The Emergence of Stay-at-Home Fathers: Changes in Male Roles in Contemporary Chinese Families

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Abstract. The gender division of labor in contemporary Chinese families has changed a lot. The traditional division of labor of "men working outside and women staying at home" is gradually weakening, and more men participate in the family affairs. No longer seen as only the breadwinner, these men are caregivers who are emotionally connected with their children, and expect companionship and communication from and with their wives. In this study, the authors focus on the changes of the role of men in contemporary Chinese families. Specifically, the authors are interested in the stay-at-home fathers and the highly involved fathers who participate in the daily life of the family. By using literature review and in-depth interviews, the authors attempt to explore how the fatherhood in China is redefined and how men try to balance the family, work and personal identity. The results show that these fathers are more emotionally involved in the childcare and the family affairs, and they have a stronger sense of responsibility. They are using a more intimate and caring way to participate in the childcare. However, it is not an easy journey. These men are practicing new fatherhood, and they are still bearing the traditional gender role expectation, peer culture and work culture pressure. They are swinging between the "breadwinner" and "caregiver". Some of them feel ashamed and some of them feel empowered. In the changing division of labor of the Chinese family, not only the reconstruction of fatherhood is visible, also the redefinition of gender is happening.

Keywords: Transformation of Fatherhood, Gender Division of Labor, Stay-at-Home Fathers, Patriarchy, Reconstruction of Masculinity.

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, the gendered division of labor in Chinese families has undergone the process of renegotiation. Although the traditional gendered division of labor still exists in social structure, more fathers have started to take on caregiving roles that used to be dominated by mothers, and a new type of "stay-at-home fathers" has emerged. Previous studies have defined paternal involvement in parenting in three dimensions: accessibility, responsibility and engagement, and found that higher paternal accessibility, responsibility and engagement positively predicts children's prosocial behavior development [1].

However, the role of fathers in Chinese families is becoming more complicated nowadays. On one hand, traditional masculinity and social expectations still exert pressure on men; on the other, increasing awareness of gender equality, changes in socio-economic structure and rise of women's agency have encouraged more fathers to participate in families more and more responsibly.

Under such context, men who decided to be stay-at-home fathers would face problems of identity and social pressure. They would feel stuck in the dilemma of self-worth and self-blame, and think of their behaviors as something inappropriate according to traditional masculine image. However, through everyday practice, some of them would find a way to redefines the division of family. They are struggling with the doubts of self-worth because they are deviating from social expectations, but also happy and proud about the intimate parenting. According to Huang Fei's interviews with 22 Chinese stay-at-home fathers, the coexistence of tension and fulfillment could be found [2].

In addition to individual experiences, structural factors such as mothers' employment and grandparents' involvement influence the level of father's participation [3]. Among these factors, the

support and recognition from female family members (especially wives) in the (re)construction of masculinity at home have been widely acknowledged [4].

In recent years, men appear to confront the dilemma between work and family, which prevents them from being deeply involved in childcare [5]. On the other side of the dilemma, the discourse of society and peers tend to label caregiving men as "unmanly" and drive them to perform care backstage.

In face of the gradual renegotiation of gender role in Chinese families, this study selects the "stay-at-home father" group to explore how they construct and perform their role in the daily life of their family. Based on the existing scholarship and qualitative interview information, this study attempts to reveal how the change of fatherhood reflects the social and cultural transformation. In addition, this study also includes another kind of fathers, who, though maintaining their job, have high level of domestic participation and emotional involvement—hence, extend the definition of "stay-at-home fathers" into another level: highly involved fathers.

Through the study of those men, this study attempts to expose the dual constraints that those men confront in fulfilling traditional gender norm and new caregiving expectation. Only by breaking through the rigid construction of fatherhood can the authors promote the pluralization of masculinities in contemporary Chinese society.

2. Research Methods

The authors interviewed two stay-at-home fathers—Mr. Du and Mr. Zhou, who are represented by codes A and B respectively. Their specific background information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Background Information of Interviewees

Code	Occupation	Number of Children	Housework	Others
A	Foreign Trade Enterprise	2	Handled by Division of Labor	Frequent Business Trips
B	Electrical Industry	1	Handled by Division of Labor	More Time Spent at Home

Both fathers were interviewed with 3 questions as follows:

1.How do you and your spouse balance parenting and work at home?

