**Masculinizing fatherhood: Negotiation of Yang and Jiao among young fathers in China**

Siyang Cao and Xiaodong Lin

Journal of Gender Studies (accepted for publication: 27th May 2019)

**Abstract**

Drawing on interviews with two groups of young men from different socio-economic positions in contemporary China, this paper explores how masculine ideals are justified, negotiated and lived out in their narratives of fatherhood and parenting. Reading through the lens of ‘yang’ (raise/feed) and ‘jiao’ (educate/cultivate), the paper addresses how neoliberal ideology in relation to competitiveness and traditional cultural values of parenthood and masculinity are simultaneously imbued in the two groups of young fathers’ aspirations for their children’s upbringing. It reflects the shifting meanings of masculinity through the cultural sentiments of yang and jiao in Chinese parenting, highlighting the cultural connections and material differentiation in making sense of the masculinization of fatherhood in China. In doing so, the paper seeks to make an additional contribution to the existing discussion on masculinity and fatherhood through a refined use of local concepts. Rather than focusing primarily on differences of fatherhood, the paper argues for the need to develop a more nuanced understanding of masculinity and parenting through reflecting on the social, economic and cultural factors in forging the meanings of fatherhood.

KEYWORDS: masculinity; fatherhood; young men; aspiration; cultural value; China

**Introduction: global concept and local meanings**

Fatherhood has been a contested site in gender studies on masculinity (Dermott, 2008). Since the early 1980s, there has been a notable shift in discourse on fatherhood, particularly in the West, marking a growing trend of involved and intimate fatherhood (LaRossa, 1988). As reflected in the popular image of ‘new fathers’, men are increasingly expected to become more nurturing and emotionally expressive with their children, as well as to share day-to-day parenting responsibilities with women (Wall & Arnold, 2007). While fathers across Western societies have reportedly been more engaged in childcare activities and in forming more intimate bonds with their children, researchers continue to note inconsistencies and imbalances in men’s departure from traditional fatherhood (Dermott, 2008; Lareau, 2003). In particular, the cultural call for involved fathering clashes intensely with the conventional hegemonic masculinity ideal (Connell, 2000; Doucet, 2004). The breadwinning role remains central in men’s family roles and the construction of socially approved masculinity, while ideal motherhood continues to be linked with women’s caregiving role (Riley, 2003).

Recent years have seen a growing discussion on fatherhood and masculinities in the context of global neoliberalism (Cornwall, Karioris, & Lindisfarne, 2016; Kaufman, 2013). As the self, within neoliberal discourse, is constructed as aspiring, competitive, and capable of embodying appropriate values against wider risks, parenting has become an increasingly crucial element in evaluating an individual’s capability for self-governance and regulation (Vincent, 2017). Good fathers are now expected to fulfil an expanded paternal role, including presence and involvement in their children’s lives, sensitivity to, and prioritisation of, children’s needs, constructing quality family time while, ideally, continuing to be the male breadwinner. Consequently, it is suggested that men are facing greater tension in terms of balancing work and family life (Kaufman, 2013), although their uneasiness in managing conflicts in ‘cash or care’ have been experienced by many mothers for far longer time. Moreover, men from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds not only confront hardship in raising their children, but are also likely to be blamed as irresponsible and immoral fathers as a result of their individual incompetency rather than economic circumstances (Vincent, 2017). Nevertheless, such a strong connection between ideal fatherhood and material inequality is often downplayed, as pointed out by Dermott and Yamashita (2014) through a comparison between contemporary English and Japanese guidance on ideal parenting.

In the context of China, the dominant national narratives of the China Dream advocate aspiring to ‘success’ (Liu, 2019), including being a better person, making a better life and a better future. As President Xi Jinping explains, the China Dream serves for ‘achieving a rich and powerful country, the revitalization of the nation, and the people’s happiness’ (Callahan, 2015, p. 984). Under such a condition, parents are expected to provide material comfort and appropriate education, as well as other the necessary support to ensure their children’s upbringing for not only their own families, but also the prosperity of the nation (Goh, 2011). Additionally, in families that have followed the one-child policy (1978–2016), parents are often eager to invest almost all of their resources in that child, thus engendering widespread child-centredness along with high achievement expectations of their children (Liu, 2019).

