, or helping with household chores. I want them to learn how to be responsible with spending and appreciate hard work. Our family is a mini society for them to prepare for entering the society in the future.

Meanwhile, Foshan SAHF Bob said that he did not want to exert too much influence on his son and wanted to allow more autonomy so that his son could form his own personality traits. Yet, when Bob noticed a possible tendency in his son’s gender identity that did not align with his expectations, he could not help attempting to direct his son’s gender to the “appropriate” gender status. Bob also revealed that he would not be accepting if his son were to identify as gay in the future:

My 6-year-old son has shown an interest in pink and Barbie dolls, and his expression of gender roles tends to be more feminine. This has led me to worry that he may grow up to identify as homosexual, even though my wife is accepting of any sexual orientation. I have not actively tried to change his preferences, but I do encourage him to engage in more masculine activities and learn sports to provide a balance. But if he does eventually identify as gay, there is nothing I can do about it, even though it may be frustrating for me.

Even though Bob made an effort to adopt a more relaxed and autonomous parenting style, the urge to guide his son in the desired direction was still strong when his son's action deviated from his own values and expectations. This situation reflects the dilemma observed by Shawn Johansen (2001) among American fathers, who simultaneously expect their children to be independent while also desiring their obedience. Bob's case indicates that the paternal habitus of authoritative educational figures is hard to escape, even with a sense of reflexivity. It also suggests that embracing a relatively progressive gender role does not necessarily translate into changing attitudes towards gender identities in the construction of masculinity.

8.2 Spousal dynamic: Negotiating housework and caring labour

This section investigates SAHFs' ways of negotiating housework and caring labour, to contribute new perspectives to changing spousal power dynamics within the family. Before moving on to the analysis of the interview data, I first present an outline of spousal relations examined in existing research, to better understand how my interviewees' practices transform and/or reproduce the unequal power dynamics within the family.

Studies on Chinese fatherhood and masculinities have pinpointed men's decision-making power in relation to housework and caring labour division as indicative of the persistence of men's hegemonic position, despite the growing popularity of the emotionally expressive and caring family man (Hird, 2009; Song & Hird, 2014; Cao, 2017; Liong, 2017). While conjugal relationships have generally geared towards a more intimate and equal direction in the contemporary world,²⁰ the extent to which the idea of equality is manifested in men's daily practices as caring husbands and fathers remains a question that requires further exploration (Jamieson, 1999; Coltrane, 2000; Song & Hird, 2014). Unequal financial power between

²⁰ See Giddens's (1992) work on "pure relationship - the transformation of intimacy in late modernity.

husband and wife has also been identified as a key contributing factor to the reinforcement of the husband's authority (Song & Hird, 2014; Cao, 2017). Meanwhile, Osburg's (2014) work on "anxious wealth" suggests that men's role as the decision maker in the household persists even when the dynamics of labour division change. As Osburg (2014) points out, many of his female entrepreneur informants complained about "the chauvinistic thinking of Chinese men" even when they are not the breadwinner of the family, so that women experience a double burden (p. 174).

The unequal power dynamic in the domestic sphere is primarily manifested in the division of parental childcare and household chores. Research indicates that mothers and fathers engage in different types of interactions with their children (Brandth & Kvande, 1998, 2016; Doucet, 2006; Liong, 2017b). Men's increased involvement in the domestic sphere is often limited to being the "playmate" for the child by, for example, engaging in outing activities and teaching the child independence, rather than assuming housework responsibilities, as many consider housework (such as cleaning, cooking, and ironing) as menial and emasculating. This phenomenon, as summarised by Berit Brandth and Elin Kvande (1998), is referred to as "masculine care" that perpetuates the gendered division of labour within the household (for further literature, see chapter two). Even when men are more involved in caregiving, the tasks that they choose to undertake tend to reinforce innate biological differences between the sexes, associating childcare and housework with femininity and motherhood. These findings suggest that gender exerts a stronger influence on parental and caregiving styles than does extent of involvement. This section expands and adds complexity to the notion that men and women assume distinct gender roles within the household. By exploring how SAHFs perceive and navigate their domestic and caregiving responsibilities, I seek to gain insights into how they either reinforce or actively challenge the gendered power imbalance within the household. Through this analysis, a deeper understanding can be archived regarding the ways in which SAHFs contribute to the transformation or reproduction of gender dynamics within the family unit.

While there are some similarities to the arguments put forth by existing research, my findings reveal a greater range of practices among the SAHFs interviewed. It is evident that there is diversity in how these fathers negotiated and navigated their domestic responsibilities with their wives. One group of SAHFs constructed and sustained their privilege by engaging in

negotiations that favoured their own interests, while another group willingly relinquished their decision-making power, recognising and appreciating their wife's contribution to the family. The couple dynamics were also subject to change, influenced by men's levels of reflexivity. In this section, by analysing my interviewees' narratives on the power dynamic in the household, I show how familial masculinity and nurturing fatherhood are continuously reconstructed in relation to their perceptions of femininity and motherhood.

All SAHFs' narratives, as examined in the previous section, indicate their active involvement in *jiao*, albeit in different ways, including accompanying their children to activities and classes, and/or formulating home-schooling techniques to help their children cultivate desirable values. Maintaining a safe and clean environment for the children by performing housework and caregiving, on the other hand, is a key aspect of *yang* in the *yang/jiao* dynamic, which has been conventionally associated with maternal duties. This section investigates what contributes to two different SAHF narratives about negotiating the division of housework and caring responsibilities. In doing so, it sheds light on how SAHFs reproduce or actively transform the gendered power imbalance in spousal relationships, while highlighting broader implications for gender equality within the household.

At the beginning of our conversations, all interviewees informed me that they not only believed that the division of housework should be equal, but also that they actively engaged in all types of caregiving practices, ranging from changing nappies to attending school meetings and spending time in and outside the house with the child. Therefore, while *jiao* has conventionally been more valued than *yang* in the ideal image of a Chinese father (Ho, 1987), it appeared that both aspects were equally crucial in the fathering practices of most SAHFs. Moreover, a more egalitarian spousal relationship seemed to be the norm in their households. However, conceptualising housework and caring responsibilities as shared and effectively "genderless" is one thing, but describing actual daily practices reveals something more complex (Townsend, 2002; Deutsch, 2007).

As our conversations progressed, two distinct patterns emerged from SAHFs' narratives about how they participated in housework and childcare duties in everyday life. The first group of SAHFs, who insisted on the benefits of *zaojiao* and extracurricular activities, displayed selectively in the types of household chores they engaged in. While they were actively involved in all aspects of childcare, this group of men preferred outdoor activities

with their children. This consistent pattern aligns with the concept of a “masculine way of childcare” proposed by Berit Brandth and Elin Kvande (1998), which emphasises adventure and independence.

The second group of SAHFs informed me that they would perform whatever household chores needed to be done, without prioritising their own preferences. This group provided no explicit preference for specific caregiving activities, and their narratives appeared to be more empathetic towards their partners’ contributions.

