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Drivers of intimate fatherhood in contemporary China: Childhood experiences, social media, and partner encouragement

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Abstract

Objective: This study aims to investigate what factors contribute to the display of intimate fatherhood amongst contemporary urban Chinese fathers.

Background: Although a growing body of research has investigated men's involvement in physical, and more recently, also emotional involvement in childcare, what drives men to be emotionally involved in childcare has received scant attention in the research literature, particularly in Asian countries such as China.

Method: Our study draws on in-depth interviews with 19 urban Chinese fathers to investigate why men display intimate fatherhood in parenting. The thematic analysis procedure is used to answer our research questions.

Results: Findings show that men's disappointed feelings about the limited involvement of their own fathers, the intimate fatherhood contents presented in social media, and encouragement from their partner were important contributing drivers for contemporary Chinese fathers to display intimate fatherhood.

Conclusion: Our study highlights the importance of personal biographies, partner influences, and social media in contributing to men's emotional involvement in childcare. Our findings are useful for policymakers and professionals to understand, and to promote, as well as strengthen, men's commitment to displaying intimate fatherhood.

Key words: intimate fatherhood, reflexivity, personal biographies, maternal gate-opening, social media, China



1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of increased female labor force participation and more gender-egalitarian attitudes about responsibilities for childcare, the ways and the extent to which men are both physically and emotionally involved in childrearing are receiving more attention (Dermott, 2008; Lee, 2019; Li, 2020; Macht, 2020; Wang & Keizer, 2024; Xu & O'Brien, 2014).

Esther Dermott, in her classical work in 2008, conducted in South London, developed the concept of "intimate fatherhood" to emphasize that contemporary middle-class fathers deem it necessary for successful fathering to be emotionally engaged and emotionally expressive. The concept of intimate fatherhood relates to the notions of "father involvement" and "intimacy". According to Lamb (2000), paternal, or father, involvement consists of three elements: engagement, accessibility, and responsibility. Engagement involves time spent in actual one-on-one interaction with the child, such as feeding the child, helping the child with homework, or cuddling with the child. Intimacy, according to the British sociologist Jamieson (2011), refers to "the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality". Also, "practices of intimacy" refer to "practices which enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other" (Jamieson, 2011). In this light, father involvement, and paternal engagement in specific, can be seen as a manifestation of the practice of intimacy, and as such, the concepts are partly overlapping. In the long run, paternal engagement can be seen as a mechanism in developing a close and intimate father-child relationship. In the current study, we are mainly interested in the daily practices of intimate fatherhood.

Additionally, Scheibling (2019) distinguishes between the father, fathering, and fatherhood, which refer to identity, experience or practice, and ideology, respectively. Fatherhood can be seen as the cultural coding of men as fathers (Hobson, 2002: 11) and is a socially constructed category that is shaped by political, social, cultural, historical antecedents, and contemporary concerns (Miller, 2011: 6). This means that the display of intimate fatherhood may be different in various cultural contexts.

With respect to the determinants of paternal involvement, most of the existing literature has paid attention to physical involvement (e.g., Castillo et al., 2011; McGill, 2014; Keizer, 2015; Planalp & Braungart-Rieker, 2016; Tan, 2023). Specifically, a large and burgeoning body of quantitative research has investigated how fathers' social demographic and socio-economic characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age, partner status, work hours, educational attainment, financial status, and residential status (e.g., Castillo et al., 2011; McGill, 2014) as well as men's fathering role identification such as gender role attitudes shape their physical involvement with their child (e.g., Keizer, 2015; McGill, 2014; Planalp & Braungart-Rieker, 2016). Also, some studies, conducted mostly in postdivorce families, have reported how mothers facilitate as well as inhibit fathers' involvement (Cannito, 2020; Fagan & Cherson, 2017; Trinder, 2008). Finally, several studies showed that societal and social-cultural factors, such as cultural norms of involved fatherhood and family-friendly social policies, facilitate men's practical involvement in childcare (Dermott & Miller, 2015; Tan, 2023).

Research on the determinants of intimate fatherhood is much more limited (Brannen, 2015; Macht, 2020). This is surprising given that parental emotional expressivity is significantly associated with children's emotion management and emotional competence and is important in shaping children's emotional socialization (Bariola et al., 2011). The aim of this qualitative study, therefore, is to examine what factors drive the expression of intimate fatherhood.

The few studies that have investigated intimate fatherhood showed that the relationship between men and their own fathers played a major role in their expression of intimate fatherhood (Brannen, 2015: 106; Macht, 2020: 71). For example, Macht's (2020: 74) recent work found men who perceived their fathers as overbearing, stoic, and too aggressive were determined to be "different fathers" and to play the role of intimate fathers in their own children's lives. Men with positive memories of their fathers' emotional involvement tended to show physical affection or display paternal love towards their children in similar ways as their fathers did (Brannen, 2015: 106; Macht, 2020: 79). These findings resonate with the concept of "reflexive fatherhood", which proposes that doing fathering can be seen as a reflexive process in which the agency of fathers emerges and in which they continually view and reflect upon their own life experiences (particularly childhoods) as well as the circumstances of family life, and then orient their parenting attitudes and practices (Brannen, 2015: 102; Lan, 2019; Westerling, 2015; Williams, 2008).

While the existing literature sheds some first light onto the drivers of intimate fatherhood, several gaps remain. The majority of the aforementioned studies have been conducted in Western Europe and North

America, where the concept of masculinities includes physical displays of closeness, such as hugging and touching, alongside emotional intimacy, both of which are expected norms in paternal behavior (Connor et al., 2021). Also, well-remunerated and flexible family-friendly policies such as parental leave and paternity leave, as well as cultural expectations and societal norms that stress gender equality have promoted the family-oriented and actively involved father in European (e.g. Norway) and North American societies (Brandth & Kvande, 2016; Dermott & Miller, 2015; Wray, 2020). In contrast to the European and North American context, Asian fathers, particularly Chinese fathers, are commonly depicted as strict, emotionally reserved disciplinarians (Li & Jankowiak, 2016; Li & Lamb, 2015). Nonetheless, evidence is provided to show that in China, fathers are also beginning to be emotionally engaged in childrearing (Lee, 2019; Li, 2020; Wang & Keizer, 2024). For instance, recent research conducted in China suggests that Chinese fathers do create emotional bonds with their children through physical intimacy and verbal expressions (Li, 2020). Yet, little is known about what drives these men to perform these emotional and intimate roles in paternal involvement. And given differences in societal context, it is likely that explanations provided for the expression of intimate fatherhood in Western countries are not the same as the ones mentioned by fathers in Asian countries, such as China.