Chinese fathers, in particular, are increasingly required to embrace neoliberal values to cultivate children with entrepreneurial subjectivities and to contribute to their children’s educational development and success (Li & Jankowiak, 2016). This essential father’s role should ideally be achieved through fulfilling the breadwinning responsibility while at the same time, participating in, or at least not always being absent from, their children’s daily lives (Xu, 2016). Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994, p. 12) maintain that ‘meanings of masculinity also vary across cultures and admit to cultural borrowing; masculinities imported from elsewhere are conflated with local ideas to produce new configurations’. At a time when there is much credence accorded to Western notions of fatherhood and masculinities as authoritative reference points to understand Chinese experiences, the aim here is to enrich existing debates on the socio-cultural contingent features of contemporary fatherhood through the lens of ‘yang’ (raise/feed) and ‘jiao’ (educate/ cultivate). Therefore, this paper brings together interviews with two groups of young men from different socio-economic positions in contemporary China. It explores the shifting meanings of masculinity through a focus on Chinese parenting values, highlighting the cultural connections and material differentiation in making sense of the masculinization of fatherhood in China. In Qi’s (2014, p. 1) study about global knowledge flows, she highlights that ‘“local” knowledge can be made irrelevant, displaced or otherwise compromised by the knowledge of those associated with the dominant power’. In this regard, this work offers a local perspective that may help to ‘“provincialize” the epistemic and cultural premises of Eurocentred knowledge’ (Bhambra & Santos, 2017, p. 4) by addressing the under-researched field of fatherhood in the context of neoliberal China. Our reference to local terminologies of yang and jiao has enabled us to investigate the nuanced meanings of western concepts of fatherhood and masculinity, thus contributing to the unfinished project of global masculinity (Connell, 1998).

**Yang and Jiao: masculinizing fatherhood ideals in China**

In acknowledging parenting values and ideals as situated in the specific social, cultural and economic conditions that often persist over time, it is necessary to take a historical perspective on Chinese fatherhood (Abbott, Zheng, & Meredith, 1992). Confucianism, with its dominant influence throughout Chinese history over two thousand years, is widely noted to play a fundamental role in the construction of fatherhood among other aspects of family life (Ho, 1987; Xu, 2016). Prior to the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty (1911), the ideal Chinese father was portrayed as a stern, aloof and authoritarian disciplinarian who should assume the prescribed role of a provider (yang) and an educator (jiao) (Li, 2018). As Three Character Classics quintessentially reads, ‘to feed (yang) without teaching (jiao) is the father’s fault’. Importantly, more emphasis was put on jiao than yang (Ho, 1987), which also echoed an overall glorification of wen masculinity (cultural attainment) over wu masculinity (martial prowess) in historical China (Louie, 2002).

Therefore, traditionally, the central aspect of the father’s role was instructing them in social etiquette and knowledge, disciplining children for misbehaviour and acting as a role model through embodied practices (Li, 2018). The father’s obligation of yang essentially involved material provision for the children and indeed, the whole family, but actual engagement in child-rearing was not considered as a masculine task. In contrast to the mother’s nurturing responsibility of undertaking everyday childcare activities, the role of yang and jiao were specifically assigned to fathers and constituted crucial parts of Chinese manhood (Li & Jankowiak, 2016).

China’s revolutionary transformations since the 20th century have brought significant changes to fatherhood ideals and also to masculinity. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Chinese fathers started to bear new expectations informed by Communist ideology. During the construction of the socialist nation, the father’s breadwinning obligation was alleviated to a certain extent under the planned economy, since almost all urban workers and their families depended completely on their affiliated work units to allocate material resources (Xie & Wu, 2008). Meanwhile, the notion of jiao arguably shifted to impart communist ideology and nationalist beliefs to the children to display loyalty to the authoritarian Party-State. The economic reform of 1978 acted as another turning point for the evolution of Chinese fatherhood and masculinity, especially in regard to the interplay between the sweeping market forces and a national desire to re-masculinize Chinese men, who had been, arguably, sexually repressed during the Maoist era (Song & Hird, 2014). In the early Reform period, the dominant gender sentiment called for the revival of gender differentiation, re-marking the male breadwinning role as ‘a salient gender issue as well as a pressing economic problem for the urban family’ (Zuo, 2003, p. 319). Consequently, the fatherly role of yang was re-articulated as a central component of ideal fatherhood and also masculinity.

In present-day China, the masculine ideal connotes a man with material wealth and upward mobility, embodying the entrepreneurial spirit as a personal response to the neoliberal market economy (Louie, 2015). These notions have gradually permeated into the redefinition of the fatherhood ideal, which underlines the normalised expectation for the father to secure sufficient financial resources for his offspring (yang), as well as raising confident, competitive, independent and happy children who will be well-placed to live a better life in the future (jiao) (Cao, 2018; Kuan, 2015; Lin, 2019). Compared to previous generations, contemporary Chinese fathers have become more actively involved in daily childcare, especially as the child grows older, as an extended or ‘bonus point’ part of yang (Liong, 2017). Jiao has also transformed to prioritise the father’s ability to provide educational resources and developmental opportunities over behaviours for imparting moral, educational, or behavioural teaching to their children in the competitive neoliberal socio-economic environment (Naftali, 2014). Therefore, contemporary Chinese fatherhood reflects historical continuities along with emerging negotiation and reinterpretation. In addition, Our data elucidates a more nuanced and sometimes ambivalent account on how an individual man masculinizes fatherhood under shifting economic and socio-cultural circumstances.