In the excerpts below, Beijing SAHF Yu and Qingdao SAHF Qi from the first group described their division of work and responsibilities at home. Both Yu and Qi have a freelance job as vloggers/writers, and their partners also work from home. As indicated below, both saw equal sharing of housework as the taken-for-granted norm, and yet what tasks they chose to perform were completely dependent upon their own personal preferences and interests:

Yu: I do what I can do. I don’t know how to cook, *so I let my wife do it*. But I can do the dishes, laundry and clean the floor - so I would actively accomplish these tasks. We’ve been married for years, and I think we’ve reached a tacit understanding about the division of housework, which is quite reasonable.

Qi: *I don’t think housework chores are menial, as I actually enjoy doing most of them. Maybe this is because I don’t have a 9-5 job, these are all I can do*. We have a very clear division of labour. For example, she wouldn’t ask or interfere with my decisions about work. When it comes to housework, there are things that she would never do, such as cooking and buying groceries. And there are things *I would not do or care about in a million years*, such as buying toilet paper or clothes for our son. It might sound extreme, but this is how we operate in the family (emphasis mine).

During separate conversations, I asked both Yu and Qi if their wives also enjoyed performing the tasks they chose not to do. Yu responded, “She is very good at cooking, and I can’t be bothered to learn – there is no need to force it. I think she enjoys doing it most of the time. I am not sure”. After a pause, then he added, “But I think our division of labour is quite fair, in the sense that we both contribute to the family in a fairly equal amount.” Meanwhile, Qi

answered my question firmly, “Well, whether she likes them or not, they [household chores] have to be done – there was not any way around.” Both Yu and Qi’s responses revealed their privileged ability to choose the contours of their involvement in housework, as they saw their decision about what kind of tasks they performed as a given, without having to consider their partners’ feelings or preferences. In other words, even though their partners and their contributions to the family might be “equal”, as described by Yu, neither Yu nor Qi seemed to give equal attention and consideration to their partners’ preferences or interests in performing different tasks.

Yu’s answer showed his awareness that the fixed labour division at home was completely due to his own lack of interest in learning how to cook, but he then justified this behaviour by quantifying his contribution to the household. Qi’s firm response indicated his unwillingness to take interest in tasks that he considered tedious, and that he would be the one who had the final say if there was disagreement on the division of housework, as “they have to be done”. In addition, Qi’s statement – “maybe this is because I don’t have a 9-5 job, these are all I can do” – unintentionally implied that he took on the household duties that he considered inferior or tedious and placed a higher value on full-time job than on housework. Another interviewee from the first group, Li from Huizhou, told me that he would do all the housework, but only in the temporary absence of his wife. As Li elaborated:

Both my wife and I work from home. She does two-thirds of the housework. I also sometimes clean and buy groceries to *help out*. My role is mostly *an assistant to my wife*. For example, when she cooks, I would *help out* with chopping or doing dishes. This is because even though we both have part-time jobs; I am generally busier than her at [paid] work. However, *when she is not around*, I certainly would do all the housework (emphasis mine).

Li’s recurrent phrases such as “help out” and “an assistant to my wife” propagated the notion that doing housework is *naturally* women’s responsibility. The fact that he was “generally busier than her at [paid] work” seemingly legitimised his role as an assistant when it came to housework. It therefore appears that housework was not on Li’s daily agenda, even when acting as a SAHF – unless under special circumstances, i.e., the temporary absence of his wife.

Regarding childcare tasks, SAHFs who prioritised their own preferences in housework chores commonly described outdoor activities with their children as a key component of their caregiving routine. As Yu stated, “I am usually the one who takes my son out to play. I think most fathers are more playful and adventurous, whereas women are less willing to take any risk when taking care of kids as they are *naturally* more cautious and protective.” I subsequently asked, “Do you think taking risks is better than being more cautious in childrearing?” Yu responded unhesitatingly, “I certainly believe my way of raising kids is better. It is important to allow children to explore and find out what are dangerous and what are safe to try by themselves. In other words, I want my son to be bold but cautious (*danda xinxi* 胆大心细) when doing anything in life.” Evidently, Yu emphasised his fathering in outdoor spaces amongst other caregiving activities, to showcase qualities of his childrearing approach that are different from conventional maternal practices, such as risk-taking, independence, fun and playful. In doing so, Yu continued to draw on a discourse that presents childcare as another way for men to reproduce the innate biological differences between men and women discussed in existing research (Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004; Doucet, 2006; Liong, 2017b). Moreover, by overly generalising maternal practice as “*naturally* more cautious and protective” in contrast to “adventurous” paternal practice, Yu devalued the benefits of maternal practice.

Similarly, Qi described running with his son every morning as his main caregiving activity:

I go for a run every day, so I will take my son with me as our daily exercise and bonding time. My wife invests more time and energy in our son’s education as she is more concerned and anxious about this. *She has her own plan, so I would just listen to her – she is the decision maker in this aspect.* She will only talk about our son’s education with me when she has something to discuss and needs my input. Otherwise, I am not that involved in our son’s schoolwork.

Qi portrayed himself as a caring father with a relaxed childrearing approach, emphasising his role as his son’s playmate, and as more of a participant and counsellor in his child’s education than the primary decision-maker. When I asked if running with his son was the only childcare activity he engaged in, Qi responded, “No, of course not. I also cook for my son daily and take care of him in many other aspects.” After a pause, he added, “They did not come to my mind first, I guess, because they are mostly just mundane, daily tasks.” While running and cooking were both daily tasks Qi performed for or with his son, he actively

brought up running as more relevant to fathering practice, perceiving it as more significant than cooking, which is conventionally more associated with mothering and femininity.

Certainly, spending quality time with their children entailed a shift from the authoritative father figure to being “new fathers” who engage more in face-to-face interaction and emotional communication with their children (Lamb, 2000; Wang, 2014; Xiao, 2016). Although these men did not prioritise mentioning any childrearing activities other than outdoor activities in their narratives, they did suggest that they were willing to do all, or most childrearing tasks in times of emergency (e.g., when the mother was not around). In this sense, these men symbolised a progressive image as caring fathers. However, childcare involves not just a set of activities or time allocations but also a mindset. How men perceive different childcare activities in relation to their sense of masculinity shapes their subjective experience as a SAHF and is crucial in developing a more equal power dynamic with their partners in the division of labour. The extracts above are, in some ways, examples of men’s ability to continue to position themselves as experts in childcare but as playmates rather than as primary caregiver; this positioning is not necessarily a calculated strategy, but is one that has evolved through deeply embedded, gendered practices of care.

On the other hand, for SAHFs whose partners acted as the sole breadwinner, they would do what needed to be done in the house instead of prioritising their own preferences. The following exchange with Chongqing SAHF Tan shows how he willingly took on almost all the housework, as he acknowledged and appreciated his wife’s work for the family, with a particular emphasis on her financial contribution:

Tan: I do most of the housework, but not all – my wife does some whenever she is free too. For example, she really likes using the Dyson vacuum cleaner, so she is in charge of cleaning the floor, which certainly eases my burden on a daily basis.

Me: You seem happy that you do most of the housework – is it because your wife is busy at work?