2. Chinese fatherhood practices, societal context, and research contribution

For a long time, Confucian culture profoundly influenced the construction of Chinese fatherhood (Li & Lamb, 2015). “Wen” (cultural attainment) and “wu” (physical prowess), emphasizing self-control and suppression of emotional expression (Li & Jankowiak, 2016) are the traditional ideal forms of Chinese masculinity (Louie, 2014). Consequently, paternal involvement’s physical and emotional roles have not been a central element of fatherhood cultural norms in China (Xu & O’Brien, 2014).

Several scholars’ works, however, have suggested that Chinese family relationships have witnessed an intimate turn similar to their European and American counterparts (Evans, 2010; Liu, 2016; Yan, 2018). Research on contemporary Chinese families suggested that emotion and intimacy are increasingly crucial to family relationships and have become central to intergenerational relationships (Evans, 2010; Yan, 2018), particularly mother-daughter relationships (Evans, 2010) and father-daughter relationships (Xu & O’Brien, 2014) of middle-class families. This change is due largely to the one-child policy (1978-2015), which has made the child to be the center of family life, the only hope of their parents (Fong, 2004), and the “emotionally priceless” individual (Liu, 2016).

In addition to the promotion of family policies, changes in social structure, such as the shift in economic patterns, the growth of women’s employment, and the shrinking in household size, have reshaped the gender norms and parenting ideas of urban Chinese parents in post-reform China (Fong, 2004; Li & Lamb, 2015; Tan, 2020). Social media, most importantly, plays an increasingly significant role in creating a new parenting environment for contemporary Chinese parents. Since the start of the 21st century, Chinese official propaganda, such as *Women of Chinese News* (*zhongguo funv bao*), has begun to introduce Western parenting ideas and styles to encourage and promote Chinese men’s involvement in childrearing (Tan, 2020). Recent research has shown that using digital technology and media to access parenting information has become a regular practice for urban Chinese parents (Peng, 2022).

In this new context, some studies noted that fathers in post-reform China are shifting from strict disciplinarians to caring or intimate fathers (Li & Jankowiak, 2016; Wang & Keizer, 2024; Xu & O’Brien, 2014). More recently, research conducted in Nanjing suggested that Chinese men renegotiate their role as fathers through hugs, kisses, co-sleeping, verbal expressions, and using loving nicknames to refer to children (Li, 2020). Research from other Chinese cities found that Chinese fathers from urban families provide emotional support for their children through verbal expressions and encouraging words, and actively display emotion work in childcare (Wang & Keizer, 2024).

However, when scholars have investigated the expression of intimate fatherhood in Asian societies, most attention has been paid to the experiences of transnational fathers and migrant fathers. Several studies on migration and fatherhood have pointed out that transnational migration and long-term separation from their families provide men with a new opportunity to reflect on their emotional relationships with their family members, especially their children (Lee, 2019; Choi & Peng, 2016). For example, Lee’s (2019) work on Korean middle-class fathers revealed that lengthy transnational separation made these men reawaken to the importance of family. After separation from their children, some of them provide emotional

support and emotional care for their children through a series of actions, such as saying “I love you” constantly to their children, making voice/video calls, and sharing photos and videos with them (Lee, 2019). Similarly, in a rare study on Chinese migrant workers and fatherhood, Choi and Peng (2016) noted that migration could be a vital factor and reshaped the emotional experiences of these fathers.

These studies have highlighted that transnational experience and migration experience are important drivers of men’s emotional expression towards their children. However, we do not know the drivers for men who do not have these transnational and migration experiences. To address this gap, the current study aims to explore what factors contribute to the emergence of Chinese intimate fatherhood amongst resident urban Chinese fathers.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 *Intimate fatherhood*

The emotional role of men as fathers in the family has received increasing scholarly attention over the past few decades (Dermott, 2008; Lee, 2019; Li, 2020; Macht, 2020; Wang & Keizer, 2024; Xu & O’Brien, 2014). Dermot (2008) introduced the concept of intimate fatherhood, which goes beyond the dichotomies of involved versus uninvolved fathers, and new versus old (traditional) fathers, to stress emotional openness and the displaying of emotions through both verbal and physical expression of feeling is particularly significant to contemporary middle-class fatherhood. In a recent study, Westerling (2023) used this concept to capture the idea of emotional and affectional reciprocity in the relationship between Danish fathers and their children. That said, Dermott’s notion of intimate fatherhood might not be sufficient to fully capture Chinese fathers’ emotional involvement in parenting. Chinese fatherhood is deeply influenced by Confucianism (a cultural model that emphasizes that men should restrain and control the expression of their emotions and feelings), and as such previous studies showed that Chinese fathers found other more practical and indirect ways of creating intimacy, such as preparing gifts, buying toys and clothes (Li, 2020; Xu & O’Brien, 2014). These practices were categorized as “silent intimacy” (Xu & O’Brien, 2014). This suggests that, at least in a Chinese context, intimate fatherhood is not only displayed through physical or verbal expressions.

Based on these work, intimate fatherhood in the current study refers to involvement characterized by verbal display, physical intimacy, and silent intimacy. Verbal display primarily implies the father expresses his emotions and feelings toward the child through direct or indirect verbal communication, including saying “I love you,” “I like you,” using loving nicknames, or saying encouraging words. The second one is physical intimacy, which means that men demonstrate close father-child relationships through intimate physical acts such as kissing, hugging, and cuddling. Silent intimacy, the third dimension, refers to men showing their paternal love towards their children through care actions such as preparing gifts for children’s birthdays, meeting the needs of children, and knowing their inner world (Xu & O’Brien, 2014).

