

## CHAPTER 4

# Children and Parenting

### 4.1 What is a ‘Good Child’? Raising Children in a Changing China

*Jing Xu*

In the summer of 2011, I packed up my life and an unruly toddler and returned to China to do field research at a private Shanghai preschool. It was an interesting time to be a new parent, particularly one living between China and America. Yale law professor Amy Chua had just published her memoir ‘Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,’ and so-called Asian parenting styles – involving ferocious discipline, frequent shaming, and even corporal punishment, all in the single-minded pursuit of academic success – were a hot topic in mainstream American media.

Unsurprisingly, Chua’s book was quickly translated into Chinese – but with an interesting twist. In place of Chua’s original eye-catching title, the Chinese edition was entitled simply ‘Mothering in the United States.’ Even more surprising to me was the memoir’s icy reception across the Pacific. By the time I arrived in Shanghai, many mothers in the preschool where I was conducting my fieldwork had already read the book, yet when I asked what they thought of it, they said that Chua’s parenting style did not resonate with their experiences at all. If anything, they found the ‘tiger mother’ approach rather depressing, if not outright bizarre.

As a fellow millennial Chinese parent, I shared their sentiment. The ‘tiger mother’ archetype capitalised on and reinforced certain long-held stereotypes about Chinese people in the West, but many of these stereotypes are long out of date. What I hoped to discover through my fieldwork was how this change had taken place. What does it mean to be a good child in 21st-century China? And what, if not strict obedience, do today’s Chinese parents want from their kids?

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Back in the early 1990s, when the anthropologist David Y.H. Wu surveyed Shanghai families about their parenting practices, he found that raising obedient children was still the paramount priority (Wu 1996). A good child was an obedient child, something Wu attributed to a mix of influences. On the one hand, he saw parents' focus on discipline as a response to widespread concern at the prospect of a generation of 'spoiled' only children. On the other, he saw in it the influence of what he called China's 'authoritarian, collective, and nationalistic' culture (Wu 1996: 25).

By the time I conducted my own fieldwork some two decades later, however, I found a very different parenting landscape (Xu 2017). When asked what moral traits they valued most in their children, 41% of my respondents said 'sociableness', followed by 'kindness and caring' and 'independence'. 'Obedience' was the least popular choice: just 2% of parents said it was the most important trait for their children to learn (Xu 2017: 157).

These results hint at a changing conception of what it means to be a good child in China. Although concern about spoiled singleton children never went away, strict disciplinary solutions – known in academic circles as 'authoritarian parenting' – have fallen out of favour in the country. Instead, since the early 2010s, Chinese parents have sought to instil in their children good social behaviours and a sense of independence.

This process should not be understood as a linear development towards so-called Western, individualistic parenting styles. It is true that 'Western' childrearing approaches have been repackaged and sold to urban middle-class consumers as authoritative and scientific. It is also true that these texts, with their emphasis on children's autonomy and socio-emotional intelligence, have shaped Chinese parenting values. But Chinese parents do not blindly absorb or follow Western models. They deliberately evaluate these ideas and compare them against their own circumstances.

Chinese parents' aspiration to cultivate more sociable children, for example, did not just arise from a desire to mimic Western parenting styles; it is at least partly the product of a declining faith in academic performance as the sole determinant of their kids' future. In recent years, as competition in schools and on the job market has grown fiercer, many Chinese have come to believe that academic credentials are no longer enough to distinguish job candidates, and interpersonal skills are increasingly seen as an important indicator of a child's future success.

The desire to cultivate greater independence, meanwhile, is related to the same fears of spoiled only children that once led parents down the disciplinary road. In particular, many young parents expressed anxiety that their children were too sheltered, and that their inner psyches had become too vulnerable. Independence thus took on new meaning: not a sign of disobedience, but of self-reliance and psychological resilience. This resilience is particularly prized given the fierce competition and challenging road parents see facing the next generation.

Yet, if parents' understanding of what makes a good child is changing, many schools' definitions of what makes a good student remain stuck in the past. Young parents looking to nurture their children's independence or preserve their creativity often have to compromise their ideals in the face of an approach to education that still prioritises conformity and obedience.