Tan: Yes, but more importantly, *her income is really high, so this is a very practical thing* – she acts as the breadwinner who shoulders great responsibilities for our two

children and me. It is therefore necessary and natural for me to do all the work within the domestic sphere (emphasis mine).

For Tan, having a wife who was the sole breadwinner made him highly value her contribution to the family and therefore felt justified in taking on the entirety of the housework at home. Similarly, Peter, a SAHF based in Shijiazhuang, informed me that it was only “natural” for him to do all the housework during weekdays:

There is no labour division [regarding housework]. I spend much more time at home, and my wife is the breadwinner for our entire family, so naturally I do most of the housework. During weekends, I do less when my wife is home, as she would usually cook. She cooks better than me – I have been cooking for our son for several years now, but my cooking skills still have not improved much.

In contrast to Yu and Qi from the first group, Peter’s statement indicated his willingness to learn cooking for the family; even though his wife was better at cooking than him, Peter did not use this as an excuse to automatically assign the task to her. While both Peter and Tan actively took up all the housework, it is worth noting that Peter did not voluntarily assume the role of SAHF like Tan. Peter’s attitude towards doing housework, however, showed a certain level of acceptance of the SAHF role, as well as a genuine appreciation for his working wife:

Staying at home is not as dull as I thought it would be – I learnt new things that I would not have had the chance to learn if I worked full-time, and I do get a sense of achievement when I accomplish domestic chores and take good care of my son. I think a lot of men, including my old self, identify too much of their self-worth with what they do for a living, and that’s too bad.

The reflexivity exhibited in this statement reinforces my point in the introduction of this chapter, that to understand changes in men’s sense of self and masculinity, their subjective experiences and self-reflection across time after assuming the role should be highlighted, rather than only focusing on whether they chose the role willingly or not.

The narratives of the second group of SAHFs revealed a different perspective on their role as caregivers. Unlike the first group, they did not highlight being playmates with their children as a distinct aspect of their caregiving practice to differentiate it from “maternal” practice. Instead, they engaged in various activities, both indoors and outdoors, with their children. As

Tan elucidated, “I do enjoy going on mini adventures amid nature with my son, and we usually do. But whenever his mum is available, she will join us, or she will take my son out instead, so I can have time doing other stuff such as reading and going to the gym.” William similarly expressed his enjoyment of all types of activities with his children, and on weekends, his wife took on the primary caregiver role to spend time with the children while he focused on personal self-care. For Tan and William, care was understood as a routine that they shared with their partners. Their fathering practices reflected a form of “de-gendered” childcare (Ranson, 2015, p. 19), where childrearing activities were perceived as achievable by anyone, regardless of gender (Merla, 2008; Ranson, 2015).

Based on my analysis of how SAHFs negotiated housework and caregiving divisions with their partners, two main patterns emerged. The first group consisted of SAHFs who had the privilege of choosing their involvement in housework and caregiving activities due to their part-time or freelance income. They prioritised their preferences in certain tasks and outdoor activities while still sharing the housework or acting as helpers to their spouses. They took up all necessary domestic tasks only on special occasions when their wives were temporarily away. In this group, domestic chores were often seen as subordinate to their work, and they tended to maintain a position of decision-making power within the couple.

The second group of SAHFs actively engaged all types of domestic tasks regardless of their own preferences or interests. They also all highlighted a great appreciation of their partners’ financial contribution to the household as a key motivation for them to take up all domestic responsibilities. While most men in the second group had a partner that was the sole breadwinner of the family, economic power was not the sole determining factor in couple power dynamics. Rather, most men from this group identified themselves as more nurturing and attentive than their partner before they became fathers, apart from Peter who reflected on his experience as a SAHF and embraced his new caring identity. As the temporary SAHF Bob informed me during our interview, “My wife does not like doing housework, but I do not mind doing it – it’s always been like this, even before we got married. Even though we both have a full-time job now, I still mostly take up all the work at home. It is only *natural* for me to do so – giving birth is not an easy task. Doing housework and taking care of our child are nothing compared to how much she had gone through during and after giving birth to our child.” Along the same lines, Beijing SAHF Sherlock, currently based in Manchester, was more than happy to take up all the chores, out of appreciation and consideration of what his

wife had gone through during and after her pregnancy, even though his wife was not the sole provider:

Both my wife and I are doing our PhDs, but I have been taking care of my daughter and all the household chores since she was born, including changing her nappies and preparing for her meal. Now she is older, I am normally the one who takes her to the park and early childhood education – I spend most of my time with her outside my study, so that my wife gets to spend more time focusing on her study and hanging out with her friends. She also hangs out with our daughter, of course! My wife has been through a lot, both physically and mentally, especially the postnatal depression. As a man, I am incapable of sharing her burden in this aspect, so I think it is only *natural* for me to assume most of the housework and childcare responsibilities. She is also not good at doing housework and caregiving, nor that she is keen on learning chores. Therefore, it seems reasonable for me to take charge as I enjoy doing them, so that she can focus on writing and hang out with her friends.

A compelling sense of responsibility and empathy towards their wives' experiences of pain and difficulties during and after pregnancy was evident in both aforementioned narratives. The term "natural" was frequently used by these interviewees to describe housework and childcare responsibilities; its usage by these two interviewees was distinct when compared to usage by the first group of men, where "natural" was more often associated with "innate" gender differences between men and women. It indicates that when care is freed from its associations with gender difference in SAHFs' perceptions, these men would be more likely to identify with care and willingly take up all types of chores in the domestic sphere.

8.3 Intergenerational dynamic: Attitudes toward intergenerational collaborations in childrearing

In this final section, I explore SAHFs' attitudes toward intergenerational collaborations in childrearing. While neither group of SAHFs sought childrearing help from their parents or in-laws, they provided different explanations for this. The first group of SAHFs who stressed the importance of child development and were selective about doing household chores, attributed the lack of intergenerational collaboration to disagreements in childrearing methods. On the other hand, the second group, who adopted a more relaxed approach to their children's education and were less concerned with their own housework preferences, cited

other factors such as geographical distance or health issues of their parents or in-laws. In addition, a few SAHFs from both groups, albeit particularly the first group, indicated that their unwillingness to ask for help from the elder generation was their attempt to avoid dealing with often-complicated intergenerational relationships.

Similar to the social media materials examined in chapter five, all SAHFs embodied a strong sense of individualism as a nuclear family, against a backdrop of a decline in the rates of co-residence among three generations and the involvement of grandparents in childcare. The transition from intrafamily to interfamily relations in intergenerational power dynamics, as seen in SAHFs' accounts, can be viewed as a continuation of recent studies on Chinese parents' expectations of upward mobility due to marketisation in childrearing, along with the family-planning policy (Fong, 2004; Lin, 2009; Xiao, 2016). As Xiao Suowei (2016) puts it, "Along with the burgeoning markets for children's education and consumption, raising the child has become a complicated project that involves parents, school, experts, and markets" (p. 6).