3.2 *Reflexive fatherhood*

The concept of “reflexive fatherhood” is closely related to reflexivity, which is considered a typical feature of modernity. The authors most often associated with the concept of reflexivity are the sociologists Giddens and Beck. Although they disagree on the origins, meaning, and implications of reflexivity for actual subjects, both view it as an essential dimension of modern subjectivities (Farrugia, 2013). For example, both authors argue that against the background of the post-traditional order, the self or biography becomes a reflexive project (Beck, 1992: 90; Giddens, 1991: 32). Moreover, both authors employ the term of detraditionalization to theorize the process that creates the conditions for reflexive subjectivities (Farrugia, 2013). Detraditionalization means that cultural norms that have been conventional and routine are questioned and critically examined (Giddens, 1994). Against this backdrop, the “certainties” of the previous times, such as the nature and patterns of work, family life, gender roles, and “gender fates”, have been shaken up and can no longer be assumed (Miller, 2010: 24). According to the authors, reflexivity mediates the role that objective structural or cultural powers play in influencing social action (Archer, 2007: 5).

Reflexivity, according to Giddens (1990: 36), “is a defining characteristic of all human action”, “allows the self (in principle) to achieve much greater mastery over the social relations and social contexts reflexive-

ly incorporated into the forging of self-identity” (Giddens, 1991: 139). In this sense, the reflexivity of modern society consists in the fact that social practices are constantly being examined and reformed in the light of new information or knowledge about those practices (Giddens, 1990: 38). Rather, for Beck, reflexivity does not imply an increased self-mastery. Regarding this point, it can be found in his idea of individualization. Beck argues that individualization allows the individual to be placed at the fore of social life. The individual himself or herself becomes the reproduction unit for the social (Beck, 1990: 90). People demand the right to develop their own views on life and to be able to act on it (Beck, 1992: 92). This, however, does not mean that people are released from cultural traditions and societal structures. The liberated individual still depends on social institutions such as the labor market and welfare state support in a risk society (Beck, 1992:130). In the current study, the notion of reflexivity is more in line with Giddens’ perspective, serving to highlight the agency and subjectivity of the individual in reflexively responding to societal structures. Employing reflexivity as a theoretical and analytical concept, we scrutinize how and to what extent Chinese men are able to challenge the existing gender norms and gender order in the contemporary Chinese context.

Since the early 21st century, the concept of reflexivity has been increasingly applied to the family area to perceive, capture, and reflect upon the ways in which fathers reflexively understand events of family lives and reflexively narrate paternal identities (Brandth & Kvande, 2002; Williams, 2008; Westering, 2015). The main contribution of the reflexivity perspective is to shift the theoretical framework for analyzing and approaching fatherhood from a system analysis and collectivist perspective based on the family unit to an analysis based on individualized identities (Johansson & Andreasson, 2017: 27).

Reflexivity offers a potential approach to facilitate the close and intimate relationships between fathers and children in contemporary families (Lan, 2019; Williams, 2008; Westerling, 2015). Berit Brandth and Elin Kvande (2002: 188), in early research on reflexive fathers, argued that fatherhood could be understood as a reflexive project promoted by the ambivalence and multiplicity of choices that characterize modern society. Further, Stephen Williams (2008) pointed out that fathering is increasingly a response to personal biography and circumstances. This means men constantly reflect upon their own experiences to play a more involved role in child care. In his work conducted in South Wales, he revealed that the current fathering styles of men are strongly related to the way their fathers were involved in their childhood. Specifically, due to the experience of “absent father” during childhood, the parenting practices of their fathers were not adopted into their own fathering roles; rather, these men described fatherhood as a way of nurturing their children in closer cooperation with their partners and taking a more active role in parenting (Williams, 2008). Similarly, a study of Taiwanese middle-class families showed that the parenting styles of the original family caused emotional trauma to parents; they, therefore, are constantly reflecting upon their own behaviors in current parent-child interactions to avoid repeating the negative practices of the previous generation (Lan, 2019: 55).

In the current study, we will therefore use the notion of reflexive fatherhood to investigate what drives contemporary urban Chinese fathers to display intimate fatherhood. Guided by the theoretical framework as outlined above, we expect to find that men’s own childhood experiences play a substantial role.

4. Methods

4.1 Data collection

This study employed in-depth interviews to explain why Chinese fathers display intimate fatherhood. Respondents for the current research were drawn from a sub-sample of men we recruited in a larger project on fatherhood. In that project, we conducted interviews with 37 urban Chinese fathers and 9 urban Chinese mothers from February 2021 to July 2023. The current paper draws on data derived from interviews with 19 men whose fatherhood narratives fulfilled the criteria of intimate fatherhood that we previously mentioned.

Contact with respondents was made through personal relationships. The first author sent interview invitations to his relatives, friends, and colleagues, asking whether they were interested in discussing fatherhood and/or whether they could recommend potential informants interested in talking about this topic. With 17 of the 19 respondents, interviews were conducted face-to-face, with the remainder interviews were conducted online (Tencent meeting). The interviews lasted between 50 and 115 minutes, with an average

time of 74 minutes. After the interview, a gift valued at 50 yuan (about US\$7.75) was prepared for the interviewee to express our appreciation.

The first author conducted the interviews following a semi-structured interview outline. Questions were asked in an open-ended way. For example, the first author asked respondents questions such as: What are your thoughts about fathers' emotional expressions? Do you express your love to your child, and if so, in what way? Do you show your emotion to your child, and if so, in what way? How did you evaluate the relationship between you and your child? What factors did you believe contributed to your behaviors? Moreover, in order to make the respondents more relaxed in sharing their emotions and feelings, the first author shared relevant experiences or feelings with the respondent and responded to the sharing of respondents through subtle interactional ways such as occasionally nodding the head, "uh-huh", etc. Sometimes, the interviewer flexibly adjusted the order and content of the questions to fit the conversation flow better.