2.If you have a friend who is a stay-at-home father, what do you think of him?

3.When taking care of children and doing housework, have you ever encountered discrimination or questioning because you are male?

3. Research Findings

In the process of the two authors' interviewing the two respondents, they found that both of them thought that the traditional definition of "men work outside and women stay at home" was very harmful to both genders and totally wrong. Mr. Du even tried his own experience to deny that definition. He said, "I once thought about letting my wife be a housewife and I worked hard to make money for the family. Now I think that was very wrong."

As for the division of housework, both Mr. Du and Mr. Zhou had developed a harmonious division model. Actually, each family developed a division model suited for their own actual situation.

The division of labor model of Mr. Du's family was a naturally formed "collaborative division of labor" in a "flexible division of labor". The authors said that, "My wife and I usually take turns to pick the kids up from school, clean the house and cook—whoever gets off work earlier does the task. Maybe due to the nature of our work, the authors often have to work overtime. At the beginning, my wife and I discussed and decided on the division of work. Later, it became a more or less flexible division of labor in a 'collaborative division of labor'. " In contrast, the division of labor model of Mr. Zhou's family was a self-planned "collaborative division labor" . Mr. Zhou said, "In my family, my spouse and I plan our time in advance. For example, in a workday, she gets off work earlier, so she

picks the kids up from school and does some simple housework first. When I get off work, I help tutor the kids to do their homework. On the weekend, the authors take the kids out for outdoor activities together. the authors also split up to do various housework errands. If one of us suddenly has a work emergency, the other does the rest. the authors do not demand too much from each other. They or I know that if the authors want to balance childcare and work in an orderly way, the authors must understand and tolerate each other and make some flexible adjustments.

It can be seen that both of the two families developed a balance between childcare and work suited for their own situation and developed mature and harmonious division-of-labor models. Both of them got rid of the traditional "men work outside and women stay at home" division of responsibilities.

When talking about their colleagues or friends who were "stay-at-home fathers", neither of the two respondents judged them by the traditional gender role. Both approved of their choice by family needs and personal wishes.

Mr. Du said, "That's a very normal thing. That's a family strategy. If the wife earns more money or can provide better conditions for the family, this kind of choice may be made." Mr. Zhou said, "This is just the choice made by this person and his family. As long as this person feels happy and the family is harmonious, it's a very suitable choice. There's no need to judge it by the traditional concept of 'men work outside'. Everyone has the right to choose his or her own life style.

From the perspective of family interests and needs, Mr. Du highlighted the "functional nature" of family roles, i.e., whoever can play a more important role by fulfilling more family functions is the pillar of the family. While Mr. Zhou stressed "individual choice" from the perspective of the autonomy of personal and family decisions. As long as the stay-at-home father feels happy and his family is harmonious, his choice is fine.

The two fathers experienced discrimination and prejudice in the external environment when they participated in household work and childcare. Mr. Du felt embarrassed about not being able to join his colleagues' social activities in the early days after taking care of their child, and was even mocked by his colleagues. He remembered, "I felt very ashamed." In contrast, Mr. Zhou did not experience any discrimination. He said, "I haven't faced any discrimination or prejudice against men in this matter. People's mindset is very open." At the same time, Mr. Du and Mr. Zhou also experienced different things when they participated in childcare.

Mr. Du felt uncomfortable in the early days of taking care of their child because he lacked experience and skills, and felt he was always a troublemaker. Mr. Zhou did not experience any negative emotions when he was willing to take part in the process of taking care of their child.

Taking Mr. Du as an example, the embarrassment and discomfort Mr. Du experienced reflect the pressure and anxiety men face in terms of self-competence in the external environment when they participate in household work and childcare.

4. Discussion

Some studies have found that in the "men working outside and women staying at home" traditional division of labor mode, gender attribution with "feminization of care responsibilities" aggravates gender imbalance in child care in family upbringing. These studies describe the differences between men and women in time, energy, role, and responsibility attribution during child rearing and reveal the phenomenon of paternal absence and weakness in family caregiving [6].