As discussed earlier in the chapter, the growing awareness of child development and the desire to provide the best opportunities for children have created tensions between older and younger generations regarding parenting approaches. In addition, this section also covers two other key reasons for the decline in intergenerational collaborations in childrearing, as stated by interviewees, namely, the inevitable conflicts among three different generations, and grandparents' inability to help due to geographical factors. The discussion below starts with the most prominent reason – intergenerational disagreements over childcare and parenting approaches.

The term "controllable" (*ke kong* 可控) emerged as a frequently-used keyword among the first group of SAHFs, reflecting their concerns about the involvement of grandparents in daily childrearing activities. These SAHFs expressed a belief that allowing grandparents to take an active role in raising their children could impeded their carefully planned child development strategies, as they perceived that the grandparent's understanding and practice of raising a child was inadequate. The consistent assertion of these interviewees was that grandparents tended to indulge the grandchildren by acquiescing to all their demands. As Beijing SAHF Yu illustrated:

It was fine to ask them to help taking care of our son when he was very little. Now he has grown up and I think that it might not be good for his education if his grandparents get too involved in day-to-day life, as they tend to spoil him. I think it might be best for us [my wife and I] to care for him – the process of raising our son is more controllable.

For Yu, being a primary caregiver went beyond simply providing physical care for the child. It was viewed as a full-time profession that involved acquiring and applying up-to-date parenting knowledge and skills. This included staying informed about the latest educational approaches, selecting suitable educational institutions, and organising appropriate activities to promote the child's intellectual and development. As the child grew older and physical care became less demanding, Yu chose to take up all the caregiving responsibilities. This decision was driven by the couple's intricate and comprehensive child development plan, which required strict adherence and could not be easily delegated or outsourced to the child's grandparents. Yu believed that involving the grandparents in the caregiving process might disrupt the carefully designed plan and compromise the desired outcomes. This perspective was not unique to Yu. Some other SAHFs shared a similar mindset and preferred to take full charge of both the mental and physical caregiving of their children. As Beijing SAHF Bai said:

The children's grandparents' different child-rearing method is certainly our concern. After all, they are from a different generation that has a different childrearing approach that they think it is right. Plus, I always think that having at least one full-time parent to be with the children is the best for their growth – I did not have this option when I was a kid, so now I want to be there for my children's growth, without interference from my own parents/in-laws.

Many SAHFs, both from the first and second groups, shared concerns about co-residing with their own parents or in-laws. They highlighted the potential conflicts and challenges that can arise when three generations live together under one roof. In particular, they expressed concerns about the often-complicated relationships with their parents or in-laws. As Huizhou SAHF Li from the first group stated:

We [my wife and I] did not ask for help from our own parents mostly because we want to avoid conflicts among three generations. The relationships among three generations are rather complicated, especially between my wife and my mother – conflicts and disagreements would be difficult to avoid if living under the same roof. Sending our children to their grandparents' house is a way for us to focus on our career, but it was unacceptable for us – we certainly do not want our children to be the “left-behind children” [*liushou er'tong* 留守儿童]. Taking care of our two children is our responsibility as parents, so I would rather stay at home to care for them full-time, while putting my career as secondary in my life.

I subsequently asked Li, “what kind of conflicts occur between your wife and your mother?” “Mostly childrearing issues”, came the response:

My mother came to live with us to help for a few months when our elder son was young. My parents were more lenient and protective of their grandchildren than my wife. My wife always complained about her to me, and my mother did not hide her displeasure and disagreement with my wife's childrearing method either. This negatively affected not only their relationship, but also my relationship with both, as I was often stuck between them – it was hard for me to mediate their conflicts as they are both very important to me.

Beijing-based SAHF Terry from the second group told me that he was the one who often complained to his wife when his mother was living with them for a short period of time:

My mother is a very negative person who does not hide her emotions. When disagreeing with my childrearing method, she would criticise me in front of the child. I don't need her around to undermine my parenting efforts. After all, I invest a lot of time and energy researching and learning how to be a good parent for my son as a full-time father – I think I am qualified. Plus, arguing too much in the house would negatively affect our son's mentality and he was rather confused by the multiple standards for behaviour set by us. Visiting our parents once a month, as we do now, is ideal for me – our relationship is better, too.

Shanghai SAHF William similarly informed me that his relationship with his parents and in-laws had improved after they stopped co-residing with him to care for the children. “Did she get upset when you asked her to leave?” I asked William. William responded, “No, not really.” He explained that they did not actually talk about their disagreements. Instead, he simply stated that he could handle the caregiving duties himself, as the kids were older and did not require as much help. He also assured them that they would visit the children every other week. William noted that his mother-in-law seemed content and busy back home, engaging in activities such as dancing with her friends in the neighbourhood and travelling with his father once every other month. From his perspective, it seemed like he had made the right decision for everyone involved.

The above narratives describe SAHFs who initially tried to continue the conventional practice of joint intergenerational caregiving, but for whom the living situation often led to tensions among caregivers over childrearing approaches. This consequently placed great pressure and anxiety on themselves and their partners. To resolve differences and yet still maintain close relationships across three generations, especially the middle and senior generations, these SAHFs eventually resorted to a two-parent family dynamic. This indicates the weakening of the hierarchical power structure between senior and middle generations, as SAHFs took the opportunity to achieve a certain independence. Returning to a two-parent family without interference parents/in-laws is a way for SAHFs to seek greater power and privacy in family matters, to achieve peace within their nuclear family and to fulfil their goals in childrearing and parenting.

Lastly, most SAHFs from the second group did not ask for caregiving help from the senior generation mainly because of geographical factors rather than the intergenerational disagreements and conflicts. As Guangzhou-based SAHF Chen illustrated:

Differences and disagreements in childrearing between my mum and I do exist, but there are minor issues. For example, we speak Mandarin with our daughter. My mum can speak Mandarin, but she often speaks (Changsha) dialect, which I thought it might not be that helpful to my daughter, since her school requires them to speak Mandarin. But I don't think it is such a big issue. I used to think it might confuse children's language study or cause them to have certain accents, but then I read a lot of research papers that indicates speaking different dialects will not cause such major issues to children. So, it's all good.

My mother is rather open-minded so if we did have disagreements in childcare, she would be open to take advice from us. Granted, we got different parenting philosophies, but that does not mean it's a bad thing – as long as there is no disagreement on major principles such as stealing or lying. But I eventually decided to quit my job and assume the role of SAHF because my mother needs to take care of my little brother in Changsha, Hunan – asking her to travel back and forth just to help me take care of my daughter is not reasonable (emphasis mine).

Intergenerational power relations appeared to be relatively fluid and open to negotiation within Chen's family; Chen did not try to act as the "manager" of the childrearing project while undermining his mother's parenting approach. SAHF Sherlock similarly said that he would not mind the child's grandparents helping with childcare duties when he and his wife finished their studies in Manchester and returned to Beijing: "my parents are open-minded, and I don't think minor differences in childrearing approach would necessarily be bad for our daughter." "Open-minded" was a term stressed by both Chen and Sherlock when describing their own parents, indicating that how SAHFs perceive their parents/in-laws affects how open they are to negotiating differences in child-rearing approaches between two generations. In addition, it is worth noting that both Chen and Sherlock, as examined earlier in the chapter, did not stress the benefits of sending their children to *zaojiao* or different extracurricular activities. Rather, they chose to home-school their children and take a more relaxed approach that allow their children to discover their own passions. This attitude also potentially contributed to their perceptions of intergenerational power dynamics as relatively negotiable.