4.2 *Sample characteristics*

The 19 respondents were between 29 and 46 years old, and their children were between 2 and 14 years old. 17 of them live in the southwest region of China, such as Guizhou province (7), Chongqing municipality (5), and Chengdu city (5). 2 of them live in Hebei, a northern province of China. 14 respondents had one child, and the other 5 respondents had two children. Among these participants, 1 father had a high school diploma, 1 father had an associate degree, 13 fathers had a bachelor's degree, 1 father had a master's degree, and 3 fathers were working on their part-time PhD degree. The men interviewed represented a diversity of occupational backgrounds, such as students, researchers, lawyers, self-employed, secondary school teachers, the real estate industry, public institutions, and state-owned enterprises.

4.3 *Data coding*

All interviews were conducted and were fully recorded in Mandarin by the first author. iFLYREC (an online service to convert audio to text) was used to transcribe the interviews into verbatim transcripts for further analysis. Also, the first author carefully corrected the transcripts.

The first author employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis procedure for coding data, which involves familiarizing data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes. More specifically, first, the first author imported the qualitative data into NVivo20 and read as well as reread the interview data to be familiarized with the data. Second, the first author did a line-by-line close reading of the extracted factors that contribute to the display of intimate fatherhood and further generated 15 initial codes, including incompetent fathers, unexpressive fathers, loveless environments, distant father-child relationships, making up for childhood, parenting articles and books, parenting applications, short-form videos, parenting reality shows, the expert system, encouragement from the partners, the vibe of original family, developing children's self-confidence, beneficial for Children, and personal characteristics. Third, the first author grouped multiple codes sharing similar underlying concepts or data features into one theme, and six potential themes were obtained, including disappointed childhood, social media, the expert system, encouragement from the partner, favorable child development, and personal characteristics. For example, codes such as absent fathers, unexpressive fathers, loveless environments, and making up for childhood described the participants' disappointment in the previous father-child relationship, which was categorized as the theme of "disappointed childhood". Similarly, codes such as parenting articles and books, parenting applications, short-form videos, and parenting reality shows were categorized as the theme of social media. Fourth, the first author and the second author reviewed and discussed the potential themes carefully and had several discussions on possible overlaps until they came to an agreement. Fifth, the authors evaluated these candidate themes and determined the final themes based on the amount of data supporting the theme. At this phase, the current study dropped themes of favorable child development and personal characteristics, considering there was insufficient data to support them. The main narrative themes in this study, therefore, were identified as disappointed childhood, social media, and encouragement from the partner.

4.4 Ethics

The current research was approved by the Science and Technology Research Ethics Committee/Social Science Sub-Committees of Nanjing University, under the number NJUSOC202307001. Additionally, an informed consent form was signed by the participants so that they understood that they could stop and withdraw from the interview at any time without any consequences. In presenting our data, we changed identifiable information to protect the privacy of our respondents.

The first author's position as an unmarried, childless, and well-educated Chinese male in his thirties may have influenced the data collection. Being a male, especially a well-educated one, likely facilitated the recruitment of fathers from middle-class families. Also, being a peer of the respondents, in terms of age and cultural background, likely made it easier for respondents to share their stories because the interviewer and interviewee share similar cultural contexts and growth experiences. Additionally, being a man without children and without any fathering experiences may have made it easier to enact the role of a 'naive' interviewer and to ask clarification questions. A downside of not having fathering experiences might have been that the first author could not fully empathize with the fathering experiences conveyed by the interviewees. The second author is a white Dutch well-educated mother in her forties. As she does not speak Mandarin, she was not involved in the data collection. As an outsider, but with personal experience in parenting, she was able to ask clarification questions on the patterns found in the data, which likely helped in interpreting the findings, in particular with respect to their relevance to countries beyond China.

5. Findings

Our study found that the "disappointed childhood" experiences of the respondents, the intimate fatherhood contents presented in recent social media, and the encouragement from the partner are important contributing drivers of intimate fatherhood in urban Chinese families. First and foremost, consistent with findings reported in the literature (Lan, 2019; Macht, 2020; Williams, 2008), respondents in this study reported they did not feel the companionship, communication, love, and care from their fathers in their childhood, which considerably enhanced their willingness to change traditional roles as fathers and to be intimate fathers. Interestingly and unexpectedly, the interviews with our respondents also revealed a gender component to this finding, being that these fathers felt more comfortable to express intimate fatherhood towards their daughters than toward their sons. Additionally, social media, such as parenting books, parenting reality shows, and short-form videos, have also contributed to Chinese men work to express their emotions and display physical intimacy to their children. Last but not least, prior research has pointed to the "gate-closing" aspect of maternal gatekeeping in caregiving, particularly in postseparation families (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003); however, several participants in our study highlighted the role of mothers in facilitating and encouraging men's emotional involvement in parenting. This finding is consistent with recent literature on maternal "gate-opening" (Cannito, 2020; Fagan & Cherson, 2017; Wang, et al., 2021).

5.1 Disappointed Childhood

Almost all of the men interviewed in our study grew up in the context of the one-child policy in the early 1980s. Although these men might have been perceived as the core and only hope of the family, most of them did not have the experience of being "little emperors" or "priceless children" who enjoyed endless love from their parents as described in prior studies (Fong, 2004; Liu, 2016). Rather, the "disappointed childhood" narratives that sixteen of our study participants shared revealed their fathers being both emotionally and physically absent in their childhoods. Below, we present the impact of "disappointed childhood" on performing the intimate father's role through the narratives of our participants who previously lived in a rural area, a county, and a developed city respectively.

The first narrator in our study is Gan, who is a father of a boy. Recalling his childhood, he stated as follows:

I grew up in a rural village, and for rural families like us, parenting ideas are influenced by traditional rural values. A father's responsibility is to be a financial provider, to ensure you are fed and clothed. My father was

very hard and spent most of his time working on the farm, so our interaction had very little verbal communication.