For instance, one mother expressed her concern at the preschool's penchant for putting on tightly choreographed performances. Her three-year-old son's class had spent a month rehearsing their dance routine for the Children's Day holiday. 'They're children, not athletes,' she complained. 'I would like to see them doing things naturally and spontaneously, and I think that might be more beautiful than an impeccable collective dance where every child has to move in the exact ways their teacher told them to. It's like a robot show' (Xu 2017: 165).

The school system is not the only harsh reality facing today's parents. Many of my interviewees found it particularly hard to cultivate morality in their children in a broader social environment that still encourages winning at all costs. Parents cherished the ideal that children should be innocent and pure, expressing their 'natural' goodness and kindness without being polluted by the hypocrisy and artifice of the adult world (Xu 2020). Yet they also feared that innocent, genuinely kind children would not be fit for the real society that awaits them.

That reality helps explain a seemingly contradictory phenomenon: while Chinese parents may individually reject the 'tiger mother' approach, they have spent the past decade signing their children up for ever more intense workloads and tutoring classes. In the most extreme case I witnessed during my fieldwork, a five-year-old attended eight extracurricular classes in a single weekend. But the motivation for this arms race is not necessarily intrinsic. Rather, many parents feel forced to push their children, even as they worry that raising a good child is not always the same as raising a good student. Rather than resorting to convenient cultural stereotypes, we need to understand how Chinese people navigate the dilemmas and challenges in the world's most competitive educational environment.

Middle-class parents at a private preschool in Shanghai should not be taken as representative of the entire country, but anxieties regarding what it means to raise a 'good' child in today's China are quite common whether you are in a major metropolis or rural county seat. Unfortunately, more than a decade after I began conducting my research, the problems I first observed in 2011 have only grown more acute. Chinese parents rarely want to think of themselves as authoritarian 'tiger mothers,' but they also know that the real world is no place for sheltered kittens.

## Note

A version of this essay was previously published with Sixth Tone under the title 'Where Have China's "Tiger" Parents Gone?' and can be found at: <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1008749/where-have-chinas-tiger-parents-gone%3F>

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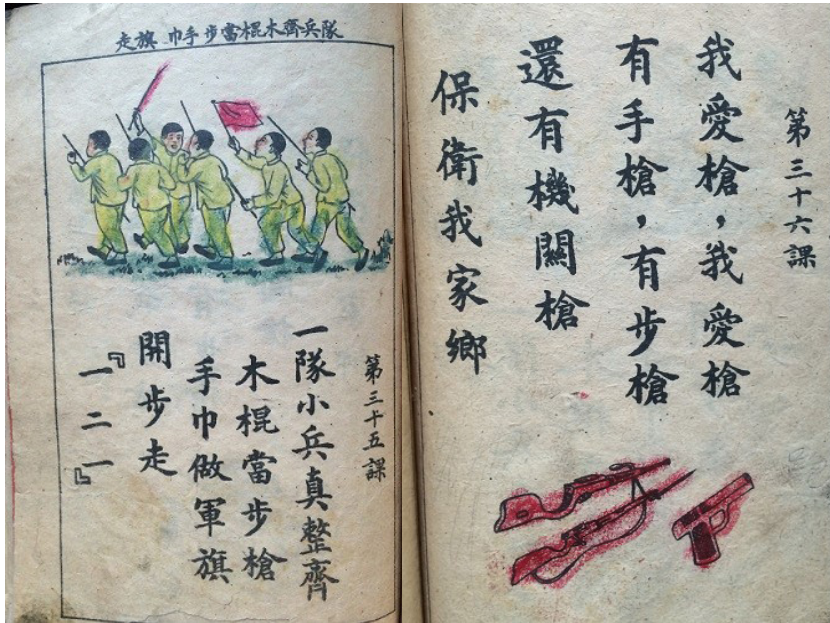
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## 4.2 Chinese Childhoods, Then and Now