However, the division of labor in modern Chinese families has gradually moved out of the traditional mode of "men working outside and women staying at home" and is gradually moving towards a division of labor with a "functional" connotation based on the actual needs of the family. This division of labor not only conforms to the development trend of "gender equality" in modern society, but also reflects the need for men and women to cooperate in their respective roles when modern family members seek a balance between family and work.

Despite the overall positive trend, there are still some problems.

For example, the problems Mr. Du encountered in the interview, such as "not very skilled in taking care of children in the early stage" and "poor child-rearing ability," are not just because they are incompetent. Actually, it is more the "genderization of child-rearing skills" in the process of social resources allocation. Research results show that when men participate in child-rearing, it greatly enhances women's labor supply and income levels without significantly impacting men's own labor supply [7]. Therefore, it can be seen that men can participate in child-rearing and just need to learn to take care of children.

On the other hand, some research results show that especially for Asian countries, men's emotional involvement in child-rearing: the driving forces have received little attention [8]. This is the result of failing to pay attention to the men's responsibilities and abilities in child-rearing, which has neglected the fact that men should also bear the responsibility of child-rearing in society for a long time (especially in Asia, China).

This not only makes public-related resources focus on women as the main service recipients, but also puts men in a dilemma, that is, there is no learning opportunity for men to practice child-rearing.

In addition, there is almost no situation of men taking care of children alone existing in the public. Therefore, it also makes it impossible for men to have experiential references in the social environment.

Research results show that Chinese fathers can have a closer relationship with their children when participating in child-rearing [9]. At the same time, research results show that maintaining positive interaction between fathers and their children can not only effectively reduce children's behavioral problems, but also improve academic performance and social-emotional abilities, which provides a scientific basis for the importance of fathers in families [10]. That is, fathers should take on the responsibility of child-rearing in time, build a close relationship with their children and bring more harmony to the family.

Moreover, although people in present times may have an approving attitude towards the group of "stay-at-home-fathers", the practical problems faced by these people have not got good assistance and support. In addition to facing the denial of social value by the environment, they also meet with discrimination when they want to enter the job market again. Even if the stay-at-home fathers themselves have recognized their own choice, they also meet with prejudice and discrimination from others. They are marked as "incompetent" or "living off their wives" and the value of labor they have created for the family is not recognized by society.

When this group wants to enter the job market again, the prejudice and discrimination that stay-at-home fathers meet from enterprises on the issue of work ability are even more serious than women's. This is because enterprises may know that women may have quit work for "child-rearing reasons", but they do not have any understanding on men.

Therefore, although the division of family labor has broken the traditional pattern of "men working outside and women staying at home" and is gradually improving, the authors should also be vigilant of the problems existing below to provide a better environment for stay-at-home fathers to survive and develop. the authors should move from "conceptual changes" to "institutional changes" in promoting gender equality.

5. Conclusion

This study aims to focus on the group of "stay-at-home fathers". To explore how men reconstitute and perform their familial role in the gradual disappearance of traditional gendered division of labor.

Through literature analysis and qualitative interview, the study finds that, in contemporary Chinese families, an important group of men break away from the constraint of traditional gender role and devote themselves into domestic work and childcare. This change not only reflects the reconstruction of fatherhood and diversification of masculinities, but also shows the combined impact of socio-economic restructuring, male awareness of participation, and women's liberation.

The study finds that some men are no longer limited to the definition of "economic provider", but show the feature of "emotional participant" and "caregiver". In addition, women's liberation and economic strength have further weakened the gender expectation of historical patriarchal relationship, which has long constrained both genders. Therefore, it provides more space for the renegotiation of domestic gender role in Chinese families.

From the perspective of contemporary society, the emergence of stay-at-home fathers makes caregiving, an activity that used to be socially assigned to women, once again become visible and reasonable. However, it still faces many challenges, such as self-doubt of men, identity conflict, peer pressure, and the dilemma between work and family.

Future studies may further consider extending their exploration of fatherhood practices in various social classes and regions, as well as the impact of women's growing influence and discourse power in the workplace on the reconstruction of fatherhood.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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