Gan's description of his father is well in line with the Confucian definition of Chinese fatherhood: the primary responsibility of men is to provide for the family, and they rarely interact emotionally with their children. Also, fathers show their paternal care and love largely through the provision of resources, not through verbal expressions (Liu & Zheng, 2021). In his perspective, Gan deeply appreciates his father's financial support; however, he occasionally feels disappointed by the absence of a warm, communicative relationship with his father. As such, he is determined to ensure that his child's childhood differs from his own experience. As he said:

Every generation has a different way of showing love to their children, my father's way was okay for my generation, but in the current time, I think I need to make some changes ... I want to do my best to give him the fatherly love I didn't get prior.

Gan is now actively engaged in childcare, with a special emphasis on emotional expression. He highlighted the significance of communication and interaction with his 12-month-old son, expressing affection through intimate words like "Daddy misses you" and through gestures.

Luo, aged 40, the second narrator, grew up in the county. He is a father to two girls and an art teacher at a local middle school. Like Gan, Luo is a caring husband and involved father. He mentioned that he took on most of the housework and was actively engaged in mundane caregiving activities. When the interviewer asked Luo about the reason for these practices, he replied:

I think it might be rooted in a need. My father didn't provide me with the paternal love I provided for my daughters, and I thought the next generation would need it. Things I had never gotten from my parents before, and I assumed my kids would want them as much as I did. So, I am more emotionally engaged in caring for children.

In this quotation, Luo described his parenting involvement as "more emotionally engaged in caring for children", which means he displayed care and love for his daughters by actions (e.g., making breakfast for them) and by verbal expressions (e.g., Daddy loves you, Daddy misses you). For Luo, this type of paternal love that he never experienced in his childhood fueled his desire to show the role of an intimate father.

Liu, a 32-year-old father of a daughter, shared similar experiences with Gan and Luo. He described his father's involvement as "deficient" (*bu chenzhi*) and mentioned that his father rarely spent time caring for him. However, Liu greatly emphasized spending time with his daughter and building emotional ties with her. He directly expressed paternal love to her and created a close emotional connection with her by his practices. Such as kissing her forehead, watching cartoons with her, playing games with her, reading bedtime stories, and preparing gifts. About these fathering practices, he explained as follows:

*In my memories, I disliked my father. I, as well as my childhood playmates, our fathers played the role of strict fathers, and the parental role of our families was "strict father and kind mother" (*yanfu cimu*). My father was less smiley and stricter with me because I am a boy. Also, he wasn't good at expressing his love. He occasionally bought you gifts and snacks to show you his love instead of saying sweet and close words. When I was a child, I didn't think he was a good father, and he was cold and scolded me ... Considering my childhood experiences, I don't hope my daughter will feel that I'm a person like him. I think I should provide her with paternal love and a warm family vibe and create a happy childhood for her. If she lives in a family without love, it might have a bad impact on her.*

Similar to Liu's father, several respondents mentioned that they expressed the silent love of a father to their children with practical actions. Lin, the father of a 6-year-old daughter, reported that he bought local specialties and snacks for his daughter when he was on business trips. For his daughter's birthday, he bought a birthday cake in advance. Paternal love, like that presented by Lin, can be characterized as silent intimacy, which indirectly strengthens mutual closeness by providing material support to the child or meeting the child's needs.

In addition to the main insight that the expression of intimate fatherhood was fueled by the recollection of the (lack of) parenting behavior of their own fathers, the interviews with our respondents also revealed an interesting gender component to the story.

Yu, a father of a 2-year-old daughter said:

I like to tell my kid that Daddy likes you and Daddy loves you...I am willing to show my emotions to my daughter and my mother. But to my father, I can't express it. Such words really can't be said between men... If my kid was a boy, I couldn't possibly show my emotions to him. Instead, I would probably play the role of a father like my father did, and I would be a strict father.

When asked if he says intimate words such as “Daddy loves you” to his children, Zhang, a 29-year-old father of two boys, replied :

Never. For boys, I don't say that. I would offer to say words like Dad will take care of (guan) you. But saying very close words to him, that's impossible.

These accounts imply that Chinese fathers feel more comfortable to express intimate fatherhood towards their daughters than toward their sons. This gendered expression of emotions and love suggests that traditional gender norms are still embodied in urban Chinese fathers, albeit mainly towards their sons.

Additionally, the quotes of two fathers highlighted the impact of traditional masculinity and femininity on the expression of emotions between fathers and their children. As a father of two boys, Zhang contended that employing intimate words such as “Daddy loves you” is inappropriate for boys. Rather, he used “guan”, a more “neutral” and “protective” phrase, to express his willingness to take care of his children and discipline them. This indicated a traditional perception of male roles, namely that men are commonly expected to be stronger, more independent, and more masculine, and that overt displays of emotion may be viewed as vulnerabilities or inconsistent with traditional masculinity.

As the father of a two-year-old daughter, Yu tended to display the role of an intimate father to his daughter, as evidenced by his verbal expressions such as “Daddy loves you”. Also, he was willing to show emotions towards his mother rather than his father. This attested to his recognition and acceptance of traditional femininity, which emphasizes the need for girls to receive protection and emotional affection. Nevertheless, he acknowledged the challenge of expressing emotions within male relationships, partly due to entrenched traditional masculinity norms and societal pressures regarding male emotional expression.

The experience of “disappointed childhood” stimulated our respondents’ will to be different fathers from their own fathers. As an agent, the idea of “reflexive monitoring of action” (Giddens, 1990: 36) that refers to the self-examination or self-reflexive process was applied to their fathering practices. These men reflected upon their own childhood experiences, which prompted them to differentiate their fathering practices from prior generations. Also, they were aware that the new generation needs and wants to have a more expressive and nurturing relationship with their children than they had with their fathers. The interviewed men, therefore, removed the silent and inexpressive parenting notions that emerged in the old generations and displayed the fathering practices that they deemed contemporary fathers should embrace to create a close and intimate father-child relationship. In doing so, they are trying to make up for their childhood regrets as well as provide emotional security for their children (Lan, 2019: 56).