*Carl Kubler*

Childhood in China is undergoing a revolution. On 31 May 2021, just a few years after ending the decades-old one-child policy (*yihai zhengce* 一孩政策) that had defined much of urban family planning from the 1980s until 2016, the Politburo of the CCP announced that in an effort to combat falling birthrates, a new three-child policy (*sanhai zhengce* 三孩政策) would replace the existing limit of two children allowed per family (Ni 2021). Also this year, new restrictions on online gaming for netizens under the age of 18 have erased millions in stock value from publicly traded gaming companies such as NetEase (*Wangyi* 网易) and Tencent (*Tengxun* 腾讯), as officials seek to curb gaming addictions among minors (CNN 2021). A roughly contemporaneous crackdown on for-profit after-schooling tutoring for elementary and middle school students has made even larger waves as government authorities seek to reduce financial and mental health burdens on parents and children, cratering the share prices of private education firms such as New Oriental (*Xin Dong Fang* 新东方) and TAL Education (*Hao Wei Lai* 好未来) and leading many to wonder what changes are next in store for China’s youth (BBC 2021).

Although the specifics of these policies are new, efforts to reimagine and remake Chinese childhood are not. Since at least the early 20th century, Chinese thinkers and policymakers have framed the wellbeing of China’s children as a key litmus test for the health of the nation. ‘To understand the degree to which a particular culture is civilized,’ wrote leading intellectual Hu Shi 胡适 in 1929, ‘we must appraise...how it handles its children.’ Essayist Lu Xun 鲁迅 similarly implored Chinese audiences to ‘save the children’ in his 1919 *Diary of a Madman* (*Kuangren riji* 狂人日记), calling for a modern nation led by a community of future adults not yet schooled in feudal society’s cannibalistic ways. Recent historical scholarship has shown that such exhortations were more than just rhetoric, with a variety of educational programmes and social reforms aimed at improving children’s welfare taking shape over the first half of the 20th century (Tillman 2018; Zarrow 2015).



**Figure 4.2a:** Textbook illustrations. The image on the left depicts children as soldiers, coloured in by a child from Northeast China during the Second Sino-Japanese War. The image on the right shows a rhyming lesson about children's love of guns. Source: Andong sheng jiaoyuting 安東省教育廳 [Andong Province Bureau of Education], *Changshi: Chuji xiaoxue* 常識. 初級小學 [General knowledge: Lower-elementary school] (1946, 1: 35, 36).

As I have argued elsewhere (Kubler 2018), these exhortations took a dramatic new turn in the wake of the Second Sino-Japanese War, as Communist educators placed a new labour-oriented ideal of childhood at the centre of the nation's modernising project. Prior to the 1940s, Chinese intellectuals and educators had largely treated childhood as a protected sphere, which was putatively insulated from the harsher realities of adult life, but the devastation of war had both ruptured that insulation and made the reconstruction of the nation – with the full participation of all its citizens, regardless of their age or social station – a matter of existential importance. Just as productive labour had become what one historian calls a 'condition of social citizenship' in the first half of the 20th century (Chen 2012), in the postwar years this criterion of inclusion trickled down to encompass children as well.

Visual media were particularly powerful in facilitating this inclusion and shaping children's nascent worldviews. Lower-elementary literacy textbooks combined rhyming moral lessons about patriotism and national duty with striking images of children in adult roles – as farmers, soldiers, factory workers



**Figure 4.2b:** Textbook cover showing children in modern, adult roles. *Gaoji xiaoxue Guoyu keben* 高級小學國語課本 [Upper-elementary Mandarin textbook], vol. 2. 1951.

– and invited young readers to imagine themselves in service of the nation. ‘I love guns, I love guns’ began one lesson. ‘There are pistols, rifles, and even machine guns; they protect my home.’ Many surviving textbooks from the era show that children actively coloured in the parts of the images that most resonated with them, while leaving other parts, like the bodies of enemy soldiers, devoid of colour.

Historians of childhood have long debated the extent to which the concept of childhood, as a separate and protected sphere of social development, is a modern societal invention, as French medievalist Philippe Ariès controversially contended in the 1960s. Regardless of which side of that debate one stands on, however, recent developments have made clear that notions of childhood in China have continued to be reimagined and redefined into the present day. Although the construction of a modern Chinese nation may have lost much of the existential urgency that motivated societal changes in the mid-20th century, as Chinese policymakers envision new contours for state and society in the 21st century, the well-being and productivity of Chinese children remain inseparable from the well-being and productivity of the Chinese nation – and arguably even more so than before.