**Fieldwork and data collection**

Data for this paper comes from two studies undertaken in urban China led by the two authors respectively. Both studies were approved by the Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology (ELMPS) Ethics Committee at the University of York. The first author collected the data used in this paper for her PhD research while she was based at the University of York. All the names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

The first set of data draws on findings from the first author’s research about the masculinity of urban Chinese young men, which explores how urban middle-class young men employ varying strategies to negotiate and rework the notion of being (good) Chinese men and their personal experiences of everyday living. The second set of data stems from the second author’s study of a younger generation of male migrant workers in urban China (rural to urban migrants). Both studies adopted a critical feminist methodology, during which participants were regarded as agents who actively make meanings of their lives. Additionally, we had similar research intentions to address questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’ in an individual young man’s construction of masculinity and ‘responsible knowledge’ of their own experience and narratives within specific local context (Skeggs, 1997).

The participants of the first study consisted of 30 young men aged between 22 and 32 from Shanghai and Shenyang, who were recruited through purposive sampling in order to maintain contact between the research and participants (Bryman, 2004). Specifically, the researcher selected young men who lived a relatively comfortable life in the city and could be generally grouped as middle class. Except for the undergraduate students, all the other men (but two) held a bachelors degree or above. At the time of the interviews in 2015, nine of these men were fathers, and three of them were expectant fathers; 15 of the other 18 participants articulated plans to have children. Interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions, during which the researcher invited the men to talk about their views on being or becoming fathers, daily fathering practices and expectations for their children along with other gendered experiences in everyday life. For the purpose of this paper, the researcher selected only the narratives of the men who were expectant fathers or who already had children. Since most of these fathers had unborn or very young children, they did not yet have, or had only very little, hands-on experiences. Nonetheless, their interpretations of yang and jiao provide nuanced accounts of how young fathers from a middleclass background perceive fatherhood ideals at this particularly life-course stage.

The second author’s original study examined the masculinity of 13 young rural-urban migrant men working in a local parcel delivery company, who were born in the early half of the 1990s. They all had early-age children at the time of the interviews. As a small-scale study, the research focused purposively on the young men’s narratives of being working-class migrants in urban China. It aimed to tease out different layers of meanings of masculinity in relation to their negotiation of being migrant men, who are often left at the margin of urban economic modernisation. During the fieldwork, the researcher asked the rural-urban migrant young men to comment on the emerging media discourse of the crisis of the stock exchange market in 2015. The purpose of using the economic crisis as a ‘vignette’ was to elicit the men’s own accounts of the impact of social economic circumstances and accompanying issues that mattered to them personally, which might otherwise be difficult to address (Lin, 2019). In their narratives, fatherhood and parenting appeared to be the primary issues that they were concerned about, in response to the economic crisis of the turbulence of the stock exchange market around the time of the interviews.

Interviews in both studies were conducted in Chinese and fully recorded. After transcribing all the interviews into Chinese, we translated selected quotations into English for analysis and pulled out transcriptions about fatherhood together for thematic analysis. Given the cultural and socioeconomic complexities of Chinese fatherhood being an under-research area, we found it particularly helpful to revisit previous data from new perspectives by placing the two groups of men in our own study into a dialogue (cf. Thompson, 2000). We thus conducted secondary analysis of qualitative data to ‘recontextualise’ and ‘reconstruct’ existing data creatively and reflexively (Moore, 2006), which allowed us to both enlarge our original sample and recreate our analytical focus. In doing so, we share with Mason’s (2007, p. 14) argument for an investigative epistemology and investigative practices with data, in that ‘good qualitative research can be about energetically and creatively seeking out a range of data sources to answer pressing research questions in quite distinctive ways’. By bringing together the accounts of two groups of young men, we have been able to investigate the similarities, differences and entanglements in the men’s negotiation of ideal masculinity and fatherhood, which are implicated in the complex intersection of gender and class. Although our samples are small and far from representative, we suggest they could nonetheless reflect wider social realities about how young Chinese fathers negotiate their parenting roles during this specific historical period. Our intention is to offer in-depth analysis in order to unravel the complexities of contemporary Chinese fatherhood rather than a generalising picture.