5.2 *The role of social media*

More recently, given the increasing availability, accessibility, and popularity of social media related to parenting, scholars proposed that social media, such as parenting reality TV programs or parenting bloggers, can be seen as a new site to rethink the contemporary family discourses (Jiang, 2019; Scheibling, 2019). Against this backdrop, several studies revealed how men employ social media as tools to perform and promote paternal involvement (Scheibling, 2019; Nauta et al., 2022). For example, one recent study reported parenting styles presented in reality shows are used by Chinese fathers to improve the father-child relationship, although some of them questioned the “realness” of reality shows (Nauta et al., 2022). Given that Chinese men have relatively fewer models from their own fathers to imitate, the role of social media might be more important in shaping their roles as fathers.

As new-generation parents, the parenting philosophies of respondents in the present study were influenced by social media. Unlike the previous generation, our respondents reported they learned about fatherhood by reading parenting books, using parenting apps (e.g., Baby Tree and Xiaohongshu), following parenting bloggers, watching parenting short-form videos (e.g., Douyin), and attending parenting lectures. Sun, born in 1990, is a father of a 2-year-old son and works in a pharmacy. He described his fathering experience like this:

I usually read articles on WeChat about parenting and change my parenting style to fit my situation. For example, those articles mentioned that fathers should squat down to talk to their kids, drop paternal authority to play with them, directly express fatherly love, and accompany them with the mind of a small child. So, when I play with my son, I don't think I'm a father, and my son is too childish.

In this quotation, Sun referenced the idea of “de-patriarchal” parenting presented in Chinese social media discourse. This idea underscores principles of companionship, equality, and emotional engagement within the parent-child relationship. Notably, in recent years, ideas surrounding fatherhood aligned with these principles have gained significant traction within both official discourse and popular media in China (Li, 2016; Tan, 2020; Wang & Hao, 2023). For example, *Where Are We Going, Dad?*, a popular parenting reality show series in China, aims to create a friendly, caring, and involved image of fathers by presenting warm, touching, and intimate interactions between celebrity fathers and their children in daily life. Participants in our study talked about the relevance of this reality show in presenting intimate fatherhood, such as Sun, a respondent we mentioned earlier:

In Where Are We Going, Dad?, I saw all kinds of fathers' parenting styles. I regarded them as mirrors and learned from their strengths. I know how to calm and manage my emotions when interacting with my kid from this reality show. For example, if Lele (his son) dropped the cup, what kind of mood should I be in to interact with him These fathers express their love in a very direct way. Fathers' love should be said loudly. These are what I have to learn.

Sun's narrative suggested that parenting reality shows could provide our respondents with ways of doing fatherhood and emphasize the significance of paternal emotional expression and emotion management. Also, when talking about this reality show, he used phrases such as “learn” and “regard them as” to describe his own behavior, which indicated his agency and reflectivity in his role as a father. Like Sun, Ming works in a real estate company and usually reads parenting books to learn how to communicate with his child. Although Ming was born in 1975, he is not rejecting the idea of showing emotional expression and physical affection to his 14-year-old son. In the morning, Ming would hug his son and say encouraging words, such as “Come on” and “Daddy loves you”; In the evening, he would kiss his child's forehead and say good night to him. Talking about these expressions of paternal love, he reported the role of short-form videos:

I usually watch some parenting videos on Douyin (Chinese TikTok). These videos mentioned that a big flaw of Chinese parents in taking care of their kids is that they are not good at expressing emotions. Even some parents are unwilling to say sweet words to their kids. This is a pity. To be a parent, you have to express your emotions to your kids frequently... I think it's time for our generation to change this thing.

Ming's narrative is in line with Wang and Hao's (2023) recent research, which argued that videos focusing on caring fathers on Douyin contribute to promoting Chinese fatherhood from “absent fathers” to caring fathers at the individual level. Additionally, the extract revealed a prevalent trend observed in the parenting practices of the older generation, particularly amongst fathers, characterized by a notable absence of emotional expression. This might be due largely to traditional attitudes toward the expression of male emotion and the expectations of parental roles. Within the traditional Chinese familial norms, fathers are expected to play a strict, authoritarian role, and emotional expression is not encouraged. Nonetheless, this conventional perception of fatherhood is regarded with regret by the younger generation, underscoring their longing for a close and intimate father-child relationship.

Several interviewees mentioned the influence of the family climate and parenting philosophies of Western societies presented in social media in shaping their fathering ideals. Yu, a 39-year-old father who works as a middle manager for a company, displayed his paternal care and paternal love for his daughter by

hugging her, kissing her cheek, playing with her, saying sweet words, reading a bedtime story, and being involved in physical caregiving activities. He explained his fathering practices as follows:

I think Western thoughts more influence our generation. We read Western books and watched movies and TV series in which Western parents easily and frequently say “I love you” to their children or kiss and cuddle them. These ideas really influence our practices. We would compare Western parents to ours and think it would be nice if we had parents like them. Also, I want my kid to enjoy that kind of love.

Yu’s account reflected the impact of globalization on parenting practices, wherein the extroverted expression of emotions between parents and children in Western families has resonated with the younger Chinese generation. Not only do they embrace the idea of intimate fathers, but they also want to create a close father-child relationship by displaying their children a warmer and more intimate paternal love.

The above respondents’ narratives revealed the reflexivity of urban Chinese men facing intimate fatherhood content presented by traditional and new social media. In other words, as agents, these men were willing to embrace the notion of caring and intimate fatherhood presented in social media. They adjusted their roles as fathers to meet changes in societal gender structures and gender norms.

5.3 The encouragement of the partner

Disappointed childhood and social media are common themes about the drivers of intimate fathering, yet several participants also mentioned the facilitating and encouraging role of their partner in performing the role of intimate father. This finding resonates with research conducted in Western contexts revealing the important role of the partner in facilitating fathers’ involvement (e.g., Fagan & Cherson, 2017; Trinder, 2008).