8.4 Summary

In this chapter, I have examined how SAHFs make sense of their fathering practices within the wider family relations. Generally, a conceptual shift towards a more autonomous parenting style, a more egalitarian spousal relationship, and a more independent nuclear family dynamic liberated from the traditional networks of family, kinship, and community has been observed as trends emerging from my interviews. However, to better understand the ongoing process of how hegemonic masculinity and conventional family values sustain, mutate, and transform SAHF fathering practices, a nuanced approach to the interview data was needed in order to complicate these conceptual shifts. To demonstrate the patterns that I

found in narratives provided by different individuals, I categorised them into two main groups under each theme and drew parallels across different themes.

Firstly, I divided my interviewees into two groups based on their parenting philosophies and practices. The first group emphasised investing heavily in their children's education and expected them to develop various skills. This group highlighted class privilege and the importance of education. The second group prioritised their children's own interests and aimed for excellence in a specific field. However, both groups recognised the value of cultivating their children's personal qualities, pointing to the growing significance of "quality-oriented education" for contemporary Chinese parenting philosophies.

I then proceeded to analyse my interviewees' narratives regarding the ways that they talked about their share of domestic responsibilities, that is, how they explained, legitimised, and felt about the division of labour at home, and thereby challenged or sustained domestic gender norms and unequal power dynamics. I concluded that the first group – that had higher expectations in their children's development – tended to prioritise their own preferences in housework and emphasised outdoors activities over other caregiving duties, while the second group – that prioritised their children's own passions in parenting – expressed willingness to do all types of domestic chores. Factors highlighted in the narratives of this second group of SAHFs included the appreciation of their wives' financial contribution to the family, consideration for their wives' wellbeing, and their self-identification as more nurturing and attentive than their wives, even before assuming the role of SAHF.

Lastly, I analysed nuanced differences within the one commonality shared among all interviewees when it comes to the intergenerational relations, that is, the decline of grandparents' involvement in childrearing. I discovered three main reasons for this phenomenon: (1) disagreements over childrearing between the two generations, (2) inevitable conflicts with the elder generation largely stemming from parents' concerns for children's development and often-complicated in-law relations, (3) grandparents' inability to help due to geographical reasons. The first two reasons were prominent among interviewees who wanted to be in full control of their childrearing project, whereas only SAHFs from the second group, albeit not all of them, brought up the last reason. This pattern suggests that SAHFs who lean more toward the idea of "being there" in an emotional and hands-on ways

for both their children and their wives, as well as having a positive impression of their own parents/in-laws, can potentially foster a more negotiable intergenerational power dynamic.

First Group: All-round development (emphasise on <i>zaojiao</i> and extracurricula r courses)	Second Group: Skilled in a certain field (emphasise on “being there” for their children’s growth)	First Group: Contour househol d chores	Second Group: Take up whateve r chores needs to be done	First Group: Disagreement s over childrearing between the two generations and/or inevitable conflicts with the elder generation	Second Group: Grandparents ' inability to help due to geographical reasons
Liu (Beijing) Yu (Beijing) Bai (Beijing) Jim (Beijing) Tim (Beijing) Magnus (Qingdao) John (Shijiazhuang) La Rou (Chengdu) Colin (Hangzhou) Alvin (Shanghai)	Tan (Chongqing) Terry (Beijing) Chen (Guangzhou) Qi (Qingdao) William (Shanghai) Sherlock (Manchester) Bob (Foshan) Ervin (Shanghai) Tom (Qingdao)	Liu Yu Bai Jim Tim Magnus La Rou Colin Alvin Li } Qi }	Tan Terry Chen William Sherlock Bob Tom Ervin Tom	Liu Yu Bai Jim Tim Magnus John La Rou Colin Alvin Li Bob Alvin Li Terry	Tan William Sherlock Tom Chen
Li (Huizhou) →					

Table 3 SAHFs’ Attitudes toward Education, Chores, and Reasons for Declining Intergenerational Childrearing²¹

²¹ Narratives about attitudes toward intergenerational cooperation in childrearing remained largely unchanged for SAHFs in both groups over the course of a year of interviews.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This doctoral research set out to investigate the changing conceptualisations and practices of Chinese masculinities in relation to fatherhood, by positioning SAHFs – an emerging gendered identity – centre stage amid the shifting social ground of contemporary urban China. In this conclusion, I outline the key findings of the research study, which revolve around themes emerging from three data sets, namely, TV dramas, social media materials, and interview transcripts, as examined in the foregoing chapters (from chapter four to chapter eight). I then elaborate on how my research contributes to existing knowledge on SAHFs in relation to Chinese family life and masculinities. To conclude, I highlight the areas for future research when concerning representations of SAHFs in contemporary urban China.

9.1 Summary of key findings

This research evolved around three primary questions: (1) What motivates men to become SAHFs? (2) How do they perceive, experience, and enact their role as SAHFs? (3) How does the construction of SAHF masculinity, as revealed through interviews, intersect with the changing representations of urban family life and masculinity in TV dramas and social media materials in contemporary China?

The motivations, perceptions, experiences, and performances of men as SAHFs are deeply interconnected, making it impossible to discuss one aspect without considering the others. To understand how these interwoven aspects contribute to the construction and reconstruction of the image of SAHFs within different discourses presented in TV dramas, social media materials, and interview transcripts, a thematic summary is provided in this section. As mentioned in chapter three on methodology, all the data sets are treated as “texts”, allowing for the identification and examination of their interconnections with other “texts”. This research shows how taken-for-granted knowledge relating to “what it is to be a man” and its correlation with being a SAHF contribute to evolving concepts and practices of masculinities and family life in contemporary urban China.

In the following paragraphs, I begin by discussing the three overarching themes that are shared among the three data sets, namely, the importance of paid work to men and masculinity, the glorification of fathering practice over mothering, and class specificity.

Within each main theme, I explore the derived and varied elements to illustrate how language reproduces, but also occasionally transforms, certain aspects of conventional masculinity and patriarchal ideology. In other words, while all three data sets share similarities, they also reveal non-unitary and contradictory representations of SAHFs. This identity engenders progressive and transformative possibilities for achieving a more equal gender dynamic while simultaneously retaining certain elements of conventional masculinity and patriarchal ideology.

9.1.1 The importance of paid work to men and masculinity

The importance of paid work to men and masculinity is a prevalent theme across all three data sets. In TV dramas, as demonstrated in chapter four, the theme manifests in male characters' reasons for retreating to the domestic sphere. The status of paid work is portrayed as so important to men's sense of masculinity that all male characters assume the role of SAHFs only due to personal crisis rather than of their own volition, and eventually return to work, resulting in a happy ending.