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### 4.3 Children and War Education in Maoist China (1949–1976)

#### Orna Naftali

War culture has had tremendous power in shaping modern understandings of the nation in the PRC. But the role of children's education in the creation of that culture has received little attention (Naftali 2021: 254).<sup>1</sup> Most studies that have tackled this issue focus on media and literary works, and argue that in Maoist publications, youth were typically portrayed as 'small soldiers' – a trope that all but supplanted both indigenous, Confucian notions of children as incomplete human beings and modern, romantic images of the 'innocent child' introduced from the West in the first half of the 20th century. This claim echoes that of scholars who have looked at Cold War cultures elsewhere in the world and argue that in countries of the Eastern Bloc, children were accorded

more aggressive roles than in the West, where the myth of the ‘defenceless child’ predominated mainstream culture. In a recent article in the *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* (Naftali 2021), I challenge this assumption by highlighting the complex nature of the discourse about children, youth, and political violence in Maoist-era China.<sup>2</sup>

The roots of modern Chinese debates about the role of children in military struggle can be traced to the first half of the 20th century. Most scholars (see, e.g. Farquhar 1999; Donald 2005; de Giorgi 2014; Kauffman 2020; Zheng 2021) nonetheless maintain that the promotion of children’s engagement against foreign and domestic enemies in the 1930s–1940s opened the way for a full-scale militarisation of childhood in the Mao era. My study elaborates on this thesis by examining war narratives in PRC middle-school history textbooks and discussions about ‘war education’ in general media publications and pedagogical journals of the 1950s–1970s.

My analysis reveals the existence of conflicting ideas of childhood and military aggression throughout the period in question. In the 1950s, PRC education journals conveyed the notion that children should be taught about the politics of war if they are to be trained for their role as future revolutionary fighters (see e.g. Figure 4.3a). Yet, educators did not necessarily cast youngsters in the role of ‘small soldiers’. During the Korean War (1951–1953), for instance, children’s publications sought to teach students to ‘hate the US imperialists’ and ‘beat American arrogance’. However, some educators argued that exposing children of all ages to information about American ‘military atrocities’ could weaken children’s characters and willingness to fight, thereby damaging their sense of national pride. Others promoted a view of childhood couched in developmental psychology, according to which children are more vulnerable emotionally and therefore must not become involved in – or exposed to – information about war brutality. Accordingly, the middle-school history textbook used in Chinese schools in the 1950s described war as the business of adults. It portrayed youth as victims of political conflict rather than as active fighters, and avoided graphic depictions of military violence (Naftali 2021: 259–263).

These features can be explained by the fact that in the early years of the PRC, the field of children’s education was still led and populated by Republican-era intellectuals, who may have adopted the socialist notion of children as political agents, but held to imported liberal and psychologised notions of childhood innocence or indigenous, Confucian perceptions of children as ‘incomplete’ human beings. That said, a conflicted view of children and violence was evident in subsequent decades as well, even as Chinese society became more militarised (Naftali 2021: 263).

The early 1960s witnessed a shift in the way PRC thinkers regarded war education, a transformation that can be traced to broader developments in both the global and domestic arenas. As China became involved in a border war in India and was preparing for a potential conflict with US forces in Vietnam in the south and the Soviet Union in the north, Mao Zedong was also



**Figure 4.3a:** Zhang Lin 张琳 (1956). 'Tomorrow I will be a defender of the territorial sky of the motherland.' Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.

concerned that policies issued by the CCP after the debacle of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) exhibited signs of 'Soviet revisionism'. To counter this trend, Mao launched a 'socialist education program' (1963), which employed military models to reintroduce 'collectivism, patriotism and socialism' into Chinese society and schools. The middle-school history textbook of this period included lengthier, more detailed discussions of military violence, while highlighting historical incidents in which youth were said to take part in the fight against domestic and external enemies. Nonetheless, the early 1960s book consigned youth auxiliary roles such as fetching food and water for adult combatants (Naftali 2021: 263–265).