Our study adds to these insights by showing that partners also play a facilitating role in the expression of being an intimate father. As Yun, a father of a 2-year-old boy, said, “My wife’s parenting ideas are influenced by new-age thinking. She told me to show our son your love directly and not be a silent father.”

Bo, born in 1991, is a father of a 5-year-old boy, works in the bank, and makes similar statements to Yun when he discussed his partner’s role in paternal involvement:

We share some parenting videos with each other on Douyin sometimes. My wife told me that you have to learn to pay attention to your child’s emotions, listen to his voice, save more time to communicate with him, and tell him the words from your heart (xinli hua). Also, you have to express your love verbally so that he can truly feel it.

In his narrative, Bo first mentioned social media’s impact on parenting perceptions and practices. The popularity of digital media allows parents to access parenting information and share experiences, thus shaping their parenting styles and attitudes. Second, Bo highlighted the counsel provided by his wife regarding his paternal responsibilities, underscoring the significance of paternal emotional engagement in child care. This observation, to some extent, reflected the role of women in contributing to the shift in the gender division of labor in the family. No longer confined to traditional gender roles as breadwinner and authoritarian figure, fathers are increasingly encouraged to prioritize emotional expression and to cultivate intimate parent-child relationships.

Similarly, Liu stated his partner’s role like this:

This (expressing fatherly love directly to the child) is a thought that my wife conveyed to me. I used to be a little shy. My wife told me that the father’s love should be said out loud so that the child feels loved. She usually shares videos with me about expressing love directly to the child, implying that I should do the same.

In this sense, as stated by Puhlman and Pasley (2013), teaching and mentoring are also important maternal behaviors in which mothers have strong ideas about how to best parent their children (p. 184). As such, they tend to instruct or model the “correct”, “suitable”, or “better” way for fathers to interact with them. This is also what our study highlights: partners did not only encourage their husbands to be emotionally involved in parenting but they also provided the materials showing how to be an intimate father with them.

Although mothers have a positive role in paternal emotional involvement, they may keep the role of “gate-closer” in men’s physical involvement. For instance, regarding the physical caring practices such as bathing, massaging, and changing diapers, Liu, a respondent we mentioned previously, stated the restrictive role of women like this:

My mother and my wife try to avoid me doing these (caregiving activities) as much as possible. I think I’m doing a good job, and I’m also careful enough, but they don’t think so, and they say my actions are too rude. So, they don’t let me participate in these activities.

This account supported the idea of maternal “gate-closing” that women perceived themselves as restrictive gatekeepers in caring for children due to maternal identity and high standards for physical childcare, which results in discouragement, limitation, and rejection of paternal involvement (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003). This latter finding suggested that Chinese mothers play both facilitating and inhibiting roles in paternal involvement, which is consistent with recent research (Cannito, 2020; Fagan & Cherson, 2017).

6. Discussion and conclusion

Although a growing body of research conducted in Western and Asian societies has been concerned with the level of men’s physical, and more recently, also their level of emotional, involved in childcare, what drives men to be emotionally involved in childcare has received scant attention in the research literature. The current study contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the drivers on intimate fatherhood by investigating the drivers of intimate fatherhood in a country that only very recently started to value the contributions of involved fatherhood. Based on qualitative interview data from 19 urban Chinese fathers, this study found that men’s childhood memories of their fathers, social media, and encouragements from one’s partner constitute important contributing drivers of contemporary Chinese intimate fatherhood. These findings remind us that men’s emotional involvement in parenting could be seen as a reflective consequence of men’s own personal biographies and fatherhood milieu. Facing the changes in gender arrangement and current social expectations of modern fatherhood, Chinese fathers, as agents, are reflexively adjusting their role as fathers to meet these new changes.

The “disappointed childhood”, the dominant and most significant driver of Chinese intimate fatherhood, can be understood in the Chinese historical context. Most participants were raised in the early period of China’s reform and opening-up; a responsible father meant that men could provide a good livelihood for the family in the context of a country centered on economic construction (Tan, 2020). Although the responsibility for childcare gradually shifted from the state to the individual household at that time (Tan, 2020), the emotional involvement of fathers was not emphasized. Our study revealed how urban Chinese men employed emotional reflexivity (reflection on their disappointed feelings about the involvement of their own fathers) in the current father-child relationship to show their emotional expression and to display physical intimacy towards their children. This finding is similar to previous research conducted in the Western context, which suggests a universal link between men’s intimate fatherhood practices and the relationship that fathers have with their own fathers (Brannen, 2015; Macht, 2020). It also suggests that men from both Western and Asian societies are aware that the change of contemporary fatherhood was coming and that they needed to step up from their own fathers’ practices.

This study sheds light on understanding the facilitating role of social media on intimate fatherhood from the perspective of subjective experiences. Although the prior literature has revealed a shift in the image of fathers in social media from the good provider to the new father who is physically involved (Gregory & Milner, 2011; Wall & Arnold, 2007), the current study highlighted the intimate fatherhood presented in social media in contributing men’s emotional behaviors in paternal practices from the perspective of fathers themselves. More importantly, social media construct and reconstruct fatherhood identities through providing Chinese men with the model of a “good” father.

Our study suggested mothers play a crucial role in encouraging and mentoring men to express the role of intimate fatherhood in urban Chinese families. As men’s partners and children’s mothers, women might provide the final “push” for Chinese men to perform the role of intimate fathers; they both encouraged men to express their paternal love to their children verbally and provided men with materials to develop intimate

father-child relationships. Through these efforts, women's role as "gate-openers" fosters a deeper emotional bond between fathers and children as well as a more balanced and collaborative approach to parenting. This finding pointed to the role of women in promoting changes in gender roles in childrearing. It is important to consider, however, that our sample is a selective sample of highly educated fathers. As prior literature on Chinese fatherhood noted, mothers are more confident in and encourage paternal involvement in parenting because of the fathers' high educational level (Wang, et al., 2021). Thus, future research can examine how maternal gatekeeping affects paternal involvement in families where fathers have received fewer years of education. Interestingly, although Chinese mothers play a facilitating role in men's emotional involvement, some also appear to play a "gate-closing" role in men's physical involvement.