**Yang: shifting responsibilities and roles**

Among the two groups of young fathers, providing a stable material life was commonly identified as the fundamental element of a father’s role. Irrespective of their diverse socio-economic positions, our participants rarely questioned or resisted the salience of guaranteeing material comfort for their children. As a result, many participants had already started to carefully plan their children’s future and put great effort into long-term projects from a surprisingly early stage. Yang Dong’s (23, migrant father with a 5-year-old son) story is a clear example in this respect. In order to gain enough income to support his family, he worked in two jobs. After finishing his day shift at a local factory, he worked part-time at a delivery company in the evening. Yang Dong was planning to buy an apartment near his hometown as an investment for his son’s future. However, as a migrant man, Yang Dong’s aspiration was limited by his socio-economic situation, and therefore the doing of ideal fatherhood involved financial support from his own father:

*My father said they don’t need money and asked me to spend it on my son. Now we just give them some money when we go home. They said they would save it for me in case we need the money in the future. I talked to them before saying we were thinking to buy an apartment. And they would like to help to make the first payment . . . . People like us won’t be able to afford an apartment without our parents’ help.*

Here, Yang Dong indicates the generational support in creating a better material future for his son, thus fulfilling his fatherly role of yang. Such intergenerational bonding is often of indispensable importance for these socio-economically marginalised migrant men. As exemplified by Yang Dong’s expression of ‘people like us’, many migrant fathers’ ability to provide financially and to accumulate wealth was profoundly constrained by their disadvantaged position in an urban setting. Being physically away from the rural home means that these men are dislocated in the city in both geographical and cultural senses (Lin, 2014); their limited competency in the labour market also renders their provider role more difficult to accomplish. Thus, seeking parental support back in their rural origins was often deployed as a practical strategy to construct ideal fatherhood. Seen in this context, the migrant fathers can also be read as reinterpreting the notion of yang in order to legitimate their continuing reliance on their rural parents, although the process is not without mutually emotional attachment.

Furthermore, Yang Dong’s narratives underline a continuing gendered division of parenting responsibilities across generations in contemporary Chinese family life (Goh, 2011). Despite the rise of female power in social and private lives, researchers found that both men and women continue to subscribe to traditional gendered expectations of the male breadwinner and the female housekeeper, potentially resulting from resilient cultural conventions and the gender income gap in the current neoliberal economy (Ji, Wu, Sun, & He, 2017). Consistent with these findings, most fathers in our study regard the responsibility of yang as a specifically masculine role, although almost all families were made up of dual-earners. As Li Qi (23, migrant father with a 3-year-old daughter) described: ‘Normally it’s her mother looking after her. She always sa jiao (affectionate) to me when I’m home. She knows she can ask for anything from me. Her mum complains that my “job” is to just buy her candy’. In present-day urban China, such an understanding of fatherhood not only reinscribes the traditional fathering ethics of yang, but also mirrors contemporary expectations for the father to accumulate economic resources for his offspring in a highly competitive neoliberal society.

While the urban middle-class men also put great emphasis on a father’s responsibility of yang, they seemed to have more confidence in their own capacity to pass on material resources to their children. For instance, Leslie (32, urban father with a newly-born daughter) was also considering the issue of housing like Yang Dong, but appeared far more decisive: ‘My wife and I want our child to go to a good school, so we plan to replace the current apartment with one located in a better school district soon’. In terms of everyday family life, financial provision was generally regarded as a normative and specific father’s role among the urban young fathers, but they often reflexively interpreted the notion of yang through negotiating the level of material comfort they decided to create for their children. As Rocky (28, urban expectant father) said: ‘Before he grows up to an adult, I’ll give him everything. Well, I don’t want to buy him all those luxurious stuff, branded clothes or suchlike. I mean good education and good food’. Jia fei mao (32, urban father with a 4-year-old daughter) similarly mentioned: ‘I try to be a generous father, but I’ve got this ambivalent feeling about the material [. . .] I want her to know that mum and dad work hard to earn money and you should spend money with such concerns’. Although Leslie and Jia fei mao described their wives as the co-provider, they seemed to downplay the mothers’ contribution in material provision for the children, which may serve to reinforce patriarchal gender-role expectations in parenting. These interviewees also strongly rejected hyper-materialism, stressing the creation of a well-off, but not extravagant, everyday life for their children as the ideal father’s role of yang. Thus, the middle-class men’s privilege lies in their capacity to offer what they judge as appropriate rather than merely what they can afford as (imagined) responsible fathers.