The launch of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 brought adolescents to the forefront of domestic political struggle in a very real sense. Textbooks produced during this period correspondingly highlighted the leading role of youth in military fighting. For instance, a 1973 book describes a scene during the first Opium War (1839–1842), in which British soldiers allegedly 'escaped in shame' and 'knelt on the ground begging for mercy' from Chinese adult and 'youth (*shaonian* 少年)' militia forces. Notably, depictions of the same scene in the 1950s textbook did not mention youth at all, while the 1960s version produced prior to the CR assigned youth a much less active role in the fighting (Naftali 2021: 266).

Even as the 'small soldier' trope was rigorously promoted in Cultural Revolution textbooks, it would be wrong to extrapolate that educators across the

country necessarily embraced this view. Indeed, reprimands circulating in PRC media publications up to the mid-1970s warned against the ‘stubborn tendency’ of certain educators to ‘over-protect’ students of all ages from horrific war stories due to the ‘false notion of children’s innocence’. These admonitions indicate that a notion of childhood as a time of vulnerability lingered among some educators, even as Chinese teenagers participated in extreme acts of aggression against their teachers and other authority figures in the initial years of the Cultural Revolution.

These findings suggest that ‘the idea of children and youth as “small soldiers” was never an unstated, assumed truth in Maoist-era education’ (Naftali 2021: 268). Instead, it constituted a locus of continual debate between disparate views of childhood, pedagogy, and violence. My research further illustrates that during the Cold War era, idealised and often conflicting notions of childhood maintained by educators in socialist countries such as China were not in fact very different from those found on the other side of the political divide.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The term *children* refers here to persons aged 6–18 years old (designated in modern Chinese as *ertong* 儿童), while ‘youth’ refers to those at the middle school stage (ages 12–18), often designated in modern Chinese as *shaonian* 少年.
- <sup>2</sup> This piece is adapted from Naftali, Orna. 2021. Celebrating violence? Children, youth, and war education in Maoist China (1949–76). *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 14 (2): 254–273.

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#### 4.4 Social Media Discourse on Stay-at-Home Fathers in China: Full-Time Father, Part-Time Worker

*Fei Huang*

‘When you hear the term stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs), what is the first image/ thought that pops into your head?’ – this is one of the questions I asked in a survey that I did with all my friends on WeChat last year. Answers varied from ‘good father’ and ‘nurturing man in an apron’ to ‘go out and get a job!’

In the following, I analyse a common narrative about SAHFs on social media who intertwine paid work with their lives as full-time fathers, which brings a new perspective on how this emergent gendered identity is represented in today’s digital China. Texts for analysis were articles on WeChat subscription accounts (*weixin dingyuehao* 微信订阅号), which I selected based on their quantifiable widespread appeal and reception (as confirmed through ratings and circulation/readership figures) and particular significance for the construction of masculinity and fatherhood (e.g. texts associating the role of SAHFs with masculinity and fatherhood, featuring experiences and insights from actual SAHFs and/or were referred by different articles in other contexts). The aim of my analysis is not to examine whether these WeChat articles accurately represent the realities of everyday SAHF life. Rather, I focus on the structures of knowledge that are represented by the statements of the articles, as they form a discourse in their correlation with each other and broader ideologies.

The term digital nomad (*shuzi youmin* 数字游民) is introduced in two recent articles about SAHFs (Hu 2019; Zhang et. al. 2019) and refers to people who work remotely and online. They argue that some SAHFs have already realised this ‘nomadic’ lifestyle, which opens up the possibility of altering



**Figure 4.4:** Stay-at-home father Xiao Chen with his son sitting in front of a desk (credit to Chen’s WeChat subscription account – @埃文爸爸).

gender dynamics in and outside the home – the increase of job opportunities that embrace mobility and flexibility has made it possible for men to be more involved in the family without cutting off their connection to the labour market. As the author from one of the above-mentioned articles (Hu 2019) states:

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

The question highlighted in the narrative above – ‘Do SAHFs who assume the dual identity as a primary caregiver and a part-time worker belong to a special social group?’ indicates that the lives that these SAHFs lead have challenged the assumed boundaries between work and family life for men, which are specified in two particular aspects in this article, i.e. their priorities and their choice of work.