Our findings reveal that the gender of the child substantially shapes the display of intimate fatherhood in China. This interesting finding suggests a more complex stance of Chinese fathers towards intimate fatherhood. Chinese fathers are, on the one hand, strongly seeking to keep away from the traditional and unexpressive parenting practices of the prior generation; on the other hand, they are still hesitant to display intimate parenting practices towards their sons. It is important to note that this finding is in contrast with findings from a recent study showing that contemporary Chinese fathers are equally nurturant with their sons and daughters, be it expressed through instrumental support, physical intimacy, or verbal display (Li, 2020). However, it is in line with a study showing that fathers with daughters show an intimate side in parenting (Xu & O'Brien, 2014). In addition, the silent intimacy presented by urban Chinese fathers is essentially related to financial support for their children, a role traditionally assigned to fathers by conventional masculinity norms. From these fathers' own perspective, however, it is a way of enabling intimate father-child relationships. This suggests that financial providing, which has long been seen as an element of traditional masculinity, also contributes to the concept of intimate fatherhood.

Lastly, the present study argues that the practices of reflexive fatherhood in the Chinese context may be both the new creation of fatherhood roles and the re-traditionalization of fatherhood roles. Strong gender norms and traditional notions of masculinity and femininity continue to shape the reflective practice of a few Chinese fathers. Some interviewees, although expressing that they wanted to do better than their own fathers, rather engage in intimate fatherhood practices with their daughters and not their sons. In their view, boys need to be raised in a "tougher" environment, and girls need a "warmer" one. In this sense, the reflexivity presented in Chinese intimate fatherhood supports Farrugia's argument that it is difficult for actors to rely on their own reflexive practices to challenge and overturn established societal structures (Farrugia, 2015). Intimate fathering practices of the Chinese were essentially developed and displayed within the constraints and conditions of these societal structures. On the one hand, each generation has the opportunity to reinvent the cultural traditions of the previous generation when inheriting them. On the other hand, traditions continue to play a role in the most modernized of modern societies (Giddens, 1990: 38).

When interpreting these findings, readers should be mindful of some of the limitations of our study. Firstly, the data and related findings are mainly from urban men in Southwest China, which means that the findings of this study might not be generalized to fathers living in all urban areas of China. Since the 1980s, the southwest region has become a major labor export area and has significantly contributed to the economy of the eastern coastal region of China. This resulted in a large number of men being absent from their children's daily lives, generating the "disappointed childhood". We recommend further research to examine to what extent urban fathers in the eastern region differ from those in the western region in how they talk about what drives them to display intimate fatherhood practices. Secondly, as abovementioned, our sample consisted of highly educated resident fathers, which might imply that these men have higher capacities for expressing their emotions and feelings, for reflecting upon their own personal biographies, and for accessing social media in comparison to their lower-educated counterparts. For example, our respondents were able to use a rich vocabulary to narrate their childhood experiences and feelings and the ways in which they displayed their love to their children. Intimate fatherhood might be in particular a way of practicing fatherhood amongst the higher educated Chinese men. Consequently, we caution against extrapolating our findings to all Chinese resident fathers.

Despite these limitations, the current study enriches the literature on the drivers of intimate fatherhood by showing that men's "disappointed childhood" experiences, partner encouragement, and social media are contributing drivers of intimate fatherhood in contemporary China. These insights are useful for policymakers and professionals when aiming to not only understand but also to promote and strengthen men's emotional involvement in child care. Policymakers can leverage these findings to develop policies and initiatives that foster a supportive environment for men to emotionally participate in childcare, thus advancing

gender equality and family well-being. Likewise, professionals in fields such as social work and psychology can utilize these findings to adjust their interventions and support services. Our study serves as a call to action for stakeholders across various sectors to value the role of social media and mothers in creating a society where men feel empowered and supported to embrace their role as intimate fathers.

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Data availability statement

The research data is not publicly available. Data are available upon request (from first author).

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Treiber intimer Vaterschaft im heutigen China: Kindheitserlebnisse, soziale Medien und Ermutigung durch den Partner

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Ziel dieser Studie ist es, zu untersuchen, welche Faktoren dazu beitragen, dass moderne städtische chinesische Väter intime Vaterschaft praktizieren.

Hintergrund: Obwohl immer mehr Forschungsarbeiten die physische und zuletzt auch die emotionale Beteiligung von Männern an der Kinderbetreuung untersuchen, wurde der Frage, was Männer dazu bewegt, sich emotional an der Kinderbetreuung zu beteiligen, in der Forschungsliteratur bislang wenig Beachtung geschenkt, insbesondere in asiatischen Ländern wie China.

Methode: Unsere Studie stützt sich auf ausführliche Interviews mit 19 chinesischen Vätern in urbanen Gebieten, um zu untersuchen, warum Männer bei in ihrem elterlichen Verhalten intime Vaterschaft zeigen. Zur Beantwortung unserer Forschungsfragen wird das Verfahren der Themenanalyse verwendet.

Ergebnisse: Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Enttäuschung der Männer über die begrenzte Beteiligung ihrer eigenen Väter, die Inhalte intimer Vaterschaft, die in sozialen Medien präsentiert werden, und die Ermutigung durch ihre Partnerin wichtige Faktoren waren, die dazu beitrugen, dass moderne chinesische Väter Aspekte intimer Vaterschaft zeigen.

Schlussfolgerung: Unsere Studie unterstreicht die Bedeutung persönlicher Biografien, Partnereinflüsse und sozialer Medien für die emotionale Beteiligung von Männern an der Kinderbetreuung. Unsere Ergebnisse sind für politische Entscheidungsträger:innen und Fachleute hilfreich, um das Engagement von Männern, intime Vaterschaft zu zeigen, zu verstehen, zu fördern und zu stärken.

Schlagwörter: Intime Vaterschaft, Reflexivität, persönliche Biografien, mütterliches gate-opening, soziale Medien, China

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