In light of the growing commercialisation of children’s education, including extra-curricular activities, in urban China (Kipnis, 2011), carrying out the role of jiao heavily relies on men’s performance in yang. Consequently, the interplay between these two layers of a father’s role may cause further tension in some migrant men’s practice of socially appreciated fatherhood. As Lin Qiang (25, migrant father with a 5-year-old son) suggested:

*Sometimes we (my wife and I) have an argument about small things, such as whether to buy an electronic keyboard for my daughter or not. I told my wife that we don’t know whether she likes it or not, don’t waste money in case she doesn’t like it. When she is a bit older, it is up her to decide. Apart from the electronic keyboard, as long as she wants to learn, buying a piano is worthy.*

Here, Lin Qiang alluded to his wife as a conflicting partner in provision-related decisions. This potentially perpetuates his male privilege in the family which is upheld by fulfilling the father’s role of yang. Existing studies on Chinese masculinities also maintain that men’s self-reflection on being responsible fathers can translate into the fabric of power that reaffirms the husband’s authority (Cao, 2017). Nevertheless, Lin Qiang’s aspiration to become a responsible father by making a cultural investment for his daughter is a challenging task. While the man’s emphasis on supporting the child to develop her talent and ability echoes some of that of urban middle-class fathers, he was also aware of the difference between his daughter and children from better-off families. For Lin Qiang, he needed to carefully calculate the family’s financial situation and whether he could afford to achieve ideal father identity. Having internalised neoliberal values of ‘intensive parenting’ and the national discourse of the China Dream, the extent to which the migrant fathers could realise these aspirations were nonetheless restricted by their disadvantaged socio-economic position in the city.

At the same time, we do not intend to downplay Chinese young fathers’ re-negotiation of the masculine role of yang, in that a few participants did talk at length about their actual involvement, or at least a willingness to participate, in daily childrearing activities. This changing understanding of fatherhood is potentially motivated by a wider embrace of intimate fatherhood, which has been particularly influenced by, and also, influenced by, men’s fathering aspirations at a global level (Kaufman, 2013). In our sample, San pangzi (32, urban father with a 6-year-old son and a 2-year-old daughter) explicitly identified his wife as the breadwinner and admitted in a joking tone that he had developed a ‘good mentality’ (xintai hao) to cope with such an uneasy situation. He explained: ‘Yes, I focus more on the family and children . . . But you know, well, we are a family. There’re no rules like the man’s role is outside and the woman’s inside’. At the same time, however, San pangzi admitted that he received enormous parental help in terms of the mundane aspects of childcare and appeared much less anxious about the family’s financial situation compared with most of the migrant fathers. In this sense, although some young urban fathers were confronted with growing challenges to provide materially for their children, their burden could be partly relieved by resorting to generational help in close proximity or their wives’ high earning ability. These socioeconomic privileges enabled them to rationalise their inability to fulfil the expected masculine role of yang and continue to present themselves as good fathers.

**Jiao: cultivating parental expectations and aspirations**

Historically, jiao – the most crucial part of the Chinese father’s role – largely centred on his teaching responsibilities for moral codes and social etiquette. As Chinese parents increasingly realise the importance of equipping their children with traits such as independence, competitiveness, and selfgovernance in order to meet the demands of the neoliberal economy, the father’s teaching role has been greatly redefined and reshaped by the market, policy and other social forces (Naftali, 2014). Notably, the motivation to open up successful futures for children played a central role in forging how the two groups of young men interpreted jiao. For almost all the young fathers, creating good educational opportunities are key for them to perform their masculine ideal as responsible fathers. However, the actual fathering strategies they deploy in everyday life demonstrate considerable differences.

In general, our urban middle-class participants envisaged a happy and free period of growth for their children. Their understanding of jiao usually extended beyond facilitating the children’s school performance, but also included supporting them to develop a package of skills and offering appropriate guidance in children’s decision-making. The majority of middle-class interviewees also revealed great confidence in the positive prospects available to their children, reflecting their understanding of the neoliberal social reality as well as their own positions within it. Danran (32, urban father with an 18-month daughter) proudly claimed that he was a family-centred man and caring father, and remarked:

*I think as parents, we shouldn’t push the kid to do such and such. I mean, we should create suitable conditions for her, and let her develop as much as possible. The exams, or the grades, that’s just part of her growth [. . .] I want her to actually feel the wonderful side of the world that she was born to, and . . . hopefully she can do what she wants without much regret. That’s enough.*

Similarly, Alex (32, urban father with a 2-year-old daughter) delineated the hoped-for future for his daughter as:

*I want her to become a positive and happy person. Um . . . the grade is not everything, but also proper moral sense. And I’ll support her when she has made a decision about her interests or career. It’s all down to her. I won’t plan her future or interfere with her decision.*

Danran and Alex’s fathering orientation of allowing their children to ‘choose freely’ are in line with middle-class parents’ expectations globally (Irwin & Elley, 2013; Lareau, 2003). In this sense, positioning themselves against the dominant cultural norms of pushing children to study hard also serves to display the men’s neoliberal spirit of autonomy and self-reliance, which potentially adds up to their masculinity (Cornwall et al., 2016). Like Danran and Alex, creating a range of development opportunities for their children was widely embraced by the middle-class young fathers. We argue that it is the middle-class fathers’ socio-economic privilege and associated knowledge of the urban environment that allow them to reflexively negotiate the meaning of jiao. Having internalised the neoliberal agenda to become self-motivated, autonomous and competitive individuals, these privileged urban fathers started to make great effort to cultivate highquality children. Many of them appreciated the value of passing on life experience, wisdom, and good personalities through embodied everyday fathering. In this sense, the father’s role of jiao, which was rooted in traditional Confucian philosophy, is reimagined and reworked to serve for the demand of neoliberalism.