In social media materials, as examined in chapter five, the significance of paid work is often stereotypically portrayed as being correlated with the financial status of SAHFs or their spouses. In other words, only SAHFs with more favourable financial conditions are less likely to choose to return to the workplace. However, this persistent and traditional association of men with the provider identity is countered by another discourse that emphasises the integration of part-time or freelance work into men's lives as SAHFs. Articles addressing this theme conceptualise a unified, dual identity, describing how men's priorities have shifted from the workplace to the family, while still maintaining paid work to supplement family income and pursue their passions in life. These social media articles frequently include input from actual SAHFs through interviews, whereas other articles gather impressions of SAHFs from secondary online sources or individuals such as SAHFs' parents or in-laws.

In my interviews, the significance of paid work to men and masculinity was mainly related to how the diverse ways in which SAHFs identify and represent themselves (chapter six). I categorised my interviewees into two groups based on their narratives concerning this theme. For the first group, the status of paid work remained important to their identity, and the loss

or reduction of work prompted feelings of illegitimacy and ambivalence towards their SAHF identity when introducing themselves, especially during face-to-face interactions. Essentially, if they had a part-time or freelance job, they would introduce their work identity only or before mentioning their SAHF identity. If they did not have paid work, they would use phrases such as “I’m not doing much” to downplay their SAHF identity. The second group, on the other hand, aligned more with the social media narratives of the “dual identity” concept. They fully embraced their SAHF identity, acknowledging the shift of priorities in their lives from work to home. They informed me that they would introduce their identity as SAHF only or before their paid work, as they took pride in doing care work. The underlying difference between these groups of SAHFs is that the second group explicitly highlighted the crucial role of spousal support in their self-recognition and appreciation as SAHFs. The disparity between these two groups of men suggests that the construction of SAHFs’ identity in relation to paid work and care work is grounded in – or mediated by – their spousal relationships. This theme of spousal support and its impact on SAHFs’ identity formation also emerged in discussions about their fathering practices in relation to their understanding of maternal practice and femininity, as further elucidated below.

9.1.2 Glorification of fathering practices

Another common theme that permeates all three data sets is the tendency to glorify fathering practices when compared to mothering and femininity. In all three analysed TV dramas, the relaxed, emotionally sensitive father is portrayed in stark contrast to the strict, working mother who may care for their children equally or more but scares them away. The portrayal of “tiger mum versus cat dad” in TV dramas indicates that men who embody a more intimate and emotionally expressive masculinity by assuming the caregiving role in the family are elevated to a “hero-like” status on screen. In a similar attempt to glorify fathering practices in contrast to maternal practices, social media articles depict SAHFs’ practices as the “masculine” way of childcare, by highlighting recurring keywords such as “independence”, “adventurous”, and “knowledgeable”. This depiction, in addition, implies that women are conditioned to be more protective, anxious, and nurturing towards their children than their male counterparts. A binary conception of gender roles is thus reinforced in this social media discourse, marginalising men who do not possess these assumed qualities that every man “should have” (and every woman supposedly lacks), as well as downplaying the importance of female caregivers.

The superiority of SAHFs' childrearing methods compared to their female counterparts, as a manifestation of hegemonic masculinity and biological essentialism, is evident in interview discourse. The first group of SAHFs saw childrearing as a solitary activity, believing that their ways of childcare and parenting were superior to their female counterparts, and that there was therefore no point asking for help in a female-dominated caregiving community. This group of SAHFs also did not want help from other men, in a way that was at odds with the "homosociality" depicted in the TV drama *Marriage Battle*. A second group of SAHFs offered a counter-discourse, conceptualising caregiving as teamwork by joining female-dominated caregiving communities and expressed their wish to meet other SAHFs. SAHFs' attitudes toward seeking childrearing and emotional support in female-dominated caregiving communities was a subtheme in my interview data that did not feature prominently in TV dramas or social media materials. The first group of SAHFs, who tended to associate emotional vulnerability with femininity and thus male weakness, sometimes struggled with handling their negative emotions, as they were unwilling to seek help from others. In contrast, most men from the second group were open about their emotions with their close relations.

However, this pattern was not static, but rather subject to change depending on individuals' levels of reflexivity. This theme is also in line with the reflexivity in crisis portrayed in the analysed TV drama *Super Dad & Super Kids*, where the father embraces upon reflection of his role as a SAHF during his unemployment time, rather than perennially frustrated in the attempt to return to work. Similarly, changes in life appeared to be the trigger for some of my interviewees to actively reflect on themselves, which provided an opportunity for them to adjust their visions of masculinity in relation to femininity. What remains consistent as the result of men's reflections was the realisation of how significant a supportive spousal relationship is to a healthy family dynamic and their sense of appreciation and fulfilment in doing care work as a SAHF.

9.1.3 Class specificity

The notion of urban middle-class background as the exclusive class background for SAHFs is prevalent across all three data sets. The class specificity acts as the taken-for-granted backdrop in TV dramas, justifies itself as the precondition for men to assume the role of

SAHFs in social media materials, and induces some SAHFs to use children's education courses to secure their middle-class status, which further contributes to different spousal and intergenerational dynamics among my interviewees, as examined in interviews.

In TV drama series, urban middle-class lifestyle appears to be an unspoken norm for all SAHFs' households. The class privilege is particularly prominent in the series *Super Dad & Super Kids* – even when the male character is unemployed, with his wife being temporarily absent and two children to feed – he does not have the need to earn money. It is worth noting that this class specificity is not an isolated occurrence within SAHFs' households on screen, but rather a representative case within the broader phenomenon of Chinese cultural production. The affluent middle class is portrayed as the social category that embodies the qualities and lifestyles deemed desirable to individuals and essential for the construction of a stable and harmonious socialist market. The exclusive portrayal of SAHFs from urban middle-class families in the analysed dramas therefore offers both escapism and entertainment to the mainstream audience, while echoing government discourse. It presents a universalised depiction of everyday life in urban middle-class households, while marginalising SAHFs from other socio-economic circumstances on screen.

In social media materials, having a middle-class family background, as demonstrated earlier in the chapter, is portrayed as a key prerequisite for men to assume the role, suggesting that it is not an accessible option for most men. An example of this is the analysed article in *New Weekly* (Li, 2019) entitled “If you do not have family properties worth millions, you cannot be a househusband”. These social media articles simplify the complexities of SAHFs' decision-making process by assuming that financial situations are the sole determinant. This oversimplification leads to the marginalisation of men who choose to be SAHFs under different circumstances, while also reinforcing the stereotype that SAHFs are associated with family wealth or laziness. However, this discourse, as mentioned earlier, is challenged by another perspective that incorporates insights from actual SAHFs. This counter discourse introduces the concept of “dual identity”, where men simultaneously fulfil the roles of a full-time father and part-time worker.