Firstly, while working from home is arguably another form of maintaining a connection with the public sphere to preserve the sense of masculinity for SAHFs (Hanlon 2012: 208), a shift in their identities and a greater focus on the family seem to be emphasised in the social media discourse, i.e. work comes after childcare. The term ‘full-time father’ (*quanzhi baba* 全职爸爸) is used throughout the above-mentioned article (Hu 2019) to denote these men's primary identity. While acknowledging the fact that raising children needs money, the author has made it clear that the purpose of this article is to understand the role of SAHFs and condemn the stereotypical conception that ‘men have to earn money’.

The SAHF/blogger Qi's experience mentioned in the article above (Hu 2019) is also narrated in the second article (Zhang et. al. 2019) entitled ‘From a workaholic to a full-time father: family is my other workplace’ (*cong gongzuo kuang dao quanzhi baba: jiating shi wode lingyige zhichang* 从工作狂到全职爸爸: 家庭是我的另一个职场). In the authors' words, during the interval between cooking and cleaning the house, Qi wrote millions of words of stories and published four books about food and romantic relationships. The term ‘interval’ (*jianxi* 间隙) suggests the secondary status of Qi's job as a writer. This article also shows another SAHF's (Xiong Jun) daily timetable, which revolves entirely around his son, and the only time for Xiong to take a break and do his own work is when his son takes a nap and/or after his son falls asleep at around

11pm. This timetable is to substantiate the point that being a SAHF is a full-day job without breaks. Similarly, the other two articles (Wu 2020; Tu 2020) compare the typical time schedules from 7am to midnight between a working father and a full-time father, to demonstrate that the time for the father himself is normally after 10pm every day without a day off. Such narratives suggest that the priority of SAHFs' lives is still to take care of the family, and their paid work is organised according to the rhythms of their everyday life as a full-time father.

Secondly, by giving two particular examples of SAHFs, the statement presented above signifies the fusion of childcare/married life and professional/work identity, in that some men tend to take inspiration from their experiences in caregiving and married life as a SAHF. This textual representation of the seamless integration of both intimate life and paid work by SAHFs resonates with Katariina Mäkinen's (2020) study on how stay-at-home mom blogging has become a form of freelance work within the digital economy in Finland. Similar to Qi's transition from a full-time advertiser to a SAHF/content producer on Weibo and WeChat, Yu Ba (Foki 2020) quit his full-time job when his son turned two and has been vlogging about/with his son on social media. He has now successfully become an influencer in childcare and parenting with 764,000 followers on Weibo. It appears that the internet, and social media in particular, has become an important medium of professionalisation and monetisation of family life for SAHFs, which enables them to combine intimate family life with the professional life in a way that challenges the assumed boundaries between paid work and family life. As the SAHF La Rou (Zhang et. al. 2019) states, 'the increase of creative job opportunities that embrace mobility and flexibility offers a new area for full-time fathers/mothers to balance family and individual careers.' These men all expressed long-term commitment to their dual identity, with being a SAHF as their primary role.

The textual representation of the dual identity of SAHFs redefines the assumed boundaries between work and life. By highlighting how busy SAHFs are with the work of the home and their part-time career, this discourse on SAHFs goes against the perception of the home as a place of passivity, laziness, and consumption (i.e. financially dependent upon their partners) (see Hays 1996; Johnstone and Swanson 2003; Merla 2008). The digital world therefore constructs new possibilities of gender performance and challenges people's perceptions and behaviours in the real world. The dual identity of SAHFs portrayed in the analysed articles is one aspect of how the image of SAHFs is circulated on social media, which allows more people to better understand this emergent gendered identity in ways that suggest a gradual shift in traditional gender roles and values.

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- 十月怀胎，他做的不比妈妈少[Exclusive interview with famous people – the full-time father who voluntarily quit his job: he does no less than a mother apart from not being able to bear the child for ten months]. *Foki*, 21 June. <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/WiwU0IifYb8ur6b8sIvG6w>
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