While urban middle-class fathers generally implied that they were capable of affording a range of educational opportunities or acting as a role model for their children, most migrant fathers in our study often saw themselves as not being eligible to either properly educate their children or hand down their knowledge and experience. As a result, enabling their children to access good schooling became almost the only route for a migrant father to complete the paternal obligation of jiao. However, in most Chinese cities, lacking an urban hukou (household registration) results in the children of migrant parents being prevented from progression in urban state schools. Although few large cities have implemented relevant policies to allow such children to attend state schools, most migrant children remain excluded from the local educational system because of the official requirement for complicated documents (Goodburn, 2015). To further compound their dilemma, leaving the city is likely to affect the family’s financial situation. Zhou Min (25, migrant father witha 5-year-old son) displayed great uneasiness about the issue of schooling during the interview. As he explained:

*It is important to ensure he attends a good school. But it is easy to say, difficult to make a decision. It won’t be easy for us to send him to the village to live with his grandparents. We have been discussing, such as we might go back to our hometown together. I can just find another one [job]. But it would be difficult for her (his wife). It is not easy for her to find a similar job there.*

Zhou Min indicated that he would find another job in order to accompany his son back to his hometown in order for him to attend a good school. Nevertheless, he was wary that securing a well-paid job might be difficult for his wife, which epitomised the larger picture of Chinese women’s continuing disadvantage in the labour market in spite of the nation’s quest for gender equality and female empowerment since the Maoist era (Ji et al., 2017). Zhou Min’s experience mirrors the multiple constraints of being a socially marginalised migrant worker, who is not only challenged by the issue of his child’s education, but also feels the added burden of financial insecurity and rural hukou status. For Zhou Min, the fatherly role of yang and jiao became closely intertwined with each other, but his limited possession of necessary resources in the city meant that he could hardly fulfil both responsibilities. Given that ideal fatherhood is essentially constitutive of meeting the children’s material and educational needs in Chinese culture, the inability to undertake these normalised fatherly roles may connote a violation of moral obligation as a responsible parent (Lin, 2019). Among many of the migrant fathers, the time of their children’s school age can therefore become a critical moment when their fatherly identities are potentially challenged or even devalued.

In addition, perhaps because of their own experience of being dislocated in the city, the migrant fathers aspired to offer the same developmental opportunities to their children as other urban parents. Wang Jie (25, migrant father with a 4 year-old-son) was one such case:

*He [my son] has just started to go to nursery. I would like him to have the same things as the other ordinary kids in the city. If the other kids learn music instruments or painting, I would like my son to have the same if he (my son) wants to in the future.*

In the above quote, Wang Jie seems to be strived to align himself with the normalised depicti issue of his child’s education (Lin, 2019). Notably, although similarly remarking that a responsible father should ensure his children’s talents and abilities are fully developed, Wang Jie’s narratives were in sharp contrast with the urban young fathers’ interpretations of jiao. The urban middle-class fathers like Danran and Alex tended to speak of the development of talents and abilities as leisure and free expressions of the children’s individual nature. But for Wang Jie, supporting his son to learn a musical instrument was a practical skill that could be later used to increase the child’s competitiveness and overall quality. Wang Jie’s emphasis on ‘other ordinary kids’ revealed the man’s class marginalisation and implicitly, the fear that his son would continue to be marginalised because of his father’s disadvantage. As a result, the fathering role of jiao turns to a site where the masculinity of migrant fathers is further challenged, and socio-economic inequalities reproduced.

**Conclusion: beyond the dichotomy of universal and Chinese masculinities**

In order to bring to light the underlying traditional cultural values and socio-economic conditions that have (re)shaped Chinese young fathers’ aspirations, we have revisited qualitative data from two studies on Chinese young men. The paper has highlighted different layers of socio-cultural meanings among their similar and different practices as young fathers that contribute to extend the emergent studies of involving fathers in caring in current western literature (see Dermott, 2008; Kaufman, 2013). By examining Chinese young fathers’ personal feelings and experiences, this paper provides a reference to expand global narratives of how men from different socio-economic backgrounds interpret ideal fatherhood. Lo (2014, p. 37) argues that ‘Asia’s project of self-formation and reestablishment of cultural values does not have to be anti-western’. In this sense, our findings illustrate that neoliberal ideology with regard to competitiveness and traditional cultural values can be simultaneously imbued in local young fathers’ aspirations for their children’s upbringing.