While all the interviewees in my research came from middle-class families, the influence of class privilege was particularly evident in some of their narratives concerning child development, as explored in chapter eight. For some of these SAHFs, the emphasis on child

development was reflected in their endorsement of *zaojiao* and extracurricular courses as effective means to screen social groups for both their children and themselves as parents. This served to create a stronger symbolic boundary between their own middle-class social environment and other social classes. However, the interview data has also provided a more nuanced and diverse understanding of SAHFs within this theme. Another group of SAHFs expressed their opposition to the idea of relying on expensive learning institutions to secure their middle-class status and placing excessive burdens on their children. The disparity between these two groups' narratives lies in how they reflected on their decision to become SAHFs, which is a sub-theme derived from "class specificity". The first group emphasised that children's education and development served as the most important motivation for them to assume the role, amongst other contributing factors. The second group, on the other hand, revealed additional factors they considered crucial in their decision-making process, including the well-being of their wives after childbirth, and a sense of fulfilment derived from witnessing and actively participating in their children's formative years – an experience they felt was lacking in their lives before becoming fathers.

The differences in motivations between these two groups of SAHFs also extended to other aspects of their fathering practices within the broader family dynamic. These aspects encompass variances in parenting philosophies, division of labour in household chores and childcare with their wives, and attitudes towards intergenerational cooperation in childcare. In terms of parenting philosophies, the first group had higher expectations for their children, aiming for all-round excellence. On the other hand, the second group valued autonomy and was content if their children excelled in a specific field rather than multiple areas in life. However, both groups shared the belief in cultivating their children's desirable values, reflecting the growing trend of "quality-oriented education" and the decline of "exam-oriented education" (*yingshi jiaoyu* 应试教育) within Chinese families. The definition of what was considered "desirable" varied, heavily influenced by the subjective lived experiences and lessons learnt by SAHFs and their spouses.

Regarding the labour division within the household, the narratives of the first group of SAHFs indicated that they had a greater ability as husbands and fathers to articulate their preferences and choose the specific dimensions of their involvement in housework and childcare. They expressed a preference for engaging in household chores that they felt more

adapted to and emphasised their main role as engaging in outdoor activities with their children. The second group, on the other hand, expressed a willingness to do whatever chores were needed in the household, whether related to childcare or housework, without having the need to prioritise their own preferences. Their narratives appeared to be more empathetic and appreciative towards their partner's contributions to the family.

Furthermore, the interviews have revealed intricate intergenerational dynamics within these families. This complexity challenges the exclusive portrayals of spousal dynamics found in TV drama discourse. While social media discourse shows the decline of influence from children's grandparents in childrearing, my interviews with SAHFs add nuance to this perspective and simultaneously provide other viewpoints. Specifically, I explored SAHFs' attitudes toward asking for childrearing help from their own parents or in-laws.

While the decline in the rates of co-residence among three generations and asking for help from SAHFs' own parents or in-laws seemed to be the dominant pattern for both groups of men at first glance, upon close analysis of their narratives, more nuanced differences in this aspect emerged. The reasons for the decline of intergenerational cooperation in childcare can be categorised into three main factors. Firstly, disagreement in childrearing methods between two generations was a common reason cited by most SAHFs from the first group and a few SAHFs from the second group. They expressed a desire to have full control over their childrearing approach, and the differing childrearing practices of the grandparents acted as a source of conflict and disruption to their plans. Other factors, such as complex in-law relations, also contributed to conflicts within the household. Secondly, the inevitable generational conflicts that arise when multiple generations live under the same roof were mentioned as a reason for the decline. Only SAHFs from the second group, who did not face significant challenges in their intergenerational relationships, fell into the third category. These SAHFs expressed a willingness to live with their parents/in-laws to ease the burden of childcare if not for the geographical distance between them. While they acknowledged the differences in childrearing methods between the two generations, they held a positive and open-minded attitude towards their parents/in-laws' approach to parenting. The recurring keyword was "open-minded", indicating that a more flexible parenting approach and a positive impression of their parents/in-laws' abilities and behaviours could potentially lead to a more harmonious and negotiable intergenerational power dynamic.

9.2 Contribution to knowledge

This thesis is the first full-length doctoral research on SAHFs in mainland China, as existing studies on SAHFs have currently been predominantly situated in Western Europe and North America, with one study in Hong Kong. It provides an enriched and multidimensional image of SAHFs by exploring the interconnections of SAHFs' representations in TV dramas, social media materials, and interviews. Through this exploration, this research presents how taken-for-granted knowledge relating to "what it is to be a man" and its correlation with being a SAHF contribute to the changing concepts and discursive practices of masculinities and family life in contemporary urban China. This research is particularly significant in the current context where gender inequalities in China coexist with an emergent individualistic culture, and yet issues of hierarchy and injustice in gendered practices are rarely addressed by government and tend to be reinforced in popular discourse. By analysing how SAHF masculinity, as an emergent model of familial masculinity, is constructed and reconstructed by multiple discourses, this study therefore contributes new perspectives to the discursive and subjective production of gender difference and hierarchy in China.

As shown in chapter two, I have conducted my literature review by examining existing research on the definition, determinants of men's decision to become SAHFs, and whether SAHF fatherhood reproduces hegemonic masculinity or represents caring masculinity that promotes gender equality. In the following paragraphs, I provide a summary of how my research has coincided with, contradicted, and/or complicated these aspects in existing literature.

Firstly, building on Mario Liong's (2017a) definition of SAHFs, this research has further deepened the understanding of this definition by introducing the concept of "dual identity as a full-time father and part-time worker" in social media discourse (as discussed in chapter five). Moreover, this research has extensively analysed and categorised how different SAHFs with dual identities perceive and enact the role (as explored in chapter six). While the emergence of dual identity generally signifies men's priority shift from the career to the family, as indicated in social media materials, the selective nature of self-representation among a group of SAHFs, as revealed in the interview data, has brought forth a more nuanced and diversified understanding of the diverse experiences and perspectives of SAHFs.

Secondly, the distinct categories of “SAHFs by choice” and “SAHFs by circumstance” have been the dominant focus in existing research (e.g., Liong, 2017a; Chesley, 2011; Kramer et al., 2015). The TV drama discourse and part of social media discourse in this research, have partially coincided with this theory, highlighting the role of crises in men’s lives as involuntary triggers, depicting the image of a strong and independent wife, and emphasising the solid financial foundation of some SAHFs’ households as a prerequisite for becoming a SAHF. However, through interviews conducted with SAHFs, this research has gone beyond this binary focus. By having multiple interviews with my interviewees over a span of a year, not only has the research examined how SAHFs have narrated their motives for becoming SAHFs initially, but it has also revealed how their narratives changed according to their changing perceptions and subjective experiences after taking up the role. The changing nature of self-perception and representation has largely depended on individuals’ levels of reflexivity, as observed throughout this thesis. SAHFs who have shown higher levels of reflexivity have emphasised the importance of spousal support and have expressed a sense of fulfilment gained from caring for their children. While the importance of spousal support has been highlighted as a key reason for men to voluntarily assume the role in existing studies (Merla, 2008; Fischer & Anderson, 2012), my research has pointed to the evolving nature of men’s perceptions of their decision, masculine ideals, and their experience as a SAHF, due to the ongoing process of identity formation over time. This point has further problematised the research that only focuses on SAHFs by choice/by circumstance.

Thirdly, the attempt to conclude whether SAHFs represent one masculinity or the other would be a gross generalisation. My research findings resonate with Doucet’s (2016) theory that SAHFs actively reconstruct masculinities by embracing aspects of traditionally feminine characteristics and moving constantly among different masculinities in different contexts. By examining the portrayals of SAHFs in both TV drama and social media materials, the construction of SAHF masculinity have served as a salient example of the hybridity of masculine discourse, suggesting both graduate shifts and continuities in “conventional” gender notions within family contexts. I have further extended and complicated this theory through categorisations of my interviewees, probing into how different SAHFs challenge traditional gender expectations, while sustaining the power and privilege associated with hegemonic masculinity in other aspects. Specifically, I divided SAHFs into two groups regarding how they identified themselves in relation to paid work, how they dealt with their vulnerable emotions which is associated with how they perceived femininity, and how they

made sense of their fathering practice in relation to mothering practice as well as the wider family relations.

There are distinct, albeit not entirely linear, threads running across the two groups of men in these three aspects (see Appendix). In the first group of men who prioritised their worker identity over their carer identity, most of them insisted on childrearing as a solitary activity. They were less likely to articulate their emotional vulnerability, even to those close to them, and all prioritised children's education in caregiving and their preferences in domestic responsibilities. For the second group of men who introduced themselves as SAHFs to others, more attested to the reflexive possibilities in our second encounters. For example, several expressed that they reconfigured their understandings of masculinities and their sense of self to improve their spousal relationships and overall wellbeing. These men generally adopted a more relaxed parenting approach by prioritising their children's interests and passions. This suggests that involved fatherhood does not automatically eliminate the hegemonic elements of masculinity. Instead, the unequal power dynamics in intimate relationships are more likely to be reflected upon when SAHFs express their intention to be involved in the family through emotional and hands-on support for both their children and partners. While I identified these patterns through categorisations to demonstrate how hegemonic masculinity is reproduced, mutated, and transformed, I have argued that these two groups of men in each aspect do not represent opposite masculinities. After all, men's sense of masculinity in both groups is constantly evolving as they adapt to changing social circumstances. As indicated in chapter two, masculine identities and practices are always plural and subject to change. Rather, I have argued that the process of change, at times, can be impeded by inverted values around paid work and the work of raising a child, less spousal support or a lack of spousal appreciation, and the overwhelming significance placed on children's education over other aspects of father-child relationships.

9.3 Future research

The multiple images of SAHFs from a variety of sources analysed in this thesis have demonstrated the multiplicity and complexity of this growing group of men's sense of masculinities. However, this work cannot claim to, nor does it intend to, have covered the full range of SAHFs in a huge country like China, I therefore highlight the following areas as recommendations for future research on SAHFs in contemporary China.

Firstly, moving my original research plan from offsite fieldwork to online interviews due to the Covid-19 restrictions made it easier for me to conduct multiple online interviews with the same individuals, greatly benefiting my research as it has revealed how identities are constructed and represented in specific contexts. However, it remains my regret that most of my interviewees expressed a preference for in-person interactions and sharing their personal stories, as they felt too formal and uneasy to share their private lives online with someone they had not met before. While I was fortunate enough to build trust virtually and conduct multiple interviews with twenty interviewees, two of them were audio interviews due to the interviewees' request. Therefore, in-person interviews conducted by future research on SAHFs could potentially further extend my observations and analysis on the similarities and disparities of SAHFs' self-representations in different contexts.

Secondly, as demonstrated in foregoing chapters, I employed "gender as a relational concept" as my theoretical framework throughout this work. In the interview data informed chapters I incorporated SAHFs' narratives on their wives and female caregivers. The gendered experiences of SAHFs' partners, however, require more emphasis in future research, to gain a more comprehensive image of SAHFs, by comparing their wives' narratives on their experiences as a working wife/mother and perceptions of their stay-at-home husband. After all, my research has identified the importance of spousal support in shaping, or mediating SAHFs' experiences and sense of self. It would be worthwhile to further explore how masculinity is constantly constructed and reshaped in relation to femininity from the perspective of women, which is an area that is greatly under-researched.

Thirdly, current research on Chinese men and masculinities has been predominantly focused on the urban middle-class. However, little attention has been paid to the process of Chinese men in rural areas representing themselves as fathers and husbands, while encountering rapid social changes.²² By exploring SAHFs in rural China – a marginalised and invisibilised gendered identity in terms of both social perceptions and socioeconomic status – future research can unveil changes in perceptions and experiences of parenting and gender relations in rural regions. By dismantling the urban-rural divide in the study of men and masculinities,

²² In English-language scholarship, there are only several journal articles and book chapters that touch upon the Chinese rural men, masculinities, and fatherhood (Choi & Peng, 2016; Cao & Lin, 2019; Liu & Zheng, 2021).

it could offer wider implications for men and masculinities in relation to structural barriers and inequality in Chinese society.

Finally, 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 this issue, by comparing Chinese SAHFs, as the Chinese variant of the “new man”, with SAHFs’ portrayals in TV dramas/films, on social media, in interviews, from other countries.

Appendix: Overview of the Groups of SAHFs from Chapter 6 to 8

Identity	SAHFs in Group 1	SAHFs in Group 2
<p>Paid work vs. care work identities</p> <p>Group 1: Paid Work > Care Work</p> <p>Group 2: Care Work > Paid work</p>	<p>Liu, John, Colin, Bob, La Rou, Sherlock, and Tim</p> <p>Tom } Alvin } William } →</p>	<p>Tan, Jim, Terry, Bai, Li, Yu, Chen, Ervin, Magnus, and Qi</p>
<p>SAHFs' Caregiving Attitudes</p> <p>Group 1: Caregiving as a solitary activity</p> <p>Group 2: Caregiving as teamwork</p>	<p>Liu, John, Bob, La Rou, Yu, and Qi</p> <p>Tom } Sherlock } William } Tim } Magnus } Li } Chen } →</p>	<p>Tan, Jim, Terry, Bai, Colin, Ervin, and Alvin</p>
<p>SAHFs Attitudes toward Education</p> <p>Group 1: All-round development</p> <p>Group 2: Skilled in a certain field</p>	<p>Liu, Yu, Bai, Jim, Tim, Magnus, John, La Rou, Colin, and Alvin</p> <p>Li →</p>	<p>Tan, Terry, Chen, Qi, William, Sherlock Bob, Ervin, and Tom</p>
<p>Attitudes toward Housework Division</p> <p>Group 1: Contour household chores</p> <p>Group 2:</p>	<p>Liu, Yu, Bai Jim, Tim, Magnus, La Rou, Colin, Alvin, and</p> <p>Li } Qi } →</p>	<p>Tan, Terry, Chen, William, Sherlock, Bob, Tom, Ervin, and Tom</p>

Take up whatever chores needs to be done		
<p>Reasons for Declining Intergenerational Childrearing</p> <p>Group 1: Disagreements over childrearing between the two generations</p> <p>Group 2: Grandparents' inability to help due to geographical reasons</p>	Liu, Yu, Bai, Jim, Tim, Magnus, John, La Rou, Colin, Alvin, Li, Bob, Alvin, Li, Terry	Tan, William, Sherlock, Tom, and Chen

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