We argue that the enduring cultural sentiments of yang and jiao are central to Chinese young men’s understanding of fatherhood and their negotiation of masculinity. Within the context of the wider discourse of the China Dream, fulfilling fatherly roles as far as possible carries profound significance for migrant and urban young fathers, who commonly aspire to construct positive prospects for their children. As we have demonstrated, this personal form of the China Dream in relation to masculinizing fatherhood is usually achieved through the men’s articulation of raising and educating their children. However, these fathers’ negotiations of yang and jiao are embedded within socio-economic inequalities, in that such a masculine ideal appears to cause greater tension for male migrants, who have already faced the challenge of reclaiming their dislocated masculinity in the city. While the urban middle-class and the working-class migrant fathers describe and practise ideal fatherhood in broadly similar ways, it is often the aspiration of urban fathers that sets the ‘standard’ for desirable ways of fathering. These young men are also those who tend to be better rewarded in terms of their masculinities by fulfilling fatherly roles, albeit not without constraints. Consequently, wider socio-spatial inequalities are likely to be reinforced in the domain of fatherhood, with the masculinity of marginalised young fathers further devalued.

In describing these young fathers’ emphasis on yang and jiao, we do not mean to understate their daily involvement in hands-on care or to simply reassert traditional gender division of labour. As we have discussed, some young fathers explicitly stated that the income of their wife were equally significant to secure the family’s finance, while others implied that working hard to provide a better life for their children were all expressions of a father’s love. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge different fathering practices among migrant and urban fathers as more than class inequalities, and to closely examine how socially structured constraints and opportunities intertwine with men’s aspiration to be good fathers. While we argue for greater attention to be paid to how fatherhood and masculine ideals are embedded in, and informed by, socio-economic and cultural forces, other factors, such as the income gap between men and women in the labour market, inter-generational relationships and personal biographies, should not be overlooked in future research.

By adopting local terminologies as key analytical tools, we have attempted to re-conceptualise fatherhood and masculinity as a response to the call for ‘advancing alternative approaches with indigenous relevance’ in global social science research (Omobowale & Akanle, 2017, p. 44). Chinese young men’s personal reflections on their roles as fathers offer a critical lens to unravel the sociocultural specificities of fatherhood and generate meaningful insights on men’s parenting aspirations within broader social changes, such as migration, globalisation and the lingering influence of local cultural values that are also visible in many other societies. In light of an emergence of new fatherhood, our participants’ accounts are strongly upheld by the notion of yang and jiao in Chinese cultural discourse. Meanwhile, their interpretations of fatherhood are changing due to their shifting social positions and life circumstances. In this sense, the young men’s negotiations of yang and jiao in their narratives of their roles as fathers have enabled us to develop nuanced understandings of the diversity and inequality in constructions of masculinity and fatherhood from a Chinese perspective.

**References**

Abbott, D., Zheng, F., & Meredith, W. (1992). An evolving redefinition of the fatherhood role in the People’s Republic of China. International Journal of Sociology of the Family, 22(1), 45–54.

Bhambra, G., & Santos, B. (2017). Introduction: Global challenges for sociology. Sociology, 51(1), 3–10. Bryman, A. (2004). Social research methods (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Callahan, W. (2015). History, tradition and the China dream: Socialist modernization in the world of great harmony. Journal of Contemporary China, 24(96), 983–1001.

Cao, S. (2017). ‘Whingeing’ husbands: Men’s practices of intimacy and inequality in urban China. Families, Relationships and Societies. Advance online publication. doi:10.1332/204674317X15120405853453

Cao, S. (2018). Crafting elastic masculinity: Formations of shenti, intimacy and kinship among young men in China (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of York, UK.

Connell, R. W. (1998). Masculinities and globalization. Men and Masculinities, 1(1), 3–23.

Connell, R. W. (2000). The men and the boys. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Cornwall, A., & Lindisfarne, N. (1994). Dislocating masculinity: Gender, power and anthropology. In A. Cornwall & N. Lindisfarne (Eds.), Dislocating masculinity: Comparative ethnographies (pp. 11–47). London, New York: Routledge.

Cornwall, A., Karioris, F., & Lindisfarne, N. (Eds.). (2016). Masculinities under neoliberalism. London: Zed Books.

Dermott, E. (2008). Intimate fatherhood: A sociological analysis. London: Routledge.

Dermott, E., & Yamashita, J. (2014). Resource-free parenting: The not no curious absence of money in policy discourses of good parenting in the UK and Japan. Social Policy and Society, 13(1), 129–141.

Doucet, A. (2004). Fathers and the responsibility for children: A puzzle and a tension. Atlantis, 28(2), 103–114.

Goh, E. (2011). China’s one-child policy and multiple care giving: Raising little suns in Xiamen. New York: Routledge.

Goodburn, C. (2015). Migrant girls in Shenzhen: Gender, education and the urbanization of aspiration. The China Quarterly, 222, 320–338.

Ho, D. Y. F. (1987). Fatherhood in Chinese society. In M. Lamb (Ed.), The father’s role: Cross-cultural perspective (pp. 227–246). Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Irwin, S., & Elley, S. (2013). Parents’ hopes and expectations for their children’s future occupations. The Sociological Review, 61(1), 111–130.

Ji, Y., Wu, X., Sun, S., & He, G. (2017). Unequal care, unequal work: Toward a more comprehensive understanding of gender inequality in post-Reform urban China. Sex Roles, 77(11–12), 765–778.

Kaufman, G. (2013). Superdads: How fathers balance work and family in the 21st Century. New York: London: New York University Press.

Kipnis, A. (2011). Governing educational desire: Culture, politics, and schooling in China. London: University of Chicago Press.

Kuan, T. (2015). Love’s uncertainty: The politics and ethics of child rearing in contemporary China. Oakland: University of California Press.

Lareau, A. (2003). Unequal childhoods: Class, race and family life. Berkeley: University of California Press.

LaRossa, R. (1988). Fatherhood and social change. Family Relations, 37(4), 451–457.

Li, X., & Jankowiak, W. (2016). The Chinese father: Masculinity, conjugal love, and parental involvement. In K. Louie (Ed.), Changing Chinese masculinities: From imperial pillars of state to global real men (pp. 186–203). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Li, X. (2018). Chinese fathers in the Twentieth Century: Changing roles as parents and as men. NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research, 26(4), 331–350.

Lin, X. (2014). ‘Filial son’, the family, and identity formation among male migrant workers in urban China. Gender, Place & Culture, 21(6), 717–732.

Lin, X. (2019). Young rural-urban migrant fathers in China: Everyday ‘China Dream’ and the negotiation of masculinity. NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies, 1–15. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/ 18902138.2019.1574140

Liong, M. (2017). Chinese fatherhood, gender and family: Father mission. London: Palgrave Macmillan. Liu, F. (2019). Chinese young men’s construction of exemplary masculinity: The hegemony of chenggong. Men and Masculinities, 22(2), 294–316. doi:10.1177/1097184X17696911

Lo, K.-C. (2014). Rethinking Asianism and method. European Journal of Cultural Studies, 17(1), 31–43. Louie, K. (2002). Theorising Chinese masculinity: Society and gender in China. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Louie, K. (2015). Chinese masculinities in a globalizing world. Abingdon, NY: Routledge.

Mason, J. (2007). Re-using’ qualitative data: On the merits of an investigative epistemology. Sociological Research Online, 12(3), 1–4. Retrieved from <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/3/3.html>

Moore, N. (2006). The context of context: Broadening perspectives on reuse. Methodological Innovation, 1(2), 21–32.

Naftali, O. (2014). Children, rights and modernity in China: Raising self-governing citizens. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Omobowale, A., & Akanle, O. (2017). Asuwada epistemology and globalised sociology: Challenges of the South. Sociology, 51(1), 43–59.

Qi, X. (2014). Globalized knowledge flows and Chinese social theory. New York, London:

Routledge.

Riley, S. (2003). The management of the traditional male role: A discourse analysis of the constructions and functions of provision. Journal of Gender Studies, 12(2), 99–113.

Skeggs, B. (1997). Formations of class and gender: Becoming respectable. London, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Song, G., & Hird, D. (2014). Men and masculinities in contemporary China. Leiden: Brill.

Thompson, P. (2000). Re-using qualitative research data: A personal account. Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 1(3), 27.

Vincent, C. (2017). ‘The children have only got one education and you have to make sure it’s a good one: Parenting and parent-school relations in a neoliberal age. Gender and Education, 29(5), 541–557.

Wall, G., & Arnold, S. (2007). How involved is involved fathering?: An exploration of the contemporary culture of fatherhood. Gender & Society, 21(4), 508–527.

Xie, Y., & Wu, W. (2008). Danwei pofitability and earnings inequality in urban China. The China Quarterly, 195, 558–581.

Xu, Q. (2016). Fatherhood, adolescence and gender in Chinese families. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Zuo, J. (2003). From revolutionary comrades to gendered partners: Marital construction of breadwinning in post-Mao urban China. Journal of Family Issues, 24(3), 314–337.